Latino Images in U.S. Mainstream Print

Raymundo Ortega

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In the following essay, I will use the critical approach to analyze a media outlet. The critical approach is a meta-theoretical approach in studying communication that uses a found discipline in psychology; its research goal is to change behavior and the assumption is that this behavior is changeable; its methods are studying communication and culture according to economic and political forces that influence communication (Martin 40-43). The method I will use is textual analysis of media through proving that Latinos and their culture in and outside of the United States have been often portrayed in limited, stereotyped, and unfavorable ways in mainstream print, film, television, and advertising (Subervi-Vélez, 1994). Despite the fact that there have been incredible changes in mass media, it is still interesting to notice that there have been changes in the Latino representation in the last decades. Meaning, there has been more representation of these, but there still exists stereotypes or generalizations in which this representation is not appropriate; in particular, in a very influential form of mass media, magazines.

For example, *Blender* magazine is a magazine known for its focus on music and fashion. Interestingly, it is sponsored by *Maxim* magazine, whose apparent objective it to attract an Anglo-Saxon heterosexual masculine audience with its very sexually provocative pictures of women in bikinis; *Blender* isn't that different from *Maxim*. In the March 2003 edition of Blender, the editors had Shakira as the cover girl. The headline read, “The Sexiest Women in Rock Today: The Rock Goddess [Top] 50!” Noticeably three of the top five fifty sexiest women in rock are Latinas, Christina Aguilera (Posed basically dressed like a clown) as #5, Jennifer Lopez (Posed with only a shell necklace on and a sheer transparent skirt on) as #2, and Shakira as #1. (Are these “sexy” women being made a mockery of? Are all Latina women dressed like clowns, and are they all like prehistoric women?) Shakira is a Colombian born singer, half Colombian and half Lebanese. She mentions how she likes to sing in English, that she likes to dance like her Lebanese ancestors, and that she aspires to see world peace. What a humble message! Ironically, she is very sexually posed in the pictures. What most bothers me about this magazine is that it contradicts itself. This is obvious when she is asked what she thinks about Christina Aguilera's new style (which is extremely vulgar and sexual). Shakira comments on that in the
following manner, “[T]here is a fine line between being sensual and being sexual. From the N to the X, there are, like, 10 or 11 letters, a pretty long distance, and I want to stay on this side, close to the N” (Duerden 124). Well, it's good that Shakira thinks this, but the contradiction is that this is not shown. In one picture, Shakira is laying down showing plenty of skin and cleavage with a white blanket over her almost camouflaging her white shirt – nearly giving the impression that she only has a white blanket over her. There are also tiny captions next to all her pictures that I find very strange. For example, in a picture where Shakira is kneeling down on a couch with a guitar on her side, the tiny caption reads in a very sexually degrading and sarcastic tone, “It [the guitar] won't play itself Shakira.” (Duerden 124). Excusing the pun, there is a play on words with the word play here. All in all though, it seems as if the Blender article or the magazine in itself is a parody of women, especially of Latino representation.

On a cross-cultural note: in reference to Shakira's public image, many say that she has sold-out by dying her hair blonde singing in English to a different audience. Many say, “She is trying to assimilate to ‘white-American’ culture.” Shakira has indeed been trying to assimilate to American culture, she has not wanted to maintain herself isolated in the Spanish Rock/Pop music genre and has started to transgress into the American-Pop music culture (Martin 207).

Elsewhere, the February 2003 edition of Vanity Fair magazine had Salma Hayek on its cover: the revolutionary Latina actress of the nineties. The article reports that Hayek is very admired for her effort in producing the movie Frida, a project that took Hayek a total of seven years. Like Frida, Hayek indeed has passed through many trials and tribulations in her life; in the article she shares some of her tough experiences as an actress. The talented Mexican-born, thick accented Hayek says:

I had studio heads say to me, “You could have been the biggest star in America, but you were born in the wrong country”. People would say, “It doesn’t matter how good you are as an actress or how pretty you are. You can never be leading lady, because we can’t take the risk of you opening your mouth and people thinking of their maids—because that’s what you sound like” (Smith 182).

It is obvious that Hayek has had to fight against having to play stereotypical roles that Latinos usually play in U.S. films. Hayek also told the Vanity Fair reporter of a time when she went to audition for a science fiction movie, and one of the film executives told her, “We can’t put Salma Hayek in the movie. Whoever heard of a Mexican in space?” (Smith 182).

Physically, Hayek claims, “As far as I’m concerned, I’m normal. I’m not pretty, I’m normal” (Smith 182). Yeah right Salma—this "normalcy" she claims is not evident in the very provocative pictures of Hayek, which I would say are very sexually degrading in representing the Latina woman. The cover of the magazine reads, “The fire and passion of Salma Hayek” and the article’s title is, “An irresistible force”; headlines that indeed have double meaning, and along with the pictures, the headlines help sell the magazine sexually to its audience, the upper-class heterosexual white male.

The implications within both magazines are that one sees the objectification of women not only as a product for their audiences, but also as misrepresentation and exploitation of the women. A social scientist might argue that these are dichotomous images of women though, and there are many dichotomous images in U.S. mass media. In the objectification of women we see that the images of all women (Latina or not Latina) tend to be dualistic (Rodriguez 76). Women have been presented as one-dimensional images that being the “good girl” and the “bad girl” and also as extensions of and subordinate to men (Rodriguez).

This dichotomy is seen in Salma for example, with the black and white pictures, and the black outfits, the darkness shows the “bad girl” image. This image is related to “the whore”, thick or hot blooded with sexy dark features. The more virginal, passive, or innocent features are seen in Shakira’s imagery; this is seen in the white blanket covering her practically nude self, and the brightness and gold-tone angelic colors in the photographs; let’s not forget about her recently dyed blonde hair. In Blender, Jennifer Lopez’ pictures exemplify the objectification of women as the subordination of men; there is one photo of her in the magazine where she is shot in a cavewoman outfit, and here we are reminded that prehistoric women were indeed subordinate to men.

But what makes Latina or Latino images so unique and different from all the other images is that there are so few of them. Many times they are very negative or degrading; even if they are positive, there exist polarities to the negative side.

For example, as I skimmed through the pages of these magazines, I realized that there are very few Latina models in the advertisements for clothing designers or makeup. I noticed the development of highly successful, but “invisible” Latina supermodels, that is, whose Hispanic origin is generally not known by the public. Latino image polarities are seen in the European (white) prototype of a Latina, the question brought up here is whether the use of this European prototype is a disservice to the larger, more heterogeneous Latino population; by this I mean that I saw very few mestizo (mixed Spanish & Native-American) or Afro-Latino faces as supermodels. Latina models that I did spot out are: Adriana Lima, Brazil-born, blue-eyed, light skinned, supermodel in her makeup and clothing shots for the March 2003 issue of Elle magazine. I spotted the Uruguay-born Yahmila Diaz-Rahi who was supposed to have been the first Latina representative for Loreal makeup, whom I would have never guessed to be Latina; again this might have been because of her features, light-green eyes, light skin, I spotted her in the 2003 Sports-Illustrated Swimsuit Issue. Yet even where I do see a more “Latina” face, she isn’t labeled as being Latina; the 2001 Sports-Illustrated Swimsuit Issue had Mexican-born Elsa Benitez on the cover. Elsa, who has darker features than the former models, brown eyes, brown hair, and tanner skin, is privileged to be on the cover of the magazine labeled as “Goddess of the Mediterranean”, not Latin-American but Mediterranean! How is the young U.S. Latina-American going to relate her ethnic identity through these girls, when their “Latinidad” is not even shown? Even so, how are the more heterogeneous looking Latinas supposed to feel about their “European” prototype? Might these polarities be giving leeway to the idolization of these models to the U.S. Anglo-American girl,
rather than to the U.S. Latina? Should they be bound by race? Well, not really, because ethnic identity is a set of ideas about one's own ethnic group membership; a sense of belonging to a particular group and knowing something about the shared experience of the group (Martin 340); according to U.S. Census Bureau, there is no racial distinction in “Hispanic”, henceforth, Latino Ethnic Identity should have no racial barriers. However, heterogenic expression should be influential to popular culture.

Another unfavorable way that Latinos have been misrepresented is through written word. Ironically, the same issue of Vanity Fair (with the Mexican Salma Hayek on the cover), has been very controversial especially in the Latino community. It is because of a sarcastic column called Ask Dame Edna. I feel that the author of this column, Barry Humphries, might as well have declared himself a racist. It should have been a parody of the same stereotyped used in American and the author was to have use backward bigotry discourage these stereotypes; but many have been offended by this piece. It was about a girl asking Dame Edna about what new language she should learn, if she should consider Spanish because everyone had been telling her to learn Spanish because even President George W. Bush knows Spanish. Dame Edna answers her very ignorantly saying:

Forget Spanish. There's nothing in that language worth reading except Don Quixote, and a quick listen to the CD of Man of La Mancha will take care of that. There was a poet named Garcia Lorca, but I'd leave him on the intellectual back burner if I were you. As for everyone's speaking it, what twaddle! Who speaks it that you are offended by this piece. It was about a girl asking Dame Edna about what new language she should learn, if she should consider Spanish because everyone had been telling her to learn Spanish because even President George W. Bush knows Spanish. Dame Edna answers her very ignorantly saying:

Vanity Fair did publish an apology in their next issue, and also emailed it to all of us who complained to the magazine, it read something like, “Our intent, in short, was to mock the very ethnic stereotypes that some have accused us of reinforcing” (vfmail@vf.com). However personally, what seemed more sarcastic was the apology not the column itself.

Ultimately, it is amazing how U.S. companies like Vanity Fair and other magazines or even Univision, the Spanish-Language major television corporation, try to do business. They want to sell Latinos to its audience and its national advertisers by identifying them as a unified group (Levine 39) or misrepresenting them, when in reality there exists an apparent paradox; that is, Latinos are distinct and pluralistic, while simultaneously integrated and acculturated in numerous facets in the practice of communication (Subervi-Vélez et al., 1999). It is time for Latinos to step up and realize that their images in the media have been limited to artists that allow their images to remind America of our “passion and sexiness”. Although some think that these images are ok, they can create stereotypes. We need to continue to succeed, not just artistically, but culturally, morally, athletically, politically, etc. What I mean, is we need to also let America more predominantly see our images as politicians, athletes, or just as the valuable members of this culture that we are.

Raymundo N. Ortega is a current student at DePaul University, with a double major in advertising and popular culture and a minor in Spanish. He is also an intern for the University ministry. Contact him at rotegadepaul.edu

WORKS CITED


vfmail@vf.com. The emailed apology from Vanity Fair magazine.

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