

Deconstructive Humour: Subverting Mexican and Chicano Stereotypes in *Un Día Sin Mexicanos* (Sergio Arau 2004)

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1) Introduction

For a long time, US cinema developed almost unshakeable stereotypes of Latino ‘otherness’, with characters stigmatised, according to Charles Ramírez Berg, in a “pageant of six basic stereotypes: *el bandido*, the harlot, the male buffoon, the female clown, the Latin lover, and the dark lady” (2002: 66). Indeed, in a survey of US films featuring Latinos, Mexicans and Chicanos up to the 1980s, early activist-filmmaker Jesús Salvador Treviño revealed even then the prevalence of “a succession of abusive stereotypes and denigrating distortions” (1985: 14).¹ Moreover, Mexican Americans (specifically those of Mexican heritage born in the US) have occupied each of those positions arguably more commonly than most other protagonists of Latin American origin. Filmmakers in Mexico, meanwhile, have treated Mexican Americans largely as misfits who belong nowhere, or have ignored them and their experience completely.² This essay examines the interrogation and deconstruction of the stereotypes of Mexican (and, where appropriate, Chicano) identity as they appear in Sergio Arau’s popular debut feature, *Un Día Sin Mexicanos/A Day Without Mexicans* (Mexico/USA/Spain, 2004), situating it within the context of a growing Chicano population in the U.S. and a high level of immigration from Mexico itself.³

The film, first made as a “mockumentary” short that had been released in 1998, was a hit in both Mexico and in the US, where it was seen by four million spectators.⁴ Intended as a production that would spark a debate on a topic that its director felt had been overlooked, this

¹ Jesús Salvador Treviño was one of the earliest proponents of a distinct Chicano cinema, which focused on the use of film to promote ethnic political awareness and self-representation, a deliberate antidote to Hollywood of the 1960s and ‘70s. His documentary *Yo Soy Chicano* (1972) was a key work of that movement which celebrated and drew attention to Mexican American identity.

² For example, *El Infierno* (Luis Estrada, 2010) in which the main character gets deported from the US and becomes embroiled in a life of narco-crime.

³ To be clear, “Chicano” is the self-identifying ethnic label coined by political activists of the 1960s and ‘70s, referring to Americans of Mexican descent. As Meier and Rivera explain, the term ‘had a somewhat pejorative connotation in the first half of [the twentieth century], but it has been taken by many young Americans of Mexican descent as a badge of pride since World War II.’ (1972: xiv) While most of the ‘disappeared’ characters in this film are in fact immigrant Mexicans (therefore NOT Chicanos), there is at least one Chicano character (the son of Mary Jo and Roberto) and a question mark is raised over the identity of several others, including Lila, who *believes* she is of Mexican heritage but turns out to be have been born to an Armenian couple.

⁴ The film was number 1 in the Mexican Box Office in 2004, and no 52 in the US (where it was released commercially three months earlier). It was made with a budget estimated at \$1.5 million, and by the end of November of that year had grossed \$4 million on the commercial release circuit. It won awards at three of the major film festivals in Latin America, including for screenplay and editing.

film reveals the image of the Mexican (and, more broadly, the Latino/Hispanic migrant in the US), as a social issue, at the same time as being a source of cultural enrichment and economic necessity for the US generally and for California in particular. Although it is widely documented, including on the DVD special features as well as in the range of interviews he gave at the time of the film's release, that the director was motivated by very serious political events, his work was dismissed by some reviewers as little more than obvious caricature and farce rather than as a serious critique of the Mexican immigrant experience.⁵

This essay argues that humour in the form of satire, caricature and parody is deployed quite effectively as a subversive tool by a Mexican director working in the US with a team of cast and crew from both countries to undermine long-held preconceptions of Mexican identity. It further contends that the politics of racism and resistance that are so often aligned with this experience are inscribed in its narrative form. For example, and as outlined in more detail below, particular discomfort is created for certain characters with whom the viewer may at first identify through the gradual revelation to them that many of the people with whom they live, work, sleep and socialise have family ties to Mexico (or other parts of Latin America). Their ignorance is certainly humorous at first as the emphasis is placed on the misapprehensions and prejudices of certain foolish individuals. However, as the revelations of who has disappeared intensify, and the dramatic impact of their absences becomes more widespread, so too the tone of the film shifts to reinforce the injustice of a system that fails to recognise both the specific identity of a certain group and their fundamental value to the so-called "American" way of life.

This essay further proposes that the hybrid form of comedy drama adopted here – which in places takes the specific form of the distinctively postmodern genre of mockumentary that was the approach adopted by the shorter version – works particularly well as a medium through which to explore and tear apart issues of such deep social concern.⁶ Arau is not alone

⁵ The motivations for the director and screenwriting team included the introduction of anti-immigration legislation in California in 1994, after which reported incidents of racism became more frequent. It is acknowledged by some that part of the film's legacy includes serving as one of the acknowledged inspirations for the national "Day Without Immigrants" of 1 May 2006. The "Day Without Immigrants" took the form of national marches that coincided with International Workers Day. It was triggered by the proposals, in 2005, contained within the Border Protection, Antiterrorism and Illegal Immigration Control Act which appeared to create particular difficulty for Latino communities from Mexico. For, as Moreno and Brunner outline in their history of the development of a Latino identity, measures included "the erection of 700 miles of fence between US and Mexico, a reduction in the number of green cards offered annually by the US government, and increased penalties for employing or housing illegal workers." (2010: 226)

⁶ Armida De la Garza has already outlined very fluently the effective qualities of the mockumentary approach in her essay of 2009 that explores the interplay between national, supranational and post-national identities, as well as between form and content, in the short film that Arau developed into his debut feature. This project focuses more on the increasingly hybrid nature of the feature length version in terms of genre, and emphasises the notion

in taking this multi-dimensional approach to deal with themes of identity in the contemporary Latino context: other popular comedy dramas made at a similar time include *Real Women have Curves* (Patricia Cardoso, 2002), an appealing coming-of-age tale about a first-generation Mexican American growing up Los Angeles; *Tortilla Soup* (María Ripoll, 2001), about the search for fulfilment outside the family circle of four Mexican American sisters; and even *Spy Kids* (Robert Rodriguez, 2001) which also deals with the mysterious disappearance of several of its key characters. However, it is the aspects of parody and mock-realism that Arau foregrounds that place his film apart and which, I propose, allows it to explore those ambivalent, liminal Third spaces that Homi K. Bhabha has spoken of as being at once threatening and intensely liberating. In so doing, it encourages the viewer to rethink questions of social agency and national affiliation in the context of an increasingly complex Mexican American identity, or rather, as Bhabha puts it to “elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves” (1995: 209).

2) *Un Día Sin Mexicanos* as Countercinema

The basic premise of *Un Día Sin Mexicanos* is simple enough: Californians awake one foggy morning to find that all the “Mexican immigrants” – workers, spouses and business owners, including those who were born in the US itself – have disappeared.⁷ Cars have been abandoned in the street and food has been left sizzling in pans. Characters we do see, and whose responses to these disappearances we track include the mother of a little boy (Mexican American) who is also the wife of a rock musician (Mexican) who was preparing for a comeback tour. The viewer is also introduced to the State Senator whose housemaid doesn’t arrive for work, and a landowner whose produce is in danger of becoming overripe if his Mexican workers don’t turn up to harvest it as they have done every other day. The thick fog cuts off communication beyond state lines, including physical travel across borders, thereby isolating the remaining non-Hispanic Californians and leaving them dependent upon each other for everyday survival. Various character sketches presented in fragmentary narrative form allow for a range of ideological stances to be aired – from the explicitly racist views of the right-wing Senator and the anti-immigration activist, to the farmer who genuinely values

of hybridity itself as site of dislocation, as a potent ‘Third Space’ and as starting pointing for new formulations of identity, drawing additionally on the work of Homi K. Bhabha.

⁷ As De la Garza points out, the term “Mexicans” used in the film’s title and in much of its dialogue, stands metonymically for all immigrants, whether recently arrived or born in the US and of Hispanic descent, including Chicanos. (2009: 123) I attempt to make that deliberate conflation clear throughout this essay by using the range of terms for Latin American migrants in the US: Chicano/Latino/Hispanic.

the work ethic of his Mexican fruit-pickers and whose supervisor José becomes the poster face of the campaign to find the “disappeared”. Despite offering a range of responses, it is quickly made clear that the film aims to position its viewer explicitly to take the side of the immigrant Other (whether recently arrived or American of Mexican descent), largely by creating potent caricatures out of those who would rather be without them, whatever their own racial or ethnic identity.

The director’s reputation for politically motivated satire had already been established before he launched this film project; Arau, working with his partner, Yareli Arizmendi, as co-screenwriter, was commissioned to create a short in the first instance by Chicago’s Mexican Fine Arts Centre Museum. The first project was released in 1998 and was followed up by Arau and Arizmendi with the longer comedy drama version that developed many of the characters and situations from the short, while retaining the elements of “false documentary” that had been particularly distinctive and well received. Indeed, the feature was granted funding before the script was even written due to the success of the short and its satirical take on a contemporary topic. Moreover, the promotional campaign for the feature drew heavily on the aspect of spoof, using a poster to coincide with the film’s release date that included the tagline: “On May 14th there will be no Mexicans in California”, clearly designed to stir up controversy, public debate, and visibility for the film itself. According to Henry Puente, in his study of the promotion and distribution of US Latino Films, the billboard had to be relocated several times after complaints from the public were received. This act of repeated poster relocation became a dramatic performance in itself that received media coverage from Fox News, CNN and several Spanish-language outlets (2011: 151-2) that stirred further controversy. Inevitably, the “scandal” attracted increased traffic to the film’s official website, the viewing of which would provide little reassurance to visitors due to the ambiguity of its presentation and the questionable portrayal of its some of its main ‘characters’ as if real people. Compounding the controversy and confusion further was a specific element of the initial campaign that saw the distribution of 100,000 copies of a fake newspaper that reported on the Mexican “disappearances”.

In terms of reception in the US, the film was most successful in Southern Californian areas dominated by Latino (and, specifically, Chicano) communities and less well-liked amongst non-Latino communities, particularly outside Southern California (2011: 157-8)⁸ where the film was less vigorously promoted and where its themes and approach might have

⁸ On its debut in mid-May 2004, the film earned a Box Office gross of \$619,000 on 55 screens in Southern California.

been less appreciated. This, we might surmise, serves to reinforce the notion that Arau and his team set out to devise a refreshing antidote to those Hollywood projects that persist in representing Mexicans in a negative or superficial light, and provides a contemporary spin on the low budget documentary countercinema projects of the 1960s and '70s that focused more explicitly – and earnestly – on educating its audiences about the Chicano experience, often attached to a civil rights movement agenda. On the other hand, even the brief box office analysis makes clear that its impact beyond the Hispanic communities in the US was likely to have been minimal.

Up to the time of making this film, Arau was best known either as son of the Mexican cultural icon Alfonso,⁹ or as provocative political cartoonist, acclaimed visual artist and satirical musician who formed award-winning *Botellita De Jerez* in 1983, a group that fused humour and Mexican traditional music with the contemporary sounds of Hispanic rock. With a burgeoning reputation as a politically and socially committed short film-maker, he turned his attention to feature film-making as a form through which to attract a wider audience to the art and politics of the immigrant Mexican and Mexican American experience. While his work makes his political intentions clear in and of itself, this interpretation is confirmed by the director's comments in interviews he gave at the time of the film's release about the concerns that inspired him to make the feature project, namely his anger at the introduction of the aforementioned anti-immigration law in 1994 after which he felt that "el racismo arreció y los californianos no latinos hasta se enfurecían de oír hablar español" (Smith 2004). Moreover, his decision to submit the film for screening at the New Latin American Cinema Festival in Havana (December 2004), the birthplace and still the centre of the revolutionary cinema of Latin America, signalled his intent to spark politically motivated debate about a topic of fundamental concern. In so doing, and even though his aesthetic approach is quite different, he would appear to have plenty in common with the filmmakers of the Chicano Movement who, as Catherine Leen points out, "shared a [...] goal in their efforts both to represent Chicano life and to overturn years of negative stereotyping of Chicanos in film" (2004: 2).¹⁰

⁹ Alfonso Arau, writer, actor, director and classically trained dancer, came to international prominence with his Academy Award nominated hit *Como Agua Para Chocolate* (1991), having already made and appeared in a number of important Mexican feature and documentary films.

¹⁰ These filmmakers of the early Chicano movement were themselves strongly influenced by the models and theories that were fundamental to Latin American revolutionary cinema of the 1950s and '60s.

3) “Day”/s of Action

Before elaborating further on the distinctive features of those stereotypes as they appear and are undermined by Arau’s film, it seems pertinent to set out the political context of the film’s inspiration in some detail so as to grasp more fully the gravity of its intent, and the different ways this may be interpreted by the viewer. Moreover, it is hoped that this may allow us to understand both the specific and the general approach to thematisation at play here and, adapting a framework elaborated by Mette Hjort, to examine how a theme may be both perennial and topical all at once. That is to say, that the theme of “disappearance” may work on one level “across historical and cultural boundaries” (2000: 106), as well as on a more localised level by drawing on memories of landmark events that may be recalled and recognised only by a specific cultural group or set of interrelated groups.

We know from interviews given by the director that those specific landmark events relate to the history and impact of migration by Mexicans across the border to the US, particularly after the introduction of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1987, the unintended consequences of which included an increase in Mexican immigration to the US, both legal and illegal. As Timothy Henderson points out, by 2000:

once the shock of IRCA dissipated [...] there were four times as many Mexicans living in the United States as there had been prior to the passage of the IRCA. By that time, Hispanics had become the nation’s largest minority. (2011: 125)

Inevitably, throughout the 1990s, these immigrants were scapegoated as those responsible for causing the collapse of a rather fragile Mexican prosperity, and those in California, particularly Los Angeles County, were the most frequent targets as their arrival in large numbers in such a short space of time changed the demographic of the area completely. Street riots broke out as a result of ethnic tensions in Spring 1992, and right-wing politicians took advantage of the climate of fear and suspicion. Most significantly, in 1994 Governor Pete Wilson, while running for re-election in California, included as a key tenet of his campaign an initiative called Proposition 187, intended as a radical solution to the state’s problems in that it would allow for the legitimate denial of all social services to undocumented immigrants.¹¹ Thanks in part to appeals by civil rights groups that the initiative was unconstitutional, Proposition 187 failed, having been approved by voters but ultimately rejected by the courts, but its impact left its trace on the psyche of many of those caught up in the political turmoil of the mid 1990s, including the director of the film under discussion here.

¹¹ As noted by Henderson, Proposition 187 would not have made it an explicit crime to hire undocumented workers, or to penalise them for violating any of the statutes of the IRCA. (2011: 128)

Indeed, while *Un Día* is the filmmakers' direct response to a very specific legislative act, its actual premise of "disappearance" draws on a similar day of action – "A Day without Art", when all art institutions in New York were closed down – in commemoration of those who had died of AIDS and in celebration of the place of arts and culture in everyday life by creating an absence of it.¹² The notions of void and denial are fundamental to the impact of actions such as these in that it shows how 'absence can be put into play in the mobilisation and, indeed, creation of political subjects' (in Weber 2011: 216) recalling strategies proposed by Derrida on the generation of subjectivity and agency. In this and several other respects, such public commemorative "Days" differ quite profoundly from the more private and affirmative act proposed by activist Gloria Anzaldúa of *El Día de la Chicana y el Chicano*, a day [2 December] set aside for contemplation of the "racial self" and for acknowledging the "essential dignity" (1987: 110) of the Mexican American people, and yet they share a similar fundamental claim for agency and recognition.¹³

Despite a mixed reception from film critics at the time of its release, Arau's film has been acknowledged as one of the original inspirations for the national marches of 1 May 2006, The Great American Boycott, also known as "A Day without Immigrants", an action triggered by a new proposal, in 2005, of the Border Protection, Antiterrorism and Illegal Immigration Control Act and as a response to worsening racism in light of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York.¹⁴ However, although the notion of absence was also important to the action of 2006, in that "participants were asked not to attend work or school for the day and to avoid buying or selling any US goods and services of any kind" (Moreno & Brunnemer 2010: 226), the key difference between such real actions and the film's dramatic conceit is that the work of fiction is not centred on the visibility of actual protest, but on the removal of labour coinciding with the disappearance of the workers completely. Those who are marginalised and "invisibilised" by their employers on a daily basis thus make themselves and their contribution visible, and valued, by becoming invisible, and it is important therefore that the film includes scenes that show many of those disappearances as they occur. Again, it is this

¹² See the statement from Arau and Arizmendi on the genesis of the film on the official website for confirmation of this: <http://www adaywithoutamexican.com/index1.htm>.

¹³ The repeated use of the word "disappearances" alludes also to the politically motivated disappearances (presumed assassinations) that have occurred under various dictatorial regimes in Latin America, including Mexico. At one point in the film, the Senator seeking re-election is forced to deny that the government had anything to do with these disappearances of all the Latinos from the State of California.

¹⁴ Although conceived well before the 9/11 attacks, the film was completed and released afterwards and its reception clearly coloured by those events and the subsequent treatment of illegal/undocumented immigrants. As Carol M. Swain has indicated, the "War on Terror" redefined immigration again as a national security issue, conflating "terrorists" with undocumented migrants. More specifically, the attacks also halted the immigration reforms that were promises during interactions between Presidents George W. Bush and Vicente Fox. (Swain 2007: 7)

provocative, conceptual liminal space of in-between-ness, and the interplay between presence and absence, that lie at the heart of the film's impact and takes it into the realm of the political and the postmodern.

4) Missing Links: 'The Latino/a Riddle'

This film is above all an exercise in social satire, parody and subversion; in other words, a site of resistance to hegemonic values. As a politically motivated filmmaker committed to social change, Arau sets out to say something meaningful about the immigrant experience in California, but eschews the more didactic approach of social realism in the belief that humour might provide a more effective and accessible way to address a tough issue through cinema. Taking an auteurist diversion for a moment in terms of tracking this director's "world-view", it is interesting to note that the choice of satire as route to debunk various social and political myths about racial and ethnic identity may be traced back through all his earlier creative work. He and Arizmendi began their artistic collaborations with a stage production dealing with the Free Trade Agreement that was presented as political satire. Moreover, with an early training in journalism, Arau re-established *La Garrapata*, the controversial satirical magazine that had been first established in 1968. Since then, he has also won multiple awards for his satirical political cartoons. Such activities have without doubt made their mark on this feature film project.

The key platform for the satire and parody in the film centres around the TV news programme format, most of the generic and spectatorial conventions of which are turned on their head. In accordance with the main function of parody, that is "to exploit and contest that which came before" (1998: 187), the director (and his screenwriting team) toys with audience expectation of and familiarity with the TV news format in order to redefine the relationship between himself and those spectators he knows are fully aware of the conventions of that popular, everyday form. In doing so, he also involves them in the work of distinguishing between the 'reality' of the film's narrative, and the 'reality' of the news reports within the film. He intertwines the different levels of fiction/reality by, for example, using the news conventions of graphics and informative titles outside of the actual news reports; more profoundly, he brings the story of news reporter Lila Rodriguez, apparently the only "Latino/a" to be spared from "disappearance", out from the fictional newsroom where the

story of the disappeared is being constructed for its audiences to consume, and into the space of the diegesis where the story of the disappeared is being played out.¹⁵

Adding further layers of intertextuality, Arau interjects flashback sequences that use the realist aesthetic of the home movie in order to provide memories of moments of intimacy between family members who have been separated from loved ones from the point of view of those left behind. He also references and interrogates the prevalence and general acceptance of both surveillance culture and reality TV culture and the shared understanding of the conventions of decoding both forms through the diegetic intrusion of a CCTV camera inside Lila's hospital room, the "drama" of which is watched 24/7 by other characters in the film and triggers an array of subsequent plot points. Moreover the Brechtian aesthetic implied by both by the absurdity of Lila's situation (she is referred to on news broadcasts as Santa Lila, and confesses that she feels like a "circus freak") and the deliberate rawness of the video filming in many sequences, all serve to set up a repeated effect of distancing between spectator and character so as to prevent the viewer from empathising with the characters or abandoning themselves to the narrative and thereby missing the political content of the drama.¹⁶

Linda Hutcheon has posited that parody "both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies" (1987: 17) and indeed with *Un Día*, Arau offers a critique of the apparently derisory and often ill-informed agenda of TV news. In so doing, the director has to assume that his audience holds a shared understanding of the conventions and intentions of the TV news format, and expects that audience to "play continual catch-up" (1991: 80) in terms of piecing together the layers, forcing spectators to try to make sense of the multiple levels of intertextuality, juxtaposition and jibe as they play out on screen. As a result, the film's spectator (domestic and international), steeped in TV news culture, should pick up on the parodic devices and delight in a sense of knowingness, of being able to share the joke with the director, while at the same time becoming the butt of such jokes.¹⁷ For if an intense knowledge of generic conventions is required in order fully to appreciate the parody, part of

¹⁵ Lila is played by Arizmendi, Arau's partner and collaborator, adding a further layer of knowingness for viewers. Many would already be aware of her political views from her previous work; others could easily discover them just through watching the DVD extras that accompanied the film's release which include an interview with Arau and Arizmendi on their motivations for the film.

¹⁶ See Michael Chanan's chapter on documentary filmmaking "After Verité" on this, in particular his discussion of the use of parody in documentaries of the more recent period (2007: 250-254). I suggest here that Arau's mode of representation shares some of their features and is, arguably, all the more effective for it.

¹⁷ Note however that, as Rosa Linda Fregoso points out in her chapter on "Humor as Subversive De-Construction", we should not assume that "the process of encoding particular social and cultural meanings onto images/languages/sound ... correspond[s] neatly with decoding strategies. Viewers may or may not get the point, so the problem of equivocation surfaces." (1993: 51) However, as with the film that she explores, because in Arau's work (this film and all his other outputs) "a comedic mode predominates" *Un Día* "simply cannot be taken literally or at face value." (ibid)

the critique must surely be focused on our own reliance upon and general belief in such problematic forms that shape our perceptions of the everyday world and its protagonists. In short, Arau's film serves both to "mirror and ridicule the supposedly more serious and central dramatic activities" (Mamber 1991: 80) of the TV news report and surveillance culture while at the same time stressing their global reach and universality.

In his work on comedy in radical cinema, Stephen Mamber has argued that "the activities of parody have been directed towards an exploration of the processes of creation", and for him the notion of the "failed artist" (1991: 88) is a key aspect of cinematic parody. Arau's film offers several examples to support this idea which are worthy of exploration so as also to understand more deeply how the political impact of his work is conveyed, and how the stereotypes are undermined. Mexican Roberto Quintana (Eduardo Palomo), one of the first to disappear along with his (Mexican American) son Bobby, is a rock musician past his prime who is intent on reliving the wild life he enjoyed before he and non-Latina wife Mary Jo (Maureen Flannigan) settled down to suburban life. At first glance, he appears to be the epitome of "eroticism, exoticism, tenderness tinged with violence and danger ... [and the] ... dashing and magnetic male Other ... possessor of a primal sexuality" (Ramírez Berg 2002: 76) who believes himself attractive to women far younger than himself. His wife is clearly suspicious about his motives for introducing a very young backing singer to the band he has reformed. This notion of irresistible Mexican magnetism is quickly debunked when Mary Jo points out to the TV news interviewer in the very opening sequence that he would not have run away without his teeth. In case we missed the jibe, shortly afterwards those false teeth are seen detached in a glass of water, and indeed when he mysteriously reappears, one of his first acts is to casually place the teeth back into his mouth in full view of his family and his neighbours. There is a further layer to the debunking of the Latino-lover image at play here in that the actor Palomo (who died suddenly just after this film had been shot) was best known in Mexico as well as amongst Hispanic communities in the US and other parts of Latin America as a highly photogenic star of *telenovelas*, a genre he is understood to have tolerated as a means to move towards more serious work on stage and the big screen in the US but from which he never truly escaped. The deliberately playful attempt to undermine his own TV image serves thus as a poignant act of resistance.

In terms of characterisation, Arau uses broad brush strokes to construct an all-too easily recognisable "type" of Mexican, which also works on wider levels, by also implying Latino, Hispanic, Chicano; even the notion of the "alien" is referenced through the nod to the science fiction genre with the inexplicable invasion of a pink fog, as well as via the dialogue of the

border patrol guards for whom that term is part of everyday parlance.¹⁸ Because the “Mexicans” disappear at an early stage, those brush strokes have to be developed by those left behind who talk about them – including family members, new reporters, landowners and university professors – often directly to the viewer in a deliberate break with the conventions of Hollywood continuity. These non-Latino characters, some of whom are immigrants from other parts of the world, serve as cyphers for common misunderstandings of Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans as well as to highlight the absurdity of the power relationships which had left those ethnic groups marginalised to the extent of social, economic and political invisibility before they took control and made themselves physically invisible.

For example, the clueless insensitivity of the Senator’s wife Ellen Abercrombie (Melinda Allen) brings to the fore both the utter reliance some Californians have developed on Latino workers at the same time as showing how there exists a further divide between those who work in the home as domestic servants (and who are hence less “alien”) and those who work behind-the-scenes in restaurants, as street cleaners, and as labourers, generally out of sight. Arguably even more ridiculous and less forgivable in this regard are the supposed “experts” who all claim to have a solution, the most appealing (and controversial) one appearing to be the identification of a Mexican gene that will be used as a vaccine for all non-Mexicans to protect them from the phenomenon of “disappearance”. Their attempts to understand the disappearances are quickly lampooned by highlighting the inadequacy and irrelevance of each. Further, it underlines the absurdity of events set up by the anti-immigration groups to celebrate the disappearances and uses both humour and statistics to emphasise the way US life is held together on macro and micro levels by the Hispanic immigrant workforce, with scenes that show the Senator’s trophy wife’s pathetic, quickly aborted attempts to do the housework, images of uncollected ripened fruit growing putrid in the orchards, and the stand-in weatherman’s realisation that the activity he has belittled for so long is rather more complex than he had understood. Indeed, the only character who speaks with any degree of lucidity about the economic, social and cultural value of the Mexican/Latino/Hispanic migrant is the one who lives on the streets and who is marked out through his demeanour as insane. Thematically, as well as stylistically, then the film functions as a parody. It relocates and violates the myths and stereotypes around identity by taking a wry approach to the theme of social and ethnic difference by demonstrating the incredible complexity of ethnicity itself.

¹⁸ Charles Ramírez Berg presents a detailed and lively critical account of the development of the alien movie and its relationship with the image of the immigrant, in particular the Hispanic migrant, in his chapter “Immigrants, Aliens and Extraterrestrials” in *Latino Images in Film*, pp. 153-182.

In an attempt to acknowledge this complexity, *Un Día* draws attention to what Fregoso has termed the “syncretism of commercial popular culture in the US” (1993: 60), the process of acculturation that continually embeds itself in everyday life in the US due to the complex links arising from the South-to-North migration, through casual references to aspects of Californian daily life that are totally reliant on its relationship with Mexico and yet which are taken for granted – such as the Senator’s favourite “breakfast burrito” which he is denied while the Mexicans are missing. For, as Shohat and Stam have pointed out, “in a multiracial society, the self is inevitably syncretic” (1994: 237), and yet we rarely pause to acknowledge this. Visual gags such as the playing cards featuring Mexican American Hollywood stars (from Cheech Morin to Jimmy Smits) used by the patrol border guards to entertain themselves during breaks, function as political gestures by poking fun at the superficial and nostalgic appropriation of “Otherness”. Through comedy of an increasingly absurd and farcical nature, and with a final image that offers an almost ridiculously utopian vision for cultural politics as “lost” Mexicans are embraced by the border patrol guards who had previously beaten and imprisoned them, the film thus exposes the fragility of the very values on which such myths and stereotypes are based.

5) Conclusion

Ramírez Berg argues that the history of Chicano filmmaking may be thought of as “a series of waves, each lashing out at Hollywood cinema in its own distinct way” (2002: 185). The first comprised of radical oppositional documentaries (1969-76) that found its inspiration in Cuba and had a unifying manifesto aimed at mobilising *La Raza*; the second (1977 to the present day) is, he suggests, still rebellious but more accessible in form and style, including fiction as well as documentary, with some institutional funding; the third wave began in the late 1980s, comprises mainly genre films whose political content “is embedded within the deeper structure of the genre formulas” (2002: 187). While the director of the film under discussion here is Mexican (residing, temporarily, in the US), on his way, perhaps, to becoming Mexican American, his debut feature has certain points in common with the work of those emphatically political Mexican American film-makers. Its accessibility marks it out as a manifestation of the second wave, while its political motivations harks back to the strong mobilising intent of the first wave. Despite, or perhaps because of its cacophony of styles, approaches and tones, the film’s attempt to expose the conditions of oppression of the Mexican people in America, and of Hispanic, Latino and immigrants more generally, is clear.

That clarity, as I hope to have argued in this essay, is largely down to the use of humour as a deconstructive tool to subvert all manner of stereotypes and thereby to force the viewer to think again about certain myths of racial and ethnic identity. Assumptions about all the protagonists are debunked and it is worth noting in these concluding words the features of those two characters, both female, which thread through the entire narrative. Mary Jo, whose voice is the first to be heard, speaking to a news reporter, is initially presented as the dutiful suburban wife and first grade teacher, as a binary counterpoint to her swarthy Mexican husband who she has surely tamed through family life and wholesome values. Her balanced 'normality' is further stressed by the contrast that is set up with her fundamentalist Christian sister who insists that the disappearances are a sign from God of a looming apocalypse, and Mary Jo's outrage at such extreme beliefs position her as a sympathetic character for most viewers. While visual cues are placed in the opening scenes, more explicit queries about this assumption are implied as the narrative progresses by the fact that her daughter has not disappeared, her constant presence uncomfortably suggestive of a different paternity and ethnic identity. It turns out that Mary Jo had been unfaithful to her husband through a one night stand with a neighbour, a revelation that serves to undermine the initial views one may have had about both Mary Jo and Roberto as a couple and as individuals.

Meanwhile, Lila finally discovers that she is not Mexican by birth but Armenian. Again, clues had been presented to the viewer throughout and two other characters are already privy to this knowledge. On air, that is to say, directly to the CCTV camera in Lila's hospital room that is linked to the TV studio for 24 hour a day "reality" broadcast, Aunt Gigi (Caroline Aaron) confesses that Lila's actual mother died when she was very small. Her mother didn't want her to know of her background as, ironically, she wanted her to grow up "all-American". At the point when Lila passionately declares that given her upbringing she feels Mexican anyway, she disappears also, which leads shortly afterwards to the film's upbeat denouement via a quick succession of unexplained "reappearances". Although he may not offer us any really radical formal innovations of the type deployed by the first wave of Mexican American filmmakers, who eschewed hegemonic Hollywood filmic conventions completely, Sergio Arau reconfigures those conventions, turns them in on themselves, and effectively undermines the very ideological premise on which such conventions are based. Giving one of the most significant pieces of concluding dialogue to the hyper-blonde female newscaster who declares that "You belong to the people who taught you the world", the film finally reveals its own purpose by emphasising identity as, at heart, "a deep, horizontal

comradeship” (Anderson 1991: 7) that exists on mutual recognition and shared understandings.

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