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Bodyfilm: The Cinematic Representation of Latinas

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Although the last decade has offered an increased repertoire of roles for Latinas in film, in a number of important aspects their depletion and characterization has remained largely unchanged. Indeed, their portrayal has served to further ground and reinforce long-standing stereotypes based on the idea of the “other”: Latinas are either dark, voluptuous temptresses who must be tamed by society and its rules, or they are light-skinned señoritas who can be accepted by being only a little exotic. In the shorthand essential to stereotypes, sexuality and the body thus become the identifying markers of Latinidad. This is especially so because the body is “at once our most intimate experience and our most inescapable public form” (Outram 52). The body also constitutes the most basic, though not obvious, political tool. In the case of Latinas, the body has been used in film to exploit a sexual, explosive fantasy, one that recreates a self-image of Latinas and at the same time fulfills expectations/fantasies of mainstream audiences. One need only look at the sensationalized media presence of Jennifer Lopez, who purportedly has insured her body for 6 million dollars, to see how the body stands for a particular identity.

The aim of this paper is to illustrate how the cinematic representation of Latinas as social subjects. Through such a strategy, films also recreate the particular rendition of the social text in which Latinas can only be marginal others.

INTRODUCTION

THEORETICAL OBSERVATIONS

A few preliminary theoretical considerations will be helpful to our analysis of the way in which I Like It Like That uses the body. The notion of otherness and incorporation presented in Hollywood films seems to legitimize the perception and position of Latinas in a society that has relegated them to preconceived places. Within these stereotypes, Latinas are at once objects of appetite and contempt. Familiar in earlier cinema, this kind of characterization has endured, becoming in fact, more prevalent as a result of the increasing number of Latinos in the United States, a population trend that is threatening to some. The power of the visual image is a significant tool serving society’s need to find a positionality for Latinos that does not challenge or threaten the mainstream—in other words, a portrayal of Latinos as a totally separate “other” whom mainstream society views only through one lens and with whom interaction occurs on very definite terms.

Noriega’s “localized discourse” is in fact a stereotype. Homi Bhabha suggests that the stereotype is essentially an ambivalent discourse: “...a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place,’ already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated” (The Sexual Subject 312). The Latino in this case will always be an object, and can occupy the position of subject only if it is no longer the stereotype, that is to say when it becomes us and ceases to be the other. Latino, thus, can be thought of as a subject if it is lost as a Latino subject to become incorporated into mainstream society. Of course, both terms in the definition of this specific subjectivity are equally impossible. Because the stereotype is an ambivalent discourse, it allows for a range of identifications and produces a subject that is always already known and always simultaneously in need of construction. Within this depletion it is a known fact that Latinas are “hot...
THE FILM AND THE BODY

A look at a recent film in which a Latina is the protagonist clearly exemplifies the construction of the stereotype through the body and the resulting social positioning of Latinas. I Like It Like That was produced in 1994 on a small budget and had strong appeal to Latino audiences, and I will argue, a strong effect (influence) in shaping perceptions of Latinas. With the lead roles played by two marginally known Latino actors, I Like It Like That is the story of Lissette (Lauren Velez), a Puerto Rican woman in New York City with three small children, who is left to fend for herself when her husband, Chino (Jon Seda), winds up in jail (stereotypically, for stealing a “boom box” during an urban looting scene). With the encouragement of Alexis (Jessie Borrego), her transvestite brother, she attempts to find a job as a model, failing in large part because of the shortcomings of her body. But she does manage to land a job with a record company and soon proves her worth in helping Latino musicians shape their image for success. Despite family pressures, including a separation from her husband after another woman claims he has fathered her child, Lissette does well in the music promotion business. Because she ultimately believes that with her husband she will have a happy family life, she eventually reunites with Chino.

Even the brief summary suggests a fundamental and highly significant aspect of the movie: the characterization of a Latina through a representation of the body and the outcome of that representation, yields, as we shall see, a particular resolution. Symbol, emotion, and stereotype merge at their fullest in the materialization of the body as a social document, as text. Without significant characters to play, Latinos are, above all, bodies for the camera, and Latinas are primarily the embodiment of exotic sexual appeal. According to Cortes, Latinas’ diversity and depth of characterization have traditionally been absent, or else, they are replaced by frivolity and sensuality.

The body is perhaps the most literal and present element in this movie, visually prominent, of course, but also articulated through dialogue. In I Like It Like That the first appearance of Lissette and Chino is a bedroom shot showing them making love, a quasi-comical scene in which Chino is watching the clock in order to test his virility through sustained erection. The fact that a sex scene opens the movie points to the importance of the body and of sexuality even as it feeds into our fantasies/stereotypes, thus evoking a social subject, the Latina, through the authorized experience of what we already know.

For this movie and others like it, the body is flesh and presence in the individual and personal sense, as well as an instrument for the creation/recreation of fantasies. The connection between both uses of the body is in the condition of corporeality. The body stands for the most visible performative aspect of any set of discourses. In that capacity it is the vehicle, the space, and the time in which visibility and representation become inscribed and performed. In this way the body performs a narrative action. Because narrative actions of this type are familiar in the ways that they encode real life and everyday practices, they sometimes seem to have no apparent meaning: at other times they seem to have contradictory meanings. Lissete, for example, has small breasts, which are presented in situations where this physical characteristic can be a source of humor or a constraint. In a way, Lissette’s body is anti-stereotypical: after all, Latinas are reputed “hot tamale”—always very curvaceous. This kind of contradiction is an indication that the narratives that the body produces can oscillate between instances of powerful meaning and insipid trivialization. Sex and the body thus constitute cinematic narratives strategically employed to construct forms of coherence and forms of representation that “produce the conditions of representability of another and gendered social subject” (de Lauretis, Technologies of Gender, 109). At once terrifying yet desirable, the stereotype of passionate sexuality provides a point of identification and alienation. In what seems to be a source of contradiction, during an argument Chino blames Lissette for their ruptured marriage and accuses her of not being sexual when he says “Maybe I had to go someplace else because I wasn’t getting what I wanted.” What is articulated through speech and images, however, amounts to an unresolvable ambivalence: even as Lissette needs to focus on her body and her sexuality to get a job—and apparently to keep her husband—she can be accused of not being sexual enough. She defends herself by asserting her sexuality and, more important still, by rejecting an imposed subjectivity. Her response to Chino’s accusation is “I am a very sexual person. I am tired of you telling me what I am and I am not.” Here the body is seen as both excess and lack of materiality at
the same time. Lissete wants to make visible her femininity, but that femininity would seem to be definable only in terms of a certain body type, or by fetishized body parts that can only contribute to the always already known discourse about Latinas. Grosz points out that

The investments and significances attributed to different regions of the body image are not simply the consequence of the subject's sensations or the subject's relations to others but also result from the significance of body parts for others (their own as well as the subject's). In this sense they are never self determined, voluntarily adopted, or easily shaken off, for they are a large extent a function of socially shared significances. (81)

Unlike Magdalena, Chino's mistress, who dresses in short, provocative garments, Lissete has an unpretentious, almost genderless young look that runs decidedly counter prevailing Latina stereotypes. Nevertheless, she clearly exhibits an awareness of how a "typical" Latina looks if she is to appeal to Latinos, and she knows very well how to use clothes and image to market the musicians represented by the music company she works for. She changes the appearance of a Latino trio by advising them to wear urban baggy clothes that have a neighborhood feel appealing to Latinos yet not aggressive to the mainstream public. The body and clothes encode a system of values that is visible her femininity, but that femininity remains there long enough will be incorporated into the body image—clothing jewelry, other bodies, objects. They mark the body, its gait, posture, position, etc. (temporarily or more or less permanently), by marking the body image.... And the posture and gait will, moreover, vary enormously, depending on what kind of clothing is worn...(Grosz 80)

Lissete's ambivalence marks the progressive embodiment of a body that appears to be the source of power, but which is ultimately responsible for conforming to the established representations of a "gendered social subject." Lissete's search for a job begins through fashion/model agencies. In order to appear desirable, she borrows her transvestite brother's artificial breasts and learns some of his walking techniques. In this case it is Alexis and not Lissete who is aware of stereotypes and the role they play in activating desire in the Anglo world. Lissete is responsive to the ideas about the new dress code that Alexis proposes, mostly because she believes that it is only through the body that she can find a job. Here, her body has to perform the task of making her invisibility visible. Lissete has to gain power through visibility. Our most intense involvement with her lies within the personal identification of the character as body, a body that performs a narrative action and moves that action forward. The resulting narrative materializes but at the same time hides the social conflict implicit in the act of dressing up in a certain way in order to be able to leave a known environment and get a "real job." The narrative performs a displacement of the problem while simultaneously collaborating discursively in it.

In a similar fashion, I Like It Like That recreates cultural images and narrative strategies that succeed in engaging the spectator into the film's "reality," even as they merely confirm the familiar stereotypes. According to Annette Kuhn, "One of the defining generic features of women's pictures as a textual system is its construction of narratives motivated by female desire and processes of spectator identification governed by female point-of-view" (The Sexual Subject. 301). In I Like It Like That the force of the narrative is certainly carried by Lissete, and the spectator is more than likely to identify with her. However, the problem of female desire and point of view is more complex; indeed here it interpellates the spectator in an ambivalent way, activating stereotypes even as it seems to disrupt them. Though we might believe Lissete is a young Latina determined to succeed outside the barrio, in fact her only chance of success seems to be determined by the sexual favors she is required to offer to her boss. "What is sometimes loosely called body language is not inappropriate description of the ways in which culturally specific grids of power, regulation, and force condition and provide techniques for the formation of particular bodies" (Grosz, 142).

Because the place assigned to Latinas can be interpreted from different points of view, identification with Lissete may appear shifting, contradictory, and precarious. This could be a positive way of identifying with a character, since it would allow for disruptions in the narrative and interpretive processes. I would suggest, however, that the contradictory identifications are another instance of the ambivalent nature of the stereotype and of the political power of the body as a discourse. Lissete's representation is that of a subject who, even when historically and socially located, is nevertheless unable to negotiate contradictory positions in an ideology that places her in a fixed position inside the social text.

The heroine in I Like It Like That is the site of the articulation of sexual and cultural difference. Lissete is the embodiment, the materialization of otherness and sameness. If she is to survive the Latino world, she needs to be successful in the Anglo world. The film's attempt at creating an empowered Lissete ends up placing her in the unbalanced role of supporting and at the same time resisting and fighting the Latino and Anglo systems in which she is embedded. Lissete embodies a social model, an economic model, and a personal model, all contradictory and ambivalent, and all of which reinscribe and confirm the stereotype we already know.

CONCLUSION

I Like It Like That materializes the fantasies of Latino and non-Latino spectators through a use of the body that is at once obvious and hidden. In this sense the film normalizes beliefs, performing the function of an invisible tool of domination while giving the impression of being harmless. The Hollywood machine purports to represent real life when depicting Latinos as either more palatable, acculturated, or even anglicized characters, or as a dangerous total "other." In fact, films like the one analyzed in this essay continue to perpetuate the prevalent stereotypes of Latinos. The danger here is that as these films purport to disrupt or reveal stereotypes, they unwittingly reinforce and reinvent them. Economic forces may also contribute: in making films that fail to challenge the ingrained perceptions of mainstream audiences, and that merely meet the expectations
of these audiences, filmmakers may indeed be increasing their chances of success at the box office.

Lissette seems to have a political-personal consciousness of herself as woman/Latina and seems able to move inside and outside of the worlds she needs to traverse so as to constitute herself as a subject. But in the end, she is still inside an ideology that defines her as a fixed social subject. Ivina Quintana says of I Like It Like That, 'With a sense of irony, Martin's film demonstrates how both central characters are engaged in a struggle to maintain the bankrupt social roles that assure their subordination and inequality' (30). As a result, Lissette is lost as a subject and becomes only a body that actively participates in a "technique of self-production." Despite all that may seem appealing about her, the Latina protagonist has done nothing to move us forward in understanding Latins in the U.S. I Like It Like That, and films like it, merely reinforce the stereotypes grounded in a pseudo-notion of real life, where Latins are always only the object of viewers' desire and contempt. Moreover, through this use of the body, the film reproduces a representation of Latinas that forces and reinforces social hierarchy and social behavior (performance).

FOOTNOTES

1. "Latinidad" in this case means the essence of being Latino/o.

2. From a political/policy making point of view, the kind of threat I am referring to is evidenced by the formulation of California's Proposition 187, which denies educational and health benefits to undocumented workers and their children; Proposition 209, which ends affirmative action for women and minorities; and Proposition 227 which promotes English only in schools.

3. In this respect it is important to note that Ana López has gone even further in her assessment of the power of the visual image, and indicates that "Hollywood does not represent ethnics and minorities: it creates them and provides its audience with an experience of them" (68).

4. A case in point is Fools Rush In, a major Hollywood film that found substantial success with mainstream audiences. In many ways, in sharp contrast with I Like It Like That, Fools Rush In has the lead roles played by a popular Latina actress and a well-known TV actor. Isabel Fuentes (Salma Hayek) is a strikingly beautiful, anglicized Chicana. She is a self-assured, economically independent photographer who likes the solitude and beauty of the desert outside of Las Vegas. She meets Alex (Matthew Perry), a New York City developer who has come to Las Vegas to manage the construction of a casino, and she becomes pregnant after their first date. They marry hastily, but cultural conflicts soon begin (including a farcical meeting of Alex's WASP parents and Isabel's equally predictable Mexican family). They split up but eventually bridge the cultural divide and reunite to become a happy family.

5. Grosz points out "...it is clear that in our own culture as much as in others, there is a form of body writing and various techniques of social inscription that bind all subjects, often in quite different ways according to sex, class, race, cultural and age codifications, to social positions and relations" (141).

6. It is comic and ironic that a woman should learn how to walk and what to wear through the advice of her transvestite brother. Humor here serves to "exaggerate and defy verisimilitude, but also ultimately end with the status quo" (Kim 113).

7. According to Lidia Curtis, "Any story can be inscribed in the text through contradictory images, denials, constant erasures, but infinite variations come above all from the decoding: the possibility of reading stereotypes against the grain, of playing between sense and sens. Cultural ambiguities, for instance, influence how the charm of the dark woman operates in different contexts, how the cliches of masculinity and femininity are perceived..." (The Sexual Subject 1140).

8. Ana López advances the concept even further and states that Hollywood is not "a simple reproducer of fixed and homogeneous cultures or ideologies" but rather a producer of some of the multiple discourses that intervene in, affirm and contest the socioideological struggles of a given moment" (68).

LIST OF WORKS CITED


