Spy Kids: A New Breed of Latinos in American Cinema

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Abstract

Since the introduction of motion pictures in the United States, Latinos have been consistently depicted in American films in stereotypical ways that have resisted change. From the greaser characters of the silent movies in the early 1900s to the current representation of Latinos as criminals, sexual objects, and buffoons, images of Latinos are mostly negative in nature. However, with the increasing number of Latino directors and producers in the American film industry, we are beginning to see a shift in the way Latinos are being depicted. Latino filmmakers are increasingly representing Latinos in significant roles previously denied to them by many non-Latino white American filmmakers. They are also portraying Latinos as more complex and multidimensional characters than ever before. Using an ideological approach to film, this study argues that Mexican American director Robert Rodríguez counters stereotypes of Latinos in his film Spy Kids.

On Hispanics and United States Film: An Overview and Handbook, Keller (1994) observes that degrading stereotypical depictions of ethnic minorities were common in the American culture even before motion pictures were invented. Nevertheless, because film images have the power to remarkably arouse our emotions and to communicate to a large audience, negative stereotypical depictions in film are so powerful that they command our attention.

From the silent movies era of the early 1900s to the present, white American filmmakers in the United States have consistently portrayed Latinos in negative stereotypical ways. (In this study, the terms “white American(s)” and “Anglo American(s)” refer to non-Latino white American(s), and the term “Latino(a)(s)” refers to all Latinos, regardless of color or nation of origin). According to Woll (1980), in the early silent American films, Mexicans were depicted as vicious bandits; they were the most vile and cruel characters; they raped, gambled, and cheated. These “despicable” Mexican characters were soon named greasers, and they were the first in a long tradition of Latino stereotypes in American films.

Although stereotypical images of Latinos in American films have been persistent, the increasing number of Latinos in positions of power in the motion picture industry, such as directors and producers, is starting to make a significant impact on how Latinos are currently portrayed in film. Latino film directors, such as Patricia Cardoso, Lourdes Portillo, Alejandro González...
Inárritu, Alfonso Cuarón, Gregory Nava, and Robert Rodríguez, are creating films that bring a different perspective about Latinos to audiences. This phenomenon compels us to ask an important question: How are Latino filmmakers countering stereotypical depictions of Latinos in their own films? To answer this question, the present study examines Robert Rodríguez’s film Spy Kids (2001) using an ideological approach. First, this analysis provides a brief review of the ways in which Latinos have been portrayed in the United States media. Next, this study defines the term “stereotype” and shows that stereotypes are used by the dominant groups in society to maintain the status quo. Then, this research looks at the origins of Latino stereotypes in films and the different categories of Latino stereotypes. Next, this analysis shows how some filmmakers are countering stereotypes of Latinos followed by a critical examination of the film Spy Kids, as one example of countering stereotypes in films.

**Literature Review**

According to the United States Census Bureau (2006), there were 44.3 million Latinos in the United States as of July 1, 2006, representing the largest minority group in the country. Representation of Latinos in the media, however, has not grown proportionately to the increase of the Latino population. Recent studies have shown that only 3.9 percent of the characters in primetime television were Latino, compared to the 12.5 percent Latino population in the United States at the time the study was conducted (Mastro and Behm-Morawitz 2005). In contrast, white Americans accounted for 80.4 percent of all the characters in primetime television while they represented only 69.1 percent of the total U.S. population (Mastro and Behm-Morawitz 2005).

Furthermore, the limited representation of Latinos in the media is primarily stereotypical (Ramírez Berg 2002; Berumen 1995; Keller 1994; Mastro and Behm-Morawitz 2005; Rivadeneyra, Ward and Gordon 2007; Mastro 2003), which raises important questions about the impact that negative stereotypical images of underrepresented ethnic groups in the media may have on audiences. Rivadeneyra et al. (2007), for example, found a significant negative correlation between Latino college students’ exposure to media images and lower self-esteem in relation to their own ethnic identity. This finding suggests that media exposure to negative stereotypes of Latinos may be related to lower self-esteem among Latino young adults.

Moreover, although findings suggest a current trend to cast Latinos in more prominent roles than the subordinate characters traditionally assigned to them, Latinos are mostly depicted as being the least intelligent and articulate
characters in primetime television shows (Mastro and Behm-Morawitz 2005). In addition, although Weaver (2005) found that from 1990 to 2000 white Americans’ views of Latinos improved, especially regarding wealth, work ethic, and intelligence, their perceptions of Latinos as violent did not change. These findings raise important questions about the origin of negative stereotypes of Latinos, such as being less intelligent, less articulate, and more prone to violence.

Defining Stereotype
The term stereotype was coined by Lippmann in 1922 (Huber 1989). In his book Public Opinion (1947), Lippmann observes that, because our environment is highly complex and we lack the time and opportunities to engage in intimate acquaintances, we engage in stereotyping as a means to simplify our experience and economize our effort in understanding the world. In addition, Allport defines stereotype as “an exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalize) our conduct in relation to that category” (1979, 191). In Allport’s view, stereotypes could be either favorable or unfavorable. Nevertheless, the term “stereotype” usually implies a negative value judgment about people from another group. In this tradition, Ramírez Berg defines stereotype as “a negative generalization used by an in-group (Us) about an out-group (Them)” (2002, 15). Thus, because stereotypes are implicitly negative, they work against the group being stereotyped. According to Ramírez Berg (2002), two key components are needed for the development of negative stereotyping. The first component is ethnocentrism, which involves other groups being judged by the standards of one’s own group. The second component is prejudice, which implies the inferiority of others based on ethnocentrically-established differences between the out-group and one’s own group.

Theoretical Background
Understanding how stereotypical images mold our perceptions of reality is fundamental to evaluating the effects of negative ethnic stereotypes. Ramírez Berg (2002) proposes that stereotypes become normal through repetition, and they serve an important ideological function for the dominant groups of society. This function is to demonstrate why the dominant group, and not the out-group, holds the power and why social structure needs to remain the way it is (Ramírez Berg 2002). Moreover, Herman and Chomsky (2002) observe that because one of the functions of the media is to inculcate the values and beliefs that will ensure the integration of individuals in the social structure, the dominant groups in society use mass media as a way to systematically convey their propaganda, maintain the status quo, and, consequently, manufacture consent. Furthermore, Zavarzadeh (1991) contends that even
films that may seem innocent and neutral forms of entertainment are charged with ideological content. In their tales (narratives), films delineate the boundaries of their ideology and instruct the viewers about how to interpret their cultural reality, in a way that confirms the dominant ideology (Zavarzadeh 1991). An ideology is a set of doctrines or beliefs that form the basis of a political, economic, or other system (The Free, n.d.). The consequence is the viewers’ acceptance of what they are watching on the screen as a true reality.

The Origins of Latino Stereotypes in American Films
With the introduction of motion pictures in the United States, North American audiences were exposed to images of people from around the world, including their Mexican neighbors. The images of these early silent films presented Mexicans as the most violent, wretched, and evil characters in their stories. They cheated, robbed, raped, and killed without hesitation (Woll 1980; Berumen 1995; Keller 1994). These “despicable” Mexican characters were named greasers, implying a negative connotation that referred to the degraded social status of Mexicans in American society (Woll 1980; Keller 1994). The evil nature of these greasers was evident in their vicious conduct. The greaser would heartlessly throw a child in the water, would attack the white American who had just saved his life, and would steal the money given to him to buy medicine for a dying man (Woll 1980). The negative Latino image in early American films was mostly represented by Mexican characters, possibly because of Mexico’s close vicinity to the United States compared to the rest of Latin America and possibly because of the troubled relationship between the United States and Mexico, as suggested by Woll (1980) and Berumen (1995). We know these characters are Mexican because we are told they are Mexican, either through the storyline or the title of the films, such as A Mexican Romance (1912), The Mexican’s Jealousy (1910), and Broncho Billy’s Mexican Wife (1912). We can also pick this information up in a myriad of films that contain the term “greaser” in their titles. According to Keller (1994), “greaserhood” was a degraded state associated with Mexicans.

While the titles alert the audience to the subject of the movies, Woll (1980) and Berumen (1995) observe two important characteristics of Mexican-American relations evident in silent American films that still prevail in the present. First, Mexicans have been traditionally seen as unable to make their own decisions and having to rely on the help of independent and capable white American leaders. Second, Mexicans have been constructed as inferior to their white American counterparts in their capacity to succeed in love endeavors. Thus, when given a choice between a Mexican and a white American in film, even the young Mexican lady will prefer the white
American. In addition, Woll (1980) argues that these images imply that it is completely permissible for a white American male to marry a high-bred Mexican female but unacceptable for a Mexican male to pursue a white American wife.

In Berumen’s (1995) view, the stereotyping of Latinos in American films is a function of various political and historical events. The first event was the “Black Legend,” which, according to Berumen, was a propaganda campaign England launched in the 1500s to damage the reputation of Spain, its rival colonizer, by proclaiming that Spain’s colonizing practices were brutal and deceptive. The second event Berumen notes is the Manifest Destiny philosophy, which proclaimed that it was the first American colonizers’ destiny to spread democracy and Christianity across the American continent. In addition, Berumen observes that the design of the Monroe Doctrine in the 1820s had the purpose of closing the American continent to European colonizers, thus allowing England and the United States to have dominance on the American continent. Moreover, Berumen proposes that the mythology of the Alamo, which is loaded with contempt towards Mexicans, was aimed at glorifying the efforts to institute slavery in Texas. Furthermore, Berumen asserts that the Mexican-American War, which took away from Mexico about half of its territory, was an attempt to maintain the balance between free and slave states but ultimately ended in the Civil War. Finally, the last event Berumen notes as influencing the stereotyping of Mexicans on film was the racism in the institutions of slavery and segregation in the United States. Consequently, according to Berumen (1995) and Woll (1980), as a result of the early Mexican-American relations and all the political and historical events, a number of stereotypes of Latinos were forged in Hollywood to justify the superiority and supremacy of the United States over Latin American countries.

Latino Stereotypes in Hollywood
According to Ramírez Berg (2002), the use of ethnic stereotypes in American films is an important convention that allows the Anglo American hero to illustrate his moral, physical, and intellectual superiority over the stereotypically portrayed ethnic opponent, who is inherently a threat to the status quo. Ramírez Berg (2002) has identified six major prevailing Latino stereotypes in American films: el bandido, the harlot, the male buffoon, the female clown, the Latin lover, and the dark lady. El bandido is the Mexican bandit, whose roots go back to the “despicable” Mexican characters of the silent “greaser” movies. El bandido is vicious, cruel, dirty, oily-haired, and unshaved, and he is also represented in contemporary films as the dangerous drug lord or gang member of the inner city. The harlot is the female
stereotype that corresponds to el bandido. She is a lusty, hot-tempered, and a nymphomaniac sex machine craving to be intimate with an Anglo male. The male buffoon serves as second-banana comic relief (sidekick); he is simple-minded and unable to speak standard English. The female clown is the counterpart of the male buffoon; she is silly, comical, and colorfully exotic. The Latin lover is the possessor of a combination of sensuality, eroticism, exoticism, violence, and danger. He is the forbidden lover whose ultimate purpose is to provide sexual pleasure. The dark lady is the female Latin lover; she is sensual and daring, distant and cautious, sinful and exotic; she is the prohibited fruit that will try by all means to seduce without compassion the trusting, moral, intelligent, brave, and righteous Anglo American male hero to steal him from the flawless Anglo American heroine.

Countering Stereotypes
Although stereotypes of Latinos have been persistent in Hollywood, there have been numerous occasions in which stereotypical portrayals of Latinos have been contested. Ramírez Berg (2002) enumerates five categories of films that counter Latino stereotypes. The first category is constituted by films where the portrayal of Latinos hovers between stereotypical and progressive. For example, Ramírez Berg (2002) observes that in the film Anaconda (1997), Latin America is represented as an exotic and dangerous place; nevertheless, the heroine of the movie is played by Jennifer Lopez, a Latina. The second category is represented by films that have diverted from conventional Hollywood paradigms, for instance, by simply casting Latinos to play Latino characters, the way Robert Redford did in his film The Milagro Beanfield War (1988). The third category is made up of films that are ideologically oppositional, such as Oliver Stone’s Salvador (1986) and Roger Spottiswoode’s Under Fire (1983), in which the filmmakers criticize the United States’ practice of interfering in the internal affairs of Latin American countries (Ramírez Berg 2002). The fourth category is made up of those films in which Latino actors countermined the Latino stereotypes. For example, in the movie Stand and Deliver (1988), Edward James Olmos plays a mathematics teacher. The final category proposed by Ramírez Berg is represented by Latino filmmakers in the United States whose films overtly or covertly counter the persistent Latino stereotypes that many of their white American counterparts have consistently offered through their films. Examples of filmmakers in this last category are: Ramon Menendez, who directed Stand and Deliver (1988), Gregory Nava, director of My Family, Mi Familia (1995), and Robert Rodríguez, whose film Spy Kids (2001) is the subject of the present study’s analysis.
In *The Ethnic Eye*, Noriega and López (1996) observe that the first generation of Latinos in the United States that had access to a means of self-representation in television and film was the generation that grew up in the 1960s and 1970s. The authors further note that this generation was born in the political and ideological context of the Cold War, the Civil Rights movement, and the struggles of Third World countries against the colonialist practices of the United States and European countries. As a result, most of the films that originated around that time were used as an expression of the struggles for Latino self-affirmation and identity.

The early work of Latino filmmakers found limited outlets. It was not until the 1980s that some Latino filmmakers were able to make feature films that had box office success, such as *Born in East L.A.* (1987), *La Bamba* (1987), and *Stand and Deliver* (1987). The portrayal of Latinos in these films countered the stereotypes traditionally presented by most white American filmmakers. In addition, Baez (2007) observes that the depiction of Latinas in films, such as *Selena* (1997), *Girlfight* (2000), and *Real Women Have Curves* (2002), has positively evolved. In these films, Latino women are represented as complex, hybrid, and transgressive characters who no longer perform just service roles, thus countering the traditional stereotypes of Latinas in American films as submissive, one-dimensional sexual objects, who are destined for servitude.

An important reason for the current trend that counters stereotypical representations of Latinos in American films is the increasing number of Latinos in key positions of power in the film industry. For example, film producer Moctesuma Esparza, actor and director Edward James Olmos, producer and director Robert Rodríguez, and producer and director Gregory Nava are some important Latino figures who have created films that have become box office successes while portraying Latinos from a Latino perspective and countering stereotypes (Ramírez Berg 2002; Berumen 1995; Keller 1994; Noriega 1996).

To summarize, although Latinos are the largest minority group in the United States, their media exposure is extremely limited and stereotypically based. Films are a powerful means to communicate ideologies and create and perpetuate stereotypes. Latinos have been stereotypically portrayed in American films since the beginning of the film industry in the United States, but the increasing number of Latinos in positions of power in the film industry is changing the way Latinos are being portrayed. To understand how stereotypes are being countered in the work of Latino filmmakers, this study examines Robert Rodríguez’s film *Spy Kids* (2001) as one example.
METHODODOLOGY

The selection of the film *Spy Kids* (2001) as the subject of this analysis was based on specific criteria. First, the research question focuses on Latino filmmakers; therefore, *Spy Kids* (2001) is an appropriate selection because this film was directed by Mexican American director Robert Rodríguez. Second, because the research question also focuses on the representation of Latino characters in film, selecting a film that contains Latino main characters was important. The reason for this criterion is to show how Latino filmmakers are portraying Latino characters in their films. The main characters in *Spy Kids* are the Cortezes, a Latino family. Third, because *Spy Kids* was made and released within the last decade, this film is an appropriate representation of the current American context. Furthermore, *Spy Kids* was highly successful at the box office in the United States. According to Movie Web (n.d.), *Spy Kids* is the highest grossing film of all time in the United States directed by a Latino filmmaker. High success at the box office means that a film has been viewed by a large, mainstream American audience. This criterion is important because one of the purposes of the present analysis is to argue that it is possible to have Latinos portraying lead character roles in mainstream films. Finally, because the research question also focuses on countering the stereotypes of Latinos, the selection of a film that contains at least some Latino core values was important. The rationale for this criterion is that the presence of actual Latino core values in the film serves the purpose of showing some of the values that are truly important to the Latino community, as opposed to the inaccurate values suggested by the stereotypes depicted in other films. For instance, *Spy Kids* emphasizes the importance of family unity, which has been identified by some researchers as one of the most relevant core values in the Latino culture (Añez, Silva, Paris Jr., and Bedregal 2008).

This study uses an ideological approach for the analysis of *Spy Kids*. According to Corrigan (1992), ideological film analysis avoids limiting the discussion of a film to its explicit content. Instead, Corrigan notes that the ideological approach to film questions how cinematic elements are used to convey explicit and implicit messages. From an ideological approach, all the elements of a film, such as framing, lighting, editing, scripting, and sound, convey important messages about the way people relate or should relate to one another and about the way social structure is or should be (Corrigan 1992; Moscovitz 2000; Boggs and Petrie 2000; Ramírez Berg 2002). Some scholars identify the ideological approach as a Marxist approach because it is based on the Marxist assumption that films are a reflection of the economic aspects of a culture and of the struggle for power among social classes (Boggs and Petrie 2000). In addition, Boggs and Petrie (2000)
observe that this type of approach allows us to pose questions about racial issues, dominant views, and social class interaction. Costanzo (1992) notes that the ideological theory of film views art as an instrument for social change. Because this study deals with ethnic stereotyping (racial issues) and countering stereotyping (social change), the ideological approach is well-suited for this examination.

In *Latino Images in Film*, Ramírez Berg (2002) notes that although the stereotypical image itself is the most obvious expression of the stereotype, other elements in films contribute to the enhancement of the stereotypical image. To demonstrate his point, Ramírez Berg examined a four-minute scene from the film *Falling Down* (1993). In his examination, Ramírez Berg separately analyzed the framing, staging, camera movement, angles, editing, music, sound effects, costuming, makeup, set design, art direction, scripting, acting conventions, and lighting used in the scene to argue how each of these elements was used by the filmmaker to enhance his stereotypical depictions of Latinos in the scene. Following Ramírez Berg’s example, this study examines some cinematic elements, such as camera movement, staging, scripting, music, and character development in *Spy Kids* to argue that Rodríguez uses these elements to communicate his ideology and counter stereotypes of Latinos in his film.

Finally, Bordwell (2004) suggests that films should be segmented to facilitate their analysis. *Segmentation* is the process of dividing a film into its major and minor parts; segmentation can be performed by marking the parts with consecutive numbers or letters (Bordwell and Thompson 2004). As suggested by Bordwell, *Spy Kids* was segmented into scene groups. This process facilitated the examination of the film to understand how Rodríguez uses cinematic elements to counter stereotypes throughout the film.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

As previously stated, the present study analyzes the film *Spy Kids* to understand the ways in which stereotypes of Latinos are countered in the film. In particular, this analysis investigates how the filmmaker’s ideology shapes the ways in which he views Latino stereotypes and how he challenges these established stereotypes, such as Latinos being evil-natured, criminals, sadistic, unintelligent, racially-homogenous, violent, lazy, and uneducated. To begin, this analysis examines the first 15 minutes of the film scene by scene to show how Rodríguez lays the foundation to counter stereotypes in his film. Next, the analysis focuses on specific stereotypes and how they are countered in various scenes in the rest of the film.
The opening scene of *Spy Kids* introduces the audience to a mystical, once-upon-a-time-like ambience that communicates that what we are about to witness will be of epic proportions. Rodríguez achieves this effect by giving the opening scene a hazy look that suggests this story is a recollection of a legend. Meanwhile, the camera flies over the ocean along an impressive coastline as it approaches a huge mansion that has the appearance of a castle. The sound of Spanish guitar rhythms helps to convey the message that what is about to happen is related to the Latino culture. As the camera approaches the house, a human figure is visible through one of the windows. When the camera finally reaches the window, we discover a female child, Carmen, looking outdoors in a nostalgic way. Next, the camera goes into the house, revealing a sizeable room that resembles a Spanish castle bedchamber. These images tell the audience that this family is wealthy, countering, right from the beginning of the movie, the prevailing stereotype that Latinos are inherently doomed to financial instability and poverty. In fact, the castle-like appearance of the house suggests that this family is possibly of royal lineage. Then, we discover that the name of the young female child who is looking through the window is “Carmen,” perhaps a reference to the fiery character of the French opera “Carmen,” which takes place in Castilla, Spain, further communicating that these characters are Latinos. The red color of the walls and the reddish tone of the overall environment convey the message that Latinos are passionate and spirited, as opposed to boring and dull. Consequently, through these images, Rodríguez starts constructing in our minds the idea that Latinos can be represented in film as passionate and heroic, countering Hollywood’s stereotypical use of Latinos as sidekicks or unimportant filler characters (Mastro and Behm-Morawitz 2005; Ramírez Berg 2002).

In the next scene, Juni, the young male child in the family, and Ingrid, the mother of both children, are shown. Through these two characters, Rodríguez counters another stereotypical convention in Hollywood’s depiction of Latinos, namely, the stereotype that all Latinos have dark complexions. Although Carmen is fair-skinned, she could possibly be identified as Latina because of her dark hair. According to Hollywood stereotypes, Latinos are dark one way or another; either they are dark-skinned, or even if they are fair-skinned, like Carmen, they are at least brunette. This convention serves the powerful ideological purpose of establishing the superiority and good nature of the white Anglo American hero, as opposed to the dark, evil Latino counterparts (Ramírez Berg 2002). However, Juni and Ingrid are both red-haired (a physical characteristic not generally attributed to Latino characters). We know these characters are Latino because their names are Latino (e.g., Cortez, Carmen, Gregorio), because the male head of the family speaks with a Spanish accent and is
played by a very well-known Spanish actor (Antonio Banderas), because of the use of Spanish language associated with these characters (e.g., a sign that says hombre, a Spanish word for man, that refers to the character played by Antonio Banderas), and because of the use of Spanish rhythms in the music played during the introduction of the Cortezes at the beginning of the movie. In this scene, Rodríguez is not only countering Hollywood’s racial stereotype of Latinos, but he is also communicating the message that Latinos are not a race but an ethnic group bound by culture.

In the following scene, as the kids are getting ready to go to bed, Carmen asks her mother to tell them a bedtime story. Ingrid asks Carmen which story she wants to hear, and Carmen responds that she wants to hear the story of the two spies who fell in love with each other. Ingrid proceeds to tell the story, which is the story of how Ingrid and her husband, Gregorio Cortez, met. Ingrid continues with the story, and rather than telling the kids that the woman’s mission was to kill the man, she says that her mission was “to take the man out,” which young Carmen initially misinterprets as taking him out on a date. Ingrid later clarifies what she really means by “taking the man out.” In this scene, Rodríguez shows a mother who is sensitive to her children’s young ages. Although she is narrating a story about spies, the mother is sensitive about not being gruesome and grotesquely explicit. The way in which Ingrid communicates this story counters Hollywood’s stereotype that Latinos are heartless, evil-natured individuals who take pleasure in other peoples’ pain and who are more prone to violence than others (Woll, 1980; Berumen 1995; Ramírez Berg 2002; Weaver 2005).

Next, as Ingrid narrates the rest of the story, she reveals that rather than “taking the male spy out,” they both fall in love and end up marrying each other. Afterwards, she explains, they decided to quit their careers as spies to raise a family. Raising a family, Ingrid states, is “a compelling and mysterious mission in its own right,” because of all the challenges that people have to face to keep a family together (Rodríguez and Avellan 2001). Thus, through this scene, Rodríguez tells the viewers that family is also important to Latinos. In fact, family is so important that these two high-class international spies decide to quit their life in espionage to raise a family. The affirmation of family as a core value in the Latino culture is also a way to counter the prevailing Hollywood stereotype that Latinos are a disloyal, evil, and heartless ethnic group that takes advantage of the occasion to betray even those who have been good to them (Woll 1980). Through his film, Rodríguez tells us that Latinos are not the evil people Hollywood has frequently portrayed them to be; rather, they are individuals who are capable of being concerned with family unity and values and who may even sacrifice their own careers for the benefit of their families.
Another message is sent through the previously described images: there are Latinos who have the ability to foresee a higher purpose, not just the immediate gratification of their more fundamental desires. This message contrasts with Hollywood’s stereotype that portrays Latinos as slaves of their own emotions and urges. In his film, Rodríguez suggests that Latinos are capable of thinking about the future consequences of their actions and act accordingly. By deciding to leave their espionage careers behind, settle down, and become private consultants to raise a family effectively, Gregorio and Ingrid Cortez show that they have consciously pondered questions about the consequences of having a family while continuing to pursue their careers as spies. They also show that they have consciously decided to do what they concluded to be best for their family’s healthy development.

Another compelling message from Rodríguez involves Ingrid’s recounting of the story where we witness the arrival of various helicopters flying above the wedding celebration whose occupants are looking to destroy the newlyweds. Resisting the destructive forces that want to annihilate them, Gregorio and Ingrid hold hands and jump off a cliff. As they are falling down to the ocean beneath them, their parachutes open up in the form of hearts. Next, they land on a boat and the camera moves to a close-up while they kiss each other. Subsequently, the boat is driven away and the camera moves backwards, creating the effect that the field of view is getting out of a baby’s eye, until the camera captures a close-up of the baby’s face. Afterwards, the camera focuses on Gregorio and Ingrid playing with the baby to let the viewers know that the baby is theirs. This scene counters stereotypes in two ways. First, the baby looks to be white by all conventions: fair-skinned and light-haired, countering once again racial stereotypes that all Latinos have dark complexions. Second, the beginning of the scene where an attack occurs in the wedding celebration serves the purpose of reaffirming the importance of family unity in the Latino culture. Specifically, the scene suggests to viewers that the relationship between Gregorio and Ingrid is powerful enough to withstand future challenges, no matter how difficult and unbearable they may seem, as symbolized by the consummation of the marriage ceremony in the presence of the vicious attack.

After Ingrid finishes telling the story, she kisses both children good night and goes to the master bedroom, which is also enormous and gives the impression of a room that belongs to royalty. Again, Rodríguez uses set design to convey the message that the Cortez family is important. The royal appearance of the master bedroom serves the ideological purpose of communicating to the viewers that Latinos can be dignified and portrayed as noble and majestic.
In addition, the name given to the male lead character, “Gregorio Cortez,” serves two important ideological functions. First, the name honors the memory of a real-life Mexican American folk hero, Gregorio Cortez, who managed to evade the Texan authorities in a persecution that resulted from an apparently unjust accusation of murder, which was actually an act of self-defense. Many Anglo American Texans at the time depicted Gregorio Cortez as a bandit, an arch fiend, and a cutthroat (Orozco n.d.). The story of Gregorio Cortez is an important legend that is part of the cultural heritage of the Mexican American community in Texas, where Robert Rodríguez was born and raised. By naming the lead character in the film “Gregorio Cortez,” Rodríguez vindicates the real-life Texan hero, positioning him as a fighter of evil rather than as an outlaw. Second, choosing Cortez as the last name for the protagonist family serves another ideological function. In Spanish, the term cortés (which in Latin American countries has the same pronunciation as the last name Cortez) means courteous, someone who is polite and kind; consequently, by naming the lead characters “Cortez,” Rodríguez sends a strong message about the good nature of these Latino characters, further countering Hollywood’s stereotypes of Latinos as being inherently evil.

In the following scene, Carmen and Juni are exercising by climbing ropes and monkey bars. Here, Juni complains about having to do this every day even though they already have physical education at school. Although the explicit idea in this scene is that these kids are being prepared for an emergency situation related to their parents’ past life as spies, an implicit ideological message is also embedded. Through these images, Rodríguez tells the viewers that there are Latino parents who are highly educated and have the ability to make choices leading to a healthy life-style for their families, such as promoting exercising habits, countering the stereotypes that Latinos are uneducated, less intelligent, and lazy (Mastro and Behm-Morawitz 2005; Woll 1980).

The following scene occurs inside Floop’s castle. “Floop” is the star of a children’s television show; he is also an inventor who is financed by Mr. Lisp and a group of wealthy individuals to develop technologies that they could use to take over the world. Floop has an assistant whose name is Minion (which possibly refers to the real meaning of the word: a subordinate). In previous scenes, stereotypical depictions of Latinos were countered by positioning Latinos as the good characters in the movie. In this scene, the viewers are introduced to the villains of the story, who are white. Although these characters could possibly be Latinos because, as noted earlier, Latinos are not a racial group but an ethnic group, there is no indication in the film that these characters are Latinos. They do not have a Latino name; they do not display any kind of stereotypical Latino customs; they do not possess any
of the physical characteristics stereotypically associated with Latinos, such as dark skin and a big mustache; and the filmmaker does not use Spanish music during the introduction of these characters. Thus, through casting and character development, the filmmaker counters Hollywood stereotypical conventions that position whites as the heroes and ethnic minorities as the villains and evil characters in movies (Keller 1994; Woll 1980; Berumen 1995; Ramírez Berg 2002). By reversing the roles and portraying Latinos as the heroes and whites as the villains in the same film, the filmmaker conveys a powerful ideological message: sometimes the villain is not Latino, and sometimes the hero is Latino.

Up to this point in the film, which is about the first 15 minutes, the director has introduced the audience to almost all the main characters, and he has also countered many of the Latino stereotypes described and discussed previously. In addition, Rodríguez counters gender stereotypes and reaffirms his counter-hegemonic position as a Latino filmmaker. Next, this analysis focuses on how Rodríguez uses cinematic elements to further counter the stereotypes already identified in this study.

In addition to the previously identified stereotypes, Rodríguez counters Latino gender role stereotypes that portray Latino males as overpoweringly macho and Latino females as submissive and servile. In Spy Kids, male and females share egalitarian gender roles. For instance, Gregorio and Ingrid decide in a mutual agreement to take on a new espionage assignment. Also, it is Ingrid, the female, and not Gregorio, the male, who finds a way to escape from captivity when they are first captured in Floop’s castle. Moreover, this equal distribution of power is seen among the child characters. Carmen (female child) is depicted throughout the film as an intelligent and powerful leader. For instance, Carmen alone fights all of Ms. Gradenko’s (one of the many villains in Spy Kids) bodyguards and her army of “Thumb-Thumbs” (monster-like creatures designed by Minion) in the scene that takes place in the safe-house, and she wins. When she is being approached in the intersection of a tunnel by two Thumb-Thumbs, the camera captures Carmen quickly looking around and thinking of a way to safely avoid the impending danger. Finally, Carmen is always guiding and protecting her younger brother.

In addition, through Juni’s character, Rodríguez further counters stereotypes of Latinos as being evil and unintelligent. Juni (male child) is presented as a smart, innocent, and genuine boy whose pure heart wins over Floop. Juni’s innocence serves the explicit purpose of comic relief throughout the film, such as the time when he knocks himself down trying to free himself from the metal box that he accidentally attached to his wrist. However, the implicit
and strong ideological function of this character is to present Latinos who are honest and morally unaffected, countering the stereotype that Latinos are inherently evil. Gregorio’s character is used in a similar way. For instance, when Gregorio is urged by Floop to collaborate with him in replicating the “Third Brain,” which will make Floop’s robot-kids intelligent and will ultimately help the villains dominate the world, Gregorio shows moral integrity and refuses to help Floop with his malicious plan.

Some scenes also serve the powerful ideological purpose of establishing Latinos as intellectually capable, fighting the stereotypes that Latinos are less intelligent (Mastro and Behm-Morawitz 2005). For instance, a scene that takes place in the workshop of Machete (Gregorio Cortez’s brother) reveals Machete as a Latino male who fits Hollywood’s stereotypical Latino physique. He has dark complexion, a long mustache, and tattoos on his body, yet he is depicted as an extremely intelligent and creative inventor who makes sophisticated spy gadgetry and equipment, from the smallest cameras in the world to state of the art vehicles. Also, Gregorio Cortez is credited in the story as being the inventor of the Third Brain, a highly advanced technological system that replicates the capabilities of a human brain. Another example is a one-on-one confrontation between Juni and Floop in the virtual room, in which the filmmaker uses cinematic special effects to present Floop in gigantic proportions, contrasting with Juni’s diminutive figure, and resembling the mythical confrontation between David and Goliath. In this scene, Juni’s intelligence wins out over Floop’s overpowering size. Through creative persuasion, Juni defeats the evil within Floop, inspiring Floop to find the good within himself. When Floop asks Juni what is missing in his show, Juni responds with innocence and ingenuity, “It needs children” (Rodríguez and Avellan 2001). Finally, a series of camera shots showing everyday life in San Diablo, the city in which Carmen and Juni arrive after they were chased by Ms. Gradenko’s army of Thumb-Thumbs, presents a group of boys who look stereotypically Latino playing chess. Although the shot is quick and may seem insignificant, its ideological content is a powerful statement that affirms the intellectual ability of these Latino children.

Ramírez Berg (2002) observes that through framing and editing rules of proximity, a film can command the viewer to identify with certain characters. Ramírez Berg further notes that, according to Hollywood conventions, the tighter a close-up and the longer a shot stays focused on a subject, the more important that character is. Using these Hollywood conventions, Rodríguez makes ample use of close-ups and long shots on his Latino characters, directing the viewers’ sympathy towards these characters and serving the ideological purpose of establishing this ethnic group as important in mainstream America.
Finally, the importance of family values in the Latino culture is consistently reaffirmed throughout the film, serving the powerful ideological function of establishing Latinos as an ethnic group that possesses positive qualities, such as loyalty, respectfulness, integrity, good character, and good-heartedness, all of which confirm important Latino core values identified by some researchers, such as familismo (strong family orientation), respeto (respect), and confianza (trust) (Añez, Silva, Paris Jr. and Bedregal 2008). For instance, when Ingrid opens the engagement ring box that Gregorio gives her, the filmmaker constructs the scene in a way that an explosion of fireworks in the background coincide with the opening of the box, giving the impression that the content of the box has magical qualities and affirming love and family as fundamental human values that Latinos possess and celebrate. The most powerful testimony to the importance of family in the Latino community is unveiled before the audience in the final scene of the film. In this closing scene, the camera zooms in to capture the Cortez family, and while all the Cortezes face the audience, Carmen states “From now on, whatever we do, we do together. Spy work, that’s easy. Keeping a family together, that’s difficult, and that’s the mission worth fighting for” (Rodríguez and Avellan 2001). The film ends on this scene.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Spy Kids is only one example among a number of films that counter stereotypes of Latinos. Future research could focus on other films by Latinos, including independent films that have not been box office hits but that are important in the history of Latino cinema in the United States. Some examples include El Super (1979), Zoot Suit (1981), El Norte (1982), and A Walk in the Clouds (1995). Also, future research could be conducted on how stereotypes of Latinos have evolved from the early “greaser” characters of the silent movies to the most current stereotypical depictions of Latinos. In addition, quantitative and qualitative research could examine the impact of stereotyping and counter-stereotyping of Latinos in films on Latino and non-Latino audiences.

CONCLUSION

Stereotypical depictions of Latinos in American cinema have been abundant, consistent, and mostly negative since the silent movies era of the early 1900s to the present (Woll 1980; Ramírez Berg 2002; Berumen 1995; Keller 1994). It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that Latino filmmakers gained access to means of self representation (Noriega and Lopez 1996). Since then, either explicitly or implicitly, Latinos have attempted to counter the stereotypes.
created by many white American filmmakers by portraying Latinos from a Latino perspective. The film *Spy Kids* is an example of these attempts.

In an interview with Ramírez Berg (2002), *Spy Kids*’ director Rodríguez states that his intention as a filmmaker is not to explicitly counter stereotypes in his films but to make movies with exciting storylines that may appeal to mainstream audiences while implicitly interweaving his Latino heritage in his work. He further expressed that he does not want the audience to perceive that he is being overly preachy about his ethnic background. Rodríguez rather wants to appeal to a mainstream audience while including in his films Latinos portraying leading characters, sending the message that Latinos are also part of the mainstream. Rodríguez’s position is in agreement with the ideological approach to film, which dictates that even when not consciously or explicitly intending to communicate an ideology, all films inherently convey one (Zavarzadeh 1991). Whether implicit or explicit, ideological content in films is determined by a filmmaker’s perception of the world and socio-cultural background. This study argues that, through the use of cinematic elements, Mexican American filmmaker Robert Rodríguez implicitly counters stereotypes of Latinos in his film *Spy Kids* and establishes his counter-hegemonic position as a Latino filmmaker.

As suggested by Rivadeneyra, Ward, and Gordon (2007), media exposure to negative stereotypes of Latinos may be related to lower self-esteem in Latino young adults. Consequently, by countering negative stereotypes and portraying Latinos in a positive way, Latino filmmakers may be empowering Latinos, particularly young adults, with more positive self-esteem and a sense of fully belonging to American society and the American story. Finally, and most importantly, by countering stereotypes, Latino filmmakers may be establishing themselves as instrumental figures in the fight against prejudice and racism in America.
REFERENCES


