

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

DAILY BRUIN

Latino representation in film remains limited, despite history of inclusion

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Posted: June 8, 2019



Introduction

In February, Alfonso Cuarón was awarded an Academy Award for best achievement in directing for his film "Roma," which follows the life of a middle class family's maid in Mexico City.

Actress Yalitza Aparicio was the first indigenous actress nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actress for her role in the film. Additionally, "Roma" was the first Mexican film to win an Academy Award for best foreign language film.

But despite the steps forward, Latino representation in Hollywood remains limited.

White actors still make up 77% of the roles in the top 200 theatrical films of 2017, with minorities in leading film roles remaining under 20% from 2011 to 2017, according to UCLA's Hollywood Diversity Report 2019. As of the latest report, Latinos, in particular, only make up a 5.2% share of all film roles. Compared to other minority groups, the report reveals that other minority groups also have limited representation, with black actors and Asian actors each representing less than 10% of the overall racial makeup in films.

Despite little modern representation, there is a long history of Latino representation within the industry, though it has not always been positive. In order to better understand the lack of modern Latino representation, the past must be taken into account to see where the industry is heading. From the downfall of the Spanish language theaters that once populated Los Angeles to the rise of more diverse content from streaming services, the way the Latino population has been seen on the screen has evolved throughout the years.

LATIN FILM CULTURE OVER THE YEARS

Latinx representation in film culture has increased in recent years, but it has existed to varying degrees since the early 20th century.

1930: California Theatre

The first theater dedicated to showcasing Spanish-language film opens on Main Street in Downtown Los Angeles.

1931: "Dracula"

The vampire-horror film is released in theaters. A Spanish language version of the film also premieres in the California Theatre. It stars Mexican actress Lupita Tovar.

1939: The Arrow Theatre

The Arrow Theatre opens on South Main Street. It is one of now multiple theaters in the in Downtown Los Angeles area dedicated to showcasing Spanish-language films. It is renamed the Azteca Theater in 1940 before closing the following year. It is now currently the Downtown Independent.

1949: The End of the California

The theatre is sold and stops showcasing Spanish-language films. Decades later it is demolished in 1989.

1958: "Giant"

The film depicts a white rancher who fights business owner for refusing his family service because of his Mexican daughter-in-law and interracial grandson. It presents a rare social harmony through interracial marriage and a mixed race baby.

1973: "Cinco Vidas"

KNBC airs Moctesuma Esparza's documentary "Cinco Vidas" which follows the lives of five different people living in East LA. Esparza goes on to win two Emmys in 1974 for best film and best writer.

1979: "Walk Proud"

Focuses on a Chicano gang member in Los Angeles. White actor Robby Benson plays the lead Mexican character.



1982: "Zoot Suit"

First film directed by a Mexican director to receive a theatrical release. Only makes \$3.2 million at the box office but is nominated for a Golden Globe for best motion picture – music or comedy.



1983: "The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez"

Moctesuma Esparza funds "The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez" through a grant from the Endowment of the Humanities, and by selling the television rights to European television stations. It is the first film featuring a Chicano hero that receives a theatrical release.



1987: "La Bamba"

The film follows the life and career of Chicano singer Ritchie Valens. Earns financial success, grossing \$54.2 million at the box office and is nominated the following year at the Golden Globes for best motion picture – drama.



1997: "Selena"

The film tells the story of Tejano music star Selena Quintanilla. Features an almost entire Latino cast. Goes on to make \$35.5 million at the box office and Jennifer Lopez is nominated for best actress – motion Picture Musical or Comedy at the Golden Globes.



2018: "Roma"

Mexican film written and directed by Alfonso Cuarón. It depicts the life of an upper middle class from Mexico City and their relationship with their indigenous maid. Has a small theatrical release before premiering on Netflix at the end of the year. Is nominated for 10 Academy Awards, winning three, including best foreign language film and best director.

SOURCES: Maria Elena de las Carreras. Graphic reporting by Susana Alcantar Daily Bruin contributor. Graphic by Ye Jin Kwon, assistant Graphics editor.

The past

1930s

Physical theaters used to house much of the Latin film culture of the time. In Los Angeles, South Main Street fostered a number of theaters dedicated to showcasing Spanish language films, such as the Azteca Theater and the California Theatre. Theater businessmen and exhibition companies recognized the local audiences and showed films meant to make a profit in the area, said UCLA Theater, Film and Television lecturer Maria Elena de las Carreras.

“There was a Spanish-speaking audience, mainly Mexicans who saw images of themselves and of the motherland in these films in the theaters,” de las Carreras said.

As films with sound began to evolve, de las Carreras said Hollywood studios made Spanish language versions of English films alongside original Spanish movies – which were highlighted by the theaters. One of the films with a Spanish counterpart was the 1931 film “Drácula,” which de las Carreras said primarily followed the original film.

However, she said “Drácula” was more risque with the female lead, portrayed by Mexican actress Lupita Tovar, donning a revealing nightgown – the actress in the English version, on the other hand, wore a modest dress. Such depictions emphasized many cliches associated with Latin culture, such as hyper-sexuality and passion, de las Carreras said.

Besides the Spanish adaptation of “Dracula,” some of the other popular films created include Carlos Gardel’s “tango” films, which were distributed by Paramount and became popular throughout Latin America. Mexico’s first film with sound, “Santa,” and films featuring popular comedian Cantinflas also appeared in theaters.

But the influx of Spanish films in Hollywood did not last long. The downturn was a result of economic, cultural and linguistic issues, de las Carreras said. In terms of finances, it ultimately became more economically viable to either subtitle or dub the film, as studios would only have to produce one film instead of two – diminishing the need to make original Spanish content, she said.

But there were subtler faults as well. First, American producers would have Latin actors from one country portray characters from a different country, such as an Argentine actor portraying Mexican characters. The producers generalized all Latin people, not realizing Spanish-speaking audiences would notice the mix of accents, de las Carreras said.

In a similar vein, sometimes studios would film at a Mexican estate and claim the film took place in Argentina, which de la Carreras said was noticeable to the Latin American audience.

As fewer Spanish films were produced, de las Carreras said the theaters disappeared soon after. The Azteca Theater was closed at the beginning of the 1940s and the California Theatre shut down by the end of the decade. By the 1960s, urban renewal caused the primarily Mexican and Central American populations in Downtown LA to be displaced. With a disappearing audience, de la Carreras said the theaters have since been demolished or transformed into evangelical temples.

1950s to 1970s

But Latin filmmakers and actors continued to work despite the downturn in Spanish films. During the 1950s, the predominant genre was still the Western, which initially gained popularity in the early 1900s. But many of the Latino characters seen in Westerns represented stereotypes, UCLA Theater, Film and Television professor Chon Noriega said.

"You have a lot of Mexican characters but ... they are the convenient villain, or they are marginalized figure that a white Samaritan can come in and save," Noriega said.

One example is the 1956 film "Giant," where Mexican characters are depicted as working in poor conditions. At one point in the film, the main character – a white rancher – fights a man who refuses to serve his family at a restaurant because of his Mexican daughter-in-law and interracial grandchild. Noriega said the film was atypical in presenting a vision of social harmony through interracial marriage and a mixed race child, but it still did little to shift racial dynamics in the film itself.

In the 1960s, the Chicano Civil Rights Movement impacted the film industry, as they became more concerned about Latino representation and employment, Noriega said. They wanted to get people in front of and behind the camera.

Television became the main avenue for Latino representation, Noriega said, as there were more opportunities in television since it was regulated by the federal government. In order for stations to get their licenses, they had to be responsive to the surrounding community. The half-hour in between local news and prime time for programs was set aside to broadcast public affairs programs that were shown locally in all major U.S. cities, Noriega said.

It was a step forward – but Noriega said filmmakers still wanted to make feature films.

"It was a way to reach a global audience. Unlike televisions, (films) crossed borders," Noriega said. "They wanted to be a part of that, and they wanted the Mexican American community to be a part of the culture of American cinema."

Latin films eventually found a resurgence in the mid-to-late 1970s. One of the pioneering Chicano producers at the time was UCLA alumnus Moctesuma Esparza, who created "The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez" and "Selena."

While at UCLA from the 1960s to the early 1970s, Esparza said he spent his time advocating for change as one of the founding members of Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán at UCLA, an organization that seeks to promote Chicano unity and empowerment. He went on to create the ethno-communications program at the UCLA school of Theater, Film and Television in order to address negative stereotypes of people of color in media and their lack of representation in the film school. The program led the film school to start accepting a critical mass of underrepresented students, opening the door for minorities to pursue careers in film and television.

He said he was fortunate enough to have the news station KNBC finance his graduate thesis, "Cinco Vidas." The documentary follows five different people living in East LA, such as a gardener, attorney and grandma. The film went on to win two Emmys, and although he did not have any difficulties making the film, Esparza said his success was built on years of activism.

But upon graduating, Esparza said the only work he could find was as a crew member. Eventually, he met Rene Cardenas, the founder and executive producer of Bilingual Children's Television, who gave him a job as a producer for a children's PBS show, "Villa Alegre."

"I was able to really get my real training in the craft and skill of filmmaking, and it was because of other Latinos and Chicanos that I got a break," Esparza said.

Despite new talent emerging, the rise of Latino gang films in the late 1970s brought new, negative Latino stereotypes to the screen. Noriega said the gangster films follow a similar framework as the Western films. They are both action and conflict-oriented genres in which the law plays a significant role in resolving the conflict – and Latino characters were often portrayed as the bad guys. They both identify and explore real problems, such as racism and residential segregation, but they often exploited these issues that the Latino population was facing, he said.

"It's the idea of looking at this population. We know they are here," Noriega said. "We know they are a part of the country, but let's do it in a way that keeps them as other, not us."

Some gangster films, such as "Walk Proud" and "Boulevard Nights," voiced the issues many Chicanos were advocating for, such as labor rights and educational access, which Noriega said led to rights-based movements being associated with lawlessness. "Walk Proud" exasperates the issue, Noriega said, because while the main character is Mexican, he is portrayed by a white actor wearing brown contact lenses.

"Those are legitimate demands that are being made on society and on the government. Suddenly, you have these gang films in which that language is the language that gang

members are using," he said. "It pathologized (those) social movements and you think, 'Jeez, that's pretty sneaky.' You just made us seem like a bunch of criminals, when what we are doing is trying to fulfill the American Dream."

1980s to 2000s

Moving into the 1980s, the first studio film written and directed by a Latino was Luis Valdez's 1981 "Zoot Suit." It was not a financial success, but it did receive critical acclaim, including a Golden Globe nomination for best motion picture – musical or comedy.

The first financially successful Latin film was not released until 1987, when "La Bamba" made almost \$55 million at the box office. Noriega said the film was successful because it was a typical Hollywood genre film – the music biopic. It provided the backstory for a song almost everyone new, while also featuring a mainly Latino cast, Noriega said.

Outside of studio films, the 1980s also saw the rise of independent Chicano films, some of which were produced by Esparza. One such film was "The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez," a biographical film based on a book by author Américo Paredes. Large Hollywood studios would not fund it, so Esparza said he first purchased the rights to the story through the National Endowment for the Humanities, then planned a theatrical release prior to a television release.

Few films were made throughout the 1990s and early 2000s as the Chicano Civil Rights Movement lessened. However, there were a few mainstream releases, such as the biopic "Selena," which follows the story of Texas Tejano singer Selena Quintanilla and her rise to success.

Esparza, who served as the executive producer of the film, said it was his daughter who first encouraged him to purchase the rights to her story. However, he originally was not interested in making the film.

"I didn't quite know how to tell the story because I thought that Hollywood would be more interested in the crime and I wasn't interested in that in that kind of a story," Esparza said.

But over time he realized that the story could be about the pursuit of the American Dream.

Esparza, working with the Quintanilla family, pitched the story to various studios, and ultimately struck a deal with Warner Brothers.

Esparza said he believes that the success of the film had to do in part because of the music appeal, but also because audiences saw a young, American Latina woman striving for the American Dream. In particular, Esparza said young Chicanas tended to view the film multiple times, as seeing a dark skinned Latina on the screen was a powerful image.

"It made young Latinas appreciate and love themselves. That influence, which acknowledges in a profound way the racism in our own culture, was beautifully over come just by the image of Selena," Esparza said.

The present and future

New talent

The industry is changing, and many students aim to be a part of the change.

UCLA graduate screenwriting student Gregory Renteria said as a Latino and disabled man in the graduate screenwriting program, he has felt out of place because although he is white passing, he comes from a working class background, and many of his classmates come from upper middle class families.



Graduate screenwriting student Gregory Renteria said, as a Latino and disabled man, he feels out of place among his primarily upper middle class peers. Growing up during the late 1990s and early 2000s, Renteria said he primarily watched Hollywood films dubbed in Spanish. (Joe Akira/Daily Bruin staff)

However, working with comedy has allowed him to focus on racial tensions in a more humorous manner and makes issues seem more universal, he said. Renteria grew up during the late 1990s and early 2000s watching Hollywood movies dubbed in Spanish on Univision and Telefutera. Though there weren't many Hispanic films at the time that he could watch, Renteria said Martin Scorsese's films resonated with him because of their portrayals of urban working class life, Catholic symbolism, and utilize 1950s and '60s pop songs. Renteria said his work reflects his Latino background.

"I tackle these subjects head on. This is my life," Renteria, said. "This is the story of my parents and people all across California, Mexico and Latin America."

He is currently writing a loose adaptation of the play "Accidental Death of an Anarchist." The play is originally set in Italy during the 1960s, but Renteria chose to place the story in 1940s Los Angeles, following union workers and the influx of migrant workers from Mexico and the Philippines.

The film emphasizes the idea that whenever a tragic attack on U.S. soil happens, white Americans are quick to mobilize and persecute those who do not fit into the mold of being a white Christian, he said.

"I want to show that these processes of unfair treatment and oppression are typical," he said. "It's never just one time."

Another graduate student emerging in the film industry is Brenda Lopez. Lopez associates her love of cinema with the image of Mexican actress Maria Felix, who has the same name as her late grandmother.

Now a UCLA graduate student in education and a filmmaker, Lopez's research focuses on women of color in film school and how their experiences impact their career trajectory and self-reflection within the industry.

While an undergraduate at New York University, Lopez said she was often the only Latina in her classes, and had to figure out her own path to success. She grew frustrated, because she was taught to write or talk about what she knew but few people around her understood her experiences.

"Folks are looking for something that is going to be relatable to a large number of people, and when your story doesn't right away catch somebody's attention, or to them feels very foreign, it can be isolating," she said. "I felt discouraged writing about those experiences because I didn't have a community that I could count on."

After receiving her bachelors of fine arts degree, Lopez decided to pursue her PhD in education. Her family valued education, and Lopez said she wanted to explore why there were so many Latino people in film school – where many industry professional find their start.

She said the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative found in its 2017-2018 study of the highest grossing films from 2007-2018 that Latino folks were among the least represented populations in film. Documentaries provide an opportunity to highlight untold stories and allow people to share their experiences in their own way, she said.

Most recently, she created a documentary film about her family titled, "No Somos Famosos," which challenges the idea that Mexican American families do not value education. When she asked her father to appear in her film, she said he questioned in Spanish why she wanted him – after all, he isn't famous. Her community does not often have their story told, though their experiences are often echoed by many, she said.

And as a Latina telling her family's story, she said she was able to bring a different perspective than if someone not of color had directed the film.

"There is this long history of writing about us as a community or our stories being told by people who have no business telling our stories," Lopez said. "Who don't understand what walking in our shoes is like?"

The Netflix effect

New talent is emerging. And according to Esparza, streaming services are at the forefront.

In the 1930s, physical theaters provided a platform to showcase Spanish language content. In 2019, Netflix is taking on that role. De las Carreras said such services allow films that might not have successful theatrical releases to shine – “Roma” being one of them.

“Everyone I’ve talked to has seen ‘Roma,’” de las Carreras said. “Lesser known films or filmmakers that have had a harder time finding a theatrical release now can be seen in a streaming platform that is stunning.”

Traditional studios would not have wanted to make the film as it was, de las Carreras said. Instead, she said studios would have wanted to focus more on the maid and the troubled marriage of the couple, but Netflix was willing to provide a platform for the intended story focusing on how the maid navigates Mexican society.

Noriega said although it is a beautiful film it still focuses on an upper middle class family in Mexico. It introduces an indigenous female character who is central to how the family organizes itself, but is also on the margins of that same family.

“It’s not her story,” Noriega said. “It’s about recognizing the impact of her presence in their lives, which is a very different story, but that is the story (Cuarón) could tell.”

Esparza said one of the reasons why Netflix and other streaming services seem more willing to show Latin content is because they are interested in targeting the younger generation. Thirty percent of people under 30 are Latino, and Esparza said their economic power serves as an incentive to cater to them.

Despite the success of some Mexican directors such as Alfonso Cuarón and Guillermo del Toro, their accomplishments often make it seem like there is more Mexican American representation in film. But their films do not focus on stories of the U.S. Latino population, Noriega said.

For example, del Toro won best director and best picture at the Academy Awards for “The Shape of Water,” following a mute woman and an amphibious creature. Meanwhile, Cuarón won an Oscar for best director for the film “Gravity,” which is about two white astronauts stranded in space.

There are also no Latino actors who could be the main actor of a Hollywood film today, said Esparza. It means we are worse off in terms of talent than we were 60 years ago, he said. For example, in the 1950s and 1960s Latin actors like Gilbert Roland, Fernando Lamas, Ricardo Montalban and Dolores del Rio were all on screen.

However, there is hope that change will occur, Renteria said. Highlighting films such as “Roma” will help encourage other filmmakers to begin tackling issues such as colorism and class stratification, he said.

“‘Roma’ is not a perfect film, but at least it’s attempting to be critical, and I think that’s always the first step to better representation,” Renteria said.

Despite streaming services ushering in changes, Lopez said she feels pessimistic because of the long history of Hollywood not opening doors for the Latino community. However, she won’t stop fighting for that by bringing it back into a film school setting, as she wants aspiring filmmakers to have a space where they feel comfortable to write about their own experiences.

Ultimately, Esparza said students need to demand more representation within academia in order to gain the training necessary to thriving within the industry.

“We need to take over the film schools and get our students from our community into those film schools so they can get trained,” Esparza said. “It’s like wanting to be a lawyer or a doctor, and we have to support them.”

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