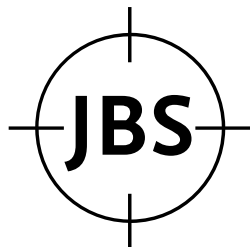


Contextualising 1980s Hispanic Stereotypes

Gender and Criminality in *Licence to Kill*

MARCELLA LINS

Cinema was the first and most important form of industrial art and entertainment that dominated American cultural life in the twentieth century. As a result of the various social changes that took place in the country amid the emergence of the Civil Rights movements in the 1960s, the Modern Cinema Era experienced a series of changes within American industry, among them the revision and liberalisation of the censorship categories established by the Hays Motion Picture Production Code (Nowell-Smith 1996, 464). The Code was a set of moral standards applied to films produced within the United States and was in force between 1934 and 1968. After 1968, it was replaced by the indicative classification system. Under the Code, the inclusion of erotic and violent content was suppressed, but by the early 1970s studios had greater freedom to produce violent content. This more permissive atmosphere increased commercial film profits (Williams 1996, 496). Throughout the 1980s, a recurring theme in American films was the ending of the Cold War and the redefinition of American identity in so-called “high-concept” films. A dark and violent sensibility was increasingly evident in productions, along with increases in multicultural representations (Sartelle 1996, 518-519). As a result, greater emphasis was given to changes in cultural representations, especially of ethnic-racial minorities, such as the representation of Hispanics.



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Mexican immigration to the United States was responsible for defining and shaping what is known as the “Hispanic community” in the country. The term “Hispanic” is used here instead of “Latino” or “Latinx” to refer to individuals born in Latin American countries or American descendants of nationals of Latin American countries. The term was chosen because it is preferred by individuals who fall into this group (“The Use of ‘LatinX’ among Hispanic Voters” 2021). The American film industry, over the years, has contributed to the perpetuation in American society of stereotypes that all Hispanics are Mexicans or that the words “Hispanic” and “Mexican” are synonymous. Emily M. Pressler points out the existence of an “obsession with Mexico” (2019, 70) in American films, as they mostly present Mexican scenarios, Mexican or Mexican-American characters, and explore Mexican culture when dealing with themes or narratives related to Latin America. American films of the 1980s, in particular, focused on Hispanic representations largely as a result of the intensification of migratory flow from Mexico into the United States and the social visibility of Mexican-Americans living there.

The construction of fictional characters begins with conventionalised ideas anchored in everyday cultural consciousness. Thus, fiction is intrinsically related to reality (Schweinitz 2011, 43). Certain fictional characters are then defined as “type” characters and are characterised by certain clear and stable particular traits. These “types” become stereotypes from the moment they are conventionalised through repetition (ibid., 47). In this sense, films from the 1980s rely excessively on the use of typification as a process of historical simplification. In view of this reasoning, this article begins from the premise that when the film industry uses stereotypes for the construction of Hispanic characters and narratives, it follows the images of the Mexican and Mexican-American population established within American society; and, by doing so, sets an effective form of image-based communication with its audience. Taking the 1980s as part of a larger research environment, I will analyse the characters of Hispanic descent in the James Bond film *Licence to Kill* (1989), arguing that the film follows Hollywood trends and American concerns of the period. The first two sections of this article aim at a historical contextualisation of American cinema and the establishment of the Mexican and Mexican-American community in the United States. Following this, a structural analysis of *Licence to Kill* and its characters of Hispanic descent is carried out – along the lines of the research developed by Peña Acuña (2010) – in which the Hispanic stereotypes presented in the film are listed and contextualised within the concrete reality of American multicultural society. Finally, the analysis of the film allows us to elucidate and exemplify not only the

Hispanic stereotypes disseminated in American media during the 1980s and their relationship with the societal images of the Mexican and Mexican-American population, but also to present *Licence to Kill* as an example of the substantial American influence in the James Bond franchise.

HISPANIC STEREOTYPES IN FILM

Stereotypes are a generalised conception based on predetermined actions and behaviours attributed to individuals belonging to a category – race, ethnicity, gender, among others – and are used to differentiate groups from one another (O’Sullivan 1994). Characterised by simplification, generalisation, and standardisation, these categories introduce a relative sense of stability and consistency to the real world by creating conventions necessary for the establishment of social and communicative relationships between the members of a society (Schweinitz, 28-35). As part of society, cinema relies on conventions, creating a familiar repertoire of tried and repeated forms in order to effectively communicate with its audience, whether in the construction of characters, narrative plots, or in the *misé en scene*, *misé en image*, or sound design (ibid., 98). The visual language of film is constructed through signs and the process of meaning of these signs depends on the context in which they were issued and on the expectations of the receivers (Joly 2007, 36). Producers create images, or representations, that make it possible to build an analogy between what is being displayed and the real world. The audience, then, manages to produce meaning and different interpretations of the images. Since every image is a representation, such images depend on a minimum of shared sociocultural convention between the producers of the message and the audience in order to enable these interpretations (ibid., 44). Through the use of stereotypes, the media reflects knowledge of the world and the ideas, attitudes, and expectations of the individuals to whom those images are addressed. Observing and aligning the expectations, desires, and demands of a possible target audience to the film’s content allows for a greater prospect of reception and financial return in any given market. Indeed, the audience tends to change over time, and the stereotypes tend to also undergo these changes. Thus, stereotypes refer to situational contexts that are related to the moment in which they were developed.

The images of Hispanics in film are, therefore, determined by the political, economic, and historical contexts that surround the production of the works (Rodríguez 1997, 1). In general, Hispanics are identified in media by their slightly tanned skin, dark hair and eyes, use of Spanish words, accented English, and spe-

cific occupation and place of residence (ibid., 1). Bearing this general pattern in mind, and based on the works of Charles Berg (1990; 2002) and Emily Pressler, it is possible to list six different base stereotypes related to the Hispanic population, which are found in American cinema: the Criminal; the Harlot; the Sex Symbol; the Clown; the Servant; and the Immigrant. These “type” characters can be combined with each other or undergo superficial alterations according to a specific film’s genre, the time in which it was produced, and the apparent intentions of the director or producer.

One of the first images of the “Mexican” created by the ruling Anglo society was that of the *greaser*: a loose, irresponsible individual, with criminal tendencies who finds it impossible to assimilate within the dominant culture. Although there is no consensus as to the origin of this pejorative term, one of the most accepted explanations is that it derives from the fallacious idea that Mexicans were dirty and dishevelled, with greasy and unwashed black hair (Bender 2003, xiii). Faced with this hostile environment and the injustices perpetrated by the Anglo population, banditry emerged as a strategy of resistance.

The connection between Hispanics and film violence began in the early years of the industry with the *bandidos*. The *bandido* is usually represented as treacherous, cunning, and dishonest, displaying emotional, irrational, and violent reactions. In addition, he has limited intelligence and is dirty and dishevelled, with missing teeth, messy and greasy hair, and a scarred and unshaven face (Berg 1990, 194). The *bandidos* main actions on screen often included robberies, murder, and livestock theft (Boessenecker 1998, 420). In this period of the western *bandidos*, the essential characteristics of the criminal stereotype were established. Later, the image of the rural bandit was then replaced by the urban gangster, or the *pachuco*. Also known as “zoot-suiters”, the *pachucos* emerged in the 1940s as a symbol of revolt against the dominant Anglo society, which denied them employment and education opportunities and treated them as urban gangsters and intruders. The *cholo*, in turn, as defined by Richard Mora, is a one-dimensional character prone to violence, while being hyperaggressive and depraved (2011, 129-130). Such films as *Boulevard Nights* (1979) and *Zoot Suit* (1981) laid down the template by which Hispanic gangs were represented in Hollywood and beyond. During the 1980s, there was a rapid growth of the Hispanic population in the United States as a result of changes in immigration laws and facilitated by the economic crisis that devastated Mexico in 1982. Within popular American discourse, and as a result of increased representation of the above stereotypical characters, the 1980s was labelled the “Decade of the Hispanics” in

reflection of this particular groups' influence on the political, economic, and cultural life of American society (Foley 2014, 179).

HISPANIC REPRESENTATIONS IN *LICENCE TO KILL*

Released in 1989, *Licence to Kill* presents many of the characteristic elements of cinema in the period, whilst also subverting some of these conventions. Considered one of the weaker Bond films in terms of content and profit (Smith and Lavington 2002, 232), it combines violent scenes with tougher-edged action akin to its near-contemporary, the blockbuster *Die Hard* (1988). Its numerous scenes of strong graphic violence earned *Licence to Kill* a "15" rating in the Britain and a "PG-13" rating in the United States, a first for the franchise at this point. The film's plot is reminiscent of a drug film and features James Bond on an individual and solitary mission, outside the scope of MI6, and purely motivated by an act of personal revenge. After being captured by James Bond and former CIA/current DEA agent Felix Leiter, drug lord Franz Sanchez escapes, attacks Leiter, and has Leiter's wife Della murdered. Seeking revenge for what has happened to his friends, Bond resigns from the British Secret Service and travels on his own to the Republic of Isthmus, where Sanchez cartel's base is located. Unlike previous films in which Bond puts himself at the service of the British government to save the world from megalomaniacal technocrats with plans for world domination (Woodward 2004, 173-176), Bond's only interest in *Licence to Kill* is to avenge Della's death and the attack on Felix, and so he is not focused on Sanchez's criminal operations *per se* (Smith and Lavington, 225).

Until *Licence to Kill*, most of the James Bond films were set against the backdrop of the Cold War, and often united the British Secret Service with the Soviets or Americans in a common cause, as is the case in *The Spy who Loved Me* (1977) for instance; or, in order to help ensure Britain's position as protector of the global *polis*, as in *You Only Live Twice* (1967). Following the fall of the Soviet Bloc in the late 1980s, *Licence to Kill* can be said to adhere to the new-world global geopolitical order, as the film substitutes the Cold War for the political context of the US's renewed interest in Latin America (Behlil et al. 2020, 95-96). Indeed, much of the success of the Bond franchise is said to be contingent upon precisely this kind of "malleability" in political focus. In the words of Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott,

[T]here is more than one James Bond in the sense that, as a 'sign of the times', the figure of Bond has not always stood for the same values or repre-

sented a constant position in relation to the ideological concerns we have enumerated. Indeed, it has been the very malleability of Bond in this respect, his ability to be changed and adapted with the times, that has constituted the basis of his continuing – but, at the same time, always modified – popularity. (1987, 19-20)

It is important, then, to highlight some initial examples of the ways in which Latin America is framed in *Licence to Kill*. The fictional Republic of Isthmus is a clear reference to the Central American country of Panama, and the film's plot bears similarities to the history of former Panamanian leader General Manuel Noriega. In 1983, Noriega seized power through a *coup d'état* and – much like Sanchez – his government was involved in extensive drug trafficking and money laundering schemes, which eventually led to his capture by United States forces in 1989. In addition to its themes of corruption, the film presents Isthmus as a “Banana Republic” – a *sine qua non* concern within US foreign policy – under the dictatorship of President Héctor López, who is really Sanchez's puppet. Drew Moniot argues that Bond films often present the political and military defence of democracy and freedom as key elements, and frequently in the context of the United States (1976, 27). *Moonraker* (1979), for example, addresses such themes as political *détente*, with Bond shown fighting alongside the CIA to sustain American control in the West during the Cold War. Moreover, James Chapman has argued that the choice to frame *Licence to Kill* as a realistic story about drug trafficking, and the inclusion of scenes of graphic violence, was an explicit attempt to appeal to the mainstream violence of American audiences (2000, 230).

Most problematic, perhaps, in terms of the film's representative politics, is its presentation of Bond's central antagonist. Sanchez is a drug trafficker wanted by the DEA and head of an “invisible empire” that stretches from Chile to Alaska. He is paranoid, emotional, and obsessed with loyalty, putting himself and his operations at risk when he suspects betrayal by his allies. His only motivation is to expand his market and increase his own earnings. Sanchez talks to his henchmen in Spanish and he has a strong Hispanic accent, using Spanish words in his otherwise-English sentences. Regarding his appearance, he has brown eyes, greasy hair, and a scarred face. He wears pastel-coloured shirts and suits, with an emphasis on pink, blue, and white/beige, referring to the aesthetic standard established by *Miami Vice* (1984-1990). His exoticism is translated into the paradisiacal mansion in which he resides and the iguana that he carries on his shoulder as a pet. Actor Robert Davi has stated that in order to prepare to play Sanchez he studied Colombian *narcos* (or drug traffickers), including their “subculture” and

mannerisms (“Behind *Licence To Kill*: Robert Davi Interview” 2022). However, Sanchez is very much in-keeping with the presentation of the *bandido*: that is, with the Mexican rather than the Columbian image of the Latin American drug lord; a slippage which, once again, suggests a questionable conflation of Latin American criminality. Sanchez is framed as an unscrupulous person who uses cruel and violent tactics even against his allies; for example, he locks his business partner Milton Krest in a pressurisation chamber until the latter’s head explodes, and he shoots his accountant, Truman-Lodge, in cold blood.

Sanchez is not the only representation of the “criminal” stereotype in the movie, however. Dario (Benicio del Toro), who is Sanchez’s main henchman, personifies the image of the *cholo*, the modern day variation of the *bandido*. The character does not have an identity of his own and depends on Sanchez’s orders and approval. With his baggy clothes, tank top, gelled hair, and fearless posture, Dario reproduces the *cholo* aesthetic defined by Richard Mora (129) which featured in other films of the time such as *Repo Man* (1984) and *Stand and Deliver* (1988). Interestingly, even though *Stand and Deliver* (1988) is not a film that properly addresses the themes of crime and drug trafficking as *Licence to Kill* does, it does include the representation of the *cholo* in the figure of one of the main teen characters, Angel, highlighting the relevance of such a character-type within industry films of this period. Dario expresses the one-dimensionality of the *cholo* by carrying out all of Sanchez’s “dirty work”, murdering whoever his boss orders him to without showing any sort of remorse. The cruel insinuation that he has sexually assaulted Della before killing her further underlines Dario’s perversity and hyper-aggressiveness.

So far, I have touched on representations of hyper-masculine Hispanic characters; now I will turn to the presentation in *Licence to Kill* of the Hispanic female lead: Lupe Lamora (Talisa Soto). During the 1820s, women of Indigenous, Spanish and, later, Mexican descent living in the Southwest of the United States were seen as morally relaxed and sexually permissive; the “object” of white male lust (Foley, 25-26). This characterisation gave rise to the representation of Hispanic women as mostly one-dimensional figures, subordinate to men and sexually passive – such as those characters personified by Dolores del Río in the films of the 1930s and 1940s. Whether as gang members, or as part of the inner circle of gang members, or acting as the moral conscience of the main characters, female Hispanics have achieved prominent roles in this niche (Cortés 1997, 136), following the visibility given to *cholos* and drug traffickers in the media at the time. Franz Sanchez’s miserable girlfriend Lupe is an attractive and sensual woman with her

brown eyes and hair. Her beauty, which can be considered exotic, is highlighted by makeup and jewellery. She wears provocative dresses and speaks English with a typically Hispanic accent, mixing Spanish words into her sentences. In terms of personality, Lupe presents essential elements of the “sex symbol” stereotype. In her first scene, she is found by Sanchez while half-naked in a bed with an unknown man. Sanchez then murders Lupe’s lover and punishes her, whipping her for her betrayal. Sanchez’s comment about her escapades becoming more creative tells the audience that we are not meant to assume that this is Lupe’s first time cheating on him, which, once again, evidences her sexuality and sexual appetite. When she meets Bond aboard Milton’s Krest’s boat, in a scene in which she is half-naked in bed, her reaction is one of indifference. As time passes, though, she comes to trust Bond and to help him with his plan to kill Sanchez, so that she, too, can be freed. In line with one of the Bond franchise’s main *clichés*, Bond has a brief love affair with Lupe, symbolically castrating Sanchez and proving his impotence by coveting his girlfriend (Woodward 181). Lupe is, according to Kimberly Neuendorf et al., the typically “striking woman with an adventurous nature, cunning attributes, [and the] strong potential for romantic entanglement with Bond” (2010, 747). Finally, the stereotype of the capricious Hispanic female is reinforced at the film’s closing: when Sanchez is killed by Bond, it is strongly implied that Lupe immediately strikes up a relationship with another man

CONCLUSION

Of the 25 official Bond films, only 13 of them show Bond in Latin America – with only 4 of these set in the Latin American continent and not in the Caribbean. Antti Korpisaari and Outi Hakola have suggested that this is because Bond does not have the support of MI6 in his missions on the continent, and that Britain is unable to act with impunity in this region as it is under United States jurisdiction (2021, 15). In *License to Kill* there are a number of similarities made between the fictional region of Isthmus and the real-world geopolitical territory of Panama; however, the fictional flag of the Republic of Isthmus more closely resembles that of Guatemala. Additionally, the specific nationalities of the Hispanic characters within the film are never mentioned. This ethnic ambiguity may well be on account of the need for marketability across all territories and to avoid boycotts by specific countries of whose national image may be maligned through explicit identification in the film. This has been an existing concern since the development of the Good Neighbour Policy introduced in 1941 with the aim of strengthening economic and cultural ties between the United States and Latin America, especially Mexico, in the face of the threat of Naziism (Foley, 72). Acting in part-

nership with the Hayes Motion Picture Code, the main objective of the Motion Picture Division of the Good Neighbour Policy was to monitor the representation of Latin Americans in films, replacing negative stereotypes with more favourable images (Adams 2007, 290). Thus in *Commando* (1985), for example, the fictional country of Valverde was created which shared many of the characteristics of *Licence to Kill*'s Republic of Isthmus, such as the institution of a military regime with a "president for life". Although this ethnic and national ambiguity exists in these films, the relationship between dominant American society and Hispanic and Hispanic-American populations, cultures, communities, and concerns large define the representation of Hispanics in the cinema of this period. *Licence to Kill*'s negative reception at the time, compared to other Bond films, forced the franchise to reevaluate its distribution strategies based on the new standards established within the film industry. Most importantly, *Licence to Kill* is an example of American influence on the Bond franchise; as a film with Latin American characters, settings and concerns, the film capitalises (however problematically) on the "Decade of the Hispanics" while also managing to follow Hollywoods trends and American concerns of the 1980s.

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