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Z151646
Visual Culture
ARTE 583
November 17, 2007
Critical Analysis of a Visual Culture or Exemplar.

Cultural Appropriation: Comedia y Musica de Mexico y Estados Unidos

Hispanic people of Mexican decent have lived within the borders of the United States since before there ever was a United States. Cultural appropriation is a method that Mexican-Americans¹ use to exist within the traditional American cultural hegemony.

Hispanic people who originate from Mexico and live in the United States have language and cultural barriers. One method to transcend those barriers is to take things that are common to the dominant culture and appropriate them to show them as negative or translate them into one's own culture.

Appropriation is the action of taking anything, without permission, and transforming it to serve a different purpose. Cultural appropriation 'borrows' then changes the meaning of cultural products, sayings, images, music, or fashion. Communicators use cultural appropriation to stage their opposition to or acceptance of dominant ideology. They alter the meaning of objects emblematic to the dominant culture in order to create powerful paradigmatic change. The communicator, working within the language of the majority culture, transcends cultural differences, thus gaining acceptance for a new culture or speak a truth, sentiment, or prejudice that the majority culture believes but cannot speak of openly.²

¹ This includes citizens and resident aliens of the United States, legal guest workers and illegal residents with over 1/8 hispanic parentage who originate from the Country of Mexico, and reside within the United States and her territories.

² Appropriation: Varia. Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 59-67, 85-86, 153.

Comedy is a form of appropriation that uses commonly held cultural knowledge and twists it to reveal a different meaning. Hispanic comics such as Carlos Mencia³, George Lopez⁴ Pablo Francisco⁵ and The Latino Comedy Project⁶ make dominant cultures laugh at their own folly or state cultural truths that the dominant culture themselves will not say publicly.

Mencia appears on stage with a nylon stocking over his head: “Did I loot shit during the riot? Yes, I did. Did I do interviews? Yes, I did, but I had this mask on and I pulled it back like this.” (He pulls nylon stocking backward, bending his eyes upward.) “and they thought I was Korean.” (Big reaction from mixed race crowd.) Mencia speaks to common Anglo prejudice that Latinos are thieves. Koreans, being the resource competitors in the same neighborhoods in Los Angeles, are ripe for Mexican retribution. His take is “I got away with it because the L. A. police would believe Koreans would do it.”

Lopez parodies an Anglo’s experience while attempting to order from a Jack n’ the Box drive-thru. “When you go to a fast food restaurant, it’s all Latinos that work there. You have to be bi-lingual to get a hamburger. You ever go to the Jack in the Box and the voice on the speaker has a Mexican accent?, ‘Welcomb to Yack een da Box, Can I tek your order?’ (opens eyes big, he is now the anglo.) ‘What the f*ck’s going on in there?’ (he is the Mexican) ‘¿Quiere algo cabron? You want somesheen?’ (Lopez now becomes the customer. He looks up confused and fearful. Lopez speaks in a straight up middle American accent.) ‘Is this Jack n’ the Box? – Yes, can I have a Jumbo Jack?’ ‘You want a Yumbo Yack?’ ‘You wan sheez?, sheez?, queso? sheez?’ (Customer is confused, he doesn’t want to look stupid or offend.) ‘Uh...I’d better not....’” The exchange

³ Carlos Mencia (1967-) Born in Honduras, raised in East Los Angeles, CA.

⁴ George Lopez (1961-) Born in Mission Hills, CA, Mexican descent.

⁵ Pablo Ridson Francisco (1974-) Born in Tuscon, AZ, Mexican descent.

⁶ The Latino Comedy project, Austin, TX. <http://www.lcp.org/>

continues with mutual, but hilarious, dissatisfaction. He speaks of the greatest hurdle Mexican-Americans face and the main reason for the difficulty of Anglo acceptance — language.

Pablo Francisco has a middle-American accent, unless he chooses to emphasize a Mexican theme. He relies on vocal sound effects and different voices. His shtick is about the mysterious, but ubiquitous man's voice behind intense movie trailers. In the noisy and wild *Previewman Parody*, Francisco appropriates the best and worst from action, mafia, and car chase movies. The section called *Tortilla Boy*, his mix of American film clichés, a poke at the “Governator”⁷ and Mexican (plus other cultures’) angst show recognition of culturally coded systems that all Anglo-Americans laugh at, but would rarely say in public.

The Latino Comedy Project parodies the movie *300* with a graphic novel, painterly portrayal of a Mexican horde screaming their challenge, and then charging the American border. For an Anglo watching the video, it is shocking. One expects the communicator to be from an anti-Hispanic group. The Latino Comedy Project has completely coded their parody for Anglo understanding. They play upon the worst fears of the anti-immigration, border-conscious “Minutemen.” in order to show its ridiculousness.

The uniting theme in these examples is that the comedians say what most Anglo-Americans think but the prevailing cultural censorship of political correctness will not allow them to say without social penalty. By appropriating the Anglo-American thought, the Hispanic communicators reveal the truth, often oppositionally. The two cultures are different in some ways, similar in most. The two co-exist and there is understanding, while not always acceptance.

⁷ California's governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, is often called “The Governator” as a play on words from his character in the *Terminator* movie trilogy.

Sones de Mexico Ensemble Chicago, a Mexican folk music ensemble, was nominated for the Latin Grammy for Best Folk Album of 2007.⁸ They specialize in *son* (a style of Mexican music) including regional styles of huapango, gustos, chilenas, son jarocho plus others. They formed as a 501©3 not-for-profit group in 1994. Their mission is to educate children and adults in Mexican Folk Music forms.⁹

Their latest album, *Esta Tierra Es Tuya*, contains a variety of traditional Mexican musical motifs. It caught the attention of Renee Montagne of National Public Radio with three songs that Sones de Mexico appropriated from common American and European music, adapting them to similar Mexican rhythms and instruments.

Mr. JUAN DIES (Member, Sones de Mexico): “We were invited to a Led Zeppelin tribute, and local bands would just do cover versions of Led Zeppelin. So they invited us. I think it was a joke in the beginning. They said, ‘Hey, let’s see what these guys do with Led Zeppelin. And we took it as a serious commission.”

(Soundbite of song, Sones version of *Four Sticks*)

Mr. DIES: “This piece attracted me because it was very rhythmic. It’s actually in 5/4 time, which is a very exciting time. And we began to transform it into an Aztec ceremonial dance, and when you listen to Aztec drums, you have the same feeling of power and drive that you would get from heavy metal.”¹⁰

Sones de Mexico transformed the well-known rock song to be a powerful anthem, completely recognizable and acceptable by any member of the dominant culture. Sones also worked with the Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Brandenburg Concerto No. #3 in G Major*...

“which [was] arranged as a jarocho piece. This is a Mexican style from the state of Veracruz.... When I realized the similarities between the piece and the zapatearo jarocho, I decided to incorporate the traditional instruments... such as the lower jawbone of a donkey. The teeth will rattle and you can hit or scrape on it. Zapatearo means “foot tapping.”(ibid)

Mr. Dies is quick to point out that they are not preservationists, trying to pretend they are in a small Mexican village, they are residents of Chicago and interact in the world around them. They

⁸ The award was won 11/8/2007 by “Un Fuego de Sangre Pura” by Los Gaiteros do San Jacinto of Columbia, their seventh nomination and first win.

⁹ Sones de Mexico Ensemble Chicago. “Mission Statement”. <http://www.sonesdemexico.com/index2.html>

¹⁰ Montagne, Renee. “Mexican Folk in the Heart of Chicago”, Transcript, National Public Radio, Morning Edition, November 8, 2007.

have no specific political agenda, however they are affected by issues of immigration because of their presence in the Mexican community. During a peak in the national debate, they were inspired to appropriate the Woody Guthrie Song. *This Land is Your Land*. They used the polka motif. “Polka is a big influence in Mexican northern music. Sometimes you don’t know if the song is from Czechoslovakia or Mexico until someone starts singing”, says Dies. They sing all but the last verse in Spanish. “We want to reach people and, you know, we’d like our music to be accessible by everyone, so the last verse is an invitation. Everyone knows the lyrics. So we like it when people sing along with us.” (Ibid.)

Sones de Mexico appropriates popular musical forms in order to become part of the dominant hegemony. Hispanic comedians Mencia, Lopez, Francisco and The Latin Comedy Project use cultural codes and prejudices to help both Mexican and Anglo American cultures to laugh at each other, exposing both similarities and the differences.

Ubiquitous media access through television, movies and internet allow these artists to expose their appropriations to a wide audience. Through their efforts, dominant ideology is changed to be more inclusive of non-anglo artform. Eventually, the differences between Mexican and Anglo cultures will work out to a middle ground.