

The Aztlán Film Institute's Top 100 List

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In June 1998, on nationwide television, the American Film Institute (AFI) unveiled its list of the 100 greatest American movies. The star-studded hoopla commemorated the first 100 years of American filmmaking, with the studios teaming up, for the first time ever, to promote home video rentals and sales under the guise of historical and artistic appreciation. The AFI, which has recently lost almost all of its federal funding, has learned a valuable lesson or two from Hollywood deals, allowing it to continue fighting the good fight for the preservation of American film. . . . Happy ending.

But what is American film? In fact, what is film? And why should we care? For the AFI, “American” means Hollywood and “film” means popular feature-length narratives. That is why the list contains no independent films, no documentary films, no avant-garde films, no short narrative films, and precious few silent films. It also explains why the list contains no films directed by women or racial minorities. None! Quite simply, Hollywood is not an equal opportunity employer, and each year the employment numbers get a little worse.

Such exclusions are of a different order than the galling absence of Erich von Stroheim’s *Greed* (1923–25), F. W. Murnau’s *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927), or any films by Joseph von Sternberg, Buster Keaton, Ernst Lubitsch, Preston Sturges, or Busby Berkeley, let alone films starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers or even Jerry Lewis. These exclusions speak to the present-day market sensibilities and the middlebrow amnesia that guide the AFI endeavor; but, even

if they were rectified, the exclusion of women and racial minorities would remain unchanged.¹

But why should we care? Because the list is being done in our name: Americans. In essence, the AFI presented a list of the 100 greatest films directed by white men making big profits—or, in the case of *Citizen Kane* (1941), good press—for the major studios. It also presented a list that enshrined a handful of living directors most likely to donate money to the AFI. These are not bad things in and of themselves, if called by their proper name. But their gravitas stems from calling the endeavor a measure of our nation's film history. The part becomes greater than the whole. Indeed, when an industry and an institute team up to lay claim to the sum of our nationality, we lose the one thing they are claiming to preserve: our heritage. Our complex, diverse, and rich heritage.

As a film historian, I have spent the past decade researching American film history—digging through archival holdings and personal papers, conducting numerous interviews, even discovering and preserving lost films, such as the first feature film directed by a Mexican American, Efraín Gutiérrez's *Please, Don't Bury Me Alive!* (1976). This independent film, a slice-of-barrio-life that was shot and exhibited in South Texas, outperformed *Superman* (1978) in some small towns, while it singlehandedly broke Mexico's monopoly over the 400 Spanish-language theaters in the United States. The film inspired an independent film movement in Mexico, where the state controlled the industry, and among Chicano filmmakers in the United States, who further refined Gutiérrez's successful grassroots marketing strategy. The film, then, is important as an instance of regional filmmaking, as a bicultural and bilingual narrative, and as a precedent that expanded the way that films got made in two nations. It is also a compelling film, one made on a dream and a shoestring!

In this respect, Gutiérrez is a pivotal figure in the same way as Oscar Micheaux, who directed "race movies" for black audiences from the 1920s to the 1940s; or Maya Deren, whose films, writings, and advocacy efforts provided a paradigm for the development of American avant-garde film from the 1940s to the 1970s; or the multiracial generation of documentary filmmakers who went to the UCLA Ethno-Communications Program in the early 1970s. Need I even mention Spike Lee? If I do, please see *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and *4 Little Girls* (1997), and then take another look at the AFI list or watch Samuel L. Jackson

extolling the aesthetic merits of D. W. Griffith's Klan narrative *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) on the AFI television special. Then ask, what's wrong with this picture? Lee, Deren, Micheaux, and these other filmmakers are among a number who have made "American films" for audiences that were segregated in theaters and other public spaces, alienated by stereotypes or outright exclusion from the silver screen, or simply uninspired by Hollywood narrative conventions.

But none of them are on the AFI list.

The irony of this situation is that it reconfirms the equivalence between American film and Hollywood, not just in the public mind, but in the field of film studies itself. Since most film scholars write about Hollywood as the American cinema, the exceptions run the risk of being perceived as un-American: Women's cinema, Black cinema, Chicano cinema, Queer cinema, et al. In order to legitimate themselves, these cinemas must create their own film institutes, stage their own film festivals, and hold their own award ceremonies—duly broadcast on television, of course. But they remain excluded from both Hollywood and the history books that document our national cinema.

Let me be clear. The AFI is not to blame. Founded in 1967, it is a rather late entrant into the picture, as it were. Its list merely exemplifies a set of deeply held assumptions that we in this country, and within academia, have about film history and its relationship to the nation. Still, you cannot roll the dice one hundred times and come up with snake eyes each and every time. If you do, it means you are rolling loaded dice. You are going through all the gestures of a game of chance, but, in fact, you are cheating. And if you call the results "American film," you are cheating a nation of its history.²

In the spirit of exclusion, then, the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center is proud to announce the formation of the Aztlán Film Institute, the other AFI, if you will. Following the American Film Institute model, we developed a pool from which to make final selections, sending these titles to a blue ribbon panel of some 1,500 leaders from the Aztlán film community, as well as President Clinton, Vice-President Gore, and the Taco Bell Chihuahua. As the other but more inclusive AFI, however, we nominated films and videos in four categories: documentary, experimental, short or television narrative, and feature film. We also stressed diversity, making sure to include male and female, straight and queer, Chicano and a few non-Chicano media artists. (After considerable debate, we even included Tejanos.)

We asked our blue ribbon panel to review our pool of 100 titles and make 100 final selections, ranking them in order of importance. But Aztlán is a strange place and it operates on a different set of rules than the mainstream. If only the pretense of democracy is offered, the citizens of Aztlán will not play along, since that is how most atrocities have been committed in this century. Instead, we received nearly 2,500 ballots (give or take), since the “community” was bigger than we imagined. Almost all ballots included several dozen write-in candidates, resulting in a group of 149 titles in no particular order. The list is by no means exhaustive. To give just one example, experimental film- and videomakers Harry Gamboa Jr. and Willie Varela have produced nearly 200 titles between them since the early 1970s. Rather, the list presents a provisional Chicano film and video heritage, one that remains outside the official histories of the American cinema. Below we present the selected titles in chronological order by category. If you have not heard of these titles, or if you do not know where to find them, be sure to ask yourself why. There is an answer.

Documentaries:

I Am Joaquin (1969) El Teatro Campesino
América Tropical (1971) Jesús Salvador Treviño
Requiem 29 (1971) David Garcia
Yo Soy Chicano (1972) Jesús Salvador Treviño
Cinco Vidas (1972) José Luis Ruiz
La Raza Unida (1972) Jesús Salvador Treviño
Si Se Puede (1973) Rick Tejada-Flores
Carnalitos (1973) Bobby Páramo
Cristal (1974) Severo Pérez
Garment Workers (1975) Susan Racho
The Unwanted (1975) José Luis Ruiz
La Onda Chicana (1976) Efraín Gutiérrez
Agueda Martinez: Our People, Our Country (1977) Esperanza Vasquez
Chicana (1979) Sylvia Morales
Ballad of an Unsung Hero (1983) Isaac Artenstein and Paul Espinoza
Rag Top Ralph (1984) Juan Garza.
The Lemon Grove Incident (1986) Paul Espinoza
Santeros (1986) Ray Tellez

When You Think of Mexico: Commerical Images of Mexico (1986)
Yolanda Lopez

No Porque lo Diga Fidel Castro (1988) Graciela Sanchez

La Ofrenda: The Days of the Dead (1988) Lourdes Portillo

Chicano Park (1988) Marilyn Mulford and Mario Barrera

Mi Otro Yo (1988) Philip & Amy Brookman

Mbamba (1989) Olivia Chumacero

Uneasy Neighbors (1989) Paul Espinosa

Una Lucha Por Mi Pueblo (1990) Federico Antonio Reade

Twenty Years . . . y que? (1990) Nancy de los Santos

The New Tijuana (1990) Paul Espinosa

Friday Night under the Stars (1990) Rick Leal

Los Mineros (1991) Hector Galan and Paul Espinosa

De Mujer a Mujer (1993) Beverley Sanchez-Padilla

Cholo Joto (1993) Augie Robles

¡Viva 16! (1994) Valentin Aguirre and Augie Robles

El Diablo Nunca Duerme/The Devil Never Sleeps (1994) Lourdes Portillo

Chicano! History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement (1996) Four-part documentary series. Executive producer: José Luis Ruiz. Series producer: Hector Galán. Segment producers: Robert Cozens, Hector Galán, Sylvia Morales, Mylene Moreno, and Susan Racho.

The Fight in the Fields: César Chávez and the Farmworkers Struggles (1996) Ray Telles and Rick Tejada-Flores

Fear and Learning at Hoover Elementary (1997) Laura Angélica Simón

Experimental:

My Trip in a '52 Ford (1966) Ernie Palomino

Mozo, or an Introduction into the Duality of Orbital Indecision (1968) Severo Pérez

Ghost Town (1974) Willie Varela

Becky's Eye (1975) Willie Varela

Cruel Profit (1975) Harry Gamboa Jr.

No Movies (misc., 1975–1978) Harry Gamboa Jr. and Asco

April 1977 (1977) Willie Varela

Entelequia (1978) Juan Salazar

Mi Hermano, Mi Hambre (1978) Gustavo Vazquez

Stan and Jane Brakhage (1980) Willie Varela

Night Vigil (1982) Betty Maldonado

Recuerdos de Flores Muertas (1982) Willie Varela

Imperfecto (1983) Harry Gamboa Jr.
Insultan (1983) Harry Gamboa Jr.
Vaporz (1984) Harry Gamboa Jr.
Baby Kake (1984) Harry Gamboa Jr.
Blanx (1984) Harry Gamboa Jr.
Agent Ex (1984) Harry Gamboa Jr.
Fearless Leader (1985) Willie Varela
In Progress (1985) Willie Varela
Juntos en la Vida, Unidos en la Muerte (1985) Willie Varela
No Supper (1987) Harry Gamboa Jr.
Border Crossing, Versions One and Two (1988) Willie Varela
Anima (1989) France Salomé España
Replies of the Night (1989) Sandra P. Hahn
Making Is Choosing: A Fragmented Life: A Broken Line: A Series of Observations (1989) Willie Varela
Reaffirmation (1990) Willie Varela
Cronica de un Ser (1990) S. M. Peña
The Idea We Live In (1990) Pilar Rodriguez
Mujeria: The Olmeca Rap (1991) Osa Hidalgo de la Riva
Border Brujo (1991) Isaac Artenstein
Slipping Between (1991) Sandra P. Hahn
L.A. Merge (1991) Harry Gamboa Jr.
El Espejo (1991) Frances Salomé España
A History of Violence (1991) Danny G. Acosta
A Lost Man (1992) Willie Varela
Columbus on Trial (1992) Lourdes Portillo
*Ramona: Birth of a Mis*ce*ge*NATION* (1992)
El Mundo L.A.: Humberto Sandoval, Actor (1992) Harry Gamboa Jr.
L.A. Familia (1993) Harry Gamboa Jr.
Thanksgiving Day (1993) Willie Varela
Loner with a Gun (1994) Harry Gamboa Jr.
Fire Ants for Nothing (1994) Harry Gamboa Jr.
Border Swings/Vaivenes Fronterizos (1994) Berta Jottar
Straight, No Chaser (1995) Eugene Rodriguez
In Saturn (1996) Willie Varela
Depression (1996) Laura Aguilar
Knife (1996) Laura Aguilar
The Body (1996) Laura Aguilar

Short or Video Narratives:

Los Vendidos (1972) Luis Valdez
El Corrido (1976) Luis Valdez

Guadalupe (1976) José Luis Ruiz
Despues del Terremoto/After the Earthquake (1979) Lourdes Portillo and Nina Serrano
Seguin (1981) Jesús Salvador Treviño
Esperanza (1985) Sylvia Morales
Tormenta (1985) Juan Garza
The Royal Family (1987) Juan Garza
Who Gets to Water the Grass? (1987) Luis Meza
Esperanza (1987) Graciela Sanchez
Ojos que no ven (1987) José Gutiérrez-Gómez and José Vergelín
Corridos! Tales of Passion and Revolution (1987) Luis Valdez
Face to Face with AIDS (1988) Socorro Valdez
Mi Casa (1989) Edgar Bravo
Vida (1989) Lourdes Portillo
Albert Pastor's First Video Project (1989) Juan Garza
Distant Water (1990) Carlos Avila
The Trouble with Tonia (1990) Juan Garza
Mi Hermano (1990) Edgar Bravo
Between Friends (1990) Severo Perez
Always Roses (1990) Luis Avalos and George Figueroa
I'll Be Home for Christmas (1990) Robert Diaz LeRoy
The Detour (1991) Joseph and Raul Tovares
La Pastorela: The Shepherds' Tale (1991) Luis Valdez
The Bike (1991) Gary Soto
Bedhead (1992) Robert Rodriguez
The Pool Party (1992) Gary Soto
Tanto Tiempo (1992) Cheryl Quintana Leader
How Else Am I Supposed to Know I'm Still Alive? (1993) Evelina Fernández and José Luis Valenzula
La Carpa (1993) Carlos Avila
The Ballad of Tina Juarez (1994) Juan A. Uribe
Cruel (1994) Desi Del Valle
Mi Pollo Loco (1995) Andrew Durham, Rico Martinez, and Victor Vargas
El Corrido de Cherry Creek (1995) Gwylym Cano
Pretty Vacant (1996) Jim Mendiola
Foto-Novelas (1997) Four-part dramatic series: "Seeing Through Walls," "In the Mirror," "Mangas," "The Fix." Executive Producer: Carlos Avila. Episode directors: Carlos Avila and A. P. Gonzalez
I.N.F.I.T.D. [I'll Not Fall into the Devil] (1997) Aldo Velasco

Feature Films:

- Please, Don't Bury Me Alive/Por Favor, ¡No me Entierren Vivo!* (1976) Efraín Gutiérrez
- Raíces de Sangre* (Mexico, 1977) Jesús Salvador Treviño
- Amor Chicano es Para Siempre/Chicano Love is Forever* (1978) Efraín Gutiérrez
- Only Once in a Lifetime* (1978) Alejandro Grattan and Moctesuma Esparza
- Run, Tecato/Junkie, Run* (1979) Efraín Gutiérrez
- Zoot Suit* (1981) Luis Valdez
- The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* (1982) Robert Young and Moctesuma Esparza
- El Norte* (1983) Gregory Nava
- Heartbreaker* (1984) Frank Zuniga
- La Bamba* (1987) Luis Valdez
- Born in East L.A.* (1987) Richard "Cheech" Marin
- Break of Dawn* (1988) Isaac Arstein
- Stand and Deliver* (1988) Ramon Menendez
- Kiss Me a Killer* (1991) Marcus de Leon
- American Me* (1992) Edward James Olmos
- El Mariachi* (1992) Robert Rodriguez
- River Bottom* (1992 and 1994) Robert Diaz LeRoy
- . . . and the Earth Did Not Swallow Him* (1994) Severo Pérez and Paul Espinosa
- A Million to Juan* (1994) Paul Rodriguez
- Mi Familia/My Family* (1995) Gregory Nava
- Painflower* (1995) Fred Garcia
- Follow Me Home* (1995) Peter Bratt
- The Big Squeeze* (1996) Marcus de Leon
- Staccato Purr of the Exhaust* (1996) Luis M. Meza
- Selena* (1997) Gregory Nava and Moctesuma Esparza

Notes

1. A case in point is the alternative list by the *LA Weekly* (July 3–9, 1998), which added all of two women filmmakers (Maya Deren and Amy Heckerling), only to receive a letter to the editor the next week complaining about such "PC" inclusion.

2. As we go to press, the Modern Library, a division of Random House, released its own list of the 100 greatest English-language novels. The list featured a scant handful of white women and black men, and no women of color or Latinos, among other exclusions. It also featured nearly sixty titles published by Random House. Despite the obvious marketing ploy, the list was treated as a cultural event in the mainstream press. For those of us trained in literature, however, the list comes across as a strange hybrid, one that mixes together half-forgotten books from high school and college freshmen courses with popular titles that can only evoke the response, “No, but I saw the movie.” Rather than release our own list, the Aztlán Publications Unit announces a national boycott of Random House. We focus our attention on two books from the list: James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (ranked number 1) and *Finnegans Wake*. If you support our cause, do not buy these books. We already suspect you haven’t read them, even those of you who voted on the list.