FRAMING FILM

THE HISTORY & ART OF CINEMA

14

The Hispanic Image in Hollywood

A Postcolonial Approach

JORGE J. BARRUETO

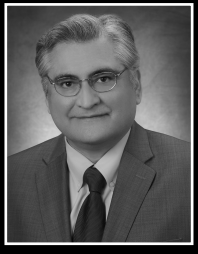
The Hispanic Image in Hollywood: A Postcolonial Approach offers an in-depth analysis of how Hispanics are represented in American cinema. Film production is a reflection of American historical processes that have defined Hispanics and American mainstream identity as oppositional forces in the domestic political establishment. Hispanic difference, as depicted in film, is understood as the by-product of Western philosophy, Western science, territorial expansion, colonialism and American nation building, wherein Hispanics have been identified as the antithetical, ubiquitous Other. More precisely, specific Hollywood films not only mirror American history but also a variety of political discourses that have defined Hispanic identity. Thematic categories of American history used to construct Hispanics reflect, in many ways, a deep-rooted, Eurocentric, colonial worldview. As the research of this book clearly shows, film depictions of Hispanics have created negative visual taxonomies based on gender, race, and class.

"Jorge J. Barrueto has detailed and analyzed a diverse number of classical and contemporary films which clearly delineate the stereotypical and biased manner in which Hispanics are portrayed in North American cinema. Utilizing empirical data from canonical pre- and post-colonial texts, Barrueto skillfully deconstructs a number of Hispanic films to show, ontologically and historically, the North American's negative attitude toward Hispanic and Latino culture, especially of those Hispanics living in the United States. This book is highly recommended for graduate and undergraduate students of Latin American culture and civilization as it also contains a thorough and well-written introduction and a very detailed bibliography with relevant, appropriate, and informative footnotes."

Víctor Manuel Durán, Professor of Spanish and Chair of the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, University of South Carolina

"Jorge J. Barrueto has certainly done extensive research on the subject. I applaud his choice of films for the book and regard this publication as important to the field of film studies. The theoretical approach he has taken is a solid one, and the project is in step with the current direction of Latino/a media scholarship."

Christine List, Professor and Program Coordinator, Communications, Media Arts, and Theatre, Chicago State University



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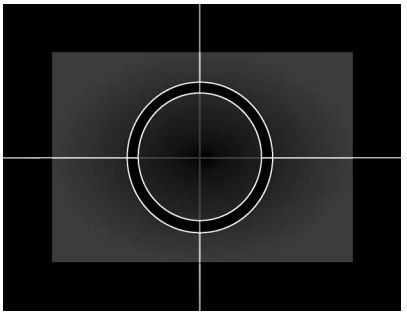
The Hispanic Image in Hollywood



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The History & Art of Cinema

Frank Beaver, *General Editor*

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Introduction

The Hispanic image in American film is as old as Hollywood itself; it was born alongside the transformation of the town from a sleepy agricultural village to the center of American cinema. In fact, the very first film shot in Hollywood was D. W. Griffith's *In Old California* (1910).[1] It is revealing, as well, that this film has an ethnic component. It is a drama about the cultural shortcomings of a Hispanic family, a story which foreshadows contemporary Hispanic representation in Hollywood productions. The narrative revolves around Perdita, a Mexican woman who has a son with Cortes, the local Don Juan. Despite the hopes of his mother, the son becomes a thief, having inherited his father's moral failings. The message of the film is clear: Hispanics, by culture and biology, are incompatible with the ideal homogenous society and, as the ending suggests, deserving of social exclusion.

As with Griffith's rendering of Cortes and his son as drunkards and thieves, the film industry depicts Hispanics as primordially un-American, the embodiment of the dangerous ethnic Other. Hispanics are, among other things, portrayed as criminal, irrational, superstitious and sexually dangerous.[2] In order to understand this historical imagery in Hollywood films, it is useful to identify how the mechanisms of ethnic representation work. In this sense, ethnic images, whether in photography, television or film, refer to the ideological relationship of such iconography to particular ontological prototypes. *Webster's Dictionary* defines *representation* as "the act of portrayal, picturing, or other rendering in visible form."[3] It can be said that representation is a system that originates, establishes and updates relationships between the image (people, things, and symbols) and socio-political concepts.[4] The symbiotic connection between conception and perception only makes sense through the prevailing social beliefs in a determined culture.

Hollywood uses a compendium of images to develop plots and construct stories about ethnic groups; in our case, it provides a visual guide to the larger polity which helps to recognize and characterize Hispanic entities. While ethnic characters personify imaginary Otherness, films are subjective phenomena and are, in effect, products of history. According to this line of

thought, the production of film images reflects cultural values, philosophical ideas, political strategies and cultural assumptions. Dangerous ethnic characters, antipodal geographies and other negative constructions in Western popular culture can be understood if one applies the discursive construction identified by Jacques Derrida as *différance*. Derrida's term applies to cultural symbols and linguistic signs which produce meaning by negation, that is, the symbols or signs are never positive or have acceptable connotations. These signs have the power of cultural acceptability by anchoring themselves in the historical binaries of good and evil.[5] If one extrapolates Derrida's ideas to the Hispanic presence in America, it is feasible to understand the antithetical dichotomies of good/bad, white/brown, civilized/savage and native/immigrant which form the grid through which the Hispanic Other is known. In the case of intranational colonialism, Hispanic images in Hollywood are the direct opposite to the norm(s), and thus this hegemony prevents the emergence of the real Hispanic subject.

These iconic and semantic metaphors of difference are part of historical models of prejudice which in time have produced an artificial yet credible reality about Hispanics. When dealing with the Other, these visions of dissimilarity embody the essence of American filmmaking where race, gender, culture and national origin are the markers of iniquity. Not only commercial Hollywood productions but also popular television programming partakes in this thinking. Documentaries such as *Border Wars* and programs like *Gangland* routinely make use of those stereotypical practices. Racial portrayals are also found in the American literary canon. John Steinbeck, to give an example, uses an ethnic discourse to qualify his Mexican-American characters; they are odd, irrational, jolly and immoral.[6] These popular constructs, however, do not appear in a vacuum and usually reflect other social praxes affecting Hispanics who are believed to be outside the idea of American nationhood. Hollywood's popular Hispanic iconography is, in truth, a basic component of the larger social consciousness; today, it is reproduced alongside political developments such as the English-only initiatives, racial profiling, police harassment and iterative anti-immigrant legislation wherein the establishment synthesizes and expresses these racial paradigms.[7] In short, Hollywood film images about Hispanics, similar to the ones pioneered by D. W. Griffith, standardize the social blueprint used to interpellate Hispanics.

It is important to point out that film mythology about the Hispanic subject is part of a social practice which has historically affected other ethnic minorities. The cinematic paradigms now used to portray Hispanics is similar to the processes used in the past to represent Native Americans and citizens of African descent both believed to incarnate the exact opposite to the American ideal of belonging. This filmic format has its genesis alongside the birth of Hollywood cinema itself where racial ranking was paramount. In his study of race in early American film, Daniel Bernardi points to one recurring cinematic mythical parameter of film production: the "divine, genetic, or cultural" superiority of Americans of North European extraction over other ethnic groups.[8] This image of the Self, to be sure, is a fictional construction, yet it has been taken to be a knowable reality, a benchmark of cultural behavior and a biological certainty.

The power to label people and cultures as part of Western colonial expansion and ethnic oppression is what Edward Said termed *Orientalism*.[9] Said positions his theory to understand the relationship between Europe and the Orient, but if one applies his thoughts to European and American history and links it to character and culture representation in American film, people of ethnic extraction are logically inferior. According to Bernardi, the myth of white superiority distinct in Hollywood films is assumed to express reality and normalcy; conversely, the "physiognomic" Otherness of ethnic groups in such productions has turned the ethnic image into the irrefutable proof of tangible abnormality.[10] Moreover, by emphasizing cultural and biological threat as an inherent characteristic of the Other, film iconography has promoted social anxiety as being symptomatic of ethnic presence. This apprehension finds its target in what is perceived to be the personification of danger and the agent of racial contamination. Filmic culture, as it reproduces these principles of difference, has become the source and the mechanism through which the larger political body learns about Hispanics, Latin American geography and Latin American politics and culture.

When Hollywood has Hispanics as its subject matter, violence and demographic fears are the main narrative signifiers. Hispanic males are invariably drug dealers, violent gangsters and repulsive aliens. Hispanic women are portrayed as feisty, fools, subservient, hypersexual and the dark-demographic menace. Hispanic lands (Latin America) are primitive; perilous jungles, scorching deserts or filthy towns and villages are the antipode to the civilized north. Politics in Latin America are perceived corrupt, criminal and

anarchical. Hollywood, as well, sees Latin American culture as static, traditional, superstitious and fraught with dangerous practices. This ethnocentrism is not a contemporary development; it is, to be sure, a historical phenomenon with origins in religious, philosophical and scientific Western tenets which have provided the American establishment the theoretical foundations in reference to ethnic Others.

At the time of the Puritan arrival, Europeans were puzzled by the Native inhabitants of the Americas; the indigenous people of the New World did not fit into any known paradigm. So the concepts about the origin of the first inhabitants and henceforth their cultural practices and the natives' human worth reflected the ethnocentric worldview of the English settlers. In a historical context, these philosophies encompassed macro policies of land expropriation, conversion and extermination.[11] To be sure, Puritans were not alone in the European Othering of the natives. Spaniards and Portuguese, who had prior contact with the original inhabitants of the New World, had invariably labeled them as primitives, devil worshippers, cannibals, and sexually voracious. Early in the so-called "voyages of discovery," Christopher Columbus writes about the dog-faced Indian cannibals whom he believes inhabited the Caribbean islands.[12] English literature echoes as well this idea of the ethnic monster living in antipodal islands, as seen in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. The foundation of this multi-dimensional rhetoric is the assumption that Europe is the center of civilization and that humans are not equal.

Polygenism, which proposes that men are not the same because their different origins, is only one component of these discursive techniques of ethnic differentiation. This type of early prejudice even superseded the traditional ideas of monogenetic origin that held that mankind, regardless of race, had one Creator. For the Puritans, if Indians and other ethnic groups were not in the Bible, then their color, culture and their own existence were contradictory to the religious blueprint embodied in Euro-American consciousness. The Curse of Ham conceivably explains this early eagerness for exclusion, for it suggests that a dark complexion is the result of divine punishment, a condition which logically extends to politics and social standing.[13] Later, the Doctrine of Manifest Destiny, the predominant ideology in American history in the last two centuries, positions this religious underpinning alongside biological excuses and socioeconomic objectives.[14] This deep-held belief that one race is special over others

resonates likewise with other concepts present in popular culture. Today Hollywood's iconography of minorities, especially Hispanics, can trace its origin to the American embrace of racial hierarchies common not just to religious tenets, but also to classical philosophy and scientific ideas dominant in the Western world.

This hegemonic Eurocentric framework is already present with Aristotle. In fact, the Greek philosopher posits that people are not equal and that inequality is necessary. For Aristotle, some are born to rule and others to obey.[15] This paradigm of social rankings reverberates in later European thought. Immanuel Kant, for instance, ventures the idea that cultural traditions are expressions of biology. Kant's *untermenschen* that includes Spaniards, blacks, Asians and Native Americans are undemocratic, cruel, lazy and averse to science and learning. For him, their own innate makeup propels Spaniards to engage in childish activities like dancing.[16] A similar racialist principle is repeated by G. W. F. Hegel. He writes that Native Americans embody the antithesis to Europeans and that the former, because of their ethnic extraction, are meant to be dominated by the latter. For Hegel, the "heathen inhabitants" of the New World, hope and wait for the "noblest and highest" Christian European rule.[17] In time, this hierarchical version of humanity is strengthened not only by religious ideas or philosophical tenets, but also by the scientism embraced by the American political system.

These chromo-cultural morphologies had their conceptual counterpart in Social Darwinism. By the time of the Enlightenment, the concepts about man's close relationship to nature, especially the study of geography and the climate's influence on living organisms, were widely known in Europe. In the question of human progress and development, these paradigms claimed that skin color, geographic origin, and race were the sources of specific behavior and cultural practices. In the eighteenth century, the classification of human races as part of animal variation was strengthened with the studies of Count Buffon and Carolus Linnaeus who pioneered the concept of racial scaffolding in a biological context. In the next century, scientists like Arthur de Gobineau and Herbert Spencer reinforced the notion that behavior and progress reflected race distinctions. For these scientists, Europeans, above all North Europeans, occupied the highest pinnacle in the family of man.[18] What is important to remember is that analogous to Columbus, the English settlers and European philosophers, Social Darwinists had no proof of the biological

and cultural inferiority of the Other, but merely ethnocentric myths and conjectures which underpinned their visions.

In this framework, the images of the Other did not mirror his own humanity, but reflected what the scientific establishment saw as a sign of difference. Scientists directed their interest to physical traits such as skull shape, height, facial features plus geographic origin which were deemed to be the tangible variables of racial worth.[19] Across the Atlantic, chromatism, physiognomy and culture became as well tantamount to social and political standing. Unlike the European experience where the poor, the sick and the criminal were the antithesis to the norm, in North America, Indians and blacks, and later Hispanics, embodied the contraposition to citizenship and the obstacle to nation building. These tenets of physical dissimilarity, underpinning personal traits, were cloaked with scientism and social acceptability and later, with the rise of photography, the visual and conceptual "evidence" of Otherness became a tangible reality. The danger of mismanagement of the photograph was, however, far-reaching; it quickly resulted in the biased production and consumption of the artificial image.[20] In the political realm, the simulated icon evolved into the conventional proof of the need for ethnic separation.

Since its inception, photography had been at the center in the certification of social fears, a role inherited by fast photography (film). A longstanding myth held that photography concretized a unique method of documenting social reality; therefore the effects of other variables such as politics, culture and desire were excluded. In the nineteenth century, photography began to be seen as the premier "scientific" tool to represent reality. The prevailing idea in those years was that photography was the pure medium which allowed the representation of nature "without the mediation of language or representational systems."[21] Photography, in later years, developed into the preferred instrument needed to catalogue social differences, that is, to document the Other within European societies. In short, Social Darwinism found its best partner in scientific innovation. Since non-European presence in the Old World was insignificant, the contrast to respectable society was embodied by the poor, the insane, the prostitute, and the working class; science embraced the visual evidence (the photograph) as its main tool to explain what were considered chronic social ills, namely poverty, immorality and degeneracy.[22] The multipurpose justification for social stratification and exclusion was the photographic image which echoed

that old idea that physiognomy and social standing reflected personal moral values.

Other developments in American imperial history encapsulated these colonial paradigms. In the nineteenth century, these views of the Other flourished during the Mexican-American War and the conflict with Spain known as the Spanish-American War. These racial underpinnings of politics had been prominent before in both the extermination of the indigenous people and the support of slavery and, by the end of that century, they had come to justify American expansion into Spanish-speaking areas, namely the Southwest, California and Puerto Rico. These political phenomena, moreover, revealed the strengths of this apparatus of differentiation. Not only was politics driven by racial notions, but the media, specifically newspapers, also played a crucial role in demands for military action.[23] Not surprisingly, the popular press developed the narrative of these conflicts alongside racial paradigms. According to Virginia Wright Wexman, the prevailing concept about races in the United States in those years was the Blood Pyramid.[24] In this theory, Northern Europeans stood at the top of an imaginary pyramid. Animals occupied the base. Other races fell in between. Mexicans, for instance, were placed around the middle.

The rationale for these wars was the acquisition of territory and the desire for political expansion, but the pretext for these actions was the old idea that "savages" could not be masters of their own destiny and custodians of their own land. Social Darwinism and the perceived Hispanic primitivism, to be sure, were convenient justifications for the war, but not the decisive elements. On the surface, the conflicts with Mexico and Spain were the outcome of a confluence of various elements of American society which saw Hispanics as antithetical to American civilization. Underneath these claims, the construction of the imaginary Hispanic threat was the direct result of economic imperial interests, the sensationalist media, popular racial notions and moralistic ideas.[25] In time, these political premises became the perennial axis on which the Hispanic image turned. In a way, the stereotype and Hispanic exclusion became part of common knowledge and national policy, respectively.

There is an ideological connection and an interlocking iconic bridge between biblical interpretations, classical philosophy, Social Darwinism and photography (film) that incorporates the idea of the ethnic Other being the antipode to Western civilization. Thus the question: is the Hispanic gangster

on the screen the modern cannibal of old European nightmares? Peter Mason, in his study of America as a discursive enterprise, points out that the New World and its inhabitants are not readily "visible" to Europeans. For Mason, Westerners are acquainted with the indigenous people only through common, home-grown European stereotypes. In the European expansion in the Americas, the geography (and the people within it) is subject to a system of comparisons and analogies; the latter are useful in connecting the Old World to the New, thus forming a lasting epistemology of dissimilar identities.[26] However, this comparison or new knowledge rests on long-established ideas of cultural superiority and the biased depictions have persisted since the unknown Other is always synonymous with evil and danger. In a way, as Mason indicates, representations allude "to other representations and not to the truth of the represented."[27] This is how the Hispanic image appears on the screen today; it refers to political discourses, philosophical ideas, and religious tenets but not to the real thing. To recall Derrida, although Hispanic imagery in Hollywood and indeed in the wider media is common, the Hispanic being remains unknown.

Today, this apprehension about Hispanics is embedded in the resilience of the stereotype which must be repetitive to reaffirm its dangerousness. The Hispanic entity is always an alien because of its "different" physiognomy, skin color, culture and language. And this idea of the harmful alien is even part of medical discourses. Sander Gilman writes that the Other is assigned a dangerous duality because of his perceived nature and influence in a determined social setting. The danger is always there; so the presence of the Other and the Other himself is always "corrupt and corrupting, polluted and polluting."[28] This repetitive image of the Other as a pathological danger is not limited to rhetorical exercises and actually points to a catalogue of political visions which require recursive action. To recall Michel Foucault's idea of power, it seems that society, in dealing with ethnic difference, needs to manage the human entity that embodies such stereotypical labels. This is achieved through political discourse and the application of specific parameters of authority imposition that such social apparatus demands. Representation then echoes, simultaneously, desires of control and the constant institutional surveillance of the Other.[29] In the question of institutionalized racism and the power emanating from it, once the stereotype has been "created and internalized" by the dominant society, it provides a safe guide for social interaction and political behavior. In essence,

ethnocentrism provides "the structure of order" under which the individual, as part of the wished-for monocratic, homogeneous society, develops his life.[30] The systematization of the Other and the racial apparatus of control of minorities then calm anxieties and reassure the dominant ethnic group in a natural and legitimate way.

Clara Rodriguez comments on this axiom prevalent on the silver screen. She points out that Hollywood portrays Hispanics as the signifiers of banditry, serfdom and immorality which suggest that Hispanics should be controlled, punish or expelled. Sometimes, the opposite happens; Hispanics are completely erased from filmic productions. Hollywood, moreover, excludes Hispanics from American historical moments illustrated in films. For Rodriguez, the omission of Hispanics from film narratives is glaring, especially in movies that explore important events in America history in which Hispanics have been present.[31] This is the social context in which racial images become part of a network of knowledge through which Hispanic presence or absence makes sense to the viewing public. It also suggests a clear delineation of Hispanic political nature. First, these images propose that Hispanics are outside American moral, social and geographical boundaries. Second, they reassure the audiences about reestablishing social order and racial lines which implies the need to banish the foreign and racial threats seen on the screen. In any case, not just Hollywood films, but also public television seems to partake of this systematic delineation of Latinos as outsiders.

In regular television programming, Hispanics are generally portrayed as indolent, ignorant, and uneducated. One study about the ethnic presence in American television finds that Latinos and blacks are overwhelmingly represented as lawbreakers, seldom as law-abiding citizens. These findings suggest that the idea of the minority embodying the criminal offender is already part of an accepted ethnic discourse which dominates the public airwaves.[32] In another instance, in which the subject is the presence of Hispanics in the nightly news, the results are similar. The term "Latino" is mentioned in stories of law enforcement, electoral fraud, illegal immigration, public school problems, the story of a Hispanic who plays "terrorist" in a training exercise for diplomats and "the growth" of Hispanics in baseball.[33] This fetish is an update of the old dichotomy of fear and desire encompassed in the views about Native Americans. Indians were bad if they were like Geronimo, Tecumseh and Crazy Horse or good if they were like Pocahontas,

Sacagawea and Squanto. Thus, in question of Hispanics, the stereotype persists and remains unchallenged. It seems that stereotyping Hispanics is still seen as a safe pursuit for filmmakers and television producers; in effect, Hispanics are the daily target of racism in cable programming which decipher them as the incarnation of illegality and danger.[34] Not even commercials can escape from this racial scaffolding.

Television commercials also corroborate and strengthen this particular worldview and encourage viewers to accept traditional social arrangements. Commercials, like other media constructs, are part of these conceptual blueprints about gender and ethnic minorities which are offered to wide audiences especially during early social and self identity formation. A study of television marketing illustrates how these concepts of racial hierarchies provided meaning to hundreds of children-targeted commercials while shedding light on the diachronic image of Hispanics. For the researchers, the commercials simply relied on ethnocentric conventions to build their narratives. On the one hand, Latinos were typically represented in menial categories usually associated with "restaurants." On the other, Anglo-American characters enjoyed positive representation and speaking parts were mostly given to them and rarely to minorities. The study concluded that, according to these commercials, "power, prestige and respect" should be inherent and rightful to white society as part of society's "natural order."[35] It seemed that as a reflection of society and film production, this study reassured white audiences that Hispanics and other ethnic characters were, if not outsiders, irrelevant.

It appears that television stereotyping, whether in commercials, the nightly news or regular programming, has already inflicted personal harm on Hispanic Americans. Besides media bias, discrimination, racial profiling and police harassment, all of which epitomize this historical imagery, there are consequences in two additional sociological fronts. Rocío Ribadeneyra notes that the media has deeply affected Hispanics in a manner consistent with what has happened with other ethnic groups. Her conclusions are thought-provoking. First, a false Hispanic identity has become a factual reality and it has been accepted and internalized by both Hispanics and the larger polity. For Ribadeneyra, these negative images of Hispanics affect the new generations of Hispanics who are being born into a social structure that has distorted their own identity. Second, stereotyping has become intrinsic to a body of knowledge that promotes the idea that Hispanics are expendable

because they make insignificant contributions to society; Hispanics are, in actuality, already perceived as an outside threat to the security of the United States.[36] This reification of Hispanics is all the more troubling because Hollywood films are even used as didactic tools and a source of knowledge in educational settings.

Without question, the learning about Hispanics takes place both at the multiplex and in public schools. According to Jeremy Stoddard and Alan Marcus, commercial films are widely used to teach historical events to American students. They suggest that teaching American history through these films is a dangerous practice since the stories in Hollywood films are made to accommodate ethnocentric cultural beliefs and social hierarchies.[37] Moreover, this idea of the natural division of society is a common perception not only in public schools, but also in institutions of higher education. In a college study about primitivism, students were asked to describe their understanding of the term "primitive." The responses were rather uniform and the students saw the primitive as hardly comparable to human. Students wrote that the primitive had a life attuned to basic instincts unaffected by time and history. The primitive, the students noted, lacked culture, intelligence and development; moreover, the primitive was seen as a dull, naïve and amoral savage. The conclusion of this study indicated a far more serious predicament expected in a typical academic exercise. These ideas of the primitive are, in effect, popular free-floating historical signifiers that are routinely applied to actual ethnic minorities.[38] Such a definition of Otherness is not a synchronic phenomenon and is useful across different dimensions of American life.

Hollywood's Hispanic stereotypes are negative in some respects and positive in others. They are negative if they endanger or challenge racial echelons and positive if they reinforce the status quo. For example, the images of Hispanics as drug dealers, gangsters and dangerous immigrants challenge the established system, but depictions of them as tomato pickers, gardeners, nannies and maids reassure the public of the usefulness of Hispanic labor. Homi Bhabha comments on this deceptive colonial duplicity present in racial political systems. For Bhabha, it is an excuse that the dominant culture needs in order to foster the domination of the ethnic Other because the assigned historical essence of the Other makes impossible to give him/her full humanity. Thus the perpetuation of the stereotypes and the immanence of social inequality are deemed to be normal and necessary.[39] In