Beautiful Identities
When History Turns State's Evidence

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Buried in the Federal Trade Commission Library are several intragovernmental documents from the 1960s and 1970s that can be found in no other archive but that signal an attempt within the state itself to create an autonomous space outside its own corporate liberalism and the emerging global media. That space was an aesthetic space, instrumental neither for political representation nor for mass communication; instead, it served the needs of a social movement for beautiful identities. That space is now called "Chicano cinema," its mode—initially at least—is that of the documentary, and its location, television.

Ironically, the history of Chicano cinema has been told in ways that link aesthetic analysis to the contingency of social movement activities that are considered discrete from and contestatory of the state. Thus, that history has been bounded by the essential terms of cultural nationalism: first, as a narrative of resistance to dominant cinema and, second, as an internal matter that distinguishes between two paths—one good, the other bad—toward such resistance. Such a history seeks to define difference, something one can call "Chicano," against the backdrop of an industrial and national sameness from which it remains excluded and with which it also seeks incorporation by way of difference. The choice between "good" and "bad," then, is not about whether to assimilate but, rather, how to do so and remain beautiful.

To a large extent, the contradictions of this historiography can be attributed to its articulation within the institutional and disciplinary boundaries of the university. But this situation is more complicated than it first appears, since Chicano histories claim to speak from (or, at the least, for) another
space, the community. And this “speaking for” reflects not so much a naive idealism within the Ivory Tower as it does the ambiguous location of the minority scholar in the first place. In other words, if such “speaking for” is similar to that of cultural nationalism expressed outside of (or even before) university-based Chicano studies, that is because the inclusion of Chicanos within the university has been structured along the lines of their prior exclusion. This inclusion/exclusion places clear limits on the type of history that can be told, especially insofar as the university and minority scholar want the same thing—a “minority discourse”—although each places emphasis on a different word. Of course, all histories can be read as allegories of employment. While histories may speak to an outside community or another time, they are also, as Michel de Certeau ([1975] 1988) notes in The Writing of History, “the product of a place” (p. 64). That is, histories speak from a social institution and its constellation of peers, methods, sources, and practices. Thus, to paraphrase David James (1989) in Allegories of Cinema, a historical text never fails to tell the story of how and why it was produced (p. 5). Within “body” programs of race, gender, and sexuality, however, that story is qualitatively different than “traditional” appointments, insofar as job recruitment and critical analysis are explicitly tied to the same object: a body marked by difference. This situation raises fundamental questions, not about affirmative action per se but about an institution that cannot imagine, let alone enact, an alternative to racial and gender exclusions. For this reason, then, the minority historian often engages in a strategic conflation of critical discourses rooted in an academic professional culture with social practices outside the university.

The literature on minority cinemas tends to deal with the expressive qualities and sociohistorical context for cultural production—that is, defining a vernacular aesthetic, cinema movement, and corresponding community, usually against a backdrop of mainstream exclusion. Despite the theoretical range of these efforts, more than anything else, they have contributed to the construction of minority-produced media as distinct genres within critical discourse, funding practices, and public exhibition. In fact, quite often, minority cinemas are named and become functional within discourse and institutional practices before they exist as a text-producing phenomenon. Historiography precedes history. There is a Catch-22 at work here that speaks to the dynamic of racially marked expression and its circulation within popular and academic discourses. It is necessary to posit subnational histories to locate texts and, thereby, incite discourse; but at the same time, any specific text will necessarily exceed the history within which it then circulates and within which it is, more or less, contained.

What we end up with, then, are a series of body genres for, by, and about women, blacks, Chicanos, homosexuals, and so on that are problematic as “genres” for the same reason that they are so effective: these social-cum-aesthetic categories create a space for filmmakers to move into in a very practical and consequential way. Films and videos do get funded, produced, and distributed. But that space often ends up being another, more public, version of the home, ghetto, barrio, and closet from which the filmmakers were trying to escape. For my current purposes, I am concerned with the historiographic impulse behind the construction of body genres, that is, with a recent critical activity that attempts to write a particular community, subject, or identity into history by way of “film” genre. What must be repressed in such a move is that one is doing a form of genre analysis that effectively reduces institutional analysis and social history to a textual effect; that is, these social phenomena exist only as signs circulating within a closed set of texts. But there is another consequence embedded within the inherent formal and textual limitations of genre analysis: insofar as one tends to look within and not across genres, the analysis also looks within and not across racial and sexual identities.

Drawing on extensive archival research, I want to offer a theoretical model for understanding “Chicano cinema” as a state-created and state-regulated practice. For the purposes of this article, as well as the confluence of aesthetics and historiography, I propose that the aesthetic is always instrumental or, rather, put to instrumental purposes—but depending on one’s vantage point, either beauty or purpose will be the only thing perceived—and that the state holds the evidence wherein the two come together. I do not, however, subscribe to a simple bifurcation within aesthetics between the autonomous and the instrumental, positions usually mapped onto Kant and Bourdieu, respectively. As a reluctant theorist of what could be called autohistoriography, I am partisan to neither position in and of itself. Thus, I am not arguing that the aesthetic transcends the particular into the universal or, conversely, that it represents the false consciousness of a particular class. Instead, I will attempt to show the structure of the particular through which “beauty and truth” take shape within the state in the 1960s and 1970s, giving rise to a “Chicano cinema” of beautiful identities. Herein lies the paradoxical origins of Chicano cinema.

Before I begin, let me explain that while I will be talking about minority “cinemas,” I will focus my attention on broadcast policy—which is to say, television—since it is here that most activity has taken place, whether in terms of media reform, state regulation, or even textual production. In fact, despite our claims to examine a “cinematic” practice, most of the relevant texts we study are products of television, including half of the dozen-or-so Chicano-directed feature films. The reason minority cinemas emerged vis-à-vis television is political: broadcasting, and not film studios, represented the one potential site of state intervention to respond to minority demands for access to the public sphere. Beginning with the Civil Rights Act of 1964,
the courts and new regulatory agencies challenged and, in some cases, changed or superseded broadcast policy, thereby introducing a conflicted state apparatus as mediator between the mass media and disenfranchised groups. Thus, in addition to addressing the industry, the state appeared to be regulating its own regulators, too. In general, this intervention came from two sets of institutions: those that actively engaged in direct oversight of the “core institutions” for broadcast policy, such as the U.S. Court of Appeals, and those that “regulated the social consequences of business behavior” (Horwitz 1989, 76), including the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and Civil Rights Commission. Rather than function as a neutral domain, the state actually created both the market and that which contests the status quo, largely by defining and subordinating political struggles within an overall corporate liberal framework. In policy-oriented and legal-oriented scholarship, this process is seen as one that generates “irony” (Horwitz 1989), “illusion” (Rowland 1982), or a “contradictory situation” (Haight and Weinstein 1981), as protest groups are brought within the administrative control of the state (see also, Streeter 1996). The internal “conflicts” between federal agencies, then, represent an adaptive feature of the state, rather than its Achilles’ heel. This double bind is no more evident than in the way in which unregulated social protest is converted into the ritual of “expert” testimony before the state.

For the most part, Chicano testimony fell outside the interpretive framework of the various agencies that solicited it in the first place. Chicano media activists understood neither the style nor the substance of the “appropriately neutral and expert policy language” for mass media. After all, they were not policy experts, nor were they professionals within the industry; they were outsiders demanding to be let inside. At the same time, however, they were part of a growing social movement defining its own boundaries, language, and demands. By the late 1960s, the Chicano movement had begun to theorize its location within power relations, largely by providing a deeply historical and, hence, transnational dimension to the current socioeconomic and political situation of Chicanos in the United States. In starting with the conquest of the Americas, this historical orientation led to an investment in defining and reproducing a culture of resistance that stood outside the historical forces of the state, whether of Spain (1492-1821), Mexico (1821-1848), or the United States (since 1848). To be inside the Chicano movement, then, was to be outside the state, albeit on cultural grounds more than anything else. Needless to say, this position colored the demands for access to the mass media, that is, the demands to be let inside, and it helped to explain why the state had to come to Chicano media groups rather than vice versa.

This brings me back to my opening remark: the state itself attempted to resolve this impasse between a viable yet unassimilated social movement and an exclusionary mass media, and it did so by creating the concept of Chicano cinema via broadcast television. Between 1968 and 1973, state functionaries working within both the new civil rights bureaucracy and key executive departments produced a series of reports and letters outlining the features of a Chicano cinema vis-à-vis the state and corporate media. The most influential document, Chicanos and the Mass Media, entered the Congressional Record twice during 1970, before being distributed as a pamphlet; although that pamphlet now appears to reside only in the Federal Trade Commission Library (Rendó and Reyes 1971). Chicanos and the Mass Media proposed “amalgamating the two extreme concepts” of Chicano media and establishment media through the “intermediary agencies” of the state: “A balance must be struck between total insulation from outside media contact and influence and the co-opting of Chicano thought and news-reporting by the non-raza communications system.” Pushing this argument even further, the report demanded support for developing a Chicano media through industry “reparations” rather than state-regulated “equal opportunity,” while it also announced the need to use the regulatory arena to bring about reforms in mass media content and hiring practices (see also, Reyes 1971).

In many ways, Chicanos and the Mass Media (Rendó and Reyes 1971) is an astonishing document that presents a full-blown theory that builds on historical and statistical analyses in a more complex way than anything put forth by either the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) or Chicano grassroots activists in the Southwest. What the report proposed was nothing less than “amalgamating the two extreme concepts” of inside and outside by allowing both to coexist on equal terms; in short, it offered a real solution to the problem of exclusion rather than the FCC’s “dance of delay, limits, cooption, and quiescence” (Haight and Weinstein 1981, 141). But this approach also questioned the very legal framework for mass media, suggesting that a noncorporate alternative, “Chicano media,” could exist alongside the industry. In this way, the report exceeded the interpretive community within which it was presented. It did not make sense. What it did do, however, was to rearticulate Chicano movement political rhetoric through the state itself. In fact, when read in the context of the published Congressional hearings within which it appeared, Chicanos and the Mass Media comes across as more an act of “thinking aloud” within the context of the Chicano movement than of speaking to an addressee within a legally defined set of power relations. Actually, it did the latter through the former.

If concurrent broadcast law and policy placed television outside representational politics, in both senses of the phrase (democracy and mediated public identities), then difference necessarily became the bête noire within the public sphere that television produced. After all, difference signaled a body politic, whereas television addressed a mass audience; and for this
reason, media reform based on civil rights often found itself subordinated to the logic of consumer rights. In the 1950s and 1960s, racial difference brought this dynamic into high relief insofar as racial minorities did not have the requisite rights of citizenship that television could then rearticulate as consumer rights. Thus positioned "outside" the corporate liberal imaginary for the citizen-consumer, racial minorities encountered the complexities and paradoxes of seeking social change. While the state responded to social unrest by constructing avenues through which racial minorities could seek adjudication, it also did so in a way that did not foster structural assimilation. Instead, the state compelled these groups to participate in a "discourse of violence" as well as base their claims on supplemental racial categories for citizenship. Thus, in their negotiations with the state, racial minorities oscillated between injured party and unlawful threat, while their status as citizens was itself marked as exceptional in both senses of the word: an exception (rights) and superior (identity). These paradoxes pitted a nonwhite racial identity against an unmarked national imaginary from which it remained excluded.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the struggle over access to and control of the mass media brought together conflicting notions of ethnic community and national identity, communication and capital, stereotypes and employment, while violence provided a rationale for linking these social spheres, basic infrastructures, and symbolic and material representations into an agenda for social equity. And here is how it happened: when Chicanos protested the broadcast media, the state intervened and redirected their protest to the policy arena, offering them a quid pro quo; the state would participate in constituting minorities as distinct groups with an identity and place within the body politic, and in exchange, that place would be an informal one that did not challenge the structure of rule. Thus, for example, this period of state activism resulted in the heyday of minority public affairs programming, which offered highly charged public symbols of an identity and community marked by "otherness" but did little to integrate the executive ranks. By the mid-1970s, amidst the recession, the state would defer issues of social equity to the marketplace, and broadcasters would quickly cast themselves as the victims of the symbolic violence of minority cultural citizenship. Minority and local public affairs series were quickly cancelled, replaced by syndicated game shows, conservative talk shows, and corporate-funded investment series. We call this deregulation, but it was also deracination, replacing minority groups' already problematic toehold in the public sphere with no place at all.

In arguing that the state created Chicano cinema, I am being at once deeply ironic and deadly earnest. Having just finished a book-length study on the topic—Shot in America: Television, the State, and the Rise of Chicano

Cinema (Noriega, forthcoming)—I set myself the challenge of writing a parody of my own book that would be as true as the book itself. If historiography precedes history, then it seemed only appropriate that the parody precede the original. But I am less concerned in generating a simple reversal than in exploring the implications of a subtle shift in emphasis. Whereas my book stresses social movements, here I foreground the state; but in both cases, I draw on the same evidence. So if I am being deeply ironic and deadly earnest, I do so to reveal something that neither the state nor social movements care to manifest: their complicity. By complicity, however, I am talking about structural relations and not ethical choices. It is aesthetics, the search for the good and the beautiful, that serves to obscure these relations; not because it is in the nature of the aesthetic to do so but because both the state and social movements turn to the aesthetic at precisely that moment when their complicity threatens to manifest itself. What we lose in the process is a history that concerns itself with the good, the bad, and the ugly, acquiring beautiful identities, instead.

As a methodological issue, then, I want to end by stressing the need to examine the relationships and tactical maneuvers that locate social protest both inside and outside the state. The archival holdings suggest the complex self-othering required for minorities to approach the state to gain access to television. The irony is that television itself often was understood as an intermediate step toward Hollywood. It is in this circuitous relationship among social movements, the state, broadcast television, and Hollywood that beautiful identities emerged. Such an approach does not deny the fact that certain groups have been clearly excluded from equal participation in political representation, economic opportunity, and mass communication, but neither does it fetishize exclusion into an identity out of step with the complexities and paradoxes of seeking social change. The evidence does exist, but it becomes invisible when we hold other truths to be self-evident.

Notes

2. This passage is from a section ("The Chicano Media") that appears in the Congressional Record but not the pamphlet. See page 75 and page 928AP in hearings cited in note 1.

References


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