

## *Price of Glory*

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*PRICE OF GLORY* (2000). Prod. Moctesuma Esparza, Robert Katz, and Arthur Friedman; dir. Carlos Avila. New Line Cinema.

Since the genesis of modern boxing early in the twentieth century, Latinos have produced a long line of top-notch boxers. Today, Latinos have finally made a film about that experience. Produced by Moctezuma Esparza and starring Jimmy Smits, the recently released New Line Cinema film *Price of Glory* did not fare well at the box office. According to the Phoenix Chapter of the National Hispanic Media Coalition (NHMC), an organization established to bring greater awareness to the lack of positive Latina/o media representations, this was due to “poor marketing strategies and lack of ad dollars to bring people into the theaters.” During the film’s initial run in April, 2000, the NHMC pleaded with the Latina/o community to support a film made exclusively with them in mind. “It is **imperative** that each of you have your family, friends and neighbors get out to the theater this weekend to see the film,” the organization announced. “Unless the film has a significant increase of moviegoers this weekend it will be pulled from the theaters.” The NHMC continued: “This would be unfortunate as it will have a detrimental and long lasting affect [*sic*] on studios wanting to produce more Latino themed films. **Let’s go to the movies!**”<sup>1</sup> The film’s backers believed that the time was right to make a film about Latinos that would ultimately be supported by a Latino target audience. However, the film failed at the box office and was pulled after a short stint.

Although it is difficult to know exactly why *Price of Glory* did not succeed at the box office, the film now joins a fight film genre that has established itself as a self-sustaining

industry since the inception of motion pictures. American boxing has always been a perfect match for the silver screen. Boxing provides poignant dramas of human perseverance, suffering, and indeed, glory. Although Latinos have made their mark on the fight film genre this has never been by their own design—until now. I was excited to see *Price of Glory*, especially when I learned that Moctezuma Esparza—who had made other films favorable to Latinos (*Selena* [1998], *The Disappearance of Garcia Lorca* [1997], and *Milagro Beanfield War* [1988] for example)—had made this one.

Based on sports columnist Phil Berger's stage play, *The Ortegas*, and adapted for the screen by Berger and director Carlos Avila, the film unfolds in the fictional Arizona border town of Mariposa, for which Nogales stands in quite well. Jimmy Smits portrays Arturo Ortega, a former boxer whose mismanaged career in the 1970s robbed him of his shot at greatness but made him a determined "stone boxing patriarch" who becomes obsessed with seeing his three sons achieve in the ring what he could not. Ortega runs a small boxing gymnasium where he trains his boys—Jimmy (Clifton Collins Jr.), Sonny (Jon Seda), and Johnny (Ernesto Hernandez)—all of whom have entered boxing's professional ranks by the end of the 1980s. The boys turn pro at their father's behest despite the wishes of their mother Rita (Maria del Mar), who insists that a college education must remain an available alternative. The three sons possess varying levels of skill, which in part determine their levels of success, except in Johnny's case; his fate is to be accidentally murdered for refusing to follow the fight game's lure of quick fame and easy money. Thus, the loss of innocence and the corruption of idealism are the price of glory that ultimately comes in the form of personal triumph and filial pride when brother Sonny wins a world title in the film's final scene.

In some ways, *Price of Glory* makes new contributions to Hollywood's fascination with the gritty world of championship prizefighting. It does for Mexican Americans, and perhaps for Latinos more widely, what fight films have always done for previous ethnic groups. In fight films from the 1920s and 1930s, movie industry moguls celebrated and established rules for the integration of new southern and eastern European immigrants into the imagined nation. In post-World War II fight films, Anglo actors such as William Holden, Kirk Douglas, and Paul Newman offered the children and grandchildren of such immigrants a sense of national belonging in such films as *The Golden Boy* (1939), *Champion* (1949), and *Somebody Up There Likes Me* (1956). In the context of Reagan-era Cold War diplomacy, Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky* movies (1976-85) made the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of these immigrants the quintessential Americans charged with the defense of American nationalism in the international arena. *Price of Glory* may, in turn, exemplify Latinos representing themselves as the latest dominant force in American boxing, and hence an assimilated and fixed part of a patriotic society in the United States. In some ways, the film does portray Mexican Americans as moving up in American life beyond the prize ring. For example, the almost certain guarantee of Sonny's financial success via boxing allows him the opportunity to marry into what is clearly a middle-class, assimilated Mexican American family. We are left to assume that the family of Mariella (Danielle Camastra) represents a contemporary social trend of advancing social status for Mexican Americans.

Yet *Price of Glory* is no facile projection of Latino national integration. The new moral in the story is a lesson in financial acumen. Indeed, part of the plot is about getting—and

keeping—"the money," reflecting a contemporary social context in which real-life boxers like Oscar De La Hoya can earn \$80 million in a year. When he's not being a father, Arturo Ortega is constantly haggling over the contract negotiations with the conspicuous promoter, Nick Everson (Ron Perlman), who in the end comes off as an entrepreneur of an admirable sort. In boxing films, scenes involving underworld gamblers attempting to set up "tank jobs" have always provided tense moments and key moral dilemmas, but this was not the case in *Price of Glory*. In this film, the seemingly endless transactions were in the end only business as usual, offering only a few gripping moments when the huge amount of prize money, which always seemed to hang in the balance, was threatened. Thus, at the film's end we are left not only with the traditional vision of boxing as a seamy violent world, but also with the new knowledge that the sport offers Latinos the chance to become exorbitantly rich. Certainly, the myth of getting rich quick in boxing is nothing new. What is different here is the ability to become instantly rich in a single fight.

In other ways, the film could not seem to avoid repeating the older fight film emphasis on ethnic culture as central to the Mexican American boxing experience. *Price of Glory*, as in past cinematic treatments of Mexican American fighters, showcased a distinctive Mexican American culture. In this case, however, Mexican ethnicity is more an inspiration than a detriment. In earlier films—such as *Right Cross* (1950), starring Ricardo Montalbán, or the *The Ring* (1952), featuring the first Los Angeles "Golden Boy," Arturo Aragon—Mexican American boxers demonstrated superior boxing skills but always lacked business acumen, prudence, or cultural respectability. As cinema scholar Chon Noriega argues, these films treated Mexican American assimilation as a "social problem" to justify the "barrioization" of ethnic Mexicans in the national imagination.<sup>2</sup> The *Price of Glory*, on the other hand, attempts to overturn older stereotypes of Mexican American cultural deficiencies by depicting the ethnic Mexican family as a key to assimilation—and therefore like any other United States family with middle-class aspirations. However, the film's portrayals are overzealous in their effort to suggest that we Mexican Americans are just like other assimilated, white U.S. citizens. In doing so, the film erases much of the truth of Mexican American boxing culture that has made a distinct mark on the sport in its fanfare, expertise, and ritual attendance. Perhaps the filmmakers decided on a white villainous champion as part of their effort to overturn past depictions of white heroes fighting villainous Latinos and African Americans, but white champions are virtually nonexistent in the sport today, making this depiction far from an accurate illustration. Today, Latinos and African Americans dominate the boxing industry, and a plurality of fans in the United States is Mexican and Mexican American. The Mexican-oriented audience, however, was nowhere to be seen in *Price of Glory*. Nowhere in the film is there any depiction of the Spanish-language media's dominant presence in promoting the sport in the 1990s. Nowhere is there any mention of the astonishing value Mexican-descent boxers represent to the sport's promoters because of the tremendous demand by Mexicans and Chicanos. Nowhere is there any sense of the way boxing became totally oriented toward Latinos and Latinas during this period. Nowhere is there mention of the growing intensity of inter-ethnic boxing rivalries among Latinos, and other groups, that produce skyrocketing pay-per-view profits. Nowhere is there any sense that ethnic Mexicans have cultivated a "Mexican style" in the ring that is a popular discussion topic among aficionados. In emphasizing

Mexican American sameness with other Americans, the film erases an important difference—that Mexicans and Mexican Americans have a greater desire than others to box, not only because they can make quick money or become culturally mainstreamed, but because they represent a long community history of seeing the fight game as one of the *only* routes for social mobility.

As with other fight films, *Price of Glory* is also an implicit exploration of the way men think of themselves and manifest themselves in culture as men. Only *Raging Bull* (1980) has explicitly sought to link the private lives of men in families with their public lives in the world of prizefighting through an examination of the perils of boxing masculinity. Nonetheless, *Price of Glory* provides a hidden meditation on manhood and a unique opportunity for examining a particular configuration of masculinity in dramatic form. Indeed, the film's production itself might well be an effect of the workings of the same kind of unconscious masculinity that drives men to become boxers, or, as Freud might have it, the same unconscious motivations that drive men to become fathers. Whereas *Raging Bull* was a conscious exploration of the dark implications of boxing manhood for family life, *Price of Glory* perhaps unconsciously makes Latino boxers into family heroes. In the film, Ortega and his sons confront a number of dilemmas that reference older stereotypes of Latino heroin use, etiquette, alcoholism, and street violence. Still, in spite of severe Oedipal confrontations involving brother against brother, and brothers against father, by the film's end, Ortega—the “stone cold boxing patriarch”—successfully redeems his leadership of the family. Thus, we are left with a film that sees boxing as a trope for Latino family unification through patriarchy, instead of a film that might have presented Chicanos as achieving quintessential Americanism in the prize ring or as celebrating the triumph of Mexican culture in an Anglo-American sporting tradition. Either of the latter scenarios would have been a more accurate depiction of Latino boxing today.

*Price of Glory*, of course, is not the first Chicano boxing film to focus on family. Maria Conchita Alonzo starred in *Knockout* (2000), in which she portrayed a female prizefighting champion who fought for the honor of her family, especially that of her father (portrayed by Tony Plana). Currently, the cable network Showtime is featuring a series entitled *Resurrection Boulevard* about a Chicano boxing family whose main protagonist is the domineering father, portrayed again by Tony Plana. In all of these stories of victory in the ring, the end result is never the acknowledgment of Chicanos as fully-vested American citizens, but instead a recognition of the durability of the Chicano patriarchal family. A new release is *Girlfight* (2000), which one suspects will repeat the portrayal of Latina boxers as posing minimal threats to patriarchy by resolving conflict with an abiding submission to male authority. Setting the fight film genre aside momentarily, what is even more striking is the overwhelming number of recent films—including *Selena* (1997), *Lone Star* (1996), *Fools Rush In* (1996), *My Family/Mi Familia* (1995), and *Star Maps* (1997)—that focus *primarily* on the family as a unit of ethnic strength, if not as a means of full assimilation into American cultural authority. If fight films with Chicana/o protagonists replace the older formula of depicting fighters as earning their place in the imagined national community, might the new emphasis on boxing as a form of strengthening the family be part of a stereotypical discourse? Or, more importantly, how might reading these films help sport and Chicano historians improve their historical methods?

The relationship between stereotypes and “reality” is not a marginal debate, but rather one that cuts to the heart of historical research, writing, and understanding; it includes issues of material reality and ideology, as well as representation, subjective identity, and actual experiences. Traditionally, historians have focused on describing or finding causes for political events that visibly mark historical change, as well as for economic policies and institutions that have materially affected people’s lives. All too often, in the historian’s story, there is little room for culture, imagery, ideology, rhetoric, or identity—the stuff of social history. In fact, many argue that social and cultural historical categories merely reflect processes of material historical change. Thus, change is rooted in some material and political tangible, something underlying the outward manifestations of historical reality. Nonetheless, today more and more historians are beginning to see the limitations of viewing stereotypes as somehow separate from historical reality, as merely falsehoods to be corrected. In looking at the stereotype of the Latino family we should not be so concerned with the content of the stereotype. Nor should we view the images as an expression or reflection of unequal relationships. Films like *Price of Glory* give us the opportunity to understand how stereotypes are continually created and recreated. They demonstrate that stereotypes are part of our historical reality, part of the productive power relations between groups, and, most importantly, part of the historical processes whereby access to resources, capacity for self definition and definition of others, and control over wealth and power are decided.

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1. “Price of Glory Needs Your Help!!: A Message from the National Hispanic Media Coalition Phoenix Chapter,” press release, 10 Apr. 2000.
  2. Chon Noriega, ed. *Chicanos and Film: Representation and Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).