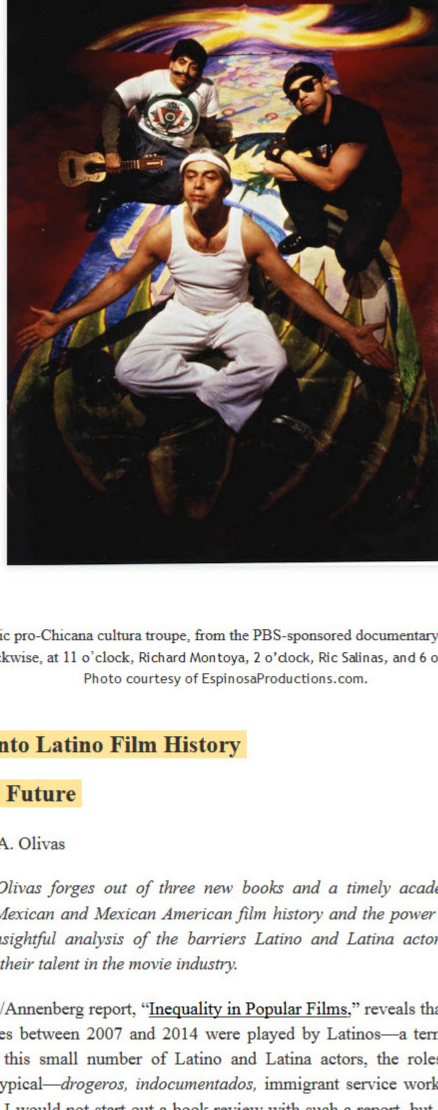


Culture Clash, the iconic pro-Chicana cultura troupe, from the PBS-sponsored documentary, "The Border," produced by Paul Espinosa. Clockwise, at 11 o'clock, Richard Montoya, 2 o'clock, Ric Salinas, and 6 o'clock, Herbert Siguenza. Photo courtesy of EspinosaProductions.com.

New Insights into Latino Film History – and the Future

Review by Michael A. Olivas

Reviewer Michael Olivas forges out of three new books and a timely academic report a vibrant narrative bridging Mexican and Mexican American film history and the power of music to provide a personalized and insightful analysis of the barriers Latino and Latina actors and directors must confront to manifest their talent in the movie industry.

The timely USC/Annenberg report, "Inequality in Popular Films," reveals that fewer than 5 percent of all roles in movies between 2007 and 2014 were played by Latinos—a term that is very broadly applied. Even with this small number of Latino and Latina actors, the roles are overwhelmingly negative and stereotypical—*drogeros, indocumentados*, immigrant service workers, and, mostly gang members. Normally, I would not start out a book review with such a report, but I draw attention to the careful work by the group that sorted through hundreds of films and thousands of characters to analyze the data.

In addition, I would wager that nearly as many roles in movies and television that are deemed "Latino" are and have been played by non-Latinos, ranging from Brando's 1952 Emiliano Zapata in "Viva Zapata!" and the Mexican drug enforcement agent Miguel Vargas depicted by Charlton Heston in "Touch of Evil" (1958) to today's Kirsten Simone Vangsness, who plays Penelope Garcia in "Criminal Minds" and Vanessa Ferlito, who has played Latinas in a number of shows and movies, such as "CSI: NY." More recently, she plays FBI Agent Catherine "Charlie" DeMarco on "Graceland."

Notwithstanding the extraordinary successes of recent Mexican-born directors Alejandro González Iñárritu, Alfonso Cuarón, Guillermo del Toro, Emmanuel Lubezki, Rodrigo Prieto, Gael García Bernal, and Amat Escalante, few Mexican Americans have broken through in directing Hollywood movies. Robert Rodriguez is on a very short list, with Gregory Nava. With so few directors, fewer Latinos and Latinas are cast in movie and tv roles.

I recently watched "Law & Order SVU," one of the few television shows in prime time that features recurring Latino actors, including Raul Esparza, who plays the DA, and Danny Pino, who plays a regular detective. Both are Latino and play the roles as Latinos, including intermittent use of Spanish. (This franchise show has not always been so diverse, but it has morphed into this cast for the last few seasons.)

In a recent episode, the great Mercedes Ruehl (Oscar-winner for "The Fisher King" and a number of other awards for various roles on television, stage, and film) was on the show, playing the DA's mother in scenes about placing his Abuelita into an assisted living facility, scenes in which Spanish was used by all the characters. That Ruehl spoke such excellent Spanish made me think that she could be Latina. Even her name is not a giveaway (think of the non-Latina Carlotta Mercedes Agnes McCambridge, who won an Oscar in 1949 for "All the King's Men"). It turns out that Ruehl was born in the US and is Cuban. She has been involved in various Latino/a issues for some time: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001689/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm. Live and learn.

Surely, it is a sign of how bad things are that I feel such excitement at discovering one of our tribe, but it was striking all the more. How can we fare so badly in the various entertainment and arts enterprises, outside the ethnic enclaves of Spanish-language television, movies, and radio? It is clear that we have many talented entertainers, across the many fields. There are many miles to go before we sleep. Pero, tenemos sueños….

Therefore, it is a welcome sight to have a growing scholarly discourse about Mexican/Mexican American/and Latin American films, with several tendrils representing film culture, Latino music, and even scholarship directed at the confluence of music and film. From two separate and promising Latino cultural series, we have A. Gabriel Melendez's authoritative *Hidden Chicano Cinema: Film Dramas in the Borderlands*, Colin Gunckel's towering history of the Los Angeles film scene, *Mexico on Main Street: Transnational Film Culture in Los Angeles before World War II* and Ryan Rashotte's fascinating *Narco Cinema: Sex, Drugs, and Banda Music in Mexico's B-Filmography*.

Even those of us who did not grow up in Los Angeles knew that the heart of the film industry was Hollywood, and I have attended Spanish language films in the shrinking number of L.A.'s Main Street film palaces—both for Anglo and for Mexican-origin filmgoers—for many years. However, until Gunckel took me to school on this matter, I did not know the extraordinary run of such films and theaters, as the modern day economics of film attendance affected their existence the same as they have downtown single screen movie theaters everywhere.

The history of this parallel universe finally has its chronicler. I live much of the year in Houston, the fourth largest city in the U.S., with over 40% of its population Mexican and other Latino-origin, and there is only one old original movie theater left, in in the tony River Oaks area, and it divided up its balcony several decades ago to provide three screens in total, and it is a dismal facility. Virtually no Spanish language theatres exist any longer, including the one near where my wife and I lived for 17 years, near the University of Houston, which showed Spanish language films before it succumbed to being an evangelical immigrant church, the restored venues of choice for current liturgical practices.

I spend the rest of my time in my native New Mexico, where the El Rey and Burro Alley theaters closed when I was a child, and morphed into night clubs and restaurants. There, I would see all the new Cantinflas movies with my grandfather Sabino Olivas, who would then explain all the *cochino* nuances to me as we would walk home past the Dairy Queen or the Santa Fe Plaza Woolworth's drugstore, where we would buy Frito Pies. The Plaza was the final stop where the El Camino Real, the Old Santa Fe Trail, and the Old Pecos Trail converged. But Spanish language movie theaters no longer converge in New Mexico: research has turned up only several dozen northern New Mexico theaters and venues that occasionally show Spanish language films, or show current movies with Spanish subtitles.

Gunckel has a grand architectural eye, and has provided maps and photos of the dozens of theaters and entertainment venues along Main Street. But his real strength is in his narrative power, describing the cultural architecture:

> Central to these critical debates about Mexican cinema was the representation of the nation and its residents, along with the cinematic articulation of the national character that would distinguish its films from Hollywood productions, in turn allowing local theaters to mark their offerings as distinctly Mexican. But the nature of cinema as a medium (along with the global dominance of Hollywood) prompted a conception of national cinematic identity that mapped the combination of artistry and technology in fundamentally transnational terms. As countless excerpts from *La Opinión* readily demonstrate, journalists in Los Angeles consistently aligned Mexican (or, in a broader sense, Latin American) culture and the Spanish language with sentimentality, spirituality, and traditional morality, while U.S. culture was often characterized by technical expertise, modernization, and a lack of emotion.

This is a beautiful resource, in every sense of the word—to the mind's eye, to the eyes, and to the mind, reminding its readers that proximity to Mexico has powerful currents in U.S. national and regional culture, even as it marginalizes its practitioners. I would venture that there are more Australian and New Zealand actors and actresses practicing their craft in the United States than there are Mexicans and Latinos of all sorts, not even counting hobbits and orcs.

American Studies scholar A. Gabriel Melendez, in *Hidden Chicano Cinema: Film Dramas in the Borderlands* (published in the same Rutgers Latinidad series as is Gunckel's work), has drilled down into the long history of filmmaking in New Mexico—then and now the most Mexican state by population and geography—and has unearthed a number of fascinating backstories to films made in the State since the late 19th Century, which perforce would have featured New Mexican/Mexican American themes and stories. I will skip over the provenance of what constitutes a "Chicano" film, but I know one when I see one.

Melendez sensitively and carefully considers all the possible kaleidoscopes: whether a film is directed by Chicanos, whether it is Chicano-themed, whether the governance of the film and its overall narrative architecture is Chicano-driven, and the few films—virtually all of them obscure and politically-themed—that fit all these threads. He reviews dozens of films that were made in New Mexico, from an early Charles Lummis 1888 series of photographs and travelogue journals that showed the Penitentes in a bad light, to D.W. Griffith's 1915 film of the same phenomenon, "The Penitentes," and scrupulously analyzes short- and full-length films made in the then-Territory and after 1912, the State of New Mexico.

As a native, I have read about and seen a number of these films, and there have been hundreds made in the State, which began one of the early formal efforts to subsidize films and attract the industry to use its infrastructure of studios, landscapes, and folk narratives, particularly on the topics of Mexicans, Native Americans, and cowboys.

When it is noted that the State has a long history of filmmaking, neither Melendez nor I are exaggerating: the film engineer/entrepreneur Thomas Edison's film company made "Indian Day School" –the first film shot there—in late 1897 and released the very short film a year later (it can be seen on the website of the NM Office of the State Historian: Indian Day School).

Other major early filmmakers came to the State for their early work: Griffith, Gene Autry, and one of my favorite early NM films, "Flying Padre," the second film ever made by the erstwhile Stanley Kubrick. "Flying Padre" is a fascinating documentary from 1951, about a New Mexican priest, Father Fred Stadtmuller, who flew a small plane around the isolated areas of the State to serve and minister to his rural parishioners. (The film usefully appears on YouTube.) As it happens, I attended the same Catholic college seminary as did Father Fred—much later than he, as the film was made the year I was born—and came to know him from various Catholic activities, and visited him in his hospital room just before he passed away.

His critical powers are very astute, and he has a command of film theory and its major authors, particularly those who have written about Chicano filmmaking and film culture. He also has an excellent narrative style for recounting the various films he chose to examine in more details, many of which track real life incidents that occurred in the State and that occasioned film treatments.

Two that particularly stand out, over and above the pejorative Penitente films early on, are the fascinating stories about the 1950 copper mine strikes that led to "Salt of the Earth" (1954), widely considered to be a classic cult film that features local actors, predominantly Mexican American, and that portrays the male workers very positively and more remarkably, treats the Mexican American women as very strong characters—traits virtually unheard of at the time.

Melendez ventures outside the State to situate the similar positive thematic treatment of Mexican Americans in Texas, in what was and probably remains the most sympathetic feature film portrayal in the U.S. cinema, the 1958 "Giant." In research on the Chicano *veterano,* Macario Garcia, I found in a well-known incident where he was denied service in a restaurant in the Houston area in 1945, the likely seed for the final scene of "Giant," where Rock Hudson fights a redneck restauranteur over the rude and racist treatment accorded his Mexican American daughter-in-law and grandson.)

In addition to "Salt of the Earth," Melendez addresses a series of films about what was arguably the most important Chicano historical event of the last half of the past century, the armed raid upon the Tierra Amarilla Courthouse by Reies Lopez Tijerina in 1967, attempting to bring attention to the plight of Northern New Mexico land grant holders. My own family has such a land grant in Los Brazos, NM, about a dozen miles from Tierra Amarilla, less than an hour from the Colorado border.

Melendez is very thorough and sympathetic to Tijerina, an itinerant Arizona preacher, but I concede that I am not in a position to be fair or impartial on this matter, as my cousin Eulogio Salazar (mentioned by Melendez) was a jailer and was shot in the raid; within several months, he was brutally murdered in Canjilón, another small town nearby.

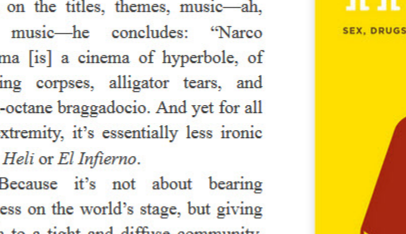
While Melendez mentions the shooting, he omits the murder of my Cousin Eloy. I have seen the various film treatments of the matter, and have read virtually every word written on the matter, and I have not yet seen any that fairly or thoroughly situates this matter of how Chicanos who shoot other Chicanos can be lionized.

Notwithstanding, Melendez is a serious scholar writing authoritatively about a very interesting and important dimension of film history—one not known or considered by most U.S. film critics and cineastes. His backstory to the making of Robert Redford's "The Milagro Bean Field War," perhaps the most popular film ever made in the State, is incisive and well-narrated. (It was also made in Truchas, as were many of these films, quite disproportionate to its location or size. It is the town where my paternal grandmother, Eliza Martinez Olivas, grew up.) He has also usefully treated the several PBS films made by my grade school classmate and filmmaker, Paul Espinosa, who is at work on a documentary film about Padre Antonio Martinez, the 19th century foil of the Archbishop fictionalized in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, a Willa Cather novel that all of us New Mexico schoolchildren were forced to read—sort of the State's "Mill of the Floss."

For a sample of the type of mind-bending creativity in the Chicano/Latino world, view Taco Shop Poets, a work by an iconoclastic master of documentaries, Paul Espinosa, founder of EspinosaProductions.com.

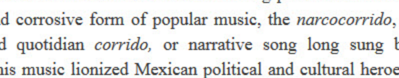
Ryan Rashotte, an independent scholar, is about a completely different task. He is a very talented observer of Narco cinema, which he defines as essentially low-brow and craven depictions of the huge *narcotrafficante* culture: it is "a low-budget direct-to-video cinema produced by Mexican and Mexican-American studios, predominantly for US Latina markets. It's a remarkably lucrative industry and in over 40 years of production has furnished a catalogue of thousands of films about narco culture in Mexico and the borderlands." He then relentlessly catalogs the filmography, the abject violence and terror associated with the drug culture, the music, and the political economy that this sector shares with pornography.

I was asked once if I had ever seen any narco cinema, and I sheepishly conceded I had done so, mostly to get a sense of the genre and the art of the deal. I thought of this college-audience question when I saw Benicio del Toro's wondrous performance as the narcotrafficante, Pablo Escobar, in "Escobar: Paradise Lost," , with about a dozen people in one of my favorite movie venues, the CCA in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Benicio del Toro is one of our country's most gifted actors, widely recognized as such (with an Oscar and a number of other awards), yet he has carved out this niche as a *drogero* and Latin revolutionary, with important roles in "Traffic," "21 Grams," "Che," "Savages," "Escobar: Paradise Lost," and "Sicario." He also has had plain old roles, such as in "The Hunted" and "The Wolf Man," but it is remarkable that such a talent mostly stars in negative, stereotyped roles.



I will say this about Rashotte—he has a delicious *razcuache* sense of these movies, which is an absolutely necessary talent in laying them out. He calls them "an addiction," and I believe him. At the end of this too-short but unrushed exposition of the genre, with riffs on the titles, themes, music—ah, the music—he concludes: "Narco cinema [is] a cinema of hyperbole, of snoring corpses, alligator tears, and high-octane braggadocio. And yet for all its extremity, it's essentially less ironic than *Heli* or *El Infierno*.

Because it's not about bearing witness on the world's stage, but giving myth to a tight and diffuse community, myth in the sense both intimate and unreal. The films don't require the suspension of disbelief, that's precisely their gift to viewers." I intend to check in on his continuing project, and all I can say is: better him than me.



I have thought about these issues in different though related terms, and I have considered the role of music in *narcocorridos,* particularly the role of drug references in rock and roll, for my weekly NPR show, The Law of Rock and Roll: www.lawofrockandroll.com. Although many states have medical marijuana and a handful of states allow marijuana for personal use, it is still illegal under most federal law and banned in most states. That said, rock and roll titles and lyrics have often referred to drugs of all sorts, whether hidden (such as in "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," "White Rabbit," or "Sugar Man") or more obvious, as in ("Rehab," "Cocaine," or "Casey Jones").

Of course, the songs do not always glorify drug use, and some of the most powerful anti-drug references have also appeared in rock and roll (Neil Young's "The Needle and the Damage Done"), even if singing "Angel Dust" did not save Gil Scott-Heron from a later drug conviction. And there may be no more haunting song in the deep John Lennon canon than his soul-searing "Cold Turkey."

The rampant drug distribution culture that has turned Mexico into a launching platform to satisfy the U.S. drug appetite has spawned a new and corrosive form of popular music, the *narcocorrido*, a drug-specific form of the more popular and quotidian *corrido,* or narrative song long sung by chroniclers of Mexican culture and history. This music lionized Mexican political and cultural heroes, beginning with the War of Independence of 1810 until 1821. And they flourished particularly following the 1910 Mexican Revolution, when so many Mexicans fled the violence but kept in touch with each other by singing these songs. (Lydia Mendoza's "Mal Hombre" is a good example.)

Most of these songs were positive moral tales, particularly emphasizing the views of the poor *campesinos*, urging them to persist and to improve their lot. While the tradition was largely oral, sung at gatherings and festivities and later transmitted by radio, they were also printed as broadsides for distribution.

Of a fashion, the *narcocorrido* performs the same function, but instead of valorous tales of war and independence, these songs and the rising narco movie productions record the drug culture that has led to unfathomable violence and corruption on both sides of the border. The leading practitioners of this genre are Los Tigres del Norte, a border band that has been wildly successful in *norteño* Mexican and Mexican American communities since the mid-1970s, as in their "Contrabando y Traición." A number of the dozens of *narcocorrido* bands have deep roots in the Mexican State of Sinaloa, where a number of the *narcotrafficantes* have originated and where they enjoy outlaw status and practice their trade in open sight, defying authority and engaging in their dangerous business. It has also proven to be a dangerous business for singers in this genre, as dozens have been killed, likely due to their transgressive song choices and involvement in the fringes of drug life. Here, listen to Los Tucanes de Tijuana's iconic "El Chapo Guzmán," one of many such tributes: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tx6N5AHpoqQ

Mexican officials have attempted without any success to quell these songs, enacting policies to ban the music: Chihuahua, the Mexican State across from El Paso, Texas, passed a law (300,000 peso fine or 36 hours in prison) to punish anyone who organized events featuring the music, hired such bands, or distributed *narcocorridos*. Sinaloa, home to so many *drogeros,* has also unsuccessfully attempted to ban the music. Of course, banning their performances is one thing, but blocking internet, border radio stations, and street-level sales of CDs and DVDs is quite another. While few play actual narco music, there are 18 Spanish language radio stations in Houston alone—all of which can be heard or tuned-into online. Neither King Canute nor Mexican officials can turn back this musical tide.

And while I acknowledge the phenomenon evident in this genre, I would prefer to listen to Mexican American artists who have not gone this route, such as the genuinely talented and popular La Mafia, the first such band to tour extensively in Mexico and Latin America, or the wonderful Tish Hinojosa, whose signature song, "Con su pluma en su mano" (with his pen in hand), honors the great Mexican American folklorist Américo Paredes, whose scholarly work chronicled *corridos* and folklore. And I grew up on the Northern New Mexico music of Al Hurricane, and have heard him play "(El Corrido De) La Prison De Santa Fe" many times. This brings us full circle, back to the original *corrido*, adapted today for other less-worthy purposes.

One final thread stitches together all these artists, across genres of entertainment: we clearly have the talent, but all of us all should raise a stink on behalf of these performers and entertainment, who have so few opportunities, in contrast to other actors and actresses. Only then will their professional attainment match their talents.

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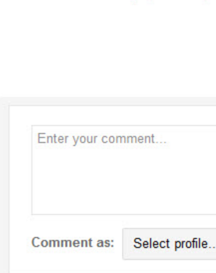

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