

UP FOR DISCUSSION

Movies' Most Memorable Mexican-American Moments

From *Stand and Deliver* to *Giant*, These Are Hollywood's Strongest Cinematic Depictions of America's Third Largest Ethnic Group

CHARLES RAMÍREZ BERGThe fight in Sarge's Diner in *Giant***ESTHER GABARA**

Crossing the border, whether real or imagined

CHON NORIEGA

The Cisco Kid and maids are only part of the story

DESIRÉE J. GARCIAThe dark past and diverse present of *Zoot Suit*

For better or for worse, when many Americans think about Italian-Americans, they think of *The Godfather*. When it comes to Irish-Americans, it's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. And for Chinese-Americans, it's *The Joy Luck Club*. The way people talk. The clothes they wear. The houses they live in. What makes them cry. Film has a way of making abstract identities vivid and tangible.

So what has the silver screen been communicating to Americans about the Mexican-American experience? Mexican-Americans make up one of the largest ethnic groups in the U.S. but only a handful of mainstream films focusing on Mexican-Americans have become household names—*La Bamba*, *Selena*, and *Stand and Deliver*, for instance, all of which came out in a 10-year span. But Mexican-Americans were present on-screen long before that moment and played a role in the off-screen American story for even longer. In advance of the event “[How Do You Film the \(Mexican\) American Story?](#)”, featuring *La Bamba* writer and director Luis Valdez and *Selena* producer Moctesuma Esparza, we asked film and art scholars: What are the most prominent and memorable on-screen moments in Hollywood history that tell us something about the experience of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in the U.S.?

MAY 26, 2015

SHARE

CHARLES RAMÍREZ BERG

The fight in Sarge's Diner in *Giant*

Although Hollywood has done its share of stereotyping Mexicans and Mexican-Americans over the past century, some films sought to counter the stereotypes and deal forthrightly with intolerance in American society. One of the most important of these was George Stevens' *Giant* (1956). It was groundbreaking because it was the first time a major studio tackled the issue of discrimination against Mexican-Americans in a big, expensive movie featuring top stars like Elizabeth Taylor, Rock Hudson, and James Dean.

For me, the scene that stood out was the fight in Sarge's Diner. It's the moment when the film's flawed protagonist, the wealthy rancher Bick Benedict, finally overcomes his prejudice against Mexicans. When the diner's proprietor refuses to serve a family of Mexican-Americans and starts forcing them out, Bick steps in to defend them.

I'll never forget the first time I saw it.

My mother took me to see the movie when *Giant* was re-released in the early 1960s. She had seen it during its original run in 1956, but I never had. Right before the scene in Sarge's, she leaned over to me and whispered, "Pay attention to this."

And I did. Though she never brought it up again, she was using that scene to teach me about discrimination, telling me what it felt like to be a Mexican-American in Texas. She was showing me the kind of bigotry that Mexican-Americans had experienced—that she herself had experienced. And she was encouraging me to stand up for our civil rights as Americans. Bick loses the fight, but that didn't matter. What mattered, my mother was saying, was doing the right thing.

Charles Ramírez Berg is university distinguished teaching professor in the radio-TV-film department at the University of Texas at Austin and the author of *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, and Resistance*. He recently appeared in *Children of Giant*, a documentary about the making of *Giant* and its lasting impact on Mexican-Americans.

ESTHER GABARA

Crossing the border, whether real or imagined

Near the end of Cheech Marín's 1978 *Born in East L.A.*, the movie's born-and-bred- Angeleno hero, who had been wrongly deported to Mexico, leads a mass dash back across the border. Neil Diamond's "Coming to America" blasts in the background. The border itself disappears in the face of an alliance between Mexicans from both sides. The solitary Chicano standing atop a mountain ridge multiplies into a cast of thousands who run and walk across the border. Under their feet the divide between north and south becomes just another valley, and Diamond's song includes them, laughingly and provocatively, in the cherished story of this as a country of immigrants.

Artists from around the world have used film, literature, and fine art to show that the border between the U.S. and Mexico is both real and imaginary. More than half a century ago, Nobel laureate Octavio Paz opened his landmark essay on Mexican national identity, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, with *pachucos* in Los Angeles, teenagers whose flamboyant style differentiated them from traditional Mexican norms as much as the "American way of life." In *Por mis pistolas (For My Pistols)* (1968), Mexican film legend Cantinflas helpfully picked the lock to a border crossing, composed only of a gate with no fence, for a U.S. border agent who lost his key.

The contemporary art series InSITE, which took place between 1992 and 2005, sponsored artworks that moved between San Diego and Tijuana. In 1997 Marco Ramirez ERRE created *Toy An-Horse*, a two-headed Trojan horse that presumably could smuggle stowaways both north and south. Javier Téllez's *One Flew over the Void (Human Cannonball)* from 2005 shot a human cannonball into the terror and promise of the other side.

These artists reveal the flimsy "common sense" of national borders by showing the real violence of a border that separates families and, like Prohibition did to alcohol, produces criminality where it need not exist. The border appears and disappears to remind us that the U.S. and Mexico are not two separate entities. For better and for worse, our experiences and histories are deeply wedded.

Esther Gabara is the E. Blake Byrne associate professor of romance studies, and art, art history, and visual studies at Duke University. She is the author of *Errant Modernism: The Ethos of Photography in Mexico and Brazil, 1920-1940*.

CHON NORIEGA

The Cisco Kid and maids are only part of the story

In 1974, Alan Arkin played Mexican-American cop Bean in *Freebie and the Bean*. I remember this film fondly, since it was the first time I saw a Mexican-American lead character. And it was packed with slapstick, chases, and vigilante police—all that a teenage boy needed in a movie! For years, I was convinced that Arkin was Chicano.

Only later, as I researched Hollywood history, did I come to appreciate the Mexican-American roles played by Latino actors. These include Cesar Romero, Gilbert Roland, and Jimmy Smits portraying the Cisco Kid in movies and on television across the 20th century. The Cisco Kid is a familiar character from Mexican popular culture: the heroic outlaw helping the people resist unscrupulous forces. And he had a sense of humor, too.

In the 1930s to 1950s, films about social problems brought an explicit, if also ambivalent, focus on Mexican-Americans. These characters evinced American values, but were also convinced to stay in the barrio. And they were often played by white actors, including Gail Russell and Charlton Heston. But these films also opened the doors to actors like Rita Moreno and Ricardo Montalban.

It was not until Chicano and Latino filmmakers started directing features in the 1970s that a different narrative about the Chicano experience filled the screen: *Please, Don't Bury Me Alive!* (1976), *El Norte* (1983), and *Stand and Deliver* (1988), to name the ones listed in the National Film Registry. If earlier films presented a morality tale about segregation, these dealt with more complicated characters and circumstances.

The late Lupe Ontiveros was without a doubt the patron saint of Chicano cinema of this era. Though she played a maid more than 150 times in her 36-year career, she also appeared in just about every Chicano-focused feature and television series. But—true to my love of action films—I'll always remember her as the drug lord in *Blood In, Blood Out* (1993) and her final, magnificent shootout scene. Lupe lived large on the silver screen, and, as a consequence, so did we.

Chon A. Noriega is a professor in the film, television, and digital media department and director of the Chicano Studies Research Center, both at UCLA.

DESIRÉE J. GARCIA

The dark past and diverse present of *Zoot Suit*

When we think of Mexican-Americans on the silver screen, Edward James Olmos' performance in Luis Valdez's classic 1981 film, *Zoot Suit*, comes to mind. Olmos' character, El Pachuco, is both "fact and fantasy," as the film says.

He represents the *pachucos* of Mexican-American history—young men (and women) who exhibited strident behavior and flashy dress in order to survive in the racially charged environment of 1940s Los Angeles. He is also the embodiment of the Mexican gangster stereotype that circulated widely in popular culture at the time of the film's release in 1981. Confronting "the national problem of a national stereotype," Valdez aspired to expose both sides of this complex character: the historical forces that brought El Pachucho into being and the prejudices that labeled him a social problem.

Zoot Suit remains unique in Hollywood history as one of the few films directed by a Mexican-American. Unlike other musical films of the time, *Zoot Suit* addressed American racism head-on. Valdez projected a vision of a new America, one that acknowledged the darkness of our past while celebrating the diversity of our present.

But the vision of its creator and the realities of 1980s film exhibition were at odds. Universal Studios noted the problem of segregated moviegoing in the U.S.—people of color populated urban movie theatres while mostly white audiences patronized suburban ones. They also underestimated the diversity of the U.S. Latino population, a heterogeneous group with distinct histories, many of whom had no connection to *Zoot Suit's* Mexican-American story. Stymied by such complexities, the distribution was tentative; it focused on the L.A. audience and then rolled out to certain Latino markets in cities like San Antonio and Phoenix. Ultimately, the limited campaign hurt the film's box office and hindered the dissemination of Valdez's message of reconciliation and redemption.

Desirée J. Garcia is the author of *The Migration of Musical Film: From Ethnic Margins to American Mainstream* (2014). She is an assistant professor in the film and media studies program at Arizona State University.

What It Means to Be American is a national conversation hosted by the Smithsonian and Zócalo Public Square.

PRIMARY EDITOR: JIA-RUI COOK. SECONDARY EDITOR: SARAH ROTHBARD.

*PHOTO COURTESY OF BENJAMIN LINH VU.

EXPLORE RELATED CONTENT
CULTURE, FILM, MEXICAN AMERICAN, MOVIES, WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AMERICAN

▲ TOP