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THE EVENING CLASS

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 15, 2009

TCM: *LATINO IMAGES IN FILM*—*The Evening Class* Interview With Chon Noriega



Chon Noriega's *curriculum vitae* is intimidating. He exemplifies the adage that—if you want to get something done—find a busy person. Upon the occasion of his most recent gig as Robert Osborne's

co-host to TCM's "[Race and Hollywood: Latino Images in Film](#)", Noriega and I touched base by phone to preview the upcoming line-up.

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Michael Guillén: Congratulations on being chosen to co-host TCM's broadcast of "Race and Hollywood: Latino Images in Film." Let's define terms first so we don't take anything for granted. How are you using the term "Latino" in contrast to, let's say, Latin American or Chicano?



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Chon Noriega: First of all, "Latino" *is* in contrast to Latin American. A lot of times there's more of a willingness to talk about south of the U.S. rather than the presence of people of Latin American descent who are living in the U.S. (who would be "Latino"). It is a pan-ethnic term meant to include Chicano, Cuban American, Puerto Rican, Dominican and all of the other Latin American descent ethnicities and—in itself—is a contrast typically to the term "Hispanic", which has been a census term for thirty-some years now.

Guillén: You're also meaning Latino to be gender inclusive; to mean Latina as well?

Noriega: Yeah. The beauty of "Hispanic" is that it is gender-neutral. [Laughs.] A lot of people use "Latina/o" or her/Latina and him/Latino. That's generally a distinction or a fine point that's lost in the mainstream; but, it's an important one.

Guillén: In terms of the series subtitle "Latino Images in Film", do you distinguish between "image" and "representation" in film?

Noriega: "Latino Images in Film" is a Turner coinage. It's probably a little more easily understood. [Chuckles.] But—in terms of the series or the selection—I was trying to identify films where the narratives were substantively about Latino characters. That's a little bit different. Sometimes the phrase





"images of" can suggest something that's very broad and inclusive and can include incidental appearances of *bandido* characters in westerns or gang members in action films. The film's really not about them; they're minor roles or what one critic calls "convenient villains."

Guillén: When I was speaking to Amalia Mesa-Bains about your selection, we were both surprised that there were many titles of films neither of us had heard of before. Once you were approached by TCM, how did you go about selecting your films? Are they from the TCM library? Or did TCM bring films in for you?

Noriega: When we had the first discussion, we agreed upon the focus being films that were substantively about Latino characters. We also agreed that we would do our best to be broad and inclusive and to make sure it wasn't all just Mexican American, but also Puerto Rican, Cuban American, and any other groups that we could find there had been films about. I went through a list of films that I had from my own research and through a number of books that have been published over the last 20 years, including a three-volume filmography. I went through everything and came up with what I thought was a more or less definitive universe of films that were really about Latino characters. There really weren't more than about 70 films. I presented these to TCM and we began to see what was available. That narrowed and brought it down to about 30. From there, we had to think through on how to build it back up. So it was a mixture of what we wanted to see and what was available. Not every film in the line-up is necessarily from the TCM library, but MGM—which was one of the studios in their collection—did have quite a number of these films and it's exciting to be able to get those broadcast.

Guillén: Remarkably, nearly 19 films in the line-up are premiering on TCM.

Noriega: Yeah, they were surprised too. It's quite a high percentage; it's more than half of the films that

we're introducing.

Guillén: How did you go about categorizing your selection? You say you wanted to focus on Latino characters, did you group your movies by character type?

Noriega: I didn't so much group them by character type. I just tried to make sense of what was showing up. In other words, what did we have to choose from? A lot of those categories were established before we narrowed down, but I was looking for patterns that were suggesting themselves. They more or less resonated with what has been written about Latino representation in Hollywood, which a lot of times follows genre more than character. A lot of what we were foregrounding were certain genres or cycles or—in a few cases—thematic issues that emerged at specific points of time, like miscegenation.



Guillén: I don't want to steal away any thunder from what you and Robert will be discussing at length when the films are broadcast, but I do want to talk specifically about some of the premieres we've

mentioned, why

you selected them and what you were going for by including them? For starters, *Ramona*, this 1910 18-minute silent short that's just about to reach its hundredth birthday. What was for you the value of including *Ramona*?

Noriega: You're right. We're coming up to the centennial of the film next year. I've written quite extensively on *Ramona* because there's quite a lot

going on. First of all, it's D.W. Griffith. It's interesting to see how one of the early masters of cinema is grappling with issues related to the Mexican American and Native American populations in California. But it's also a first in a number of ways for Griffith at that time. It's the first film to prominently identify *where* it was shot and that was an important crossover to tourism. It wasn't incidental. There was an emerging tourism around these sites and the film was riffing off of that as well as the popularity of the novel, which it also acknowledged. It was still kind of unusual at the time to say, "Here's the book" because—for the most part—filmmakers were stealing those stories. [Laughs.] Griffith actually paid \$100 for the adaptation rights, which was still a relatively new thing to do. The courts were cracking down on them but they weren't really being done that much. At least not at that level.

Guillén: I find it intriguing that—in this film that's nearly 100 years old—the origins of Hollywood are so intimately tied to representation of Latinos.



Noriega: Yeah, and I think that's been overlooked throughout the history. You can see these critical moments in the history of Hollywood and you'll usually find a few examples—a film, a person or an issue—that really ties in with the Latino population; but, it's been overlooked. We tend to tell another more streamlined story about the development of the industry. Even today, a lot of colleagues will teach Griffith and they have a hard time incorporating discussions of race and gender into their teaching. But it's there. It doesn't dismiss him as a filmmaker, but it's very much a part of the world he was representing.

Guillén: Another fascination of mine in these early films is the concept of passing, ethnic disguise, or inequitable casting of Latinos in subsidiary roles while non-Latinos win the major roles. Any thoughts on that phenomenon?

Noriega: It's something that Robert Osborne and I went back and forth on throughout the series because it's a difficult issue. On the one hand, it's clearly a sign of a certain way of thinking about race and ethnicity and also about opportunity. Inevitably, you'll have white actors who are portraying other races and ethnicities in the films. On the flip side, we often forget that film is all make-believe in its representation. It's a certain level of the craft. But what we don't see happening is—for the most part—Latino actors getting opportunities. You see a little bit of it here and there but often times it's problematic. In order for a Latino actor to succeed, to get wider recognition, they essentially have to pass as being white.

Guillén: Our of sheer curiosity then, let's say that—out of the many performances where white actors play Latino characters—is there one you feel to be most accomplished?



Noriega: That's an interesting question. Lou Diamond Phillips is often incorporated into the Latino character category and he's a multi-ethnic multi-racial actor. He's had several roles where he's played a Latino character. There are some performances that are notable precisely for not being that believable. It's interesting when you see the mainstream press say, "Well, this is

not believable. We love the actor but no way is it convincing." Historically, the performance I find most

fascinating—not necessarily believable per se, but believable in the context of Lon Chaney—is Paul Muni in *Bordertown*. And also in *Juarez*, where he plays the Mexican president Benito Juarez. It's a great performance though I don't know how authentic it is in essence. But that's not the question. It's a fascinating example of somebody who—like Lon Chaney—made a career out of playing and trying effectively to play just about every type he could.

Guillén: Is the term "brownface" ever used?

Noriega: Yeah. I don't know how widely accepted it is; but, I've certainly used it.

Guillén: I imagine that selecting the titles for this program was exceptionally difficult and that you had to omit films or personalities that you would have preferred to otherwise include. As a companion piece to my interview with you, I'll be interviewing Amalia Mesa-Bains on Dolores Del Rio. I didn't see Dolores anywhere in your line-up.

Noriega: Yeah, it's tough because—unless I'm missing something—she's mostly playing Latin American characters. I know she's in a western with Elvis Presley but I think she's playing Native American there. Dolores Del Rio and Carmen Miranda were real challenges. I wanted to be able to find a way in which they were

representing Latinos in the United States and not a more general or exotic sense of Latin America. With Carmen Miranda, I was fortunate to find that with *Greenwich Village*, which is a wonderful film.



Guillén: As a Chicano myself, I took great

inspiration and encouragement from the batch of films that came out in the late '80s, early '90s that addressed Chicano representation; however, I have taken note that many of the actors in those films—Edward James Olmos and Jimmy Smits, to name two—have gone on to do more mainstream work. Olmos, of course, became a television personality with *Battlestar Galactica* and I have just recently been watching Jimmy Smits murder people with his serial killer buddy *Dexter*. Can you speak to what kind of progress there's been for Latino actors in Hollywood and if there's been a shift in how Latinos are being portrayed in films today?



Noriega: We do have a core group of Olmos and Smits, Selma Hayak and Jennifer Lopez, who have managed to break into an upper tier where they're more widely known celebrities and actors. For a long time, Olmos was

more a celebrity than an actor because he had a higher public visibility than he had roles. But it was an important way for him to come back into it, particularly through television. We have these instances; but—if you look at the overall numbers in terms of all the feature films and all the TV series being made and how many roles are available for Latino actors—it's still a fairly small number. There has been a shift to where there's a higher amount of visibility for a smaller number of people; but, that does have an impact. Certain kinds of casting seem more possible. Jimmy Smits could become the first Latino President on *West Wing*. Of course, they canceled the series; it's easier. [Laughs.] But we can see that's probably a good direction. There were at least two television series and

four or five movies where there was a Black President before we had Barack Obama. A few more to go and I think we've laid the ground for political change.

Guillén: Of the films premiering on TCM, I'm most excited about *...And Now Miguel*, which I've heard about but never seen. I was born in 1953. My name is Miguel and my stepfather was a sheep shearing contractor and my grandfather was a shepherd.

Noriega: Is it *you*?!! [Laughs.]

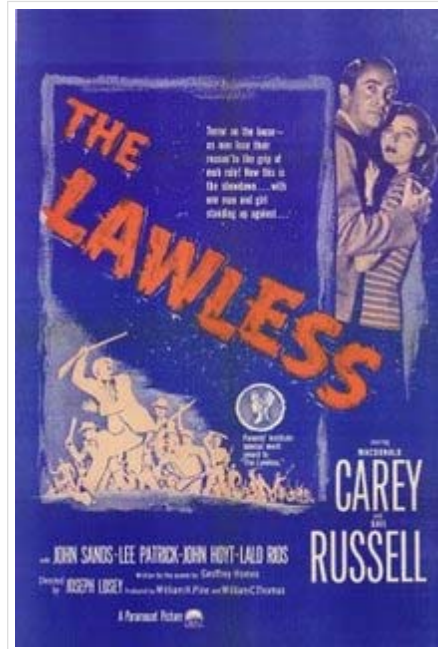
Guillén: Might be! In one of my conversations with my Mom, she remembers film crews arriving on the ranch to film the sheepshearers at work. There are very few movies that depict sheep shearing communities, so I'm always on the look out for familiar scenes. Can you tell me a little bit about *...And Now Miguel* and why you chose to include it?

Noriega: It's a fascinating storyline. There was actually a feature film made in the sixties but we couldn't track it down and get a hold of it. We were able to get this, which was the precursor. It's a documentary made by the U.S. Information Service, who—in the first year they were created—billed themselves as the U.S. Information Agency so that they wouldn't be confused with the U.S. Immigration Service. Isn't that interesting? They changed their name locally but internationally they're known as the U.S. Information Service. It was formed in 1953 and they started making films that basically sold the Cold War and America's role in it around the world. *...And Now Miguel* was one of the first films they made. The guy they hired, [Joseph Krumgold](#), had actually worked on other military training films. He did the narration for *The Autobiography of a "Jeep"*, which is considered one of the classics of military training films. In *...And Now Miguel*, he takes the same approach. In *The Autobiography of a "Jeep"*, the jeep is talking about how it's being made and in *...And Now Miguel* the little boy talks about how he becomes a shepherd. As any film shot in New Mexico, it looks stunning and captures a distinct, somewhat isolated culture and—boom!—right near the last third, it brings the Cold War into it. It's a gentle, pastoral film but it

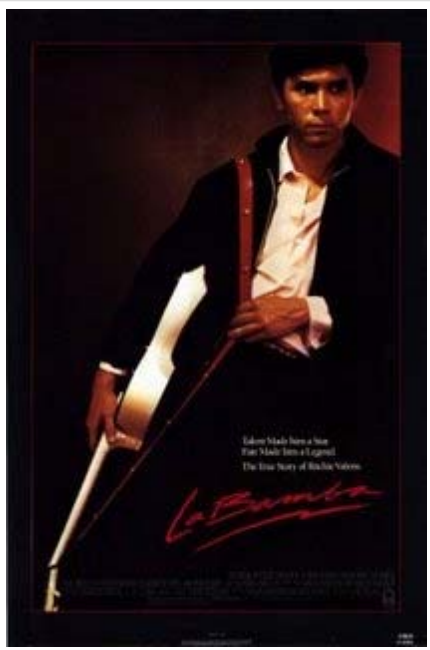
subtly shows how all that connects to the Cold War. It leaves you thinking, "How exactly did they see this as a way of selling America's role in the Cold War to other countries?" I suspect they were trying to present this to largely agricultural or shepherd-based cultures; to show: "We have people like this too and they're also behind the Cold War." I don't know if the Afghans would buy it. [Laughs.]

Guillén: Yet another premiere I'm looking forward to is Joseph Losey's *The Lawless*.

Noriega: It's a great film. It was the last film Losey made before he went into exile rather than testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. It kind of follows his earlier film *The Boy With Green Hair* as a parable about mob



behavior. In this case it's focused on the Mexican American side of a small California town. There are conflicts that emerge, represented—interestingly—not between the structures of society, between business and law and the working class; but, between teenagers and the way in which class and racial boundaries are marked among teenagers. That leads to an incident where there's mob behavior against a Mexican American boy who's accused of various crimes that he had no part in. What I find interesting about *The Lawless* is that the salvation or redemption for that town comes from the press; not the broadcast press—because they're shown to be quite venal—but the print press, newspapers. You have the Mexican American newspaper and the Anglo American newspaper and—as fate would have it—a romance develops between the two editors/publishers who happen to be different genders. The publisher of the Mexican American paper is played by an actress in brownface.



Guillén: Returning to Lou Diamond Phillips and your section on musicals, I was surprised for some reason to realize that *La Bamba* was premiering on TCM. I presumed it had already been shown. Why did you feel that showing *La Bamba* was more important, let's say, than showing *Zoot Suit*?

Noriega: Actually, I wanted to show both but *La Bamba* was the one we were able to show. *Zoot Suit* is great and I wish we could have shown that but there were a few films like that where we weren't able to show. Maybe at some future point? It certainly deserves much more visibility than it gets.

Guillén: I notice thematically that through several of the categories there's a focus on youth and gang culture; either negative portrayals of gang members or portrayals of youth trying to escape gang culture. Are these films truly reflective of Latino youth?

Noriega: It's reflective of Hollywood following what's in the news but also participating in a certain shift in how they look at youth that occurs from the 1950s onward. It really has to do with a lot of what happened after the Second World War in terms of legally creating the category of the juvenile delinquent. Understanding that category as one that's legally constructed provides an opportunity for the State to come in and say to families: "We will play a better role in raising your child." Under this rubric, right? A whole lot of other change is happening with youth as well, not only in labor but also in terms of constituting them as a market that can be appealed to. Now, we see where that plays out. You watch cartoons that are basically long advertisements for toys for six-year-olds. I think that's the shift that's taking place; but, what happens is

Latinos and Blacks get the heavy portion of the attention in a way that's grossly out of step with the demographic. It becomes a way of also trying to talk about the challenges that society is facing in terms of acknowledging the growing non-white population, particularly in urban areas. That becomes a very familiar story for how you try to account for them. You can't keep them out of the picture. How do you put them into the picture? Usually it's in terms of discussing the youth as juvenile delinquents. That allows you then to shift the discussion from one of integration to one of legal enforcement.

Guillén: Fascinating. In terms of genre, you begin your series by showing Latino images in the old westerns and then you wrap up with western revisionism in *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* and *Lone Star*. What is revisionist about those two films?



Noriega: There's a generation of filmmakers starting with *The Ballad* who—in some ways—all the Chicano filmmakers who I know are now in their late fifties early sixties at the peak of their careers and they loved westerns. They're probably more knowledgeable about them than I am. They just never saw themselves reflected very well within them. [Chuckles.] So with *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, there's an opportunity to resituate the western and say, "Well, yes, that story's been told and you don't have to get rid of it, but let's add another story alongside of it, which is more from the Mexican American perspective." In *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* you have an interesting case because it's based on an academic study that essentially details how the Mexican American community communicated with itself; how it understood a lot of these issues happening with respect to the Texas Rangers. The film

tells both stories concurrently until viewers come to that point where they realize the relationship between these two stories and what the problem that occurs between them is based on. To my mind, ***Lone Star*** is an obvious retelling of ***The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance***, which was itself a revisionist western. What John Sayles does is to take that story—which is how do we look back through nostalgia to find what was really happening—and what is our commitment once we find that out? Do we bury it? Or do we let that become the basis for a new story? Sayles adds a racial element to it that's been missing and comes up with what I think is one of the more astounding endings of any of these films that we're showing. It's a good way to end the series.

Cross-published on [Twitch](#).

POSTED BY MAYA AT 4/15/2009 12:49:00 AM

6 COMMENTS:

 **Belén Rodríguez** said...

Great interview. I've been looking forward to the series.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 15, 2009 12:09:00 PM PDT

 **Maya** said...

Thanks, Belen! I'm looking forward to the series too! Will you be writing about it on your site?

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 15, 2009 12:15:00 PM PDT

 **Adam** said...

Hey Michael,

Thanks for this interview and letting me know about this series. I just finished Adrian Burgos, Jr.'s **PLAYING AMERICA'S GAME: BASEBALL, LATINOS, AND THE COLOR LINE** so this series and this interview are flowing nicely with what I'm already studying.

Cheers,
Adam

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 15, 2009 3:53:00 PM PDT

 **Maya** said...

Hey Adam, thanks for stopping by to comment. I noted your