

Corridos and Mexican Cinema
by
Mike McKinley

The corrido or popular ballad is a musical/poetic form that is typical of Mexico and has no true corresponding equivalent in North American culture. They comprise a vital cultural force whose relevance to the social fabric of Mexico is vast. They are ballads that might be compared to *The Streets of Laredo* from the North American tradition that tell a heroic, usually tragic, story in lyric verse set to music. These songs were, according to Vicente T. Mendoza:

...un género épico-lírico-narrativo, en cuartetas de rima variable, ya asonante o consonante en los versos pares, forma literaria sobre la que se apoya una frase musical compuesta generalmente de cuatro miembros, que relata aquellos sucesos que hieren poderosamente la sensibilidad de las multitudes; por lo que tiene épico deriva del romance castellano y mantiene normalmente la forma general de éste, conservando su carácter narrativo de hazañas guerreras y combates, creando entonces una historia por y para el pueblo. Por lo que encierra de lírico, deriva de la copla y el cantar, así como de la jácara, y englobada igualmente relatos sentimentales propios para ser cantados, principalmente amorosos, poniendo las bases de la lírica popular sustentada en coplas aisladas o en series. (Mendoza ix)

The corrido, depending upon which scholarly school of thought to which one subscribes, began a dramatic rise to prominence in Mexican culture around the middle or end of the 19th century. In the years of the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1920, the corrido enjoyed a golden age singing of the exploits of heroes during the most dramatic episode in Mexican history since the Conquest. Then, according to several corrido scholars such as Mendoza and Américo Paredes, it declined into a commercial decadence during the 1930's from which it never recovered. Oddly enough, the purported decadence of the corrido coincided with the rise of the golden age of Mexican Cinema, and many interesting films from the period are based on corridos. Here, in these cross-currents of culture we see a fascinating nexus of forces: the Revolutionary secular and leftist ideology that overthrew the repressive thirty-year dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz versus the

rise of the bourgeoisie during the 1930s and 40's whose sentimental and reactionary philosophy harked back to that very age of pre-revolutionary social stability, religion and colonial hierarchy the Revolution tried to supplant. The PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) can be seen as perhaps the greatest metaphor for this confluence of leftist and bourgeois ideology in Mexican society. It was the dominant political force for seventy-one years, and its name, Institutional Revolutionary Party, shows us a revolution that institutionalized itself into a conservative hegemonic power structure that sought to be all things to all Mexicans: dominating politics, economics and culture, and pervading all aspects of society, from the President of the Republic down to the citizens of the smallest village.

Though a detailed discussion of the many cultural, political and economic forces at work in the corrido during this clash of politics, ideology, art, industry and creativity is beyond the scope of this investigation, suffice it to say the primary focus of most scholars of the corrido has been to champion it as a reflection of a popular or community culture that Américo Paredes described as the “ballad tradition” (Paredes 232). This tradition is usually considered to be ideologically transgressive of the dominant class by nature and expressive of ideals best embodied in the Revolution. In contradistinction to this, the corrido that became an element of Mexican Cinema and commercial mass media during its decadence is considered to be homogenized, sentimental, bereft of authenticity and perhaps even a tool of the reactionary dominant class whose interests only coincide with those of the masses of people in the form of cultural domination. As Mendoza referred to this decadent phase or *tercero lapso*, “De 1930 a la fecha de se hace culterano, artificioso, frecuentemente falso, sin carácter auténticamente popular...” (Mendoza xvi). Thus, we see an idealization of the Revolutionary period in the works of some influential corrido scholars, many whose worldview seems to have been shaped by leftist Revolutionary precepts, with an emphasis on purported genuine ideological expressions of popular culture which is placed in opposition to any cultural production sullied by commercialization or hegemonic bourgeois influence. Almost too facile to be credible, this analysis is a useful point of departure for our consideration of the two films based on corridos that we are going to analyze which were produced during the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema, *Juan Charrasqueado* and *Yo Maté a Rosita Álvarez*. These songs and

the subsequent films expressed and continue to express cultural ideas that are as important in mythic nationalistic terms to the Mexican people and their culture as the cowboy, the frontier and Manifest Destiny is to the master narrative and cultural identity of the North American. In attempting to gauge these cultural artifacts and their importance to their native cultures, we will need to indulge in what John Holmes McDowell referred to as “serviceable fictions” (McDowell 44) to conceptualize these communities whose values corridos supposedly reflect. These theoretical “communities” throw the values emphasized in the songs and films into relief and provide a context for issues of class, race and gender we will consider. As McDowell noted, “Whether ballad communities may be located in time and space, or must be assigned a more tenuous ontological status, I leave open for treatment elsewhere” (McDowell 45).

To extrapolate from these communities into specifics of the two corridos and films we will look at, we will need to take these “serviceable fictions” a step further and examine the very concept of Mexican male identity. To do this, we will examine how various scholars have postulated conceptualizations of “the Mexican macho.” In Spanish, *macho* refers to the male of any species of animal, however it has become emblematic of a certain specific role within certain cultural contexts. This cultural archetype should not by any means be assumed to be descriptive in complete or definitive terms of the complex and subtle reality of the Mexican male’s experience. However, these two corridos and films deal with and within the world of a very specific form of male experience around which all other cultural norms, especially those of the female, revolve and are defined. Therefore, the reader is asked to indulge in this additional “serviceable fiction” in this cultural analysis, and is invited to judge the value of the arguments in view of this.

Juan Charrasqueado and *Yo Maté a Rosita* Alvérez are two films based on corridos, and both deal with issues that are at the core of Mexican identity: machismo and its inevitable handmaiden, misogyny. Santiago Ramírez in *El mexicano: psicología de sus motivaciones* postulates that the Mexican identity was forged in the crucible of the Conquest and burnished amid the fires of rape, torture, bloodshed and wholesale cultural annihilation. The Spanish soldier took the indigenous woman, often without her consent, and the resulting mestizo son was a mongrel who identified with his nurturing mother

and, consequently, the indigenous world as well, all the while simultaneously rejecting it due a strong desire to be powerful and dominant like his Spanish father. The Spanish *peninsulares* and even *criollo* society (the Europeans born in the New World) would never completely accept this mestizo son, so he would be forced to reject them as well, leaving him abandoned between the indigenous and European cultures. “El mestizo, como dijimos al principio, nació producto de una conjunción difícil. Su padre es un hombre fuerte, su cultura y forma de vida prevalecen, contempla a su hijo más como el producto de una necesidad sexual que como el anhelo de perpetuarse” (Ramírez 60). This mestizo son is set adrift in society, and his typical reaction is to rebel against both his indigenous origin and his foreign father. The Spaniard, exemplifying the masculine, and the indigenous, exemplifying the feminine, create a polarity where there can be no resolution. Ramírez goes on to state, “Dado que las significaciones masculinas son sustancialmente pobres, hará alarde de ellas; alarde compulsivo que adquiriría las características de machismo. El machismo de mexicano no es en el fondo sino la inseguridad de la propia masculinidad; el barroquismo de la virilidad” (Ramírez 62) Thus, in this “baroque virility” the externals of masculinity became ornamented and exaggerated to excess leaving an interior that can barely support the weight of the outside. Something must fill this vacant space inside the macho – usually it was alcohol, promiscuity, violence and an egotistical narcissism tinged with hefty doses of fatalism. The author continues, citing one of the corridos in this study as the exemplar of the macho Mexican, “Sus intentos de machismo son otros tantos de lograr una identificación que le es negada; caricaturescamente, como el niño que imita al papá, se transforma y adquiere las características de éste, se vuelve ‘Juan Charrasqueado’, ‘que fue muy macho, parrandero y jugador’” (Ramírez 68).¹

Charles Ramírez Berg, in his analysis of Mexican culture and film "Cracks in the Macho Monolith: Machismo, Man, and Mexico in Recent Mexican Cinema," delineates a dichotomy for both men and women in Mexican society: “Like women, men have their own version of the impossible contradiction. For women, it is the virgin/whore; for men

¹ Most versions of the lyrics for this corrido are not as Ramírez states here. Rather they say that Juan Charrasqueado “que fue borracho” not “que fue muy macho.” That is to say, he was a drinker or drunkard, rather than a *macho*. However, in spite of this inconsistency, I believe that the basic point in his analysis is not affected.

it is hero/outlaw” (Ramírez Berg 67). He continues, “*Machismo* is thus a pose of sexual potency made by one man before his fellow men, and in relation not to women in general, but to *a* woman in particular” (Ramírez Berg 69). Octavio Paz describes this macho construct in his famous book, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, which Dr. Ramírez Berg quotes at the beginning of his article: “[For the Mexican man] the ideal of manliness is never to ‘crack’ [*rajar*] The Mexican *macho* – the male – is a hermetic being, closed up in himself, capable of guarding both himself and whatever has been confided to him. Manliness is judged according to one’s invulnerability to enemy arms or the impacts of the outside world” (Paz 29-30).

Thus the macho *is* the labyrinth of solitude, and as stated earlier, this “baroque virility” is the ornamentation that overwhelms the substance. Taking another tack, let us consider the corpus of songs written by one of Mexico’s most popular composers, José Alfredo Jiménez, whose songs are paeans to the machismo of the popular imagination during the mid-20th century. A. Rolando Andrade describes the dilemma of the Mexican male in much harsher terms:

José Alfredo's lyrics represent a radical point of view as they are extremely negative and do not represent the best of the Mexican culture. The lyrics project a desperate life and mostly a negative view of death, alcoholism, fatalism and machismo. His critics go on to say he appears to represent the worse of the Mexican culture and that he is the "composer of alcohol."² A different view is that José Alfredo is not satisfied in merely suggesting drinking, he wants to portray a hard and destructive drunkenness; he is not satisfied in suggesting "you are killing me," he goes on to express a hope of death; he is not satisfied suggesting machismo: "I, as a man, control the female," he goes on to suggest: I am her owner, her master, her king; he is not happy simply to suggest fate turns against humans, he goes on to show how life is totally destroyed by the fateful decisions of women. These extreme perspectives abandon reality and

² Interview at the Plaza Garibaldi in Mexico City, summer of 1993.

approach the negativism and fatalism that some students of culture suggest is the reality of Mexico.³ (Andrade 147)

Thus, according to this view, alcoholism, fatalism, violence and self-destructiveness become the substance of the macho interior and the only means by which the façade can stand up. It is not surprising this view might be very provocative. Let us keep in mind that the negative male stereotype is not exclusive to Mexico by any means, and there have been those who dispute these generalizations, notably Américo Paredes, who is singled out by Ramírez Berg for his contrary stance:

Folklorist Américo Paredes is not convinced the *macho* image dates from the Conquest, nor that it operates as universally in the Mexican consciousness in the way that Paz, Ramos and others believe. Citing a study of Mexican ballads undertaken by the Argentine Vicente T. Mendoza, Paredes notes Mendoza's division of the *macho* into two categories. One is a truly brave, generous and heroic man; the other is a fake who uses the pose to hide his cowardice. The first type, says Paredes, is simply the manly, heroic ideal common to many nations. The second type begins to show up in Mexican *decimas* (ten-line poems) at the end of the nineteenth century. And the word *macho* only comes in popular usage much later, during the 1940's, in *corridos*. Here, says Paredes, the popular image of the *macho* as we know it today crystallized. Among the factors that contribute to the modern usage of the term *macho* are, first, the figure of the *pistolero* [gunman], the Revolutionary man of action who becomes a tragic figure once the fighting stops and he is suddenly thrust into a peaceful world. Second, there is the Mexican experience during World War II: for all practical purposes, Mexico did not partake in the conflict, but opted instead to fall under the comfortable protectionist umbrella of the United States. Thus, as opposed to the *corridos* of Revolutionary times which celebrated actual feats of wartime courage, those of the 1940's instead had to concoct a brave stance much like, as Paredes says, a fellow who shouts challenges while hiding behind a strong

³ Lewis, Oscar, *Pedro Martínez: A Mexican Peasant and His Family*. New York, A Vintage Giant, 1964.

protector. Finally, Paredes opines that the term *macho* would never have gained acceptance or popularity but for the fortuitous coincidence that it rhymed with the name of Mexico's president from 1940 to 1946, Manuel Avila Camacho.⁴ (Ramírez Berg 70)

I beg the reader's indulgence for having cited so much material at such length, but I believe the issues herein are so complex that a basic understanding of some of the scholarship in the field will not only give the reader a better grounding in the topic, but will also yield some preliminary conclusions. *Juan Charrasqueado* was written in 1942 and first recorded in 1945 for the commercial market. Furthermore, both *corrido/ranchera* films, *Yo Maté a Rosita Alvérez* and *Juan Charrasqueado*, were produced and released in 1946 and 1948 respectively, right on the heels of the *sexenio* or Presidential term of Camacho. García Riera has noted that, in his opinion, the hegemonic atmosphere of the presidential administrations influenced the films that were released in those periods. Could we assume then that the corridos used in these films were affected as well? Unfortunately, it seems to overstate the case to follow Paredes blindly in his analysis. That valor was confined to the Revolutionary period, that the bravery of Mexican people went into decline during World War II, or that the term *macho* was only popularized because of a happy linguistic coincidence is hard to accept. However, the patriarchal state and the macho individual did feed off each other. Ramírez Berg notes that, "More than a cultural tradition, then, *machismo* is the ideological fuel, driving Mexico's patriarchal system. To speak of the male image and *machismo* in Mexico is to speak of the nation's self-image and ultimately to speak of the state itself" (Ramírez Berg 71).

These corridos deal with issues of class and gender, which are presented in the idealized context of the early 1900's. Industry is not seen, cars are not driven, candlelight is the norm – this technique of creating a timeless quality out of a period from the recent past is often used. Perhaps, because human beings begin life looking to their parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles for guidance, we can more easily accept a didactic approach that comes from the past. Both corridos, though they created *corrido/ranchera*

⁴ Américo Paredes, "Estados Unidos, México y el Machismo," *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 9.1 (Jan. 1967) 65-70.

films differing in terms of style, technique and quality, basically promote the same set of values. *Juan Charrasqueado*, the “movie corrido” was written for the commercial market but with the trappings of the folkloric tradition. The original corrido, *Yo Maté a Rosita Álvarez*, although it arose from of the folkloric tradition of transgression of social norms dating back to medieval Spain, evolved into a very different commercial product when made into a film. That they derive from such divergent backgrounds, and yet both have very similar messages seems to enforce the universality of the corrido itself. Both show the error of sexual indiscretion and the transgression of social norms, and how the transgressor, though perhaps well meaning, must face serious consequences. A good corrido, like any other good artistic work, must be timeless in its message even if its setting is historical. It must have a theme that can be viewed as relevant from age to age. Naturally, the lure of a timeless message and a dramatic set of metaphoric images would be attractive to a filmmaker. As McDowell observed “The *corrido* as a narrative discourse is a verbal icon, in a manner impersonal and in content historical” (McDowell 49). The iconicity of the corrido is what lends it so well to film adaptation, as a film is essentially a series of visual icons that, strung together, produce a narrative. Arguably more useful for filmmakers is that the corrido changed during the emergence of radio and commercial record manufacture, becoming the shortened forms that made their appearance on 78-rpm records. This was one of the primary causes for the “decadence” of corrido during the 1930’s in the Mendoza/Paredes model. Longer corridos were cut down to fit the shortened formats, leaving only their iconic narrative, propositional and emotional cores. That is to say the central message, basic story and emotional elements essential to the experience was retained, while much detail, which would make the corrido too long to be recorded, would be cut away. Having these well-known songs with virtually a built-in audience, already popularized by radio and phonograph recordings, all neatly cut down to their basic elements was an irresistible opportunity for filmmakers to take these popular catchy songs with their highly-charged stories of love, death and dishonor and embroider them as much as necessary to create a feature-length film.

In both the corridos and the films, male characters are fools for love, hotheaded and violent, whose tragic ends are fueled by alcohol and fragile male egos. Women,

though clearly at a disadvantage in a patriarchal society where their very sexual nature is seen as threatening, are surprisingly independent, headstrong, resourceful and play upon the men's lust and egos with exceptional skill. Consequences and redemption are expressed in very Catholic terms, and will be found only in the afterlife. The question as to whether we are seeing dramatic ideology or ideologically influenced drama always rears its problematic head in cultural and artistic criticism. What we see is both. The dramatic aspects of corridos were most important to filmmakers and audiences, while ideology – Christian, sexist, patriarchal, and hetero-normative – was so omnipresent in the culture that it became a natural element in these corridos and *corrido/ranchera* films. The hegemony is reinforced in a rousing chorus. Their settings prior to the Mexican Revolution made them both conveniently accessible and remote. Much like the Biblical stories that are recited at major Jewish or Christian holidays, the ritual of reenactment makes us participants in distant events. Like the Eucharist for the Christian or the Seder for the Jew, reenactment dissolves the barriers of time and space, making years and distance fall away before this unifying experience. The performance of the corrido has always been one of its defining factors as a cultural artifact that arose as part of an oral tradition. And by extension, a film can only be experienced during viewing.

The marriage of these two art forms creates much more than the sum of their individual parts. The aural elements of music, poetry, dialogue and sound effects coupled with the visual elements of riveting images, romantic *mise-en-scène*, action, dance and dramatic acting create a synthesis that makes the viewer feel as if they are living through the history of the characters. The corridos in the films are presented as part of the film's diegesis; that is to say, they are played by musicians in a performance setting in the special world created by the film. The corridos begin and end both pictures, and are usually played, along with a variety of other songs, as they might conceivably have been played in a realistic setting during the period, even if some of the settings seem rather unlikely. Naturally, this last point can be ascribed to dramatic license. Why would a mariachi band play outside of the town jail in the street, seemingly to serenade the incarcerated male leads at the end of *Yo Maté a Rosita Álvarez*? However, in light of the conventions of musical theatre or film (and *comedia ranchera* was no exception) where the actors can suddenly burst into song at any moment, this is a minor concern. To see

Pedro Vargas, a member of the founding family of the most famous mariachi group the world has ever known, singing the last verses of *Rosita Alvérez* in his beautiful tenor voice, admonishing women never to sully a man's honor in public on pain of death as the two male leads sit in a jail cell, one awaiting execution for killing her, is a powerful moment. This makes a very clear statement about the standards of behavior in John McDowell's "ballad community." In *Juan Charrasqueado*, we see the final verses in the corrido being sung in the cantina as his best friend drinks and cries. Then we cut away to an impressive Eisenstein-worthy montage of the funeral of Juan, church bells in the cathedral tower tolling, his dewy-eyed widow gazing to heaven as she sits dressed in mourning and cradling their son, then we cut to the countryside and the idealized figure of the hero/outlaw riding in silhouette among the agave-studded hills meeting a dramatic sky of huge, white clouds with bursts of sunlight that lends an unmistakably epic and heroic stature to the protagonist in the last moments of the film. The figure of Juan Charrasqueado, with his mutilated face and his fame as a drunk, a carouser and a philanderer, has often been seen as a burlesque of the corrido hero coming upon the scene as a popular song written in during the purported age of corrido decadence. But, there is no decadence in these messages, the tragedy of the stories, the oppression and murder of women in a culture that viewed their sexuality as dangerous, or the brutal retribution of society on the transgression of its members. The actions of these mythic and poetic men, trapped in their labyrinth of solitude, their dilemma as the heroes and outlaws in a fatalistic world of alcoholism and violence, and their bravery as they fought, lost and died, remains with us to this day; if only in the words of a song or a flickering image on the screen.