

OF MESTIZAJE, BRICOLAGE, AND TERGIVERSATORS

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Rosa Linda Fregoso, *The Bronze Screen, Chicana and Chicano Film Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). xxiii + 166 pp.

In a recent review of Chon Noriega's 1992 edited volume, *Chicanos and Film: Essays on Chicano Representation and Resistance*,¹ I wrote,

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. . . .²

Rosa Linda Fregoso's book, *The Bronze Screen, Chicana and Chicano Film Culture*, is not that work, but it is an important and signal advance in Chicana/o critical film theory. Among the growing shelf's worth of books on Chicano films, this book and Gary Keller's newest, *Hispanics and United States Film: An Overview and Handbook*,³ are complementary bookends.

Fregoso's work is highly conceptual, steeped in postmodern film theory and aesthetics. The brief introduction and five chapters each weave film theory, deconstructionist analytic tools, and Chicano/a criticism into an example of an important film or films. In her brief but interesting introductory chapter, she sets out her intellectual lineage, what she characterizes as "intellectual fashions": poststructuralism, postmodernism, feminism (classic and Third World), classic Marxist political economy, nationalism, postcolonialism, and cultural studies (race/gender/sexuality). Of course, these currents undergird the formation of many or most academics trained in the humanities or social sciences since the 1970s, when Chicano/a academics have come of age. She is particularly influenced by what she terms "feminism's critical discourse on film"—especially "the construction of gendered subjectivities," that is, representations of gender.

If the use of these "intellectual fashions" occasionally results in opacity rather than lucidity, it may be because she sees her cultural studies approach as "a mestizaje, a bricolage." It may be that for Chicanos or Chicanas, *mestizaje* is an irresistible lure, given our mestizo heritage, but as cultural theory it can be imprecise and lacking in specific detail. Like Fregoso, I have read Saidiya Hartran, but I still do not understand the concept of "transcendental homelessness," or, at least, I do not understand its application to Chicanos, especially to those born in the United States, and I have never felt that I was a "subaltern."

In fact, Fregoso's aesthetic is a classical critical theory approach, one grounded in feminism, and her range is in narrative filmmaking. Thus, she is most interested in the accessible studio and independent films that comprise Chicano/a film culture. Notwithstanding her fondness for Lourdes Portillo's short works (such as *Después del terremoto* and *La ofrenda*) and Willie Varela's experimental films, she is most at home critiquing early Raza-genre and *Movimiento* films (*I Am Joaquín*, *Raíces de sangre*, *Águeda Martínez*, *Chicana*, and *Yo soy chicano*) and

longer, feature films (*Zoot Suit*, *La Bamba*, *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, *Born in East L.A.*, *El Norte*, and *American Me*).

Her treatment of the 1960s Chicano classics is thorough and imaginative. It may be just too easy to treat the early works as male renditions of primal Mexican/Indian myths, and she does not stoop to such quick characterizations. Rather, she notes their mythmaking, using a rendition that is almost one of art history, and contrasts the approaches of Luis Valdez and Jesús Treviño with those of Esperanza Vásquez (in *Águeda Martínez: Our People, Our Country*, made with Moctesuma Esparza) and Sylvia Morales, in *Chicana*, the most widely known of the 1960s-era Latina films. I would have been interested in her evaluation of *Chulas fronteras*, with its front-and-center treatment of Lydia Mendoza and her music.

While Chapter Two is organized around the theme of "intertextuality and cultural identity," its freshest insights are the treatment of *Zoot Suit* and *La Bamba* as essentially artistic compromises aimed at mainstream moviegoers. (Here she also critiques the theatrical treatment of *Zoot Suit* as an accommodation made to eastern theater patrons.) Unlike many who have ridiculed the efforts as commercialized versions of Chicano icons—the Pachuco and Ritchie Valens (né Valenzuela)—Fregoso seems accepting and understanding of the pressures on director Luis Valdez to make commercially successful "ethnic" films. She likes his politics, his scholarship, and his aesthetics. For instance, she forgives the distortions deemed necessary to give structure to *La Bamba*'s narrative (e.g., demonizing Ritchie's bad-boy brother Bob) by seeing in Valdez's design a neo-Mayan and Aztec philosophy. My recent rewatching of the film corroborated some of her insights, but I find the notion of "Jesucristo-Quetzalcoatl" a little too attenuated and unconvincing. This "mestizaje/bricolage" approach may be too rich for such an avowedly mainstream movie, although I recently heard Luis Valdez speak at a lunch where he defended his choice of Laura San Giacomo to play the role of Frida Kahlo in his forthcoming production. I left that lunch, where he said "I am a woman and an Italian is a Chicana" (or something to that effect), feeling confused and uncertain about what he had meant. (It may have been the bricolage I had for dessert.)

Whatever imprecisions and fluctuations there are in her treatment of Valdez, a brilliant but sometimes confusing director, Fregoso is at the height of her powers in analyzing Chicano cinematic humor. (It is notable how little Chicano filmmaking is overtly comedic, when so much ethnic comedy is prevalent in Hollywood films.) In "Humor as Subversive De-Construction, *Born in East L.A.*," she skillfully analyzes the most popularly successful Chicano filmmaker, Richard (Cheech) Marín, particularly his 1987 classic, *Born in East L.A.*

First, she grounds Marín's style in the longstanding Mexican tradition of *teatro* and *carpa* performances, citing the influence of Cantinflas and Tin-Tan. She overlooks (or does not cite) the historical work of Nicolás Kanellos, which would have suggested that Marín draws from the old Mexican vaudeville character, the *peladito*, a humorous, scatological tramp-clown figure that is a likely precursor to both of Cheech's principal screen personas, the dooper (in *Up in Smoke*, *Cheech & Chong's Next Movie*, *Nice Dreams*, and *Cheech & Chong, Still Smoking*) and Rudy, the hapless Chicano "repatriated" to Mexico in *Born*.⁴

She is very astute in her recounting of Rudy's hide-and-seek comic attempts to reenter the United States, his farcical time in Tijuana, his teaching of East L.A. cool to the Asian students, and his final triumphant return to the homeland. For example, she notes perceptively of this final return,

Determined to return home, Rudy, along with hundreds of thousands of undocumented "brown" people, descends from the mountaintop upon two unsuspecting border agents. Through invoking this political/religious metaphor of

struggle, *Born in East L.A.* resists [the] ideology of individual heroism at the same time that the film reaffirms the sense of collectivity. (61)

This is a powerful insight, for the film mockingly depicts both the vigor of the national effort at border control (Rudy's thwarted efforts) and the ultimate futility of stopping persons bent upon entering (thousands, but not "hundreds of thousands" of *indocumentados* swarming at the two ineffectual agents). Indeed, *Born in East L.A.* is the premier seriocomic depiction of the paradox of undocumented immigration: the United States policy of spasmodic official enforcement but unofficial invitations to enter. Marín's hilarious treatment of repatriation contrasts sharply with the more tragic, dramatic repatriation of the pregnant mother in Gregory Nava's recent *My Family/Mi Familia*, where the harm to her, her child, and her family is substantial, serious, and longstanding. Repatriation, featured also in *Break of Dawn*, *Ballad of an Unsung Hero*, and other Latino films, has become a Chicano trope, emblematic of the colonized minority literally displaced by the majority power. Fregoso believes, as I do, that Marín is an important filmmaker with a keen cinematic sense of political humor.

Her judgments are consistently sound, her writing style fluid, and her choices interesting. To be sure, reading her requires substantial familiarity with a sophisticated literature, one that crosses disciplinary lines of fine arts, social sciences, Chicano studies, and film studies. Occasionally, she overdoes the background. My favorite example is: "He [Cheech] re-inscribes a Chicano political space that ruptures both the notion of Hollywood hegemony and borders of political correctness in Chicano cinema" (62). I am willing to believe that there is such a thing as "political correctness in Chicano cinema," but Fregoso doesn't describe it clearly. (I am reminded of a joke: What do you get when you cross a gangster and a deconstructionist? Someone who makes you an offer you cannot understand.) Also, for a feminist scholar, she tolerates a lot of Cheech's *cochinada*. Even so, this is an important and largely engaging work, certainly a vast improvement over her contribution to the Chon Noriega-edited volume, in which she was shrill, unfocused, and oblique.⁵ She is much more sure-footed when she focuses her substantial attention on the films, not on personalities.

Keller's previously mentioned volume, *Hispanics and United States Film: An Overview and Handbook*,* is one of those magnificent works that the reader simply cannot imagine anyone undertaking to create but is enormously grateful to see completed. (The Kanellos volume, cited earlier, also comes to mind.) In the seven chapters, Keller reviews and comments on literally thousands of films by and about Latinos, from early "greaser films" to current releases. While it is essentially chronological, it is also divided by genre (the Hispanic avenger, gang films, Puerto Rican films, etc.). It is encyclopedic, jam-packed with detail and commentary, and fascinating.

Doing this kind of work, usually undertaken over a period of years by teams of researchers, requires access to enormous reams of archival materials, extraordinary synthetic powers, and an obvious love of films. Hidden gems delight: Walt Disney's Latin American films for the furtherance of the Good Neighbor Policy, a rogues' who's-who of Anglos who have portrayed Latinos (my favorites were Jack Palance as, no kidding, "Jesús Raza" in *The Professionals*, several years before he played a more famous revolutionary in *Che!*, and Paul Newman in *Outrage*, a Hispanic *Rashomon*), and a sub-subgenre of boxing films (e.g., *Requiem for a Heavyweight*). Given the sheer number, Keller sometimes confusingly categorizes the films, such as listing Ricardo Montalbán's 1950 *Right Cross* as a Hispanic good Samaritan film as well as its more

*Managing Editor's note: Gary Keller's book was not commissioned for review here as it is a Bilingual Press book, and it is not our policy to review our own publications in *The Bilingual Review*. The passages that follow are the responsibility of the author.

natural venue as a boxing film.⁶ (He omitted the journeyman Mexican pugilist from John Huston's *Fat City*, who calmly urinates blood after his boxing match with Jeff Bridges.) And there are inevitably errors, even though this is a very well-researched and thoroughly documented work: Rita Moreno is the first Hispanic *woman* to receive an Oscar, following José Ferrer and Anthony Quinn, and "daring-do" is "derring-do." But I quibble.

Keller treats documentaries, narrative films, shorts, and other film formats, and he does so with a steady hand and a practiced eye that has certainly seen many of these films. And he has a sharp wit for these vignettes—witness his insightful treatment of the gay caballero genre, highly stylized and quintessentially Latino:

The gay caballero is essentially a Latino Robin Hood. Or a pseudo-Latino one: occasionally the plot has the masked man turn out to be an Anglo in Latino disguise. The specific allusion to the Hispanic Robin Hood was common in the trade advertising or the reviews of the films, and particularly so after Douglas Fairbanks's 1922 *Robin Hood*, which, however, postdates the first Zorro film. Fairbanks did *The Good Badman* in 1916 which has some of the qualities of his Zorro role.

The Robin Hood connection is understandable in light of the fact that Douglas Fairbanks, who was closely associated with the Sherwood Forest, was the first Zorro, simply transferring his persona which featured cheerful exuberance, courage, a devil-may-care attitude, and extraordinary physical agility to the Southwest. [Richard] Koszarski points out that "what might have been a wrenching change of image for a lesser star only served to increase Fairbanks's popularity, for his new Don Diego character was simply Doug's old American aristocrat dressed up for a costume party. Behind Zorro's mask was the Fairbanks his fans had come to adore, now fully liberated through the simple expedient of the period setting." (60)

By his own admission, he has only "scratched the surface" in his cataloging efforts, and we should all be grateful to him for this prodigious feat. Except for an old score he settles with Fregoso in an extended footnote at the end of the book,⁷ he has a generous and cheerful approach to this task. These two works are indispensable bookends, complementary to each other. Neither is the "ground-breaking work in film criticism" I predicted would appear, as that book has not yet been written. When it does appear, however, it will combine the best elements of these two volumes. And then let one of our directors (maybe my New Mexican grade-school classmate Paul Espinosa) with Keller's eye and Fregoso's sensibility assemble a Latino/a *That's Entertainment!* video edited entirely from these films and narrated by Rita Moreno. You read it here first.

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Notes

¹Chon Noriega, ed., *Chicanos and Film: Essays on Chicano Representation and Resistance* (New York: Garland Press, 1992).

²Michael A. Olivas, "Of Pachucos, Yeguas, Greasers and Coffee and Eggs: Chicanos and Film Criticism," *Bilingual Review/Revista Bilingüe* 19, no. 1 (January-April 1994): 75.

³Gary D. Keller, *Hispanics and United States Film: An Overview and Handbook* (Tempe, AZ: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 1994).

⁴Nicolás Kanellos, *A History of Hispanic Theater in the United States: Origins to 1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), pp. 24, 90-103.

⁵For example, she accused Keller of excluding women scholars in his 1985 volume, *Chicano Cinema: Research, Reviews, and Resources* (Binghamton, NY: Bilingual Press, 1985), when, in fact, six of the twelve essays other than Keller's were written by women, including Fregoso.

⁶This also points to the need for a good index. No project this large and comprehensive should be published without a thorough, cross-referenced index. (I might note that in the introduction to his volume, Keller states that the forthcoming *Pictorial Handbook of Hispanics and United States Film* will contain "a general index cross-referenced to both volumes" [2].)

⁷He defends himself against her "bilious passage" and "frivolous agenda." He is so angry that he resorts to calling her argument a "straw dog" when I believe he means a "straw man" or a "red herring." He also chides her for overlooking Cheech Marín's "salacious and juvenile humor" and, in an accusation that sent me to the dictionary, he calls her an "elitist theoretical tergiversator of humor." The term means "one who uses subterfuges." I hereby put all my colleagues on notice that if they ever call me an "elitist theoretical tergiversator," in print or in person, I will hunt them down like a straw dog.