

Between Stereotypes and a Cultural Identity of the *Vato Loco* in Recent Hollywood  
Film<sup>1</sup>.

*Vida al margen, informe, sí, pero vida  
que busca su verdadera forma.* (Paz 16)

We are dealing here at the intersection between identity, and filmic representation. In this analysis we will confront the diverging vato loco stereotypes and models of identity as they are incarnated time and again by popular filmic figures in recent Hollywood film, and more precisely in the films *Blood In Blood Out* (1993), *Mi Familia* (1995), *American Me* (1992), *Born in East L.A.* (1987), and *Quinceañera* (2007). By doing so, a panorama will be explored, a territory of the representation which the *vato loco* inhabits, suffers, and perhaps transcends. It here proposed that the figure of the *vato loco* has firstly suffered the great weight imposed on him by a Hollywood linked to a political project of exclusion. Secondly, the *vato loco* has also been a symbol of cultural re-appropriation employed by the Chicano cultural elite in order to mould a very specific and closed sense of Chicano identity. And thirdly, we point to the possibility of a representation of an identity that reveals itself as a strategic mask, and which effectively disarms previous static and hegemonic conceptions of the *vato loco* identity.

Already in the third edition of *El laberinto de la soledad* (1972), Octavio Paz alludes to the coming of age of the *vato loco* when he writes in a footnote that “[e]n los últimos años han surgido en los Estados Unidos muchas bandas de jóvenes que recuerdan a los ‘pachucos’ de la posguerra” (16). More recently, critics have pointed more

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<sup>1</sup> Quintanilla, Felipe Quetzalcoatl. "Between Stereotypes and Cultural Identity of the *Vato Loco* in Recent Hollywood Film." Third Mexican Conference of Graduate Students and Researchers in Canada. 25<sup>th</sup> October, 2008. Montreal, Ontario, Quebec.

explicitly obvious genealogy between the *vato loco* and the *pachuco*. For James Smethurst for example, the *vato loco* is seen as a “descendant” of the *pachuco* (119). A link that permits us to assume in the figure of the *vato loco*, a history, an origin—and thus a cultural identity common to both figures--- and we can conclude that the specific origin of the *vato loco* resides precisely on the arduous experience lived by the *pachuco* in the 40s and 50s i.e. the racial violence and social prejudice suffered by the *vato loco* at the peripheries of an Anglo-American nation, are nothing but an inheritance unwillingly passed down.

It is worth saying that *Blood in Blood out* (1992) a movie by Taylor Hackford has become a cult movie for various generations of young spectators at the margins of the first world nations. Despite this widespread popularity however, a critical reading of the film reveals a film heavily steeped in misogynist, racist, and homophobic imagery based precisely on the stereotypical figure of the *vato loco*. The film tells an epic story, the coming of age of three cousins, three *vatos locos* from a third world neighbourhood of East Los Angeles, California. The three very diverse trajectories of these *vatos locos* symbolize the three possible destinies allowed for in mainstream Hollywood film i.e., assimilation by incorporation to the military/police state apparatus, junkiehood, and/or jail.

Obviously, the representation of the *vato loco* in this film, corresponds to the stereotype of the *vato loco* as an anachronistic social problem. There is no intent to show the subtleties of the historical and social context of systematic oppression. By not making reference to the antecedent figure of the *pachuco* then, the film remains a caricaturesque portrait, a story *in medias res*. The *vato loco* is an essentially dysfunctional and damned

being. The potential of the *vato loco* is either utilized in the benefit of the state—to aid in the policing of the barrio, or diminished completely by the end of the film.

Gregory Nava's *Mi Familia* (1995), and Edward James Olmos' *American Me* (1992) are two films where the *vato loco* appears again, though as a secondary character, and where there is a conscious representation of the historical context that binds the pachuco to the *vato loco*. Both then, show the *vato loco* as a natural inheritor of the pachuco's circumstances. Now, if Jimmy proves to be a quite far from the stereotypical imagery so prevalent in films like *Blood*, he is nonetheless a character not all fully satisfactory. In an act of rage caused by the death of his wife, Jimmy breaks into a store at night and consciously activates the alarm, cuts his hands on the glass in the process and waits for the arrival of the police. He becomes in a sense what Paz described as; una "llaga que se muestra, una herida que se exhibe... adorno bárbaro, caprichoso y grotesco... herida que se ríe de sí misma... la presa que se adorna para llamar la atención de los cazadores" (Paz 19).

It is only at the end of *American Me*, that the *vato loco* starts to question his own identity as the most *bad-ass vato loco- el mero jefe de la clica*. It this same questioning which causes his downfall precisely at the hands of his own men. As Luis Aldama points out;

It is not out of left field... to read Santana's ultimate show of "weakness" as the move into an unfixed identity zone. (Aldama119)

Santana's struggle, finally, is about how he breaks free of age-old binaries -colonizer vs. colonized, bully vs. sissy, male vs. female, activo vs. pasivo,

buggerer vs. maricon, holemaker and holed one- that continue to inform and control from within the Chicano/mestizo subject today. (Aldama 115)

Without a doubt then, *American Me*, puts on the screen a sort of deconstruction of the mythic figure of the *vato loco* in favour of a hybrid identity in process. Or perhaps it is better said, that *American Me* solely points to the possibility of a more complex identity for the *vato loco*, but fails to provide us with one, and death truncates this story.

If *American Me* only promises without delivering, the representation of an alternative identity, there are others which do provide us with complex or at least subversive models of identity of the *vato loco*.

To conclude then, let's take a look at two examples

To find a truly comical-subversive figure of the *vato loco* it is imperative to talk about the character Rudy (Cheech Marin) from Cheech Marín's *Born in East LA* (1987). Rudy is simply a *vato* from East Los California when he is mistaken by *la migra* (he forgot his ID at home) as an undocumented Mexican "illegal" and is thus sent to Mexico where he must do odd jobs in order to raise the funds necessary to pay a *pollero* and find his way back home. One of these jobs is to teach a group of young OTM— "other than Mexicans but mostly Indian and Chinese— how to dress and speak like authentic Americans and blend in East Los. In single file them, the young men practice and practice the walk of a *vato loco*, the common greetings, and Rudy even tattoos on their hands the authentic *placas* (hand tattoos) we've seen in all the films here mentioned.

Hey relax, Relax man. This little tattoo is gonna make you blend right in. Pretty soon they won't be able to tell you from the natives. Next thing you know, you

got a job, making a little money, getting a little place, get a credit card. Start making payments on a Toyota. Just like an American.

The migrants soon graduate from Ruddy's school and endure the test of fire when they are able to pass conspicuously under the noses of the police while pronouncing in perfect tone; "Waasupening, hey vato! Waaspening, Orale! Panocha! You looking good man! Good! Suave! Good! Pélamela! Ja! Go Raiders!". It is clear here, that Marín vindicates the *vato loco*'s place in USAmerican society as an integral, pre-foundational, authentic natives, owners of Los Angeles. The *vato loco* here is also however, an identity which functions as a strategic mask- a costume which as Noriega reminds us, "advertises a social conflict, yet... also disguises an identity from the state" (Noriega 7). Marín's parody of the stereotypes effectively mines the hegemonic conception of a nation/identity as purely Anglo-USAmerica. He mines the precious border in favor of an inclusive identity and consciousness.

The most recent *Quinceañera* (2007) by Richard Glatzer, y Wash Westmoreland, starts off with an already fluid and complex representation of the *vato loco*. Quite successfully, the film plays with and ultimately surpasses previous representations of the *vato loco*. The camera introduces Carlos by following him from behind, with a shot of his head and neck while he walks the dark streets of East Los and steals a flower from a vendor. His walk, his clothing and the tattoo on his neck, automatically make reference to the imagery and common Hollywood aesthetic for the representation of the *vato loco*. The next time we see him, he arrives at a Quinceañera party only to be expelled violently by his very own father. We have thus, the familiar trope of the damned *vato loco*, meritor of his own blood relatives' rejection. The figure of the junkie *vato loco* from

Blood comes to mind. Subtlety however, the image of Carlos as a *maldito vato loco*, begins to dissolve in favour of a more complex contemplation of identity. Carlos begins to frequent the house of an Anglo gay couple who see appear to see as rather a exotic sexual trophy. In a stupendous scene, the couple's camera frames Carlos lying down on their bed, with both men by his sides. Proud with their hunt, the smiling Anglos gesticulate towards the camera that will document their exploration of the *vato loco*. Later on in the film, Carlos is able to establish a sincere and intimate relationship with one of the Anglos. The film all the sudden lets us know that we are in the presence of a queer *vato loco* who is now truly in love.

In a key scene, Carlos shows his lover the way to manually identify himself as part of the neighbourhood *Echo Parque*. They both smile, and the Anglo tells him, "you really are from another world hey?"; Carlos of course corrects him, and replies, "no, you are". Carlos desire then can be seen symbolically as a desire to surpass the limits imposed by a normative heterosexual white USAmerican society. Carlos is shown to be, primarily a human being, flesh and bone, who like anybody else suffers the likelihood of falling in love. If at the end, his love is not shared, Carlos proves to be a truly subversive figure of the *vato loco*. No longer a caricature, or a static and limiting symbol of ethnic pride, he is simply a *vato*, a hybrid queer Chicano alternative.

Bibliografía anotada

Aldama, Frederick Luis. Brown on Brown: Chicano/a Representations of Gender,

Sexuality, and Ethnicity. Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 2005.

En el capítulo cinco, Aldama parte del análisis del filme *American Me* (1992), para llevar a cabo un análisis de varios filmes producidos entre 1910-1998. De esta manera, el libro provee una buena introducción panorámica al estudio de la representación fílmica de la imagen del sujeto chicano.

Blood In, Blood out. Dir. Taylor Hackford. Perf. Damian Chapa, Jesse Borrego, and

Benjamin Bratt. Walt Disney Home Video, 1993.

El filme relata la historia a modo de *bildungs romans* de tres primos chicanos residentes de los barrios del este de Los Angeles California.

Born in East L.A. Dir. Cheech Marin. Perf. Cheech Marin, Paul Rodriguez, Tony Plata.

Universal Studios, 1987.

En esta comedia Cheech Marin personifica estratégicamente la figura del chicano-vato en su odisea de regreso a su hogar en EEUU.

Browitt, Jeff. "Nationalising the Popular: Ritual, Resistance and Survival in Latin

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Mi familia. Dir. Gregory Nava. Perf., Esai Morales, Jimmy Smits, Edward James Olmos.

American Playhouse, 1995.

En este filme, el personaje de Esai Morales, es un pachuco y el líder de su propia pandilla de pachuchos en los años 50. Incidentemente, muere dicho personaje en manos de otro pachuco rival. Más adelante en el filme, Jimmy Smits personifica por su parte el rol del vato loco.

Noriega, Chon A. "Fashion Crimes." Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies 26.1 (2001):

1-13.

En este artículo, el crítico se enfoca sobre la simbología detrás vestimenta idiosincrásica del pachuco.

Paz, Octavio. "El laberinto de la soledad." Fondo de Cultura económica, 1970.

Utilizaré este primer capítulo-introductorio sobre la identidad y espacio del pachuco como punto de partida en nuestro estudio.

Smethurst, James. "The Figure of the Vato Loco and the Representation of Ethnicity in the Narratives of Oscar Z." MELUS. Vol. 20, No. 2, Varieties of Ethnic Criticism. 1995; 119-132.

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Zoot Suit. Dir. Luis Valdez. Perf. Danuel Valdez, Edward James Olmos, Charles Aidman. Universal Pictures, 1981.

Este filme basado en la obra teatral del mismo director, relata la historia de un grupo de pachuchos y su posterior marginación por parte de la sociedad norte americana envuelta el frenesí paranoico de la según da guerra mundial.