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Against the hegemony of the present world order that passes itself off as natural and necessary, global actors are tearing a hole in knowledge. New forms emerge. They nourish our imagination, the most radical power that we as humans have. 

Susan Buck-Morss, “A Commonist Ethics”

Raíces de Sangre (1979), the first Mexican and Chicano cinematic co-production, brought the realities of the border region and of Mexican migrants to cross-border audiences. The film was the consequence of then President Luis Alvarez Echevarría’s attempt to restore confidence in the state for Mexicans at home and “afuera” by diminishing political censorship and repression, particularly in the media. He forged links in personal meetings with Chicano leaders like Cesar Chavez and organizations, giving publicity to the conditions of Chicanos during the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. One consequence of this democratic apertura was the disbursement of funding that resulted in the first Chicano film produced in Mexico featuring Chicano and Mexican actors, and helmed by Chicano director Jesús Salvador Treviño. Raíces de Sangre documents the struggle of Chicanos around immigrant rights and labor issues for migrant workers and those working along the border region in maquiladoras (assembly plants). It takes place during an era of what David Maciel describes as a “discovery” of the Chicano community as a political entity and a market for Mexican goods and media.1 This film set the tone and raised the standard for border films and Chicano and Latino films: it draws on the history and context of transnational labor migration while establishing the importance of linking worker struggles across the border into Mexico and beyond.

Almost forty years later, U.S. and Mexican production companies, Televisa and Lionsgate, join forces to produce a biopic, shot mostly in Mexico, of Chicano activist Cesar Chavez by Mexican actor and director Diego Luna, and Mexican and Mexican American actors and actresses. Luna is part of a generation of Mexican cross-over or, more accurately, global talent—including Gael García Bernal (also a producer of Cesar Chavez), Guillermo del Toro, Alejandro González Iñárritu, Alfonso Cuarón, Salma Hayek, among others. The film is nominally part of a slate of film and other media that targets labor policy and practices
along the border during a time of heightened immigrant phobia and economic crisis, or what some cultural critics have called the end times, a time when the economic system is no longer sustainable in its current form.

There are several Latino films that address the social conditions of inequity besetting those at the bottom of the labor market, those first sacrificed in an economic crisis—immigrants and migrants who work and live at or near the border; they are Maquilopolis (2006), Machete (2010), and Cesar Chavez (2014). These films express a vital political expediency different in tone from its predecessors, the struggles for worker and immigrant rights are ever more pressing leading up to and following the economic freefall of the leading world economy that began in 2007 and that ended, for some, a few years later. These films offer a range of remedies and imagined outcomes drawn from cross-border media productions from a number of different genres and modes of production. Cesar Chavez, mentioned earlier, is a fairly conventional Hollywood narrative that targets a large mainstream audience to send a message about the struggles of migrant workers deprived of basic rights. It is a melodrama that, while focusing on the individual and his family, goes against some of the conventions of the genre to explore the political and cultural context of local and national labor organizing. The documentary Maquilopolis (2006) was released just as the U.S. economy was showing signs of economic distress but focuses on the Border Industrialization Program (BIP) and its outcomes along the Mexican side of the border. Like Raíces de Sangre, the documentary thematizes the struggle of women working in maquiladoras, but it uses an experimental approach to their stories, allowing each woman to control the means of production of her own story within an overarching narrative of political organization against worker rights violations—it does what Cesar Chavez purports to do, which is to allow the poor to narrate their histories and control their futures. Machete is a border film that uses the exploitation grindhouse genre to tell a different story about organizing and social change: rather than promulgating participation in a corrupt democratic process, the film asserts a different imaginary of coalition building and change through revolution. Each of these films participates in different genres, often mixing or expanding the boundaries of genre to give a different take on the migrant condition, along with different modes and methods for addressing their social and cultural status during times of economic crisis. These films address and partake in the history of Latino filmmaking while they add new dimensions to it.

Cesar Chavez presents the farm worker’s movement within a melodrama of family dynamics in which father and son tensions present a point of coincidence between the growers and those struggling against them. The overarching story aspires to universality through this plot point, while it delivers another story about the enactment of social change. The film is attentive to the history and tendency of Latino cinema to address issues relevant to its target audience, in this case, the work of organizing and building coalitions to create social change. The labor of migrants is rendered visible for a wide audience, drawing on the tradition of Latino Cinema and the Chicano movement that sought the social, cultural, and political empowerment for those of Mexican descent in the United States—most notably Raíces de Sangre and Alambrista (1977)—which began to emerge during the post-civil rights era of the 1970s. The film is more in line with the funding and production lineage of “Hispanic Hollywood” of the 1990s—La Bamba (1987), American Me (1992), Mi Familia (1995)—which were the result of the civil rights era and demands for more nuanced representations of Latinos and Latinas in their families and communities of origin. Cesar Chavez draws on these traditions while glossing them too.

Marshall Ganz, a labor organizer who worked on the staff of the United Farm Workers (UFW) for 16 years, describes the portrayal of Cesar Chavez in the film as caricatured.
and often departing from historical events to the point that the “lessons the film teaches contradict the real lessons of Chavez’s work.” The weaknesses he identifies are exactly those of melodrama, of reducing complex historical events to a struggle between good and bad—the growers and the workers—while foregrounding a storyline of individual pathos and struggle. The historical Chavez exhibited incredible skills at coalition building and creating relationships with diverse constituencies and individuals, while the filmic Chavez is engaged in an often lone struggle against opposing forces. Ganz writes:

Cesar’s core leadership gifts were relational. He had an ability to engage widely diverse individuals, organizations and institutions with distinct talents, perspectives and skills in a common effort. The film, however, depicts him as a loner: driving alone (when in reality he had given up driving), traveling alone (which he never did) and deciding alone (when his strength was in building a team that could respond quickly, creatively and proactively to the daily crises of a long and intense effort).

“Not the Cesar Chavez I Knew,” The Nation, 1 April 2014, np.

The film glosses the UFW’s deep connections to the civil rights movement and to others struggling towards similar ends—Filipinos (represented to some degree), African-Americans, the labor movement, and the larger Chicano movement. This is partly a result of the institutional constraints of major studio-funded productions. In this case, the filmmakers, director, and producers were beholden to a number of constituents, not the
least of whom were the Chavez family who had veto power over the script, and the studios that seek marketability, defined as content that will appeal to liberal democratic ideals without threatening to alienate a white mainstream audience. Cesar Chavez meets these competing demands by lionizing its protagonist and locating the struggle for equal rights in the domain of U.S. liberalism as an individual struggle.

The story follows Cesar Chavez in his emergence to social consciousness as a young man aware of the struggle of workers and their degradation by a system that values profit over human dignity (see Figure 2.1).

He devotes his life and work to raising migrant worker consciousness—“you can’t oppress someone who is not afraid anymore”—and to creating social change within democratic legal process, leading to the creation of the first law allowing migrant workers to organize. The struggle of Cesar Chavez as the representative of a racialized group is rendered the story of the U.S as an exceptional political entity, a beacon of civil rights for the rest of the world, formed against outside forces in a paradoxically global and nativist sense. The film portrays a targeted boycott on a single grape grower, Bogdanovich, who exemplifies and symbolizes all other growers. When Bogdanovich aligns with then President Nixon to have his grapes distributed abroad, thus bypassing the U.S. boycott, the struggle against the growers turns global. This is a major turning point in the film. The farm workers’ struggle ceases to be that of a marginal constituency and becomes the very sign of U.S. American liberalism. This is conveyed significantly in the scene that evokes the symbolic power of the Boston Tea Party that signaled the revolutionary spirit of the U.S. against British imperialism. The film tacitly alludes to this historical event when British dock workers, in alliance with the U.S. UFW movement, throw Bogdanovich’s grapes into the harbor rather than unloading them. This moment allegorizes how the film itself signals the full integration of the Latino narrative in the U.S. historical and cultural storyline, coopting it as a sign of the revolutionary spirit of the U.S. In this way, the farm worker struggle is framed as relevant and significant to U.S. audiences: the film moves the activist work of peoples of color into the mainstream, making it palatable and accessible and neutralizing some of its antiracist valence.

Cesar Chavez puts the UFW movement squarely into the social world of global audiences, integrating actual footage from the era, giving the movement unprecedented publicity while appealing to U.S. cultural values. It glosses many of the historical realities of this struggle and is complicit with Hollywood success stories, offering a story of individual triumph in the face of impossible odds. But it is a timely story that reminds viewers of the struggle of the poor during times of crisis and it is one that brings Mexican filmmaking, artists, and producers, into alliance with their U.S. counterparts. While Cesar Chavez is limited and constrained by industrial and capitalist demands, the documentary Maquilapolis is the result of independent and collective binational efforts by Vicky Funari and Sergio De La Torre in collaboration with the women of Grupo Factor X, Chilpancingo Collective for Environmental Justice, and Women’s Rights Advocates, co-produced by the Independent Television Service and partially funded by the Sundance Institute Documentary Fund (see Figure 2.2).

The film approaches worker struggle on the border with little regard for marketability or accessibility. It too is the result of the collaboration between U.S. based filmmakers and the Mexican women who commandeer the camera to tell their own stories and enact their own struggle against major corporations along the border. The documentary has a stated aim expressed by the filmmakers as a cross-border campaign for social change through mediamaking:
We are currently seeking funding to implement a binational Community Outreach Campaign, designed and implemented collaboratively with stakeholder organizations in the U.S. and Mexico. The campaign utilizes a high-profile public television broadcast, top tier film festivals and community screenings of the film to create meaningful social change around the issues of globalization, social and environmental justice and fair trade. Our outreach team includes dedicated activists on both sides of the border, mediamakers committed to social change, and most importantly a group of women factory workers struggling to bring about positive change in their world.

http://www.maquilapolis.com/project_eng.htm

This collaborative production and the political initiatives it documents and encourages enact the ideals of political organizing expressed by Cesar Chavez, particularly in his statement upon which the biopic ends: “I'd like to see the poor take a very direct part in shaping society and let them make the decisions. If the poor aren't involved change will never come.” This is the premise of Maquilapolis. The women at the bottom of the maquiladora labor market commandeer cameras to tell a story that involves their struggle against the factory owners. Their activist work is not mediated by either the filmmakers, in the case of the documentary, or the unions that, as Raíces de Sangre also reveals, are under the employ of the owners, not the workers. They make the decisions about how they will organize and act, and shape the direction of their own futures.

The women’s stories are conveyed within a larger historical and social context that implicates economically driven policies of the United States, in particular the BIP and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The documentary explains how the BIP of 1965 initiated the creation of the maquiladoras or foreign owned assembly plants in the “free trade zones” along the Mexican side of the U.S-Mexican border, and invited U.S. manufacturers to move their operations to this area. Maquilapolis describes waves of development that intensified and expanded after the passing of NAFTA, and that deepened the exploitation of workers’ rights. This is conveyed in images of the production and
destruction of factory spaces to convey the economic cycles of capitalism. Once the border economy proves to be less than profitable, the factories move elsewhere. The film shows images of the vacant, ruined, and abandoned spaces to convey corporate disregard for local economies. The women visually document these spaces and narrate its hidden story—for instance, Carmen Durán explains how Sanyo closed shop and moved to Indonesia in search of lower wages. The corporation abandoned its factory space and its workers, to whom they refused to pay severance wages. Durán, along with several colleagues, initiates legal action against Sanyo to recuperate lost wages and eventually wins.

The documentary uses some experimental, non-narrative, techniques to shape the mood and meaning of the images. The women's monotonous and rote work is conveyed not in factory scenes but in images of nine workers dressed in blue factory uniforms dramatizing their repetitive labors like a choreographed installation in an abandoned lot. Their work is rendered a kind of dignified aesthetic experience, meditative and graceful. The music that accompanies this scene is composed industrial sounds from or imitating the machines of the factories. While their work is dignified in this aesthetically appealing sequence, the narrative conveys the oppressive conditions of their work which include risks to their health, lack of job security, and violation of their rights. Also, the shift work they perform is often out of conjunction with the daily schedules of their children, and many of them are without partners to share in the domestic work. They live in precarious circumstances in which the loss of employment or the diminishing of wages has devastating effects.

In addition to the struggle to work and maintain a household, these women are beset by rising toxicity in their environments, both in the factories and in the areas surrounding their homes. One of the women, Lourdes Luján, describes a river that runs through a neighborhood that turns various colors and emits noxious fumes when the factories dump waste into it under the cover of rain. She describes how, when she was a child, people in the neighborhood or colonia would swim and camp along its shores. Now such use of the river is unimaginable. Lourdes and Carmen Durán, her colleague, catch the river in full toxic bloom on camera as they jokingly mock-report on it like newscasters. This footage is a key visual indictment of environmental violations that solidifies their case against the maquiladoras.

Maquilopolis, like Cesar Chavez, follows a narrative arc that builds to success for the women's campaign for environmental clean-up by major corporations, and the remitting of severance pay for workers who were rendered unemployed when a factory closed—presumably to find a more profitable set of circumstances, partly through unpaid wages. The women's collective efforts to use mediamaking as a political tool reflects the ideals of the New Latin American Cinema movement of the 1960s—which included cross-border collaborations like Raíces de Sangre—to use cinema to create social change. This movement coincides with the precepts of the Chicano and civil rights movements’ emphasis on social justice and antiracism in the struggle for self-determination and equality. Maquilopolis fulfills these ideals for a new era in which economic instability leads to full blown crisis, the impact of which is more far ranging for the marginal and the poor on both sides of the border.

Robert Rodríguez’s parody of immigration phobia, the Machete franchise—Machete, Machete Kills (2013), Machete Kills in Space (in development)—brings revolutionary ideas about collective organizing and social change to a general audience through a mix of the grindhouse style of filmmaking and the b-grade cine negro style of border filmmaking. Machete was released during a time of anti-immigrant hysteria, particularly in Arizona, and it appeared just prior to the bicentennial celebrations of Mexican independence. Machete (Danny Trejo) represents the cross-border provenance of the film, as an ex-Federale from
Mexico who works as a day laborer in Texas. He is a migrant worker who is not a passive object of immigration policy or worker politics, but an action hero. He is hired to assassinate a racist senator, Senator McLaughlin (Robert De Niro), only to be “double-crossed and left for dead,” and so he must avenge himself of his would-be killers and in doing so, participate in the cause of collective antiracist struggle in a massive *Wild Bunch*-style shootout.

Like Cesar Chavez, *Machete* garners a mainstream audience while the storyline encodes a critical discourse about U.S. immigration policy. The advertising copy for *Machete* locates the film squarely in the action genre directed at Hollywood audiences:

Set up, double-crossed and left for dead, Machete (Trejo) is an ass-kicking ex-Federale who lays waste to anything that gets in his path. As he takes on hitmen, vigilantes and a ruthless drug cartel, bullets fly, blades clash and the body count rises. Any way you slice it, vengeance has a new name—Machete. (see Figure 2.3)

The film actually targets two distinct markets: mainstream Hollywood, through its major stars—Jessica Alba, Lindsay Lohan, Don Johnson, Steven Segall, and Robert DeNiro, and a critical Latino border genre and its stable of stars—Danny Trejo, Michelle Rodriguez, and Cheech Marin. This is evident in the different previews and movie trailers directed at these two distinct audiences. Danny Trejo narrates the trailer intended for Latino audiences “in a special Cinco de Mayo message” that clearly depicts the critical parody of the border film and its anti-immigrant hysteria. Whereas the Hollywood trailer, narrated by Jessica Alba, conveys a story about an individual hero whose successful struggle against the odds will be rewarded with the affections of Alba’s character.

The film in its dual distribution took on a life beyond its immediate narrative order and spurred public outrage about the racialized conflict portrayed in the story. In “The Border Crossed Us,” Zachary Ingle, drawing from the various ways that the public commented on
the film on blogs, discussion boards, and YouTube videos, found that the film elicited a range of responses about its racial plot (159–60). In particular, syndicated radio host Alex Jones describes Machete as a symbol of Latin American revolution, and the story one of liberation theology, while other critics, like Stephen Holden, found the film to be unthreatening except to those on the extreme right. While these diverse responses point to a divided reception of the film, Machete is a story with social impact, one that might motivate audiences to act to change their circumstances. As an action hero, Machete provokes and excites, turning the ethos of revolution into cultural capital for Hollywood viewers.

Like Cesar Chavez, Machete combines a storyline about an individual male hero struggling against a corrupt system within the context of collective struggles. Yet the main focus of these stories is on the male hero in a manner that coincides with U.S. exceptionalism, or the idea that a single character or entity might act alone and outside the strictures of law in a manner that ultimately benefits the public or greater good; in these cases, the ends justify the means in a way that captures the ethos of the U.S. revolutionary spirit. Yet what is at odds with this ideology of individualism as the cornerstone of capitalism is the larger context of collective organizing of these individuals, one that is more akin to socialist practice.

Cesar Chavez and Machete publicize collectivist ideas through a sleight of hand in which a storyline appears to fit the Hollywood pattern, but ultimately sends a message about the creation of alternate publics, ones in which networks and assemblages of people might act against the prevailing social order to change it. Yet these stories fail in some ways to reimagine gender dynamics along more collectivist lines. Women's roles are sometimes powerful, as in the case of Dolores Huerta in Cesar Chavez and “She,” or Luz and Sartana in Machete, but these women remain ancillary to the real heroes, though Huerta was a powerful and iconic organizer in her own right. In Machete, in keeping with the grindhouse style, women are fetishized and their power emanates from sexually charged visual appeal. All of the women are hyper-feminine and stylized while Machete, the main hero, played by sexagenarian Danny Trejo, is a non-typical romantic lead.

Cesar Chavez and Machete cater to mainstream and masculinist desires and demands and in doing so are able to reach much wider audiences with messages about equal rights and social equality, though women are often sacrificed to this masculinist ideology. Maquilapolis offers a counterpoint to Hollywood and major studio depictions of women. It shows the steps and stages of women engaging in collective action as agents and subjects of the story. While the documentary does not engage all of the elements of the creation of a storyworld, it shows women in active roles without framing them in a sexualized manner. Though Maquilapolis may not have received the wide distribution and theatrical release of Cesar Chavez and Machete, it was shown nationally on the PBS Point of View series and continues to be screened in various venues.

These films work different angles of social change during an era of economic crisis. They contain stories about a racialized immigrant working class of seasonal, temporary, and ultimately disposable workers. And these workers allegorize the condition of all workers in a troubled economy. The main characters, Cesar Chavez and Machete and the women of Grupo Factor X, Chilpancingo Collective for Environmental Justice, and women's rights advocates, contest the idea that precarity demands compliance, that individual preservation should take precedence over social solidarity. Instead, in keeping with the tenets of the revolutionary use of media that emerged during the civil rights era in the tenets of New Latin American cinema, Chicano cultural productions, and Latino film, they dramatize the demand for human rights and equality, antiracist struggles, and the right to
self-determination. And they show that the struggle to obtain these demands is successful, issuing hope and optimism for new generations of media activists. These border films represent a reconfigured cultural politics around social movements that create networks and alliances across social divisions, cultural divides, and the borders between nations.

Note


Bibliography


LATINO FILM IN THE END TIMES


