

Editor's Commentary

Why Chicanos Could Not Be Beat

Chon A. Noriega

In 1959, *Pull My Daisy* ushered in a brief period of underground film rooted in Beat aesthetics—with its inherent clash between disengagement and celebrity, spontaneity and posing. Produced by Robert Frank and Albert Leslie, the film depicts a rather romantic and clichéd slice-of-bohemian-life that features Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Peter Orlovsky as well as a voice over narration by Jack Kerouac. The film—together with John Cassavetes's *Shadows* (1959)—was a commercial and critical success, inspiring Hollywood knock-offs as well as independent feature production from Shirley Clarke to Andy Warhol (James 1989; Tyler 1995).

In 1966, Fresno native Ernie Palomino's own film, *My Trip in a '52 Ford*, brought an end to Beat poetry and underground film. A coda to his own participation in Beat art and poetry in this period, the film can also be seen as a eulogy to the extensive and unacknowledged presence of Chicano writers and artists in and around that movement: Omar Salinas, José Montoya, John Rechy, Ernie Palomino, Luis Valdez, and Oscar Zeta Acosta, just to name a few. By the mid-1960s, then, most of these California artists would reject Beat disengagement and postwar avant-garde aesthetics in favor of the Chicano civil rights movement and an aesthetics rooted in cultural nationalism. The connection between the Beat and Chicano art movements—one that can still be *heard*, for example, in any poem by José Montoya—never made it into the history books as scholars of each movement articulated self-contained and sui generis borders. Below I would like to consider some of what was missed in the process.

The One Avant-Garde

Since Luis Valdez's *I Am Joaquín* (1969)—widely identified as the “first” Chicano film—the notion of a Chicano cinema has been framed within the political discourse of the Chicano civil rights movement. As such, in the 1970s, filmmakers and collectives worked within a binarism of reform and revolution, on one hand advocating for access to U.S. television stations and film studios, whereas on the other hand theorizing their work as the “northernmost expression” of New Latin American Cinema (Treviño 1984, 40).

In the same period, however, a different type of Chicano film practice was taking shape that neither sought access to the industry (reform), nor rooted itself in a radical politics (revolution). Instead, these filmmakers produced low-budget films drawn from personal or local experience and situated within the context of the American avant-garde or “underground” film. Inspired by Sheldon Renan's *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* (1967) as well as regional screenings of avant-garde films, Chicanos were among the “fantastic numbers of people” who started shooting and screening their own “underground” works as personal expressions in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Renan 1967, 18).¹ Renan defined the underground film as a “dissent” located in personal expression and noncommercial practices:

The underground film is a certain kind of film. It is a film conceived and made essentially by one person and is a *personal statement* by that person. It is a film that dissents radically in form, or in technique, or in content, or perhaps in all three. It is usually made for very little money, frequently under a thousand dollars, and its exhibition is outside commercial film channels. (17)

Although the underground film has been faulted for its “repression of a materialist analysis of society and culture” in favor of disengagement, it nevertheless generated alternatives to Hollywood and society-at-large, most notably in Beat subculture, Warhol's Factory, and the personal “art films” of Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, and Jonas Mekas, among others (James 1989, 99).² But given its antithetical positioning, as David James argues, underground film did not so much become an autonomous and authentic cinema as it did a

“countercultural activity” deeply engaged with and vulnerable to Hollywood (99-100).

For Chicanos, however, things were not quite so simple, because *their* rejection of the commercial cinema would not be assimilated and commodified. Likewise, their participation within the avant-garde revealed the underlying limits of its stylistic and thematic heterogeneity. In both cases, what Chicanos came up against was the fact of racial homogeneity. Perhaps for these reasons, then, Chicano “underground” filmmakers often registered a critique of the very styles they used: Severo Perez (the trance film), Ernie Palomino (Beat poetic narrative), and Willie Varela (the lyrical film).³

Although scholars continue to locate the alternative “cinemas” of racial minorities either after or outside the underground, there has been a rediscovery of an increasing number of exceptions. These include Raphael Montañez Ortiz’s recycled films of the late 1950s, Ernie Palomino’s *My Trip in a '52 Ford* (1966), William Greaves’s *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1968), Severo Perez’s *A Day in the Life: Or Mozo, an Introduction into the Duality of Orbital Indecision* (1968), and Willie Varela’s personal films since the 1970s.⁴ Still, several factors mitigate efforts to see avant-garde and ethnic cinemas as coincident rather than as sequential, not the least of which is that these filmmakers’ work does not appear to fit the cultural logic of later ethnic cinemas, but, rather, belongs to the existential subjectivity of underground film. In fact, with the exception of Ortiz and Varela, most of these filmmakers became “ethnic” by leaving the avant-garde and shifting to ethnic-identified documentary and narrative by the end of the 1960s.

Palomino even goes so far as to identify his work up to *My Trip in a '52 Ford* as *gabacho* or white art—especially given its reliance on found-object sculpture and Beat poetry (Quirarte 1973, 96). He has taught in the La Raza Studies Department at Fresno State College since 1970. For his part, Perez moved to Los Angeles in 1971, where he briefly worked with Moctesuma Esparza, before turning to educational, science and medical films.⁵ In 1994, he wrote and directed *...And the Earth Did Not Swallow Him*, a feature-length adaptation of the Tomás Rivera novel.⁶ Their early work is worth considering, not for its failure to articulate a *Chicano* avant-garde practice, but for the ways in which it critically engages and participates in the *unmarked* avant-garde of its time.

"You Must Identify Yourself"

Ernie Palomino's *My Trip in a '52 Ford* (1966) represents a summation of his so-called *gabacho* art between 1960 and 1965, during which the Fresno native studied art at San Francisco State College. The film, his M.A. thesis project, uses Palomino's found-object sculpture as characters in a Beat narrative set in San Francisco. The 26-minute film begins with Mary Go, a 1952 Ford, being driven by Palomino until she breaks down, whereupon she is liberated ("at last I'm free") and her parts are reincarnated as various children: George Go, a "grotesque truck" made from a radiator and golf bag; Dorothy Dresser, a prostitute; Carol Chair, a housewife; Steve Stove, a marijuana-smoking Beatnik; and the Great Wild Bird, a messenger for the Great Go Father that is made from the hood of the '52 Ford. The film follows the course of a day, providing character sketches for each child, usually by having the previous child meet and comment on the next one, but also through poetic voice over descriptions. The Go children are identified as "ghosts" to their social and mechanical functions within the terms of traditional gender roles. Whereas George Go embraces functionalism, Steve Stove exemplifies Beat disengagement, proclaiming, "No hope-ah without dope-ah." Dorothy Dresser and Carol Chair play their roles in relationship to male needs and desires.⁷ Despite their differences and even conflicts, the Go children assert their sameness insofar as their design and character are determined by the social roles they play: "We're the same." Only the Great Wild Bird claims to be the "true ghost" since it places form over function and "does not reflect a character" in its visual manifestation: "We're not the same."

The film's denouement depicts scenes from different parts of San Francisco the next morning. Steve Stove is shown on a downtown sidewalk as white office workers walk past him in wonder. At a junkyard where black workers crush and cut up cars, Mary Go again proclaims, "At last I'm free, now I am going as I please, soon we shall be one again." Finally, on a building rooftop, a "Chinese student" named Jesse Wong confronts a "Negro janitor" named Bill Chair (Carol's husband). Wong, who is trying to reassemble Mary Go and her children into a trailer, sings, "My trailer is a sweet chariot coming for to carry them home." When Bill calls him crazy, Jesse responds, "No we're not, we're the same, Bill Chair," and the film ends. The

fact that the “Negro janitor” is played by a white actor and the “Chinese student” is played by Palomino himself brings racially defined class difference into the film’s allegorical critique of form and function in relation to gender roles. These final scenes, then, provide the transition between the allegorical narrative and the closing credits that depict Palomino’s M.A. exhibition, locating Palomino-as-artist in the space between abstract formalism and allegorical commentary, but doing so in terms of the racial difference that troubles Beat social disengagement.

In this respect, *My Trip in a '52 Ford* offers an appropriate coda to the Beat underground film, a period David E. James likewise ends in 1966, albeit by citing the summer release of Warhol’s *The Chelsea Girls* and the eruption of riots in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles (1989, 94). The film expresses a Beat critique of materialist culture in its allusion to John Clellon Holms’s *Go*, its jazz score and Beat poetic narration, the association of Steve Stove with Palomino (through a shot of Palomino’s art book, *In Black and White*), and its depiction of San Francisco’s night-life and the “square” work-a-day world. At the same time, however, the film’s message of “sameness” reduces both character types and racial classifications to a question of role playing, offering a satire of Beat exceptionalism itself.⁸ In many ways, then, the film identifies the gender biases and race-based class fantasies that made Beat nonconformity and disengagement into a role played on the same stage as everyone else. The irony of Palomino’s refrain, “We’re the same,” echoes within a movement that proclaimed its categorical difference from society, brokering it through others’ racial difference, and thereby voicing its dissent in the same idiom as the dominant society itself.⁹ In confronting Bill Chair—the white “Negro” as ostensibly working-class but also as homonym for the *chair* of Palomino’s department—Palomino likewise engages in racial masquerade as a “Chinese” *student*. His declaration of sameness conflates his receipt of an advanced degree (when the student is accredited the “same” as the chair) with the racial masquerade of the Beat poets. If, like Steve Stove, Palomino evinced a “queer relationship with the Go family” of the Beats, it is because his own racial difference precluded using racial difference as a metaphor for dissent-by-disengagement. Neither white nor black, Palomino refused the demand of the Great Wild Bird—

that “you must identify yourself” as somewhere between “plain” and “exceptional”—answering instead, “We’re the same.”

Although *My Trip in a '52 Ford* marks the end of Palomino’s so-called gabacho period, it also set the terms on which Palomino would be identified as a Chicano artist by none other than Luis Valdez. In an unpublished three-page interpretation, Valdez called the film “a brilliant work of art,” linking it to the Chicano movement *because* it rejects ethnic classification: “It is not, perhaps, the vision that one would expect from a Chicano artist, but its very rejection of ethnic (or any other) classification identifies it as a work created by a man very much concerned with the entire question of identity” (1). (For Valdez, the film moves beyond the “moralistic platitudes” about the “oneness of man,” replacing such liberal humanism with the “oneness of everything.” In so doing, he asserts the arbitrariness of race, but as a physical and metaphysical insight, not a moral and political one. Having localized humanist discourses within the universe, and thereby identifying the particular and the universal as never more than human responses to the universe, Valdez ends by explicitly linking particular concerns about racism to universal ones about human creativity. This subtle maneuver within liberal humanism itself allowed one Chicano artist to advocate another for speaking about the human condition and the world-at-large:

Palomino’s concept of existence frees people as well as things to be something other than function, routine or habit would dictate. Thus a rusting ’52 Ford may become a mother, a man can be husband to a chair, a white can be a black, Palomino can state (as he does in the film credits) that his film was written by J. P. Wong, etc.

In a sense, the film is one Chicano’s response to a world that tried to stereotype him. In a greater sense, it is a human response to everything in life that restricts the creative spirit of the universe. And that is a greater trip than most of us have ever taken in a ’52 Ford. (3)

But it is a trip taken but once. In his interpretation, Valdez read Palomino’s abstract narrative as Chicano because it addressed the spurious nature of any and all classification systems, including race. Valdez’s own work followed the same impulse, but it moved in the other direction, proclaiming the

universal appeal and relevance of his own culture-specific narratives: *Los Vendidos: The Sellouts* (1972), *Zoot Suit* (1981), *La Bamba* (1987), *La Pastorela: A Shepherd's Tale* (1991). If Valdez could see it both ways, Palomino did not, nor did there appear to be an audience for either Palomino's film or Valdez's interpretation (which remains unpublished).

A Day in the Life

In San Antonio, meanwhile, Severo Perez purchased a 16mm camera and basic editing equipment, then shot the twelve-minute film, *A Day in the Life: Or Mozo, An Introduction into the Duality of Orbital Indecision* (1968), an experimental chronicle of a *mozo* or young guy portrayed by Perez himself.¹⁰ The film was shown throughout the United States as part of the "The Texas Underground National Tour." Between 1968 and 1970, Perez produced thirteen other experimental films, including "film poems" and animations.¹¹ *A Day in the Life* presented a calculated critique of the trance film, which dealt with heightened states of consciousness, including Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) and *Ritual Transfigured in Time* (1946), Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (1947), and Stan Brakhage's *Reflections on Black* (1955). In response, Perez literalized the genre's "psychodramatic" existentialism, which Sitney argued dealt with "the quest for sexual identity" (1979, 18). Perez's protagonist wakes, urinates, and grooms himself, then strolls across San Antonio on his way to a friend's apartment, where he gets high on marijuana, finally leaving to frolic in the city park. In the park, Mozo sees a couple, another Chicano *mozo* with a "white" woman, and begins to fantasize that he is the one involved with the woman. Several cutaway shots to Mozo in bed suggest that his fantasy occurs both in the park and later while he masturbates. The film ends after Mozo plays with several children in a tree and then returns home. If Perez debunks the pretensions of the trance film, he nevertheless depicts the register on which his generation *did* experience "trance" states and the quest for sexual identity, while placing both within a racial economy. Mozo's source for marijuana as well as his object of desire are "white," and he is revealed to be in competition for each one's attention from other Chicano males.

Despite the cultural elements, and *de facto* Chicano subject, however, Perez did not identify his work as either Chicano

or political: "Is it a 'Chicano film'? Yes and no. I mean, it's Chicanos that made it, and it's about our experience. . . . But I never considered it a 'Chicano film' when I made it."¹² Instead, Perez identified his work as a "film artist," although, he admitted, "often there are cultural motifs which might make them Chicano art."¹³ Interestingly, Perez raised these issues in a letter to Jesús Salvador Treviño about the exclusion of "film artists" from the Chicano Cinema Coalition. In the struggle to be both a "Chicano" and an "artist," rather than a "Chicano artist," Perez raised identity as an issue that was at once more personal and abstract than the political self of the Chicano art movement.

In other words, Perez refused to foreground a politics of resistance and affirmation, preferring instead to manipulate representations of Chicano culture and identity to the same extent that he did other elements of the text. For both Palomino and Perez, however, that potential was soon subordinated to their locations within the identity-based sectors of educational institutions and the film industry. In the words of the *Great Wild Bird*, "You must identify yourself."

And when they did, they could not be Beat.

Notes

1. The quotation is taken from Sheldon Renan's *An Introduction to the American Underground Film*, but he does not make explicit reference to Chicanos.

2. The most influential account of this period remains P. Adams Sitney's *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-1978* (1979). For a recent attempt to explore the confluence of the underground and gay subcultures, see Juan A. Suárez's *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema* (1996).

3. Sitney defines the trance and lyrical films in *Visionary Film*: "The trance film was predicated upon the transparency of the somnambulist within the dream landscape. The perspective of the camera, inflected by montage, directly imitated his [sic] consciousness" (64). "The lyrical film postulates the filmmaker behind the camera as the first-person protagonist of the film. The images of the film are what he sees, filmed in such a way that we never forget his [sic] presence and we know how he is reacting to his vision" (142).

4. In the period before 1975, other Latino experimental media artists included Puerto Rican video artist Edin Vélez, who produced his first work in 1969, the Chicano art group Asco, which formed in 1971, and Chicana filmmaker Esperanza Vásquez, who briefly worked in an experimental mode in the early 1970s. On Greaves, see MacDonald 1992, 24-29. On Ortiz, see MacDonald 1994, 26-31 and 1996, 183-207; and Noriega 1995, 36-40. On Velez, see Jiménez, 1994, 99-104, 6.

5. Perez produced and directed *Cristal* (1975)—a short documentary segment on the Crystal City, Texas, voters revolt—for the *Realidades* series. In 1976, he purchased Learning Garden Production, producing educational films until 1982. Perez also worked as the line producer for Treviño's *Sequin* (1981), and wrote the play *Soldier Boy* (1982, which was performed at El Teatro Campesino Playhouse and directed by Luis Valdez. Perez also wrote and directed a series of female-centered educational dramas on illegal immigration (*Yolanda/De Nuevo*, 1988), low college enrollment among Latinos (*Dreams of Flying*, 1989), and AIDS among Latino teens (*Between Friends*, 1990).

6. The film received its major funding through the National Endowment for the Humanities. It had a limited theatrical release and later aired on PBS's American Playhouse. *Tierra Newsletter* (May 1992), KPBS-TV, San Diego State University; Press package, KPBS-TV, San Diego State University, n.d. (c. 1995); Barrios 1994, F1, F7; and Thomas 1994, F4.

7. The description of Dorothy Dresser is the most blatant caricature, evoking sexist and racist stereotypes: "She had the majesty of an outdoor toilet and the fat warmth of a Mexican woman cooking tortillas over a stove named Rosa. The perfect female, vain with marvelous physical comforts, embracing everyone who looked at her. The very filth pouring through her body, sifting, churning on its downward voyage to the great drain between her legs. She adorns herself and suddenly becomes the ghost of an apparition." It is Dorothy Dresser, then, who speaks against this description in her confrontation with the upright Carol Chair, pointing out, "Baby, we're the same."

8. I am indebted to Rebecca Epstein's reading of the film in terms of its satire of Beat counterculture in her paper, "Beating on the 'Beats' in Ernesto Palomino's *My Trip in a '52 Ford*," UCLA Department of Television, November 30, 1995, four pages.

9. On the Beats' neocolonialist figuring of Latin America, see Manuel L. Martínez's "With Imperious Eye: Kerouac, Burroughs, and Ginsberg on the Road in South America," (1998, 33-53).

10. Interview with Severo Perez, San Antonio, February 3, 1990, by Chon Noriega and Lillian Jiménez. Perez, "working completely in the boonies," edited the film in his living room, but lacked the

equipment to add sound. An advertisement in the phone book led him, unwittingly, to the trailer of a porno filmmaker, where he was able to use the pornographer's more advanced camera to print sound onto the raw stock. As Perez recalls, "And talk about *rasquache* [make-do] . . . it was as *rasquache* as a production can get." The soundtrack consists of recorded conversations, sound buzzes, and a piano composition by Daniel Llanes, who also appears in the film.

11. Severo Perez, *Art Filmography, 1968-1979*. Interestingly, the "art filmography" includes experimental works, documentaries, and educational animations. Most of the experimental films have either disappeared or "just died" (disintegrated) after numerous screenings. *A Day in the Life* had been available through the New York Filmmakers' Cooperative, but was pulled from distribution by the filmmaker in 1995.

12. Interview with Severo Perez.

13. Severo Perez, personal letter to Jesús Treviño, July 12, 1979. Quoted with permission of the author.

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