Identity and Otherness in Contemporary Chicano Cinema
– An introduction

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1) Preliminary remarks

In the last decades, most Western nations have become countries of very significant immigration and diaspora. The effects of increasing globalisation have accelerated this process, and the results have been closely monitored and discussed, not only in political discourse but in the media as well. Cinema and TV are no exception, and in a virtual world media portrayals of cultural encounters are of key importance, be it as potential reflections of popular attitudes, ideas and preoccupations towards migration, or as regards their likely impact on popular views and opinions on the topic (see Rings 2008; Loshitzky 2010; Gomann/Jaschke/ Mrugalla 2011).

All this is a particularly hot topic in the United States as, despite all measures to reduce immigration, including the construction of a 2000-mile long border fence which has been compared to the Berlin Wall, the number of residents with migrant background is on the increase. With nearly forty-five million people (Diaz de Leon 2011), the Hispanic population forms by far the most significant minority making the US numerically the third biggest Spanish-speaking country in Latin America, preceded only by Mexico and Colombia. Considering that the vast majority of the Hispanic diaspora has Mexican roots, that Mexican-American birth rates tend to be considerably higher than Anglo-American birth rates and that more than 140,000 Mexicans continue to migrate to the United States every year (Terrazas 2010), it is no surprise that the continuous increase in people with Mexican background remains a major theme for US cinema and TV.

Chicano cinema is probably the most visible expression of this media discussion, as the ever growing number of directors and scriptwriters who have focused on Mexican migration to and diaspora life in the US have managed to bring migrant perspectives into numerous Hollywood productions as well as TV, therefore reaching North-American mainstream population on a regular basis now. While such a popularity was clearly unthinkable for the producers of the predominantly documentary–style first phase of Chicano Cinema, which was well known for its radical critique of common patterns of discrimination and exclusion of
Hispanic minorities in post WWII US (Berg 2002: 186), there is also a potential downside to this success, which includes the danger of assimilating filmic messages to the taste of mainstream audiences.

According to Berg, most examples of contemporary Chicano cinema could be categorised into one of two movements that have developed largely in parallel: There are the films of the ‘rebellious, not separatist […] Second Wave’, for which Young’s Alambrista (1977) would be an early example, and then in particular the productions of the ‘Third Wave’, which starts in the 1980s with films by Jesús Salvador Treviño and Robert Rodríguez and could be regarded as ‘made either within the Hollywood system or, if not, adhering closely to the Hollywood paradigm’, and that includes a reluctance to ‘accentuate Chicano oppression or resistance’ (Berg 2002: 187). As the scholar rightly points out, the assimilation of Hollywood paradigms in that Third Wave does not necessarily imply that ‘that the films are […] non-political, devoid of commentary about Otherness, or that their makers have sold out’ (Berg 2002: 187). However, there is certainly the danger of self-censorship of political messages and cinematic style with a view to increase or maximise the chances of box office success, which tend to be key for securing the necessary funding by predominantly white, male and conservative sponsors and/or producers in the first place.

A question of interest to all contributors is in how far the films discussed in this special issue of imex 2 reflect alternative perspectives to the well known Hollywood assimilation paradigms that frequently culminate in the American Dream leitmotif or the melting pot allegory as established models for national identity building. Drawing on an operative concept of culture, the identification of cinema as a key factor in the shaping of mentalities and the education of its viewers, as well as recent research on Chicano cinema, individual contributors will address at least one of the following questions:

1. How successful are the directors in providing alternative histories of migration that manage to transgress the boundaries and constraints of traditional discourses?
2. How do their films express cultural difference and interconnectedness, and to what extent could they be categorised as parts of a wider transcultural discourse?
3. How significant can the differences be between the director’s and the producer’s perspective vis-à-vis the spectator’s reception.
2) Contributions

For this special issue, we have brought together a unique combination of pooled expertise from countries that reflect key migration patterns in Western nations, and the wide spectrum of media responses to it. While the focus is obviously on the Anglo-American spectrum, i.e. on the US, the UK and Ireland, there are also contributions from Spain and Germany. *iMex* contributions embrace a variety of disciplines that lead current research into Mexican migration and Chicano diaspora as reflected in contemporary cinema and TV, in particular media studies (Barrow), Latin American studies (Pitman), sociology (Mora), anthropology (García Castaño, Bretones, Abuladze), intercultural and transcultural studies (Carty), postcolonial studies (Rings) and gender studies (Simón-Lopez), although all contributors are highly interdisciplinary in their critical interrogation of narratives on migration and diaspora.

In addition, the short ‘ámbito cultural’ section offers perspectives from colleagues in law (Gómez Jimenez) and intercultural communication (Vogler).

The article section starts with Thea Pitman’s redefinition of Chicano cinema beyond traditional boundaries in which racial categories have been (and continue to be) employed to frame the ever growing number of movies on the topic in a way that facilitates their exclusion from mainstream cinema. In her study, ‘Allison Anders and the Racial “Authenticity” Membership-Test: Keeping “Mi vida loca/My Crazy Life” (1994) on the Borders of Chicano Cinema’, Pitman argues that, while numerous non-essentialist theorisations of Chicano identity have been put forward by key critics working in the field, these same critics still struggle, on occasion, to disentangle themselves from using essentialist arguments in their own work. A prime example of this problem is the debate over definitions of ‘Chicano cinema’, which has frequently been reduced to films which must be produced for, by and about Chicanos. Pitman argues that such a racial limitation (by and for Chicanos) cannot be upheld any longer and proposes a more open definition which ought to focus on Chicano themes. In this context, she examines non-Chicana director Allison Anders’s *Mi vida loca*, a film that has provoked a quite particular polemic. Pitman’s discussion of Anders’s film centres on its reception among a range of professional film critics, mostly Chicana/os, as well as reports on the reaction of a sample group of the film’s subjects – Chicana gang members – to their representation on screen. It examines the factors at play in the way it has been received, and exposes evidence of recursive essentialism in such arguments where apparent.

In ‘Deconstructive Humour: Subverting Mexican and Chicano Stereotypes in “Un Día Sin Mexicanos” (Sergio Arau 2004)’, Sarah Barrow explores the use of humour as a subversive
tool to deconstruct certain myths and stereotypes of Mexican and Chicano identity in Sergio Arau’s popular debut feature Un Día Sin Mexicanos. She argues that the ‘Mexicans’ referred to in the film’s title and used in much of its dialogue stand metonymically for all Hispanic immigrants, whether recently arrived, or born in the US and of Hispanic descent, and stresses that this focus correlates with the introduction of controversial anti-immigration legislation in California in 1994, which could be regarded as a reflection of growing national scepticism if not xenophobia vis-à-vis the significantly growing Hispanic population. In particular, Barrow asks to what extent Arau’s filmic satire offers a critique of the Mexican immigrant experience, and of discrimination more broadly against Hispanic minorities. In so doing, she explores the ways in which the politics of resistance that are so often aligned with these experiences are inscribed in its narrative form.

Alexandra Simon-López’s study of ‘Masculinities in Robert Rodríguez’s “Mexico Trilogy”’, discusses the various layers of masculinity, in particular hegemonic masculinity and the notion of ‘machismo’ used in Robert Rodríguez’s key work which comprises the films El Mariachi (1992), Desperado (1995), and Once upon a time in Mexico (2003). Their focus on male hybridity is of particular interest for this study because it could be regarded as an important means of resistance to patriarchal masculinity which links up to the symbolism of Western colonialism in the films. Ultimately, El Mariachi, Desperado and Once upon a time in Mexico seem to question traditional hegemonic masculinity quite successfully, although the last part of the trilogy appears to be considerably more explicit in its post-colonial agenda.

In ‘The Cinematic Cholo in “Havoc”’, Richard Mora explores the role of the ‘cholo’, an expression used to label Mexican American (or other Latino) gang members in the Southwest of the United States. The author argues that the cholo, in his view an abject being within Kopple’s controversial film from 2005, serves as the deviant other, whose personality and character is stunted by neighbourhood pathologies, and stands in contrast to the rich, white characters for whom deviancy is an adolescent rite of passage, not a final destination. This is very much in line with an earlier work by Mora (2011) in which the author explores cholo characters as stereotypes that do not develop as the film progresses. Instead, they are embedded in the narrative in very predictable ways.

Gabrielle Carty’s article ‘Language, Space and the Evolving Chicano Family in Nava’s “My Family”’ focuses on My Family as an outstanding example of Chicano cinema that was successful in reaching both minority and so-called mainstream audiences. In particular, the study explores the film’s use of language (specifically, code-switching), its representation of
space (the film is set almost exclusively in East L.A.), and its representation of the family (the film depicts three generations of a Chicano family). These categories are examined in turn to determine the extent to which *My Family* enacts a dialectic between accessibility (openness to the dominant culture) and inaccessibility (the assertion of difference), concluding that the film rejects separatism and assimilation in favour of integration.

The article section ends with Fco. Javier García Castaño’s, Damián Esteban Bretones’ and Tamar Abuladze’s joint contribution “‘Mirando’ *Bread and Roses*” which analyses the representations of migration and labour conflicts in Ken Loach’s acclaimed film from 2000. In particular their study explores spectators’ perspectives in comparison with the director’s political agenda and the information provided by the producer’s synopsis. In this case, the spectators are university students who have studied key aspects of contemporary migration in the ‘Instituto de Migraciones’ in Granada University and have seen *Bread and Roses* as part of an experiment in a module on ‘Cine y migraciones’. While – considering this context – the investigators started from the assumption that the focus of students’ reception would be on migration topics and theoretical concepts delivered in lectures, the results prove how far these overall rather critical spectators have actually been guided by the director’s Trotskyist agenda and the information provided by the producer’s synopsis. This is yet another indication of the impact cinema can actually have on the views and opinions of the the general public regarding migration and diaspora, and here in particular on Chicanos in the United States.

Under ‘ámbito cultural’, *iMex* 2 offers trailers of all key films explored in the articles section, e.g. *Mi vida loca, Un día sin mexicanos, The Mexico Trilogy, My family, Havoc, Bread and Roses*, and also selected interviews with directors and actors. Furthermore, Petra Vogler contributes with an intercultural perspective on female migrant experiences as reflected in *La Misma Luna* and, in her discussion of housing rights in the United States, María Luisa Gómez Jiménez introduces thoughts from a law perspective on *My family*.

In the review section, this special issue offers a conference report by María Eugenia González Cortés on the *Primer Festival de Cine Chicano* in Mexico City, which highlights the extent to which Chicano cinema has so far been marginalised in Mexico itself, i.e. rightly or rather wrongly Mexican emigration and Chicano diaspora in the US are clearly far more a topic for the country of destination than for the country of origin. Furthermore, there are two book reviews which complement the article section because of their focus on the country of origin: Marion Röwekamp explores Giovanni di Stefano’s and Michael Peters’s volume *Mexico como punto de fuga real o imaginario* (Munich: Meidenbauer 2011), which deals with a wide variety of academic contributions on the migration from Europe to Mexico within the
context of WWII. Overall, the volume draws our attention to the cyclical development of migration and diaspora (Europe – from emigration to immigration; vice versa for Mexico), and could help increase intercultural awareness and competence, starting with the ability of readers from the post-industrialised West to detect their Self in the migrant. Finally, Vera Elisabeth Gerling’s review of Anne Hufschmid’s Mexiko – das Land und die Freiheit from 2010 presents a book that offers a very interesting introduction into Mexico, with particular focus on its history (e.g. its revolution and independence) and the complexities of contemporary life arising from poverty, ‘machismo’ and the everyday violence of the ‘modern mafia’, complexities which already indicate some of the numerous reasons for searching a better life in the US.

3) Continuities and discontinuities

In line with recent studies on European migrant cinema, which have highlighted monocultural patterns of thought in the filmic reconstruction and dissemination of ghetto concepts that tend to permanently exclude people with migrant background from the ‘host culture’ (see Rings 2008, Halft 2010), Mora and Pitman confirm essentialist identity constructs and ‘racialised’ patterns of exclusion in Chicano cinema with a particular focus on Havoc and Mi vida loca.

On the other hand, Barrow, García Castaño, Bretones and Abuladze draw our attention to the more transcultural orientation and reception of films like Un día sin mexicanos and Bread and Roses in a genre which aims to blur traditional boundaries in a political context characterised by increasing scepticism and/or xenophobia vis-à-vis new immigrants, although at least the Obama administration pursues within the current election period a much more open policy (see Little 2012) than its conservative opponent Mitt Romney and many European governments (see for example Cameron’s push for a radical cap on immigration in the UK as summarised in BBC 2011).

Finally, there are productions like My family and the Mexico Trilogy which present scenarios that continue to fuel – even more explicitly than the films mentioned above – an ongoing debate about the acceptance or rejection of established boundaries: While Carty detects a tendency to integration and negotiation of identities in My family, within which the protagonists aim to destabilise the traditional binary of assimilation or exclusion, Rings (2012) regards My family more as film that reflects neo-colonial concepts of assimilation, which marginalise the cultural heritage of the Chicano diaspora and suppress cultural
difference in favour of Western constructs of progress, as visible also in Akin’s *The edge of heaven/Auf der anderen Seite* (Naiboglu 2010) or Chadha’s *Bend it like Beckham* (Rings 2011). Similarly, the interplay of hegemonic and hybrid masculinities in the *Mexico Trilogy* analysed by Simon-López leaves room for further discussion.

Overall, this compilation of studies highlights the fact that the search for identity in contemporary Chicano cinema and the academic debate around it are far from closed, and there is no reason for assuming optimistically that migrant cinema will follow a linear development in its deconstruction of mono-cultural patterns of thought. However, there is hope that directors and scriptwriters will increasingly develop a more open, intercultural and/or transcultural portrayal of migration and diaspora life, which could help viewers consider Chicanos more as an essential and enriching part of contemporary postmodern US society, rather than an ongoing problem and an indicator of decline.

**Bibliography**


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