

OF PACHUCOS, YEGUAS, GREASERS, AND COFFEE AND EGGS:  
CHICANOS AND FILM CRITICISM

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Noriega, Chon A., ed. *Chicanos and Film: Essays on Chicano Representation and Resistance*. New York: Garland Press, 1992. 356 pp., \$50.00.

By all rights, this should be an exciting time for Chicano and other Latino film scholarship. Though hardly a torrent, there are an increasing number of films starring Latino artists, a growing number of Latino directors, several high-profile Latino film festivals, and a small but active cadre of Latino film scholars, trained both in film criticism and in social sciences and humanities. Because of these favorable circumstances, it can be assumed that a major, ground-breaking work in film criticism should appear, similar in nature perhaps to Rudy Acuña's original *Occupied America* (1972), Américo Paredes's "*With His Pistol in His Hand*": *A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (1958), Mario Barrera's *Race and Class in the Southwest* (1979), or Vicki Ruiz's *Cannery Women/Cannery Lives* (1987), all of which were paradigm-shifting works provoking others to look at Chicano lives differently. To expect this in Chicano film studies may be a tall order, but Chon Noriega's new collection of essays is disappointing, and at \$50.00, disappoints terribly. Like a high-priced film one waits eagerly to see but that fails to deliver, this volume leaves a reader blinking in the sunlight after the show.

After attending the important Astoria film series that Noriega curated, I had enthusiastically awaited this book. Chicano film scholarship needs more informed historiographic and curatorial/archival expertise, and his careful work at the Queens exhibit promised a thorough, meticulous, mature study. His publisher promised that this was "the first collection of essays on Chicanos and film to provide a comprehensive framework for the field," so my high expectations were jolted by the book, which, if it were a film, would close after a week, consigned to video store oblivion.

First, instead of a substantial treatise or full-length essays, fully a third of the book recycles old articles, ranging from José Limón's twenty-year-old *Aztlán* piece on stereotyping to the 1974 Cine-Aztlán manifesto, "Ya Basta Con Yankee Imperialist Documentaries!" The museum-quality relics almost creak with age, touting revolutionary Cuban agitprop influences, carnalismo, and "Raza Cinema." Several of these hoary pieces comprise the final part of the book and constitute an almost comical time warp. If this had been the first book on Chicano cinema, the preservation efforts might have been justified, although not at the price, which exceeds most coffee table museum reprints. Gary Keller's 1985 *Chicano Cinema: Research, Reviews, and Resources*, published both as a volume by the Bilingual Press (then in Binghamton, New York, and since relocated to Tempe, Arizona) and as a double issue to *Bilingual Review/Revista Bilingüe* subscribers, already paved the way for a more ambitious, focused work. Noriega's disappointing volume is the road not taken. Keller's essay, bursting with ideas and film references, remains the premier essay on the cultural history of Chicanos in cinema, including Mexican and American influences. Yet, readers had reason to believe that the genre had advanced in the years since Keller's work appeared, inasmuch as he was trained in the Spanish

classics and was a *recién llegado* to cultural film history. However, he is one of the few Chicanos to teach a university course on the subject, and his prodigious writing skills, entrepreneurial instincts (he founded the Midwest Chicano Film Festival, one of the two major Latino presses, and a variety of important minority education enterprises, such as Project 1000), and cultural acuity led to the excellent 1985 text, one Noriega correctly acknowledges as a "ground-breaking collection." In addition, it has been ten years since Carl Mora's revised dissertation was published as *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1896-1980* (1982).

One can reasonably ask, why does the Noriega volume fall so flat? In my view it is because there is too little Noriega in evidence. He is certainly capable, and as I mentioned earlier, he is a talented archivist and conscientious scholar. His 1991 article in *Social Research*, "Citizen Chicano," is a thoughtful and well-conceived piece of critical cultural history; his only substantive written contribution to this volume, however, is an essay of fewer than twenty pages and an introductory preface that sets up the work's orientation. It is this near-absence that is so puzzling, not only because he has more to say than do many of his contributors, but because no one appears to have edited (or, as I will grouse in my final point, to have proofread) this text; and it badly needs a strong editorial hand. Plotlines to the few Chicano films included are meticulously recounted several times; one author shoehorns in mention of a three-minute film; another dissects an episode of *Miami Vice*, directed by Edward James Olmos. While there are fluid boundaries among the various cinematic arts, this lack of focus reinforces the book's pastiche approach and makes for a diffuse, confusing series of starts and stops. A more assured editorial consistency would never have allowed careless, gratuitous asides, such as Rosa Linda Fregoso's unexplained allegation about the marginalization of Chicana film makers in the Keller volume. Six of the twelve essays, other than Keller's, were written by Latinas, including a brief but interesting critique of *Seguin* by Fregoso. More conscientious, careful scholarship and editing would have rendered Fregoso's grievance less oblique and would have provided a clearer rationale for her insistence in the next sentence that Cheech Marín's omission from a particular film festival was due, as I understand her elliptic objection, to Chicano political correctness. By no means should the editor of an essay volume exact uniformity from all participants, but the too catholic, err-on-the-side-of-including-everything approach is undisciplined and uncritical in a field that badly needs sustained and careful work.

I do not despair, as Noriega and a number of the scholars represented in the volume are producing interesting and important work on Latin American, Mexican, and Chicano artistic culture. It is fascinating to see how many of our scholars trained in allied fields have turned to cinematic studies. Almost any volume with the work of Antonio Ríos-Bustamante, David Maciel, Alex Saragoza, Mario Barrera, and Sylvia Morales is worth the price of admission, and they do not disappoint here. Mario Barrera is particularly interesting, in a more didactic role than is usual for him; having recently produced *Chicano Park*, he contributes a useful chapter on screenwriting. I regret particularly that a dozen-year-old piece is the only contribution by Sylvia Morales, a talented director and critical writer. Her brief essay in Keller's volume was a solid contribution, and I believe it is a promising development for film makers like Morales to write and for scholars like Barrera to produce films. Unlike most other areas of Chicano intellectual production, this is one where the elusive goal of achieving meaningful praxis is truly possible, and I wish other talented film makers such as Paul Espinosa (who holds an anthropology doctorate from Stanford) would produce scholarship as well as excellent movies—which are inexplicably absent from this volume. All of us await his production of . . . *y no se lo tragó la tierra*, for which filming is under way.

This book would have been a more valuable contribution as a special issue of a major journal (perhaps *Wide Angle*, whose format and low price would have been useful) or as a better con-

ceived monograph, both because it would have forced more discipline into the undertaking and because it would likely have received better proofreading and editorial care. I started circling typos in my review copy, and finally stopped after I found over fifty—some of them howlers. My favorites were the misspellings of “Chicanos,” leading to the unexpected Midwest focus for Carlos Muñoz’s book on the Chicago Movement and John Chávez’s work on the Chicago image of the Southwest, and Cheech Marín’s hilarious song from *Cheech and Chong’s Next Movie*, in which Cheech sings, “Mexican Americans don’t like to go to movies where the dude has to where [sic] contacts to make his blue eyes brown, and don’t it make your brown eyes blue.” (Of course, all Cheech and Chong fans will recall Chong’s anthem, “Beaners,” from the same movie.)

My fondest hope is that the many talented people included in this volume and its 1985 Keller predecessor will write their own full-length works on Chicano cinema. Never before has there been such an opportunity as now, and even this woeful book cannot crowd out a solid critical work. There are many more scholarly books published in the United States on Mexican and Latin American cinema (e.g., the recent publication of Ana López’s *Latin American Cinema*, University of Illinois Press) than on Chicano or Puerto Rican film studies. This situation is ripe for change, and I predict that Chon Noriega or his collaborators could write that groundbreaking treatise. Then they will fulfill the promise that this book, regrettably, does not. I await that book even more than I await the next Luis Valdez film or Rosana de Soto role.

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