“¡Alambrista!” (1977)
Inside the Undocumented Experience
By Charles Ramírez Berg

When it was first released in 1977, “¡Alambrista!” depicted something previously unseen in American fiction films—the lives of undocumented Mexican immigrants from their point of view. Though writer-director-cinematographer Robert M. Young was not Latino and didn’t speak Spanish, his film convincingly conveyed the perspective of a people whose labor is welcomed at the same time that they are exploited and ostracized. A prime reason “¡Alambrista!” was important then—and is now—is because it balanced, deepened, and enriched our national conversation about immigration.

The film was also noteworthy for Young’s innovative use of cinematic skills he had acquired as a documentary filmmaker to thrust the viewer into the experience of his undocumented Mexican protagonist. How Young came to make “¡Alambrista!” is a fascinating journey in its own right, involving considerable professional, artistic, and political growth on his part. Young had been making a name for himself as a documentarian since the mid-1950s,

working on everything from nature films to cinema-verité-inspired investigations for “NBC White Paper,” the acclaimed and controversial television public affairs series. One of these was “Sit-In” (1960), a record of the civil rights struggle in Nashville, Tennessee. That led him to collaborate with Michael Roemer, a fellow filmmaker at NBC, on his first fiction project, “Nothing But a Man” (1964), on race relations. Directed by Roemer and coproduced, cowritten, and photographed by Young, “Nothing But a Man” was praised by the “Washington Post” as “one of the most sensitive films about black life ever made in this country.”

In his first decade of making films, then, Young’s aesthetic was emerging. In part, he was a curious and dedicated documentarian, ready to go to great lengths to get the story, and willing to follow wherever it led. He was also a committed journalist with an activist streak, drawn to projects that touched on issues of social justice. And despite his documentary roots, he was gravitating toward narrative storytelling.

Much like the Italian neorealists, Young discovered the effectiveness of using documentary techniques to tell fictional stories. But the Italians—De Sica, Rossellini, and Visconti, for instance—were experienced narrative filmmakers who appropriated documentary techniques to lend a sense of authenticity and immediacy to their contemporary tales of ordinary people.

Young was coming from the opposite end of the filmmaking spectrum. Steeped in the documentary tradition of journalistic objectivity, he wrestled with a paradox then slowly dawning on him: fiction could be truer than reportage. “I wanted desperately to be able to make a film out of life,” he has said of this period in his professional career, and a documentary didn’t always “go where you need it to go.” In certain cases, he came to realize, events could be made more compelling if given narrative shape. “I wanted to be *inside* the situation,” Young said, “not standing at a distance with the camera on a tripod,” the vantage point of the traditional documentarian. Fictional filmmaking was the way inside.

It was another documentary, however, that led to “¡Alambrista!,” his first foray into fiction film directing. That short documentary, “Children of the Fields” (1973), was produced for a television series on children sponsored by the Xerox Corporation and dealt with migrant farmworkers. To make it, Young immersed himself in the lives of Mexican American migrant laborers in the Southwest. He befriended the Galindo family—Polo; his wife, Lili; and their five

young children—who all toiled in the fields. They agreed to permit Young to follow them during the harvesting season and to be the subjects of his film.

In the course of making "Children of the Fields," Young was introduced to, and became fascinated by, another segment of the migrant worker population, undocumented Mexican immigrants. "I saw these people living in junkyards," Young said later, "and I heard stories about people who were here without papers, and I just determined that I was going to make a film about them." As he envisioned it, "¡Alambrista!" would be a narrative film relating a story unknown to most Americans—that of the undocumented Mexican migrant experience, distilled into the quest of one man, Roberto Ramírez (Domingo Ambriz), who comes to the U.S. seeking work to support his family back home.

Seed money for the film came from a $12,500 Guggenheim Fellowship, which Young used to return to the Southwest to begin researching the lives of Mexican farmworkers (with the help of Polo Galindo, who served as his guide and translator). Young wrote the script in six weeks, and KCET, the Los Angeles public television station, agreed to air the film as part of its "Visions" series, giving Young a $200,000 budget to make it. Casting little-known actors in the main roles and non-actors in most of the minor ones (except for Ned Beatty, Jerry Hardin, and Julius Harris), he worked documentary-style, directing and shooting the film himself (with Tom Hurwitz on second camera), supported by a skeleton crew. To help his actors build their characters organically, he shot in sequence, starting in Northern Mexico, then moving on to locations in California, Arizona, and El Paso, Texas.

Wanting to bring viewers inside Roberto's life as an immigrant laborer, Young employed cinematic techniques he had developed to chronicle the Galindos in "Children of the Fields." His intimate camera-to-subject distance ensured an up-close-and-personal view of Roberto and the other immigrants at work. A handheld camera enabled him to catch action on the fly and permitted his actors to move about freely. In the scene where *la migra* suddenly arrive to arrest the migrants in the field, for instance, Young's camera races alongside Roberto as he scrambles between rows of tomato plants, desperately trying to avoid capture. Extensive use of wide-angle lenses allowed Young to compose his signature deep-focus shots containing a facial close-up on one side of the frame and a long shot of the background on the other. In this way, a single frame could include specific details without losing sight of the big picture—Roberto's face as he picks tomatoes and the numerous faceless laborers stretching beyond him into the distance. A preponderance of low-angle shots, too, brought viewers down to ground level, where the crops are picked. No American feature film had ever taken viewers as deep into the world of undocumented immigrants as "¡Alambrista!."

The finished film was broadcast by KCET and other PBS affiliates in the fall of 1977 and received positive reviews. It had a successful festival run as well,

winning the inaugural Caméra d'Or award for best first feature at Cannes in 1978 and best film at the San Sebastián Film Festival the same year. Despite the acclaim, however, "¡Alambrista!" never had a national theatrical run in the U.S. It showed up here and there over the next few years, on the art-house circuit and on college campuses, but by the mid-1980s it had disappeared from distribution altogether and was on the verge of becoming a lost film.

And it remained so until 1999, when two academics, Davíd Carrasco and Nicholas J. Cull, teamed up with Young to form the Alambrista Multimedia Project. Their goal was to release a new director's cut of the film that would be part of an educational package including a book of essays about the history of Mexican immigration to the U.S. and the making of the film.

"¡Alambrista!" wasn't just a landmark film in portraying the perspective of undocumented aliens and injecting that viewpoint into the national discourse on immigration. That is a remarkable achievement in itself, but "¡Alambrista!" did more: it played a key role in the history of Mexican American film, ushering in its second wave.

The short documentaries of the first wave of this cinema (1969–77), such as Luis Valdez's "I Am Joaquin" (1969), were do-it-yourself works made "by, for, and about" Mexican Americans. Frustrated by their inability to enter mainstream filmmaking and angered by the demeaning, stereotypical representations of Latinos in movies, first wave directors sought to make films that would educate Chicanos about their history, build cultural pride, boost self-esteem, and dismantle Latino stereotypes. For these filmmakers, "¡Alambrista!" was a revelation, a sterling example of how the Mexican American experience could be the basis for fiction films with broad appeal. It launched the second wave of Chicano filmmaking (1977–87)—which had the same goals as the first but embraced narrative film and expanded its reach to the larger U.S. viewing public—including Young's "The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez" *(*1982), which also premiered on PBS, and Gregory Nava's "El Norte" (1983). And this phase in turn laid the groundwork for third wave films like *"*La Bamba" (1987, Luis Valdez), "Born in East L.A." (1987, Cheech Marin), and "Stand and Deliver" (1988, Ramón Menéndez), which were made inside the Hollywood studio system. Young has participated in this wave as well, coproducing actor-director Edward James Olmos's film "American Me" (1992).

Beyond its historical significance, however, "¡Alambrista!" affected many of us who saw it all those years ago on an emotional level as well. The shared experience of leaving the homeland for *el norte,* repeated over centuries by generations of Mexican immigrants, is a kind of origination narrative of our ethnic group. Its essential elements—the journey north, the border crossing, the arrival in the U.S., the adjustment to a new culture and language, the challenge of beginning a new life—are events most Mexican Americans can locate in their family history. But they were nonexistent on American movie screens until "¡Alambrista!"—the first and arguably best rendering of the Mexican American diaspora story.

The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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"¡Alambrista!" was added to the Library of Congress National Film Registry in 2023. Part of this essay was originally published by the Criterion Collection. It is republished here with permission. The photos in this essay are also courtesy of the Criterion Collection.