

Women Belittled in La Bamba

I have a little experience with producing media for the public through my experience as editor in my high school yearbook class so I know how much conviction there can be behind a somewhat insignificant detail. That is why I cannot negate my reaction to seeing La Bamba as a film that is not pro-feminism or equal women's rights. It is a stereotype that Latino men are macho, or overly prideful in their masculinity, and see women beneath them. I don't think the film helped defy this stereotype contributing to making a fool out of three main women we see on screen: Danielle von Zerneck as Donna, Elizabeth Pena as Rosie, and Rosanna DeSoto as the mother, Connie Valenzuela.

With the one of the actresses we see first, Rosie played by Elizabeth Pena, we have one of the first scenes in the movie where she is backstabbing the main character, Ritchie Valens, by sleeping with his on screen brother, Bob Morales. To have an opening scene include a young woman not only losing her virginity but to be betraying the main character of the movie declares that women aren't of high character. I doubted that was based on truth because it was so scandalous so I referred back to the readings and I was supported by Mario Barrera's article "Story Structure in Latino Feature Films," where he says "This whole sequence was fictionalized (8)." Considering this, the movie isn't much of a ground breaker for the portrayal of Latinos in the media because immediately we were introduced to a "lusty" harlot who "is a slave to her passions (18)." This stereotype is supported when in a few scenes later she leaves her family to be with Bob. To go with him on such a whim, does not set up the female characters to be seen as able creatures that are in control of their own destinies. No, instead, they need an ex-convict to take them on a ride on his motorcycle to somewhere new.

We see Rosie develop more into a harlot as she throws fits and ends up pregnant. Her actions carry the storyline along until we have one upset that completely changed how I viewed La Bamba: Bob takes advantage of Rosie. We only see her crying and Bob later says he only “almost raped her.” To me, the scene completely embodied the idea that he did rape her because there was not that much room for doubt as he breaks down the door, is violent, and shuts up Ritchie when he overhears Rosie's reaction of tears. At the least, we just see another Latina woman not being heard or given the right to even speak up for herself and clear up the situation which would benefit the men in the movie but that would be being considerate of a woman's ideas. Rosie's character does not mature in the movie but actually regresses as she fails to be fulfilled alongside Bob (who is himself portrayed stereotypically as a "Latin Lover"), who she ran away with for no reason, and never marries.

Introduced to a white woman in the middle of the movie you might think she will be portrayed in dignity and you might go thinking the whole movie that justice was done to her, because even Ritchie dedicated a song to her. But there is a small detail which you might miss near the end of the movie that proves otherwise. There's a scene where Donna is talking to a friend about boys, specifically Ritchie and they pan up from her shoes up to her face. To me, it's almost as though the cameraman is mean-mugging her, looking her up and down. There's nothing amiss with her clothes. She's not wearing anything unfashionable at all. In fact, you might say it is quite on the contrary to that idea and the producers even want to show off her clothes but still, emphasizing this is not beneficial to her development as a female character because it discredits the idea that she is a worthy companion for Ritchie or that they should even be together due to their racial differences and different social class because it hints that the relationship is shallow. This scene did not have to show the girls from the ground up; it could have been a

powerful shot of their faces in conversation as they walked down the street even though they were still gossiping about boys. Maybe it's saying In support of my this detail, we have a section on camera angles on reader page 31 in the reading from Charles Ramirez Berg's "Stereotypes in Film" describing how the use of where the position of the camera adds or retracts from the power of the characters in the scene. Also Professor Barrera mentioned in class to notice how the characters are positioned on screen and had a PowerPoint dedicated to "camera movement: controlling gaze of the film." Ultimately, Donna is white so she does not fall under any of the Latina stereotypes caught on film through previous decades in the Bronze Screen but she is a woman so she still is hurt by the dominant white male privilege mentality because she is portrayed as a silly girl who wither can't think for herself while succumbing to the authority of her father or by being Ritchie's emotional conquest.

My final example of the belittlement of women in La Bamba is with how the mother is portrayed as the ever-doting, loyal, and devotional character without other defining dimensions whose hair and makeup is always done. I noticed that the costume designers paid particularly close detail to when she would wear her red lipstick. Even though the color red is empowering, paying such frivolous attention to the leader of the family connotes that she cares too much about her looks and takes away from Ritchie reaching the American Dream because of the type of people he is surrounded by. In the opening scene we saw the mother as a field worker and maybe lipstick makes her feel good but this again raises the question whether this is based on fact or if it is for theatrical effect. If it is for theatrical effect, why would a field worker spend money on makeup that is off your face by the end of the day? It doesn't make sense and regardless if it is based on truth the people producing the movie have the ultimate power on how the character will be perceived. Wearing lipstick sexualizes the mother unnecessarily. It would have been nice to

hear more from her besides "My loving Ritchie" type of things since again she is the family leader like when she defended Rosie having the baby where in fact she is not wearing lipstick but that might have been too little too late.

The details I noticed toward the belittling of both brown and white women alike in La Bamba may seem insignificant and trivial but as an individual consuming a mass produced piece of media that is recognized as a high point for Chicanos in mainstream Hollywood films of the 1980's-I have to disagree with popular opinion and say, as a Chicana myself, that the film did not quench my thirst for dignified depictions of brown and/or female power. I understand the film is supposed to cater to a wide audience but in focusing on that and adding drama with a girl losing her virginity to her beau's brother tainted the film from the beginning as something not worthwhile to remember in the consciousness of Latino films for the next 50 years or ever after. I would like to see the film redone but that is probably a lofty dream. This is not to say I did not enjoy the film, but that I disagree with the choice of many details that made up this movie. Whoever was most influential in how the production of the female image was portrayed, both that of brown and white women alike, from the script to the wardrobe was not revolutionary in terms of moving the women's empowerment agenda forward.