The End of Chicano Cinema

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The early 1990s witnessed the end of Chicano cinema, a film movement that had its start in the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, entered the public sphere via television in the 1970s, and saw a brief flirtation with low-budget integration into a so-called Hispanic Hollywood in the 1980s. In all these periods, Chicano cinema worked against the specter of the gang film—and not the western as one might suppose—since this genre and its gangster predecessor more closely corresponded to the urban milieu for Chicano political struggle.

With the release of Edward James Olmos’s *American Me* (1992), followed closely by Taylor Hackford’s *Bound by Honor* (1993; available on video under its original title, *Blood In, Blood Out*), Hollywood effectively co-opted Chicano cinema, recuperating it into the very genre it had struggled against for nearly three decades.

In these films, the prison is refigured as the site of Chicano “home” and “family,” while the barrio itself becomes little more than a place where disaffected family members hide their time. Domestic and institutional spaces not only interpenetrate each other, but are interchanged wholesale.

Insofar as these films constitute a decisive shift in Chicano representation, it is important to start with some background. In earlier Chicano-produced feature films, prison often stands as the displacement of domestic space and the interruption of couple formation. Here I’m thinking about films such as *Zoot Suit* (1981), *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* (1982), *Born in East L.A.* (1987), and *Break of Dawn* (1988). This combined displacement and interruption operates on two levels: historiography and genre conventions.

On the first account, the eighties films are all based on actual events
and attempt to articulate and situate these local histories within some notion of “American” history. If the protagonists have all been denied the rights of citizenship, these films are insistent that their “true story” is a decidedly “American” one. The Chicano community functions as a spatial counterpart in the narrative to the culpable legal system. This is why, in part, the Chicano protagonists fluctuate between two noncontiguous spaces, the barrio and the prison.

In terms of genre conventions, the few Hollywood films “about” Chicanos have been courtroom dramas or have had pivotal scenes of trial and imprisonment. Most of these films fall into the gangster-to-gang genre. This is a well-worn observation. But what I find interesting in the wake of American Me is the degree to which Chicano directors have suddenly accepted the industry’s premise that the gangster and gang genres represent the Ellis Island of Hollywood cinema. In short, these genres represent something every new “immigrant” group must pass through on its way to assimilation, acceptance, and the romantic comedy.

If so, these films also occupy what George Lipsitz calls the “dangerous terrain” between history and myth: that of counter-memory. In contrast to Foucault, Lipsitz defines counter-memory as a process in which the particular (local, personal, hidden histories) continually attempts to reframe the universal (dominant narratives). What is of interest in the Chicano films of the 1980s is that the “dangerous terrain” of counter-memory is not so much a metaphoric space as a material one. Counter-memory oscillates between the social environment and its textual representation. Here, in other words, Lipsitz’s proposed “suspicious” interplay between history and myth takes place in the representation of a local struggle between a minority culture’s “home” and the dominant culture’s “prison.” At stake, of course, is the space—both narrative and institutional—from which Chicano history will be told. That struggle also delimits or frames the spaces from which it can be told.

The same can be said of an earlier group of social problem films about Mexican Americans: Bordertown (1935), The Lawless (1935), My Man and I (1952), and Trial (1955). In these films, the “prison” represents the point of entry for Mexican Americans into the dominant culture, or, in the language of the times, “first-class citizenship.” The courtroom became the space and place within which Mexican Americans might begin to speak within the national discourse—as a citizen, as a laborer, as an adolescent or student. These statements were a form of public perfor-
Bound by Honor represent a radical shift in both Chicano cinema and the gangster-to-gang genre. These films invert panopticism, wherein the panoptic prison imposes an axial visibility (from the supervisor) and implies a lateral invisibility (among prisoners).12 Prisoners are seen, but do not see; they are the object of information, but never the subject of communication. In these films, prison and panopticism are represented as the very condition for the "collective effect" they are supposed to abolish.

In these films, the protagonist is no longer exiled either to or from the barrio; and, in fact, the courtroom that interrelated and mediated these spaces in the earlier films disappears altogether here. Instead, the barrio itself is conflated with the prison, so that the minority culture occupies, infiltrates, or produces itself within that institutional space. In both films, the prison becomes the space for the emergence of a cultural politics rather than for the enacting of social control (at least, not in a direct sense within the narrative). These films are perhaps the first to articulate the discourse of the Chicano civil rights movement—a movement to gain control over (or access to) public spaces and institutions—within rather than in opposition to dominant institutions. But while the narratives are strikingly similar (a fact that has occasioned a lawsuit), each film is different in how it envisions the prison as the space of domestication for the (male) Chicano community.

Bound by Honor conflates the rhetoric of the Chicano civil rights movement with prison culture to a degree that is truly shocking, in part because neither the Chicano movement nor its discourses has ever been represented in mainstream narrative and documentary. The only exceptions are, not surprisingly, two gang exploitation films from the late 1970s: Boulevard Nights and Walk Proud (both 1979). But in Bound by Honor, there is no indication whatsoever that the cultural politics within the prison emerged first and foremost as a broad-based public movement, one that was aimed initially at education, employment, and property rights. The film does, however, offer alternatives within the public sphere, although they are dependent on some notion of surveillance rather than access or rights. In short, the two "good guys" who emerge from the original delinquent triumvirate become a police officer and a neo-expressionist painter (one who kicks both his drug habit and photorealist documentation of barrio culture). Both watch the barrio, the former on behalf of the state, the latter with an eye toward the marketplace.

With American Me, Olmos's highly stylized poetic narration becomes unstable vis-à-vis his very different roles as character, star, author, and celebrity. Olmos's Santana does not rehash the rhetoric of the Chicano movement. As Chicana and other feminist critics have noted, American Me decouples the discourse of the Chicano movement from prison culture in such a way that also challenges its overt gender politics. By the end of the film, Julie—Santana's would-be girlfriend—challenges his rhetoric of "la raza, education, revolution" and identifies him as nothing more than "a fucking dope dealer." But, unlike Bound by Honor, American Me offers scant alternatives, ending with a nihilistic vision of the barrio-as-prison. Even Julie and Santana's father are shown, in close-up, to have the telltale gang tattoo between their thumb and forefinger. No one escapes. Or, in the case of Julie, who covers her tattoo with makeup, only individuals escape. As Carmen Huaco-Nazum argues, the film's "implicit" analysis is that "the barrio functions as a form of social containment built into the socio-economic apparatus to prevent... integration with the rest of society."34

Rosa Linda Pregos notes the shift in the film's cultural politics and, ultimately, in its mode of address. The film is not, she concludes, a "celebration of the Chicano nation," but rather "disturbs and disrupts our
[Chicanos and Chicanas] imaginary self-coherence." But at the same time, neither is the film "for 'ideal' white middle-class males (or females) like Siskel and Ebert." Instead, "its race and gender specificity speaks mostly to young Chicano males." Citing Teresa de Lauretis, Fregoso concludes that "These are the viewers 'inscribed in the filmmaker's project.'" Fregoso, however, does not follow up on the full implications of de Lauretis's statement about the address of feminist cinema, namely, that the film would have to address all viewers as young Chicano males, not just literal "Chicano males."

So what about these young Chicano males? In contrast to the "non-corporeal" penalty of the modern prison, in these films anal rape functions as a return to the spectacle of punishment within an economy of the criminal. Spectacle and pain return, not as the meta-logic of the criminal system, but as the inner logic of the criminal class itself. Or rather, that is how it is represented in these films. In American Me, in what is clearly the film's worst pun, prisoners repeat the aphorism "Control the inside, you own the outside." Thus, the spectacle and pain of anal rape lead prisoners to conform to the codes of the criminal class in their outside behavior, whether they reside in the prison or in society-at-large.

But rather than take the film's aphorism at face value, we need to pay attention to how such a logic resitutes the outside (barrio/body) within the inside (prison/body). This logic does not so much reverse causality as, in fact, establish one—mapping the Chicano movement onto prison "culture" and the barrio onto the prison—enacting, historicizing a literal present.

By way of a provisional ending, it is of note that the prisons in both films are at some remove from East Los Angeles—Folsom State Prison and San Quentin—and yet that geographical distance is never represented, let alone suggested. Crimes are committed in the barrio, fade out, fade in, and we're in prison. This begs the question, "Where are the long bus rides from East L.A. through the agricultural belt on the way to prison?" Indeed, would the bus stop in San Juan Bautista, where El Teatro Campesino might perform a revival of La Gran Carpa de los Rascuachis, a tale of farmworkers who become urban poor whose children become gang members, drug addicts, prisoners, and then die? Where, in short, are the highways? The dissolve—a common enough effect in narrative cinema—works within the overall strategy of both Bound by Honor and American Me to conflate two noncontiguous spaces as well as the history between them. Here we return to the "dangerous terrain" of counter-memory wherein this absence speaks to the topographical history of East L.A. itself: to the state appropriation of the private home in order to make the public highway; and now to similar efforts to impose state prisons within that space as well.

Despite their liberal impulses—or, perhaps, because of them—these films articulate a rationale for these state actions. Like the riddle of the chicken and the egg, it hardly matters which came first, the barrio or the prison, since, as the films argue, we know that their relationship is both organic and cyclical—that is, that they produce each other. In the final analysis, the two are the same. They belong together, by no less than the same logic that made Chicano cinema isomorphic with Hollywood (and its genres) in the 1990s.

NOTES

3. Ibid.