
How Henry Reyna Struggled To Exonerate Himself From The Accusations Of Murder And Jailing As Depicted In Zoot Suit, A Film By Luis Valdez

This Critical Analysis will focus on the performance of the movie Zoot Suit (1981). Although named in part after the Los Angeles Zoot Suit Riots of the early 1940s, this movie focuses its narrative on the story of a man named Henry Reyna and his struggles to appeal the unjustified charging of murder and sentencing of prison time. Another part of its namesake, the Zoot Suit, is itself a representation of the defiance of the Mexican American community to racist and classist perspectives from the White community. With the movie taken into context of “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” by Walter Benjamin and “The Commodity as Spectacle” by Guy Debord, Zoot Suit is seen as a voice for the underlying affects racist and classist motivations have on the Mexican American community.

One of the main arguments of “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” by Walter Benjamin is the presence, or in the case of the medium of film, the absence of aura in the efforts of the actor. This is due to the manipulation of cameras. Zoot Suit has a unique way of telling its story. This is how the film addresses this particular reading, which will be further discussed. In “The Commodity as Spectacle” Zoot Suit addresses this reading from the attire of the suit itself as a commodity literally demanding spectacle. In this way, Deboard states that “the spectacle is money for contemplation only” (Debord, 33). Zoot Suit as a whole attempts to create a wealth of contemplation from its singular protagonist and his struggles, especially at the end when the movie makes the audience choose Henry Reyna’s three fates.

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, Benjamin states how the camera is actually creates the efforts of the actor than the actor themselves. “It compromises certain factors of movement which are in reality those of the camera [...] the performance of the actor is subjected to a series of optical tests” (Benjamin). As mentioned before, Zoot Suit presents itself in a unique way. It presents itself as a film, but the film records the performance from a live stage. This could be intentionally done to blur the lines of the diegetic world of the movie from the perceived reality of the stage as portrayed in the film. In the aspect of Zoot Suit as a film, it does benefit from being presented as a film because of the transitions between scenes as Henry’s conscious, Pachuco, literally snaps audiences from flashback to flash-forward to present time. At the parts where the film captures the actors interacting with the stage and in-film audience, it shows them running through the aisles and acting out scenes between audience members. This in attempts to actively engage audiences to the story. And like mentioned before, the three endings the audience can choose from adds to the engagement.

Ultimately, Zoot Suit is a film with the viewpoint dictated by the eye of the camera and the cuts of the editor. As Benjamin states in his article “consequentially, the audience takes the position of the camera. [...] this is not the approach to which the cult values may be exposed.” (Benjamin). I disagree slightly with this quoted statement. While the view is dictated by the camera, the one dictating what the camera sees is a person, superficially the director. This, in some degree, escapes the argument Benjamin states of the absence of aura in the actor. The actor, Daniel Valdez, does lose a part of his acting aura, but done so to highlight the aura of the

director who is the defining voice to the message of the film.

In “The Commodity as Spectacle” by Guy Debord, two ideas stood out to me. One of them is “The world the spectacle holds up to view is at once here and elsewhere; it is the world of the commodity ruling over all lived experience” (Debord, 26). The other is “in the spectacle the totality of the commodity world is visible in one piece, as the general equivalent of whatever society as a whole can be and do” (Debord, 33). These two quotes can describe the zoot suit’s nature and role in the 1940s for Mexican Americans succinctly. As discussed in lecture, America saw Mexican Americans and other minorities as invisible. In retaliation to this popular conception, the zoot suit was worn to show how Mexican Americans can look good and compete with the styles of traditional American clothing in their own way. This, however, was contested because at the time, people felt that this fashion was a statement of not supporting the war efforts of World War II. Its seemingly excessive nature conflicted with the notion of conservation and use of resources solely for the war. All this context contributes to the importance and significance of the zoot suit.

Part of the assault scene of Henry’s brother in Zoot Suit was inspired by the attacks on Mexican American boys being attacked at the Carmen Theater. According to the PBS article “People and Events: The Zoot Suit Riots of 1943”, Around 50 sailors sought out the boys at the theatre after the attack on Seaman Coleman and attacked them merely from the attire they were wearing (PBS). What was originally a revenge attack for an allegedly attacked member of their own quickly became race-fueled hate crimes that extended beyond Mexican Americans wearing the zoot suit. Nonetheless, the zoot suit became a symbol for the hate crimes that occurred in Los Angeles.

Among the heavy themes addressed in Zoot Suit, the issues of sociopolitical, economic, and racial types are, like many topics of the kind, intersectional. This means that all the topics aforementioned are related to each other in some way or another. For the sociopolitical aspect, the social mentality of supposed conservation and heightened view of white military service men contributed to the justification of committing hate crimes against Mexican Americans. The unjustified trial of Henry Reyna was conducted with this mentality too. For the economic aspect, part of the sociopolitical motivations for the hate crimes apply too. The need to conserve products shifted US economy heavily towards the war effort. So the economic situations for Mexican Americans were worse than that of white citizens while the war effort added to their dwindling status.

Specifically, for the movie, Reyna’s efforts to be released from jail are prolonged because of his economic status. He couldn’t afford bail to get released that way and had difficulties finding a good lawyer. Even then the economic status of the lawyer made it difficult to win the case. The racial aspect of issues addressed in Zoot Suit again reflect historical events from the 1940s. The riots and attacks were hate crimes against a certain group of people based on their ethnicity. The racial standing of Henry Reyna and company affected how they were treated outside of prison and inside. Their status also was a cause of the attack against Henry’s brother.

In this way, the three issues addressed in Zoot Suit are interconnected. I think the sociopolitical issues that were in Zoot Suit influenced the economic and racial issues in the movie. Social conditioning over hundreds of years dictated that those of Western European descent were more superior than those who weren’t and that way of thinking shaped how those who at least do not appear of Western European descent are treated in society. Political gains are also

heavily influenced by racial construct.

I don't think Zoot Suit offers any specific solution to racial injustices nor does it directly suggest ways to change, but I do think it provides a way for coping. Racial injustices are still practiced today, but the way music is incorporated to Zoot Suit provides a way for coping. I think that music, like the zoot suit, helps bring a sense of power and control to a real life situation that threatens the lives of an entire group of people. When I say that the movie doesn't suggest ways to change, I mean that it doesn't outright say to revolt against racial injustices.

The entire movie itself depicts a very dangerous time for Mexican Americans. I think it was made to inform people of the situation of the time and serve as warning of situations in which it could happen again. This is not far from the truth with the rising popularity of Donald Trump and his proposal to build a wall at the US and Mexican border. The way Zoot Suit provides indirect change is that it informs audiences so they might possibly know how to handle situations like those of the Zoot Suit Riots in a different way.

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