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Throwing Curves: Realness, Women and Popular Culture

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Judging by its reviews and box-office success, the greatest triumph of Real Women Have Curves is not the Latina coming-of-age-cultural-conflict story, but its affirmation of a non-standard female physique; which, some critics suggest, gives it general “cross-over” appeal. Even the lead, America Ferrera, appeared on Oprah promoting the film as a ‘universal story.’ Yet the commercial promotion of the film suggests a more complicated scenario, especially in the tagline “go ahead, eat the flan” and a storyline that evokes the conflicts specific to the conjunction of class and ethnicity. Real Women Have Curves is successful, but not for being a cross-over film. Why not? The cross-over is a sign of compromise and diplomacy; it is both part of this culture and that culture, disrupting neither the one nor the other. It crosses over, but also eclipses all categories to become ‘universal,’ which means that it lacks the oblique codes of local culture or translates them into something transparent and accessible. Real Women Have Curves says something new about women’s bodies for a Hollywood audience on the one hand, while it is part of the vital history of independent Latino cinema as an alternative critical domain. It maintains its cultural specificity by drawing on a critical Latino tradition of theater and film without drawing on the box office impact of major cross-over Latina/o stars—possibly because of economic or other constraints, the effect is nonetheless the same. Real Women Have Curves has Independent film pedigree: it showcased at film festivals and won several awards at Sundance including the Dramatic Audience Award, two Special Jury Prizes for Acting for the work of Lupe Ontiveros and America Ferrera, respectively. Yet it refuses the traps of ‘positive representation’ by not offering portrait of family life palatable for a cross-over audience, families that are enabling and protective and whose good intentions for their kids’ futures lead to endless sacrifice. In short, Real Women Have Curves is a willfully independent film that challenges the Hollywood Film and Television industry but moves in similar audience, distribution, and studio circles as the Hollywood film, bringing a critical and culturally specific message to a mass audience. The era of the new major
independent cinema harkens, not a crossover moment, but, in a crucial difference, a coexistence of Major Independent Cinema and mainstream Hollywood.

*Real Women Have Curves*, directed by Colombian emigrant Patricia Cardoso, began as a play by Josefina Lopez that was subsequently transformed into a screenplay with the help of producer George LaVoo. The link to Latino Cinema can be traced in the filmographies of the actors: George Lopez in *Bread and Roses* and Lupe Ontiveros in *Zoot Suit, Mi Familia* and *And the Earth Did Not Swallow Him.* Moreover, the press-release for the film describes the story in terms of the main topoi of Latino cinema.

This is the story of Ana, a first generation Mexican-American teenager on the verge of becoming a woman. She lives in the predominantly Latino community of East Los Angeles. Freshly graduated from high school, Ana receives a full scholarship to Columbia University. Her very traditional old-world parents feel that now is the time for Ana to help provide for the family, not the time for college. Torn between her mainstream ambitions and her cultural heritage, she agrees to work with her mother at her sister’s downtown LA sewing factory.

This press-release foregrounds the story of cultural conflict to target ethnic newspapers and Latino theatrical venues, yet mainstream media promotes the storyline about body-image. The latter focus was the main impetus for producer-writer George LaVoo to transform the play into a major motion picture. But this does not split audience reception, instead the body-image plot comes to bear on the contested history of representation for peoples of color in popular culture.

*Real Women Have Curves* exploits a nascent reimagining of the female body. This is the cultural moment of the curvaceous woman, the first sign was signaled from behind Jennifer Lopez and mythologized by Sir Mix-a-Lot, but now confirmed by reality television’s biggest stars like Anna Nicole Smith and Kelly Osbourne or El’s Emme not to mention the talk show heavies: Oprah, Rosie O’Donell and Ricky Lake. This list represents the consolidation of a new force on the landscape of popular culture. *Real Women Have Curves* adds to this new cultural agenda in an explicit way, by revealing the ‘real’ bodies hidden by popular culture. It critically undermines the impossible dimensions idealized by the Hollywood Film and Television industry, an unwritten code that is rarely challenged, but offered as an unimpeachable reality or as simply just the way things are in the industry—women are routinely told to play the game, get the implants/lose the weight, or find other work. The hidden operative in the physical ideal for women is also the imperative to transformation for women who look “too ethnic” who are coerced to dye their hair, change their ethnic physiques, hide accents or lighten skin-tones. It is all part of the postmodern eugenics of the image surgeons of popular culture: the agents, directors, producers and decision makers who regularly set the agenda based on the market dictates of cultural prejudice. Women are constituted by their physical dimensions alone; from body-type to ethnic-type. Take, for instance, those well-known female celebrities whose interviews, unlike their male counterparts, are a litany of comments on their wardrobe, hair, make-up, exercise routines, marriage plans, and engagement rings; rather than their ‘craft’ or ‘art,’ political views or anything beyond explicitly narcissist musings. *Real Women Have Curves* is the first film to literally disrobe almost the entire cast to show the ‘real’ dimensions of women for a mass audience. The group strip down, initiated by a combination of heat and critical self-revelation, begins as self-mockery that quickly loses its negative tone. The women turn the session into an opportunity for communal support and affirmation, showing how the self-image formed in pop culture can be transformed by engaging a different community of reference. Women, who are socialized to compete against each other for the scarce supply of male attention—in the you’ll-never-get-a-husband-looking-like-that kind of way—find affirmation in each other. By the final scene, when we encounter a newly self-possessed and confident Ana strutting down Times Square, we know that she has accomplished something culturally unique: she has struggled against her negative body image, worked to help support her family, taken a stand against corporate disregard for its sweatshop labor and convinced her parents to release her from work so that she may attend college. If the film crosses over, it also comes back.

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