

MY FAMILY

TECHNICAL FILE

O.T. My Family

USA (1995)

Director: Gregory Nava

Mexican music: Pepe Avila

Editing: Nancy Richardson

Photography: Edward Lachman

Script: Gregory Nava and Anna Thomas

130 minutes

ARTISTIC FILE

Paco: Edward James Olmos

El Californio: Leon Singer

Chucho: Esai Morales

Toni: Constance Marie

Jimmy (young): Jonathan Hernández

Jimmy (adult): Jimmy Smits

Maria (young): Jennifer López

Maria (adult): Jenny Gago

Irene (young): María Canals

Irene (adult): Lupe Ontiveros

Gloria: Mary Steenburgen

Isabel Magaña: Elpidia Carrillo

José: Eduardo López Rojas

SYNOPSIS: In 1926 the Mexican José Sánchez emigrates to Los Angeles in search of a better future. On arrival he stays with a distant cousin known as El Californio. José finds a job as a gardener and he daily crosses the bridge that joins the marginal outskirts with the rich residential suburbs. In this wealthy part of town he meets María and creates a family that is capable of resisting poverty, racism and xenophobia and come out of the most varied conflicts, changes in mentality and ways of life brought upon by the simple passing of time.

THE DIRECTOR: This Northamerican from San Diego (1949) comes from a Mexican family of Basque origin and is, doubtless, one of the major representatives of chicano cinema. His film , *Las Confesiones de Aman*(1973) won the best film award in The Chicago Festival. With *El Norte* (1984), the dramatic migration of two Guatemalan brothers in the USA he was nominated to the Oscar award for best script.

“I WALK ALONE, NOBODY KNOWS ABOUT ME”

The magic of films is brought by its polysemic character. There are probably as many points of view as viewers and only a ticket is needed to plunge into a world which cannot be seen only with the eyes. And by that we refer specifically to the worlds of stereotypes and prejudices which display maps of meaning independent of reality in itself. We are talking about what makes the transcendence of a film beyond its story and the technical skills of its makers.

If there are as many points of view as viewers, it seems necessary to clarify ours and how we incorporate it to what we see on screen and what lies behind it. Three years after the fall of the Berlin wall, the Tijuana wall started to be built: fourteen fortified miles to separate Alta California (USA) and Baja California (Mexico). The new iron wall is part of the operation “Gatekeeper” promoted by Clinton in order to reduce the “aliens”, as the immigrants are called in a 90%: night-vision helicopters, modern technology equipment, more police, more money...which cannot prevent, nevertheless, some crossing this wall to become, as in La Vargas song, a citizen without a face, a name, a story.

In this context of xenophobic fear of invasion is how *My family* ought to be seen. A chicano film which seems to be constructed in order to stop the “aliens” from walking alone and let everybody know about them. Merit should be given to the courage of releasing into the market a work against the majority audiences, who, in the end decide the products of the film industry. A daring decision that has won Gregory Nava the consideration of independent cinema creator.

Really, *My family* cannot be understood without the light of the existing antimigratory policies of the last republican administrations. From Reagan to now, the spark of “hispanophobia” has been lit and the results can be seen in the form of threats, humiliations, beatings, school and hospital discriminations, police abuse, etc. The “fucking spics, back to Tijuana” appears painted here and there, not only in California, but also in other states with strong migration: Arizona, Texas, Illinois and New York.

To the courage of having made a chicano discourse in times of crisis, we must add that *My Family* is a tender and moving film. A story full of stories which begins in 1926 and finishes in our times. A homage to the Mexican people settled in the south of the USA, a land which for many of the main characters has not ceased to be Mexico. A homage also to the Latin population faced to the conservative reaction of the “English only”, the most reactionary ideology of the “anglo conformity”. And, finally, a

homage to an old human response: the freedom to emigrate and start anew in another land without having to renounce one's identity and beliefs. This same idea is dealt with remarkably by Gregory Nava in *El Norte* (1984).

My Family deals with the story of a family that emigrates from Michoacan (Mexico) and settles in Los Angeles*. It highlights the courage of a family in which, despite the permanent conflict between tradition and change, the individuals find a place to be, affection and refuge in a society which allows them to make their living but from which they also receive indifference if not contempt and aggression.

Based on an original story by the director Gregory Nava, it is at the same time a reconstruction of the best Latinamerican literature modelled by García Márquez, Miguel Angel Asturias or Juan Rulfo, since the film can be described as a sample of magical realism.

It is narrated by a member of the Sánchez family (Paco) incarnated by Edward James Olmos, a remarkable figure of chicano cinema. The film follows the circumstances of the couple José and María and their 6 children: Paco, Chuco, Toni, Jimmy, Irene and Gloria. The story is presented in three stages. First, José's migration from Michoacán and his marriage to María, an immigrant working as a servant for a wealthy family. This stage concludes with the wife's deportation while she was pregnant with her third child in the times of the Great Depression and the first antimigratory policies. The second stage moves around the 50's and the different bounds taken by their children. The 80's are dealt with in the third part of the story, showing us an elderly couple who witness the dispersion of the children in charge of their own destinies now.

A story of stories, circling around the family house, the milpa, a father and a mother fully devoted to their roles who link present and past, happiness and misfortune. At the end of his days, the father can exclaim, satisfied: "We have had a good life" even though the viewer knows how the good life has its own costs, leaving behind a dead son, prison and tears. On this beautiful story, told with affection and expertise, lots of information is piled up to serve as educational material.

To start with, the language: in the 130 minutes of the film we feel the constant reference to the popular Mexican language with words such as *pendejo*, *pinche*, *chavo*, *chingada*,... which beyond their colourfulness refer to the identity signs that are still kept despite the processes of aculturation, represented in one of the brothers who is able to mingle with the angloamerican culture but at the cost of rejecting and despising his own past, the world of his parents and siblings.

Secondly, the film presents the passing of time through the change in music tastes and the evolution of politics. This change of time is masterfully signalled with readjustments of the narrative style, specifically with the

use of the camera: from the beginnings that remind us of silent movies, a still camera in the wedding scenes, to a constant camera movement in the narration of the 80's.

That music is an essential component of a people's culture is a well-known fact. That it is also a sign of pride and identity is made clear by the irruption of the salsa, which gives consistency to the pride of acknowledging one's difference. By the way, the wonderful scene in which Isabel conquers Jimmy, has nothing to envy, in our opinion, the famous dance by Travolta in Tarantino's film.

Last of all, the political events which permeate the film- The Mexican – American war, the Great Depression,..- shift from the background to occupy an important part in the last part of the story. Irene's caring action or Isabel's life, a refugee from El Salvador, explain new migrations, new rejections, new illegalties built on the borders which were before just " a line on the land".

Credit should also be given to Jennifer López in the role of María Sánchez. She was discovered in this film by Francis Ford Coppola – himself coming from the worlds of immigration- and has become an outstanding hispanic actress: she is Robin William's teacher in *Jack*; Bob Rafelson places her in the love triangle of *Blood and Wine* with Jack Nicholson, Terri Flores calls her for *Anaconda*; Oliver Stoen gives her the main character in *U-Turn* and she Works with George Clooney in *Out of Sight*. With the nickname of "la bien pagá" she has incarnated the singer Selena and for *The Cell* she has earned the considerable figure of 10 million dollars, becoming a leading star in the group of Hispanics blooming in Hollywood.

MY FAMILY

(a didactic proposal)

The film is open to various approaches but, from our point of view, these seem relevant for a school work using films as a didactical tool.

- The story of a life: that of a Mexican family in the south of the USA.
- A set of events that are historical facts.
- A cultural conflict between two ways of life: the Mexican family and the Angloamerican family.
- An analysis on the changes in musical tastes.

The work centers around historical events and cultural conflict.

1.- THE HISTORICAL APPROACH METHODOLOGY

- The film can be viewed in the school or be proposed as material to view at home.
- The task will be carried out in teams of 4/5 students who will subsequently present the results of their investigation to the teacher.
- Internet will be the main working tool to access the information.

Lead -in tasks proposed in order to understand the story

Two tasks will be assigned to the students:

Team 1.- Sánchez stays with El Californio after leaving his village. The house is situated in the outskirts of Los Angeles (USA), in a territory which he maintains was Mexican. When and how did it stop being Mexico? This is the question the students must answer.

In Wikipedia we can find this text that allows a Web search to answer this question.

“The American intervention in Mexico was a war conflict between Mexico and the USA between 1846 and 1848; it was also called the “Mexican-American War”, the “Mexican War” in the USA and “The American Intervention” in Mexico. This armed conflict started because of the expansionist pretensions of the relatively young American nation, whose first step was the creation of the Republic of Texas – which the Mexican government considered a rebel territory that could be reconquered- over part of the territory of Coahuilla, Tamaulipas, Chihuahua and New Mexico; this fact, in addition to the demand of a compensation to the Mexican government for the damage caused in Texas during the War of Independence of this former coahuilan territory and the American claim on the territories of Alta California and New Mexico, were the motives which caused the invasión of the territory of the Mexican Republic by the army of the USA.”

The investigation will consist in establishing the conflict, note some facts about it and determine the subsequent peace treaty and its consequences.

Team 2.- Jennifer López gives life to the character of María, Sánchez’s young wife. In the 30’s, during the Great Depression, she is arrested by the policía and expelled from the country.

The topic of the investigation is the change in the migratory policy during the Great Depression. This team’s work has before them two tasks:

- Explain the migratory policy of the USA up to this period. In order to do so, they consult this Internet address.

- <http://www.equintanilla.com>
- Published material
- A journey to hope
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- The Great Depression can be investigated in the Encarta Encyclopedia: <http://es.encarta.msn.com/>

The film shows the consequences that political policies , such as the expelling of the immigrants, have for the people. The idea is to consider the consequences of María's expulsión for her family and generalize this fact to extract moral lessons that allow us to judge other expulsions.

2.- THE CULTURAL CONFLICT

Some preliminary considerations

The film shows a model of integration of the Mexican family into the host society which is closely related to the social division taking place in societies. The Sánchez family belong to the so-called lower classes that provide manual work to the wealthy classes. They live on the outskirts. They share a life of mutual support that is not typical of Angloamerican families whose children leave the family home as soon as they finish their education and become adults.

One of the children of the family is successful in his studies. He dresses like the higher classes and has an angloamerican girlfriend. The film shows a scene in which the girlfriend and her parents visit the Sánchez's home. The meeting is both an encounter between two social classes and two cultural communities. Nothing will prevent that the couple start a new family but that family will no doubt resemble one model more than the other.

We talk about cultural assimilation when the people abandon their cultural heritage, their traditional identity and assume those of the host society. Time slowly softens the differences and the powerful mass media or school institutions favor cultural models that end up taking over, regardless of the origins of the people.

But, at some point, cultural assimilation might prove troublesome for the people involved, generating a conflict. Adopting one culture or the other is a decision to be taken by each individual. Nobody has the right to limit individual identities; the decisión on how to live, what to keep and what to modify from the family's cultural heritage is individual.

However, this right is not always considered and, let alone, respected. Some cultures press their members not to step out of the rules set by tradition, religious or not. This pressure is particularly strong in those cultures with an intense community life in which the individual constantly refers to the group. The case may be acute in those groups used to exerting violence over the young generations, especially if they are women. This conflict is frequently dealt with in films such as *East is East* (Damian O'Donell, 1999) or *Just a Kiss* (Ken Loach, 2004).

A very interesting aspect is to analyze the director's point of view, himself belonging to the group of Latin directors. To take sides with one group parodying the other.

METHODOLOGY

- View the third story or, more specifically, the scene of the family reunion
- Reflect upon the existing cultural and/or social difference
- Reflect on how the assimilated brother lives the situation
- Analyse the director's position, who is he in favour of?

Follow-up activities

The students must do the following exercise.

In teams of 4 or 5 people, they will make up a script, a story, a comic....., recreating the situation but modifying the context of the action and the characters.

- Context: the family of a member of the team
- Characters: a girl or boy from the group and a girl or boy belonging to the gypsy, North African or African minority.
- Introduce aspects of social and cultural differentiation.

In any case, the script may adopt a partial point of view, such as the one adopted by the director of *My Family*.

The best script will be played out in the classroom.

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR THE TEACHER

The teacher should focus on the analysis and the most frequent stereotypes that come up in this kind of situations: a) considerations about minority groups; b) group pressure on the members that live with or decide to live with members of minority groups; c) pejorative considerations of other cultures.....

The teacher will place the centre of attention on the freedom of the individuals to decide on their own lives. It should also be highlighted that “mix” is an accepted life option over which no prejudice should exist.