La Bamba: The Fall and Rise of El Bandido

In the last decades the progression of film has revolutionized our outlooks on Mexican American characters in film. A very familiar example comes in the form of La Bamba which was directed by Luis Valdez in 1987. The technical aspects of the film helped manifest the stereotypical Bandido in La Bamba as well as other facets typically used in film. However, the director manages to find a decent balance of subverting and at the same time using specific parts of the film in order to cultivate a positive glimpse into the reality of these characters.

One of the most notable characters in the film is Bob Morales, played by Esai Morales, who is the brother of protagonist Ritchie Valens, played by Lou Diamond Phillips. Morales’s supporting role in the film shows the obvious contrast between himself and Ritchie. This allows the audience to perceive him as the “bad” character, thus giving the audience the makings of El Bandido.

The term El Bandido comes from Charles Ramírez Berg’s book, Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion and Resistance. Berg states that “El bandido is dirty and unkempt, usually displaying an unshaven face…psychologically, he is irrational, overly emotional, and quick to resort to violence.” (Ramírez Berg, 17) This term specifically applies to Bob in the sense that he is not the main antagonist in the film, yet the audience will perceive him as such because of the way he is filmed and the way his character is written. This is where the film collides with its subversiveness. It completely down plays a valid character in the sense of
having this character remain in the shadow of another in order to focus on the protagonist. As a result, we gradually see the makings of the *Bandido* in *La Bamba*, but not because he is a genuine bad guy, but because of how devalued he is as a character.

In another chapter of the book, Berg delves into how the costuming will objectify a character. He states that “Costuming provides another common narrative cue. The most familiar example of this is the well-known Western genre convention whereby good guys wear white hats and villains dress in black.” (Ramírez Berg, 33) One of the first objectifications we see is in the opening credits. Bob is visually introduced riding his motorcycle wearing a black leather ensemble on his way to the farming fields. Alongside the costume design this feeds the audience the foundation of who he is right from the start. He hasn’t even said a word, but just his appearance alone lets the audience know that he is trouble.

Another costuming example is shown right after Bob arrives at the farming field. Both Bob and Ritchie look sweaty in this scene, but here we see where all of these technical aspects come to life and merge together to create an image of the good and the bad. Ritchie is wearing a white shirt and at this point in the film the audience is well aware that he has been working, thus making the audience connect with him for being hard working. But in the instance of Bob, he is sweaty and he is dark and is wearing dark clothing making him look like the stereotypical lazy *bandido* that we all love to detest. This on itself is an indisputable factor that embodies the *El Bandido* stereotype.

The editing and music play a big role in the beginning and ending of the film. The smooth transitions of the credits playing alongside the red lettering of *La Bamba* across the screen makes you immerse yourself in a literal ride of events that deal with the rise and fall of Ritchie Valens. Ergo, there wasn’t much use of a score in the film, but there were a lot of notable
recorded songs. And although not added to the original soundtrack for the film, the recognizable tune of Santo and Johnny’s “Sleepwalk” truly becomes Ritchie’s downfall theme. The somber notes that are played go well with the last edited scene in which we see his funeral, and then watch on as Bob finally redeems himself and we finally resonate with him and his grief. This powerful scene evokes the true genuine familial bond that Bob and Ritchie had. It is one last reminder that the bond between was more than good and bad.

All in all, Valdez does an acceptable job at bringing these characters to life. Albeit, he used many stereotypes besides the *Bandido*, and other multiple cinematic techniques in order to build up the protagonist, overall he still managed to bring together the story of a Mexican American musician who was lost too soon. He gave the audience an adequate look into the dynamics of both brothers and in the end, no matter how different they were, they were symbolically each other’s yin and yang. Thus, the film does a fair job at giving a broad audience a glimpse into the Mexican American culture as well as significantly challenging any notions of who Mexicans really are.
Works Cited