

# ICG

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# **MUY FUERTE!**

Native Spanish-speaking members of Local 600 are part of a wave of Latin filmmakers finding work in the United States. But the transition is hardly without its challenges, as ICG Staff Writer **Pauline Rogers** found out

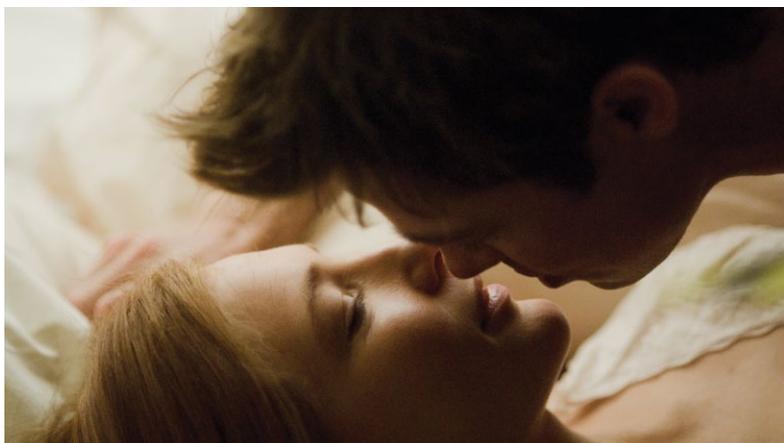
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The statistics say there are approximately 55.4 million Latinos across the United States. In 1970, it was 2.4 million in California alone. By 1990 the figure had jumped to 7.7 million. The tally released about a year ago reached 14.99 million – signifying California and Los Angeles County as having the largest Latino populations of any state or county in the nation. Estimates are that by 2060, Latinos will account for about 49 percent of the country’s most populous state, reflecting an ongoing trend in the nation as a whole.

The conclusion drawn from these numbers is this: the United States is (and always has been) a melting pot, a fact that should be embraced at all levels and areas of society, particularly in popular culture and the entertainment industry that drives its imagery and content. It’s a win-win for the film and television worlds: the addition of Spanish-speaking creative talent enriches the approach to images, and it provides studios, networks and Web-based firms a different insight into developing products to reach this significant population.



Above: Mexican-born DP, Emmanuel "Chivo" Lubezki, ASC, AMC, filming the western *The Revenant* / Photo Courtesy of Kimberly French  
Below Right: Scene from *Gravity* - the first of Chivo's two Oscars for Best Cinematography



Chilean-born DP Claudio Miranda, ASC, was nominated for an Oscar for *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008) (middle above) and won an Oscar in 2012 for *Life of Pi*.

Indeed, the film he industry does have a historical record of Latinos in the camera crafts. Mexican cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa, who studied with Gregg Toland, ASC, was the first Latin-born cinematographer to be nominated for an Oscar (in 1964 for *Night of the Iguana*). More recent names include Uruguayan shooter César Charlone (in 2003 for *City of God*), Mexico native Rodrigo Prieto (in 2005 for *Brokeback Mountain*) and Chilean-born Claudio Miranda, ASC (nominated in 2008 for *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* and a winner in 2012 for *Life of Pi*). But there was a 30-year drought between Figueroa and the next Latin DP to be noticed by the Academy, Mexican cinematographer Emmanuel "Chivo" Lubezki, ASC, in 1995 for *A Little Princess*. The most lauded native-Spanish-speaking shooter in this country, Chivo has been nominated six times for Oscars and won twice (2013 for *Gravity* and 2014 for *Birdman*). But like fellow Oscar winner and Mexico native Guillermo Navarro, ASC (*El Laberinto del Fauno*), whom, along with himself, Lubezki describes as the "wise old man" of the Latino creative community, neither has had an easy road to success in this country.

Lubezki arrived in the U.S. filled with expectations,



Top: Mexican-born DP Guillermo Navarro, ASC, AMC, on location for *Night at the Museum 3*  
 Above: Guillermo won the Best Cinematography Oscar for *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006)

assuming the process would be similar to the creative community he already enjoyed in his native country. But his first wake-up call came when the autonomy he had in Mexico disappeared.

"I was used to what I called 'open filmmaking,'" the legendary artist recalls. "The budgets might have been small, but they were doable. And everyone was invested in the creative process – from the actors to the crews and the neighbors. We'd arrive at a location, and if the light was too harsh, the neighbors would pitch in. Young and old alike would string long silks so we could make it work.

"When I came to the United States, I never knew about 'scouting,'" he continues. "When we got back to the office after my first scout, I was asked what I needed. Tent the street for the day of the shoot? I didn't even know about permits and cranes and safety." It took a while for Lubezki to get used to working within the Hollywood System – but at least he had been rather easily accepted.

Not so for Guillermo Navarro, who arrived 20-plus years ago. Two of his Mexican films had been submitted to the Foreign Language Committee of the Academy, which led to a meeting with an agent. "Your work is great," the agent told him. "But I can't go to a studio. A DP from Mexico will never fly."

Navarro was puzzled. "Really?" he asked. "Why?"

"Because we already have a gardener in the office," the agent answered.

Hard to believe that someone spoke in such a demeaning fashion to the DP who would later shoot visual feasts like *Pan's Labyrinth*, *The Twilight Saga – Parts 1 and 2*, and the most recent *Night at the Museum* entry, but that story is indeed true.

"Today," Navarro laughs, "with the burgeoning [Latin] market, being a filmmaker who comes from Mexico is a prestigious thing."



When he arrived in Hollywood (from Caracas, Venezuela) in 2011, operator Eduardo Fierro was advised to “look for a Hispanic agent.”

**Attitudes have shifted, but bias still lingers.** As recently as 2011, when operator Eduardo Fierro arrived from Caracas, Venezuela, having shot *E!* Entertainment projects and major commercials (not to mention building an amazing website), he was advised to look for a Hispanic agent.

“That to me was very disappointing,” Fierro recounts. “Why is there this desire to put people in stereotypes? If you are good at what you do, there should be equal opportunity.”

Other issues besetting Latinos coming into the market include adapting to a regimented Hollywood work style, and overcoming any language barriers.

“Working in Hollywood is very systematic,” describes DP Christian Herrera, who came to L.A. from Costa Rica in 2002. “The Unions work separately, yet they still collaborate and make the job a lot more efficient,” he says. “And you can find great crew and gear, specialized for each job.” But Herrera, like Lubezki, often longs for a more free flow of creative autonomy.

Digital Imaging Technician Carmen Del Toro joined the Union in 2010 from her home state of Puerto Rico [ICG November, *Digging Deep*]. Working on her current project for Netflix, *Narcos*, in Colombia, she describes Latin America as more of a “professional” democracy, without hierarchies on the set.

“When we shot *The 33*, we all lived in the same hotel outside of Bogota,” Del Toro reflects. “Antonio Banderas was my neighbor. Everyone worked, ate and drank together as a family. When I find myself back in the U.S. on a studio shoot, it can be more stressful.”

“When you get here, no one knows who you are

and what you do,” adds DP Pedro Avila, who came to Hollywood in 2013 from Durango, Mexico. “You have to prove yourself and make it, so that people start trusting you and throwing your name around.”

El Salvador native Eduardo Mayén [ICG September, *The New Normal*], who is a two-time ECA winner and currently shooting a low-budget Amazon Prime series, says Latino creatives bring a different sensibility. “I think working outside Hollywood helps you think outside the box, because sometimes you don’t have all the tools. But once you get to Hollywood you get to apply all that creativity – and the work elevates you.”

“Having the limitation of not speaking the language is also frustrating,” Fierro adds. “You have to get rid of the fear they won’t let you talk. It’s my second language. I often make fun of myself. When I used to say ‘focus,’ it sounded like a bad word, so people either got offended or laughed. I still say it my way sometimes – to wake up the set.”

**Often times, that sense of humor is necessary.** “I remember a conference call my first year in the U.S. with a Canadian team,” recalls *Learning to Drive* cinematographer Manel Ruiz, who moved here from Barcelona, Spain in 2000. “I had been speaking for about 30 minutes, when one of the directors said, ‘Thank you, Manel. Let’s talk tomorrow when you are in L.A. and we can all speak English.’ I was mortified, as my speech *was* in English! I guess they thought I was talking in Spanish due to my strong accent.”

“You don’t need to speak the same language to understand someone else,” adds DP Antonio Riestra,



Barcelona-born DP Manel Ruiz recalls a 30-minute car phone conversation where the director said: 'Thank you, Manel. Let's talk again in L.A. when we can all speak English.' And I was speaking English the whole time!"



DP Angel Barroeta, who was born in the U.S. but grew up in Venezuela, says "Latinos are very diverse. The [Spanish accents] music, and even social issues, aren't the same in Mexico, Argentina or the D.R.."



Hilda Mercado says the exposure from being a two-time ECA Awards winner has been essential to her career. "Both projects were Latino stories. One in Spanish shot in California, and the other shot in Mexico half in English and half in Spanish."

who joined the Guild in 2012 from Mexico City, and calls filmmaking a "universal language" within which crews and creatives are joined by the common goal of visualizing the story for an audience.

Local 600's significant Latino workforce understands that the journey they've taken has been worth the challenges. "In 1998, there was a big boom and opening to the Latino community," describes operator Hilda Mercado, AMC, who has been going back and forth between Hollywood and Mexico City since 2005. "Suddenly it was cool to be Latino."

Last year, Mercado adds, the statistics of how many Latino families will attend the cinema and watch TV showed what a major influence the group is in the United States and California. "It's cultural and voting power," she confirms.

And that power has to be entertained.

Studios like NBCUniversal's Hispanic Group Multicultural Studio are turning their focus to this significant market in the feature world. They recently finished a sci-fi thriller called *Reversion*, a follow up to *Isa*, which was released in October.

**But there are still hiccups in commercial production** for Latino shooters. "It can be very frustrating

when you are asked to change a look or a camera angle just because [the project is directed] toward people in a different country, with a different language," shares operator Nic Restrepo, a native of Bogota, Colombia. "The reality is that if everyone agrees that things look good, this will resonate with any audience."

Restrepo says a commercial agency will sometimes ask to hire a Latino camera operator, even when the director is from the U.S. or Europe. "A lot of the crew members will ask what that has to do with anything," he adds

"[Latinos] are very diverse," says DP Angel Barroeta, who was born in the U.S. but grew up in Venezuela. "Mexico. Argentina. Dominican Republic. The [Spanish] isn't the same; the accent, music, and, yes, the social problems, are all very different."

"The average American citizen doesn't see any difference between a Mexican and a Chilean voice," adds Del Toro. "But Latin Americans do see and hear it. And it is harder for them to swallow a character who does not speak properly."

Even when that amalgam works, it is jarring, especially for the Latino crews. "I was working on a TV series for a Spanish audience that, even though the cast of the show was from many different Latin countries, the producers wanted the non-Mexican actors to have a Mexican accent,"



DP Pedro Avila came to Hollywood from Durango, Mexico in 2013. "When you get here, no one knows who you are and what you do."



Digital Imaging Technician Carmen Del Toro, who joined ICG in 2010 from her home state of Puerto Rico, on location in Bogota, Colombia for the Netflix streaming series *Narcos*. "Latin American sets don't have hierarchies like in the U.S.," she observes. "They're more like professional democracies and less stressful."

Avila recounts. "There was a Colombian actress with a heavy Colombian accent, but when rolling you could swear she was from Mexico."

Still, all things considered, the Latino members of Local 600 are thriving. Restrepo says that being in the Guild "brings a sense of security as far as what you can expect on set. That's pretty big when you've been on a non-Union set where they have complete disregard for fair treatment, with long hours, late or no lunch breaks, and short turn-arounds."

For Mercado, the exposure she's gotten as a Guild member and a two-time ECA Awards winner has been essential to her career. "Both projects were Latino stories," she explains. "One in Spanish shot in California, and the

second shot in Mexico half in English and half in Spanish." Both films raised her profile as a Latina – and raised the profile of the viability of Latino productions.

Local 600's Spanish-speaking members are also showing the U.S. film and television industry that coming from different backgrounds and languages has no bearing on one's skill set and level of dedication. The Guild welcomes the richness these members bring – and greets them all with open arms. This has gone a long way to put new members at ease. For Avila, it means meeting fellow 600 members, "all of whom have helped me in one way or another," he concludes. "Mostly they've helped open possibilities for more Union work. I've also met some of my closest friends through the Local." 🍷