

Mexicanidad Meets Americanism: *The Circulation of National Imaginaries and Generic Regimes between the Western and the Comedia Ranchera*

Peter W. Schulze¹

¹ Peter W. Schulze is a researcher and professor of cinema at the University of Bremen, Germany. He published books on the work of filmmaker Glauber Rocha, the relation between cinema and globalization and the transmedia passages of genres, among other topics. He developed many cultural events and curated film shows, among them “Transpositions: literature and cinema in Brazil” in the context of Frankfurt Book Fair 2013.

E-mail: pschulze@uni-bremen.de

Abstract

Peter W. Schulze discusses transregional cinematic flows between Hollywood and the Mexican film industry, using the example of two major genres; the American western and its Mexican counterpart, the *comedia ranchera*. Conceived as a paradigmatic study of cinematic “glocalisation” (Robertson), the essay traces some of the complex interconnections between the two genres and the “media capital” (Curtin) at work; it examines the circulation of stars and other film personnel and transnational cross-media synergies among film and music industries, as well as political interventions from governments and economic and technological interrelations between the respective (trans)national culture industries. Specific attention is paid to the negotiation of generic and cultural identities vis-à-vis intertwined globalising and localising processes. Both western and *comedia ranchera* have shaped national imaginaries to a degree that they appear to be quintessentially U.S. American or Mexican, respectively. Contrary to these “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm/Ranger), both the ‘national(ist)’ figures of the cowboy and the *charro*, who play central roles in the western and the *ranchera* culture, are far from being genuinely U.S. American or Mexican. Schulze traces their ‘multiple origins’ from early modern globalisation of equestrian culture to mid-20th century genre configurations in cinema, which has been a major catalyst in the globalisation of cultural economy. Although genre hybridisations and the “multiple generic identities” (Moine) of the western and the *comedia ranchera* are highlighted, the essay avoids the widespread “hybridist triumphalism as an end in itself” (Spivak). Schulze points out that when the *comedia ranchera* emerged in Mexico, affirmative discourses on *mestizaje* and the “*raza cósmica*” (Vasconcelos) may have prevailed in terms of the construction of a hybrid cultural identity with nation-building function. Nevertheless, intranational exclusions based on ethnicity, gender, class and regional belonging seem to be structurally inherent in the genre. Rather than being perceived as a ‘subversive’ quality, the generic and cultural hybridity of the *comedia ranchera* is grasped in the sense of a “postcolonial exotic” (Huggan); it is interpreted to be a form of folkloric autoexoticisation as a means of global commodification of cultural difference. This representational strategy proves to be aimed especially at the Latin American film market with its domination by Hollywood films, many of which capitalised on U.S. American folklore in the western genre.

Keywords: western, *comedia ranchera*, film musical, globalisation, generic and cultural identities.

This paper discusses transregional cinematic flows between Hollywood and the Mexican film industry, using the example of two major genres; the American western and its Mexican counterpart, the *comedia ranchera*. As a study of cinematic «glocalisation» (see Robertson), the essay traces some of the complex interconnections between the two genres and the “media capital” (Curtin 215) at work, which will be specified according to particular “logics of accumulation,” “forces of socio-cultural variation,” and “trajectories of creative migration,” including not only personnel, as Curtin has it, but in particular genre patterns. Thus, the paper examines the circulation of stars and other film personnel, cross-media synergies among film and music industries, as well as political interventions from governments and economic interrelations between the respective (trans)national culture industries. Specific attention is paid to the negotiations of generic and cultural identities vis-à-vis intertwined globalising and localising processes. Both western and *comedia ranchera* have shaped national imaginaries to a degree that they appear to be quintessentially U.S.-American or Mexican, respectively. Contrary to these “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm/Ranger), both the ‘national(ist)’ figures of the cowboy and the *charro*, who play central roles in the western and the *ranchera* culture, are far from being genuinely U.S.-American or Mexican. The paper traces their ‘multiple origins’ from early modern globalisation of equestrian culture to mid-20th century genre configurations in cinema, which has been a major catalyst in the globalisation of cultural economy.

1. Foundational Fictions and Colonial Encounters

The figure of the cowboy seems to be the epitome of Americanness. Since the late 19th century, “foundational fictions” (see Sommer) in different media such as literature, painting and, subsequently, film, constructed a national myth around the figure of the cowboy ‘going West.’ “Nation and narration” coincide (see Bhabha) in many cowboy narratives that – often implicitly – depict the conquest of the American West. Exemplary representations of such a national myth can be found in *The Virginian*, Owen Wister’s novel published in 1902

(see Wister), as well as in various film adaptations of the same name, most prominently in the first sound film version; Victor Fleming's *The Virginian* (1929), in which Gary Cooper programmatically proclaims to "make more United States out of raw prairie land." Associated both with the concepts of frontier and regeneration through violence (see Slotkin), the figure of the cowboy stands at the core of a mythical foundation of the United States of America as a nation, or rather, as an "imagined community," enabled and sustained not only by "print-capitalism" (see Anderson) but also by modern mass media, especially film. Hollywood played a central role in the global dissemination of the imaginary of the cowboy via western productions. As "the richest and most enduring genre of Hollywood's repertoire," the western evolved coevally with American cinema, marking the beginning of "commercial narrative film in America" and serving as "the prototype for the studio system" (Schatz 45). Furthermore, the genre held a central position in Hollywood cinema up to the 1960s – approximately a fifth of all films produced were actually westerns. The genre was one of the "most coveted American cultural imports" around the world (Bloom 197). Its popularity helped to establish the global predominance of American cinema via a "genre whose visual elements, semantics, and meaning were intimately tied to American history, its landscape, and its ideology" (Moine 186). Undoubtedly, the western ranks high among the cultural productions most readily associated with the U.S. nation and Americanism.

Although appearing to be quintessentially U.S.-American, the cowboy as an emblem of the nation is an "invented tradition," in the sense of attempting "to establish continuity with a suitable historic past" (Hobsbawm 1), which actually does not trace back to 'genuine' American origins.² Far from being 'originally' American, nor even stemming from white Anglo-Saxon protestant tradition, as has often been claimed, the cowboy in fact evolved from a Mexican predecessor (Chevalier 150). In his thorough comparative study on *Cowboys of the Americas*, Richard W. Slatta (44) states that "[m]uch of the dress, language, equipment, and values of the Mexican and California vaquero

² Of course, there is no such thing as the essence or a single origin of any culture. In this regard, Edward W. Said points out that "all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated and unmonolithic" (xxv).

passed to the Anglo-American cowboy.” The Mexican origins of the cowboy are already implicit in the etymology of the term. Although the origin of the word ‘cowboy’ is a matter of discussion, convincing arguments have been brought forward that “the term cowboy, like its synonym *buckaroo*, derived from *vaquero*” (Smead 74). As the linguist Robert N. Smead underlines, “the earliest *cowboys* were the Mexican herders,” and their formation is very similar to that of the *vaquero* (*ibidem*). Tellingly, many expressions and terms of the American cowboy were loaned from Mexican Spanish. Far from being of single origin, though, the “*vocabulario vaquero*” includes numerous loan words from Amerindian languages, deriving mainly from Nahuatl, the Aztec’s language, but also from Arab, which entered Spanish during the occupation of the Iberian Peninsula by the Moors (*ibidem* xxvi). Thus, the language of both cowboys and precedent *vaqueros* already indicates diverse cultural matrices and colonial encounters that are also manifest in various other expressions of equestrian cultures both north and south of the Rio Grande, or Río Bravo del Norte, the border river’s name in Mexico.

The emergence and dissemination of equestrian cultures in the Americas result from wars, migration, commerce and exertion of colonial power, all of which were deeply intertwined. This congeries of influences is a manifestation of early modern globalisation.³ Livestock was of utmost importance for the conquest and colonisation of the so-called ‘New World.’ Columbus introduced cattle and horses on the island of Hispaniola, and livestock quickly spread to the mainland. In 1519 Hernán Cortés took along horses on his invasion of the Aztec Empire, which after the defeat of Tenochtitlan became part of Nueva España (New Spain), which also included much of North America. Societies both in Nueva España and subsequently in independent Mexico were sharply divided by race and class. As a reward for colonial warfare, the Spanish elite received *encomiendas*, or royal grants of Amerindian labour which was exploited for tending the multiplying cattle herds. Colonial landowners perpetuated the legacy of Spanish *caballeros*, or gentlemen, in sharp contrast to the status of their employees, the *vaqueros*, or working class cowboys. As

³ For the definition of “proto-globalisation” or “early modern globalisation,” see Hopkins 5-6.

it were, the elite equestrian culture of the *charro* developed from traditions cultivated by the wealthy landed *caballeros* and subsequent landowners, evident in the luxuriously adorned black dress and the white shirt worn by the *charros*, which contrasts strongly with the clothing of the lower class *vaqueros*. Shortly after the consolidation of the Mexican Revolution around 1920, the *charro* quickly became a national symbol, not least as a manifestation of the “centralistic aspirations of the nation state” and as “an instrument of unification and homogenisation of the national dispersion and plurality,”⁴ as Tania Carreño King has pointed out in her study on *El charro: la construcción de un esterotipo nacional 1920-1940*. The first association of *charros* was founded in 1921, and in 1932, December 17th was declared the day of the *charro* and the *china poblana*, his female counterpart. In the following year, the *charrería*, i.e. ritualised events involving horses and cattle performed by *charros*, was declared as the national sport of Mexico via a decree by the President Abelardo L. Rodríguez. Cultural expressions like music and especially cinema were of utmost importance for the consolidation and dissemination of the imaginary of the *charro* as a national symbol. When Carlos Rincón Gallardo published a paradigmatic book called *El charro mexicano* in 1939, his characterisation of the *charro* closely corresponded with the figure’s representation in cinema. Rincón Gallardo (6) distinguishes the *charro* as “noble, loyal and brave;” as a man who is drawn to dangerous exercises, who loves beautiful women, horses and pistols, and has the habit to sing and dance; he concludes: “By tradition he is the genuine national symbol.”⁵ Similar to the figure of the cowboy, who evolved from the Mexican *vaquero* and became a national symbol of the USA in the late 19th century, the *charro* with his various origins also turned into a national figure of Mexico in the 1920s.

⁴ “aspiraciones centralistas del Estado nacional;” “instrumento de unificación y homogenización de la dispersión y la pluralidad nacionales.”

⁵ “Por tradición es el símbolo genuino nacional”.

2. Convergences of the Western and the *Comedia Ranchera*

Although the figures of the *charro* and the cowboy result from an intercultural mixture, which originated in the history of colonialism, both have been traditionalised as ‘essential’ epitome of Mexican and U.S.-American cultural identity respectively, cleansed from its traces of otherness. Rather than displaying intercultural connections, differences between Mexican and U.S.-American cultural identities were commonly emphasised – especially in the western, where Mexican culture often served as a backdrop to foreground U.S.-culture, but also in the *comedia ranchera*; both genres have aptly been called “the American cinema par excellence” (see Rieuepeyrou and Bazin) and “el cine mexicano por excelencia” (Ayala Blanco 69), respectively. As would become prevalent in the classical Hollywood western, early U.S.-American films already construct Manichean oppositions between the cowboy as hero and the Mexican villain, stigmatised by the stereotype of the ‘greaser,’ a derogatory term commonly used by U.S. soldiers in the Mexican-American War (1846-48) (see de León). In this construction of Hispanic alterity, Mexicans are depicted as lazy and thieving, a stereotype that persisted in numerous silent films, already evident in many film titles such as *The Greaser’s Gauntlet* (D.W. Griffith, 1908), *Bronco Billy and the Greaser* (Gilbert M. ‘Broncho Billy’ Anderson, 1914), *The Greaser* (Raoul Walsh, 1915) and *Guns and Greasers* (Larry Semon, 1918), to name but a few examples.⁶ After Pancho Villa’s ‘Burning of Columbus,’ New Mexico in 1916, Mexicans virtually became the “enemigos prototípicos” or “prototypical enemies” in Hollywood cinema (García Riera, *Breve Historia* 33). Nonetheless, Hollywood eventually changed its overtly discriminating depiction of Mexicans⁷ to improve film distribution in Mexico and on other Latin American markets. Subsequently, Mexican film productions, which initially were more oriented towards European cinema, began to increasingly take up – and alter – genre patterns of the western.

⁶ For a detailed account of representations of Mexicans in cinemas outside of Mexico, especially in Hollywood, see García Riera *México visto por el cine extranjero*.

⁷ In a less obvious manner, though, negative stereotyping of Mexicans and Latinos in general still prevailed for many decades (see Ramírez Berg).

Significantly, one of the first feature films evolving around a *charro*, *El Caporal/The Caporal*, directed by Jesús B. Abitia and Rafael Bermúdez Zatarain, tells the story of this ‘Mexicanist’ figure who fights against cattle thieves, drawing from genre patterns of the western, both on the “semantic” and “syntactical” level.⁸ In a similar fashion, in Arcady Boytler’s *Mano a mano/Hand in Hand* (1932), the hero is a *hacendado* (the owner of a hacienda) vested as a *charro*, whereas the villains are dressed in cowboy garments. As it were, films like *Mano a mano* invert the stigmatisation of Mexicans in U.S. cinema. Even if the villains are also Mexicans, they correspond with a common depiction of U.S. Americans in the western genre, while the figure of the *charro* appears as a hero in a national sense, with the hacienda already tending to appear as a symbol of the Mexican nation. As in the *comedia ranchera* that emerged as a genre shortly after, the hacienda in *Mano a mano* already is the central, idealised setting, where the *patrón* amicably reigns and fiestas demonstrate a communal life abundant with ‘typically Mexican’ cultural expressions such as cock fights, the *jarripeo* or bull riding, and *ranchera* songs. Arcady Boytler’s film anticipates the evolving *comedia ranchera*, not only in terms of representing the hacienda as the main setting and the *charro* as protagonist, but also in the central generic function of *ranchera* music and folkloric culture, especially from the region of Jalisco – all of which became typical and immediately recognisable elements that were repeated and varied in hundreds of Mexican genre productions.

Even if most U.S. westerns emphasise the Americanness of the genre, while Mexican films accentuate the *mexicanidad* of the *comedia ranchera*, the Manichean oppositions between the constructions of the respective national identities are sometimes transcended in both genres. While negative stereotyping of Mexicans as greasers still prevailed in the 1920s, Ken Maynard, in contrast to most western stars, often appeared vested in tight-fitting black outfits that

⁸ According to Rick Altman (“A semantic/syntactic approach to film genre” 30), the semantic level of a genre consists of “a list of common traits, attitudes, characters, shots, locations, sets,” i.e. the genre’s “building blocks themselves,” whereas the syntactic levels comprises “constitutive relationships between undesignated and variable placeholders,” i.e. “structures into which [the building blocks] are arranged.”

resemble Mexican style clothing, most evidently in 'south of the border westerns' such as *Song of the Caballero* (1930), where he even wears a traditional *charro* outfit, including the typical short jacket adorned with embroidery. Although his most pronouncedly Mexican outfits often were masquerades, they do attain positive, if slightly ironic, connotations and form part of the star persona of Ken Maynard. In Mexican cinema, in turn, the hero Juan Pistolas of the eponymous film very much resembles the figure of a cowboy. Tellingly, *Juan Pistolas* (1935) was directed by Roberto Curwood, who under the name of Bob Curwood starred in many silent westerns at Universal Pictures in the 1920s. Juan Pistolas is embodied by Raúl de Anda, who also worked as a prolific director and producer of both Mexican westerns and *comedias rancheras*. Shortly after his role as Juan Pistoles, he became the emblematic actor of a very particular *charro*, very much unlike the singing *charro*, impersonated by the major stars of the *comedia ranchera*, including Tito Guízar, Jorge Negrete, Pedro Infante and Antonio Aguilar. In the personal union of director and actor, Raúl de Anda played the hero of the *charro negro* series, a very popular masked *charro* fighting for justice, much like the U.S. series westerns with masked cowboys as heroes.

Rather than displaying intercultural connections, though, differences between Mexican and U.S.-American cultural identities were commonly emphasised – not only in the western, where Mexican culture frequently serves as a backdrop to foreground U.S.-culture, but also in the *comedia ranchera* that often accentuates its generic identity in distinction to the western, as is evident in the following example. In René Cardona's *La marca del cuervo/ The Mark of the Raven* (1958), the opening already refers to Hollywood, since the logo trailer of the production company Filmex, beginning with a spinning globe, is highly reminiscent of the logo of Universal Pictures. Subsequently, the title sequence evokes the scene of a western by strongly drawing to syntax and semantics of the genre: a masked horseman with a 'cowboy hat' gallops through a deserted landscape of hills and rocks under a dramatically clouded sky, accompanied by a highly rhythmic score. What could be the soundtrack for a key scene of a western, suddenly turns into a *canción ranchera*, a Mexican folk song with characteristic *gritos mexicanos*, yells at intervals within the song, whose origins date to the years of the Mexican Revolution and later

became associated with mariachi groups. Although in a western, the black clothing would often be a cue that the character is a villain, here the song praises him as “el cuervo amado por el pueblo,” that is “the raven, loved by the people.” Unlike the conventions of the western, black clothing, including the symbolic black hat has a positive connotation in Mexican genre equivalents, since the traditional garb of the *charro* is black. And although the horseman does not wear the adorned traditional clothing, he is quickly associated with the ‘national’ figure of the *charro*. Besides his mastery in horse-riding, the song and the credits reveal the actor to be Antonio Aguilar, one of the most popular stars of the *comedia ranchera* and *ranchera* music, who was nicknamed and widely known as ‘El charro de México.’



La Marca del Cuervo

In an ironic, self-reflexive scene ensuing the credit-sequence, René Cardona acknowledges both the adaptation of genre structures of the western and the

particular resignification of the “American cinema par excellence” when the character played by Antonio Aguilar comes upon children playing cowboys and Indians, with the Indians significantly defeating the cowboy.

Films about masked revengers of crimes committed against the defenceless were very common in Mexican cinema in the 1940s and 50s, often in form of film series. The earliest Mexican series of this kind began with *El charro negro/The Black Charro* (1940), followed by four films, all starred, directed, written, and produced by Raúl de Anda.⁹



El Charro Negro en el Norte

⁹ The first film of the series directed and starring Raúl de Anda was *El Charro Negro/The Black Charro* (1940), followed by *La vuelta del Charro Negro/The Return of the Black Charro* (1941), *La venganza del Charro Negro/The Vengeance of the Black Charro* (1942) and *El Charro Negro en el norte/The Black Charro in the North* (1949). The series was taken up again in 1960 with Raúl de Anda's son Rodolfo de Anda playing the son of the charro negro in *El hijo del Charro Negro/The Son of the Black Charro* (1960) and *El Charro Negro contra la banda de los cuervos/The Black Charro Against the Gang of the Ravens* (1963), both directed by Arturo Martínez.

The masked *charro* series were apparently based on earlier masked cowboy films from Hollywood, especially the successful Republic production *The Lone Ranger* (1938), directed by William Whitney and John English. However, most of the Mexican serials ostentatiously ‘Mexicanise’ U.S. productions, not only by drawing from the generic structures of the *comedia ranchera* but also by opposing conventions and central traits of the two ‘national’ genres. This is particularly evident in a series of nine *ranchera* films directed by Jaime Salvador for Rosas Films S.A. (1955-58), which all evolve around the hero Mauricio Rosales, played by Antonio Aguilar.



La justicia del Gavilán Vingador

A telling example of the ‘generic differentiation’ would be the set-piece of the duel in *La justicia del Gavilán Vingador/The Justice of the Avenging Hawk* (1957), the 7th film of the series. The duel sequence takes place in a *cantina*, the Mexican equivalent to a bar in a western. Because of a beautiful woman dressed in red, a conflict breaks out between the hero, played by Antonio Aguilar, and the villain.

Instead of a gun fight, the Mexican machos compete via a ‘duelo de coplas,’ a singing duel, accompanied by a *ranchera* song played by a group of mariachis in *charro* garb. The film thus draws on one of the most characteristic set-pieces of the *ranchera*. Having finished their songs, the two opponents confront each other, and a brawl breaks out, in which the character played by Aguilar beats up the henchmen of the villain. Significantly, the duel à la *mexicana* literally takes place in front of an American background. On the wall, just above the head of the woman in the red dress, the iconic sex photo *Marilyn Monroe on Red Velvet* (1949), shot by Tom Kelley and published in *Playboy* magazine, is clearly visible and repeatedly framed in the centre of various shots. Apparently, the naked star seems to symbolise a supposedly depraved, immoral American lifestyle, which the Mexican woman in her sexy dress is associated with. In contrast, the subsequent scene is a fiesta with ceremonial singing and dancing of indigenes, followed by mariachis playing *rancheras* for traditionally dressed Mexicans.

Apart from the ‘American background’ of the sex photo, the generic background of the western is equally evident, particularly since Marilyn Monroe famously starred in Otto Preminger’s *River of no Return* (1954), where she sings lascivious songs, vested in a tight red dress which strongly emphasises a sexualised image of her body. Evidently, the western genre is a strong reference for the duel scene which valorises *mexicanidad* in binary opposition to stigmatised U.S. culture. Antonio Aguilar, the famous ‘charro de México’, embodies traditional Mexican values and a code of honour by settling the dispute in a ‘duelo de coplas’ and by proving his manliness in a brawl.



La justicia del Gavilán Vingador

By contrast, the villain draws a gun, as a westerner would, but is deterred by his equally villainous friend, because using a firearm is regarded as dishonourable. His thugs with their habitus and Stetson-like hats visually correspond to characters typical for a western, whereas Aguilar wears a huge Mexican sombrero. Typical for the *comedia ranchera*, mariachis and women dressed in proper folkloric dresses symbolise traditional values, while the ceremony of the indigenes displays the ‘folkloric particularity’ of Mexico. Like numerous *ranchera* productions, *La justicia del Gavilán Vengador* strongly emphasises the *mexicanidad* in relation to the genre patterns and national imaginaries of the western. The pronounced ‘Mexicanisation’ of the western genre is evident right up to the last shot of Jaime Salvador’s *ranchera* film. *La justicia del Gavilán Vengador* closes with the image of a masked hero with his two guns drawn in a dramatic landscape that corresponds to the visual culture of the western, but is superimposed by a text that again emphasises the *mexicanidad* of the film: “Es una película mexicana en MEXISCOPE,” i.e. “This is a Mexican film in MEXISCOPE.”

Besides different forms of hybridisation of the western in Mexican films, the U.S. western is also intertwined with Mexico and its cinema. Not only is the figure of the cowboy related to the *charro*, as part of the common history of the USA and Mexico, but the western genre itself is laden with references to Mexico and its culture, extending much beyond the representation of the ‘greaser’ mentioned. Even John Ford’s ‘emblematically’ U.S.-American westerns are “packed with Hispanic references,” as Edward Buscombe and Roberta Pearson have phrased it (6). Among the many Mexican elements of the genre are settings, songs and characters, some of which were enacted by the best known Mexican performers who pursued careers both in Hollywood and in their country of origin, such as Emilio Fernández, Pedro Armendáriz and Dolores del Río. Besides numerous references to Mexican culture, the action of many American westerns partially takes place in Mexico, or, in the so-called ‘south of the border westerns,’ is even (almost) entirely set there. Moreover, not least because of the low production costs, a considerable number of Hollywood westerns have partly been shot in the Mexican state of Durango, including seminal films such as Raoul Walsh’s

The Tall Men (1955), John Huston's *The Unforgiven* (1959), Sam Peckinpah's *Major Dundee* (1964) and Henry Hathaway's *The Sons of Katie Elder* (1965).¹⁰ Apart from pronounced Mexican affiliations in Hollywood westerns, U.S. directors and other film personnel have worked in the Mexican film industry, especially in western productions or genres related to the "American cinema par excellence." Norman Foster, who directed *Viva Cisco Kid* (1940) for Twentieth Century Fox's Cisco Kid western series, made five films in Mexico in the 1940s, including the remarkable *El ahijado de la muerte/The Godson of Death* (1946). This pronouncedly hybrid film could aptly be classified as a mystery noir ranchero western.



El ahijado de la muerte

El ahijado de la muerte is set in the context of the Mexican Revolution and features the famous actor and singer Jorge Negrete, a leading star both of the *comedia ranchera* and *ranchera* music. Foster's hybrid genre film was shot by cinematographer Jack Draper, an American, who in the 1920s photographed a dozen westerns for Robert J. Horner, but since 1935 worked exclusively in Mexico, where he shot over 100 films until the early 1960s. Significantly, *El ahijado de la muerte* was made in the newly founded Estudios Churubusco, one of the largest movie studios in Latin America, which was founded in 1945, and 49% of which was owned by RKO Pictures.

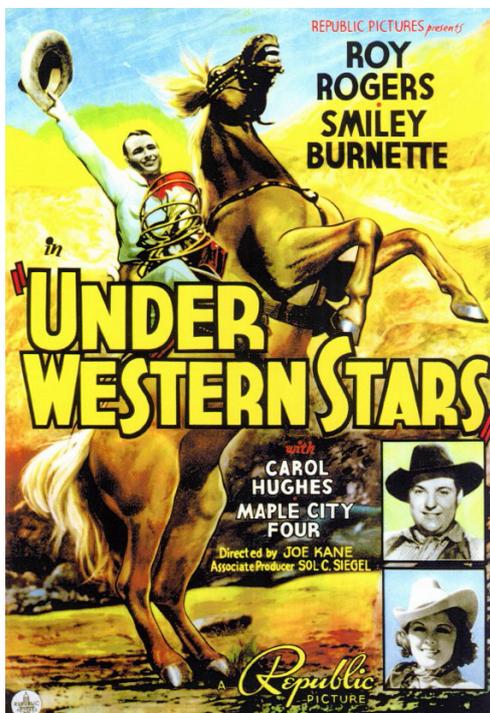
¹⁰ For the history of film production in Durango, see Avitia Hernández.

Besides 'Mexican' films, various U.S.-Mexican co-productions were shot at the studio by directors such as John Ford, Robert Wise and Don Siegel, featuring both Mexican and U.S. film stars.

3. The cultural economy of singing cowboys and *charros cantando*

Of the multiple interconnections between the cinematic representations of *charros* and cowboys, the convergences between the genre configurations of the singing cowboy film, or 'horse opera,' and the *comedia ranchera* are particularly pronounced. Besides, mutual references and interconnections exist between the singing cowboy film and the *comedia ranchera*. For example, Frank McDonald's *Rancho Grande* (Republic 1940), starring Gene Autry alludes

not only to the famous Mexican folk song *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, which was sung by Autry (among many interpreters), but also refers to the eponymous genre matrix of the *comedia ranchera*, a box-office hit starring Tito Guízar, in which the Mexican singer-actors star famously sings this song (as will be commented on below). Tito Guízar, in turn, played in two Republic singing cowboy films directed by William Witney and starring Roy Rogers, *On the Old Spanish Trail* (1947) and *The Gay Ranchero* (1948), in which the title song not only features Spanish words but also seems to allude to the star persona of Tito Guízar. Although the convergences between the two genres are very distinct, they also exhibit marked differences. In contrast to the *comedia ranchera*, which rejects modernity in favour of an idealised pre-revolutionary feudal social order safe from any upheaval, both negotiations of modernity and social critique can be found in the singing



Under Western Stars

cowboy film, particularly pronounced in Joseph Kane's *Under Western Stars* (1938), in which Roy Roger has his first starring role. Furthermore, Gene Autry "functions as a representative of the[se] working-class communities" (Stanfield 103) in films such as *Tumbling Tumbleweeds* or *Guns and Guitars*, both directed by Joseph Kane.

The singing cowboy film and the *comedia ranchera* evolved around the same time and make substantial use of western and *ranchera* music, respectively. Not only do they integrate musical numbers into the diegesis as one of the central characteristics of their generic identities, but they also both feature cross-media synergies, including interconnections between the cultural economy of both U.S. American and Mexican music and film productions. When "the figure of the singing cowboy as a distinct film persona" (Stanfield 2) emerged in 1935 with Gene Autry's starring roles in the Republic production *Tumbling Tumbleweeds* and the Mascot serial *The Phantom Empire*, his first film appearance in *Old Santa Fe* (Mascot 1934) had already capitalised on the previous musical success of the singer and radio star. Significantly, western star Ken Maynard, who plays the protagonist of *Old Santa Fe*, likewise had recorded songs (with Columbia Records) before appearing on the screen, and was one of the first singing cowboys in the 1930 film *Sons of the Saddle*. The emerging singing cowboy film was evidently aimed at profiting from economic synergies between film and music productions, a strategy frequently employed in the film musical. Stars of western and country music were contracted to act and perform their songs for the screen, thus drawing on their previous success in concerts, radio shows, and recordings. 'Horse operas' starring Roy Rogers and especially Gene Autry were among Hollywood's main box office draws in the late 1930s. Successful films in turn increased the popularity of the respective singer-actor and raised the sales figures and ratings of the music and radio industry. The cultural economy of transmedia connections between film and music productions potentiated the hybrid genre patterns and the eclectic style characteristic for singing cowboy films. A telling example is Mack V. Wright's *The Big Show*, a 1936 Republic Pictures production starring Gene Autry. This

highly self-reflexive film about a western movie production not only integrates various musical numbers, but also slapstick elements, melodramatic scenes, and a whole subplot pertaining to the genre of the gangster film.

Although the *comedia ranchera* hardly features any self-reflexive dimensions, let alone radio or recording scenes within the diegesis as found in many singing cowboy films, it is also characterised both by genre hybridisation and interconnections with the music industry. In many aspects, what western music is for the singing cowboy film, the *ranchera* music is for the *comedia ranchera*. Besides, the *música ranchera* can be regarded as “the Mexican equivalent of country and western music,” as Brenner put it in the title of his study on *ranchera* music. This holds true especially in terms of nationalist narratives idealising ‘the country as nucleus of the nation,’ which are fairly common both in western and *ranchera* songs and films.

Just as the ‘horse opera,’ the emerging genre of the *comedia ranchera* integrates songs into its generic structure and substantially draws on singers that were well-established in the music industry and the *teatro de revista*, or revue. This strategy is already evident in the generic matrix of Fernando de Fuentes’s *comedia ranchera Allá en el Rancho Grande/Out on the Big Ranch* (1936), which was the first big international success of Mexican cinema. At the time, the film’s title-giving folkloric song was already very popular and had been getting about in performances and recordings, for example in the 1927 *teatro de revista Cruz*, which included a version of the song by Emilio Donato Uranga and Juan Díez del Moral,¹¹ as well as in various radio and record versions, including interpretations by Tito Guízar, the protagonist of *Allá en el Rancho Grande*. Significantly, by the time Guízar starred in Fernando de Fuentes’s paradigmatic *comedia ranchera*, he was not only an established singer in Mexican *teatro de revista*, broadcast and recordings. Guízar had also

¹¹ Donato Uranga and Díez del Moral claimed to be the authors of *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, although they most likely just registered their arrangement of a folkloric song of unknown authorship at the Sociedad de Autores y Compositores de Mexico (SACM) in 1927. Shortly after, Silvano R. Ramos and Barley Costello registered an English version of the song at the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) in Texas – a version that, significantly, would later be performed and recorded by the ‘singing cowboy’ Gene Autry and many other stars of U.S.-American folk and western music.

very successfully worked in the U.S.-American music industry and appeared in a few Hollywood productions, and thus promised to attain an audience outside of Mexico. *Allá en el Rancho Grande* did indeed become an international success; it received the award 'best cinematography' for Gabriel Figueroa at the Venice Film Festival in 1938 and was released in many countries, including the USA, where the film was screened not only for Hispanic communities but also for an English-speaking audience. The artistic and commercial success of the film helped to establish a Mexican film industry that strongly capitalised on the generic formula of the *comedia ranchera*, and flourished until the 1950s. Significantly, outside of Mexico, the distribution of *Allá en el Rancho Grande* was in the hands of United Artists Corporation, which made the majority of the film's profit (see Pérez Turrent 164). As Vega Alfaro has underlined, the Mexican film industry developed "in a country with a dependant capitalist structure"¹² (105), which heavily relied on U.S. economy and politics. Part of the capital for the nascent Mexican studio system was subscribed by U.S. investors; both the big real estate and land owner Harry Wright and Howard Randall from the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) had been economically involved in the Studios Clasa since 1935, and Randall also partook in the construction of what would become Azteca Studios (see Pérez Turrent 164). In 1943 RKO Pictures made an agreement with the Mexican radio magnate Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurreta to found Estudios Churubusco, inaugurated in 1945 as one of the largest movie studios in Latin America. The major Hollywood studio held 49% of Estudios Churubusco's stock (and only the protectionist 'Mexicanisation' laws impeded RKO from holding a bigger share). Besides the involvement in the production and distribution of Mexican films, U.S. corporations dominated much of the screening sector. In 1949, William Jenkin's group controlled 80% of the film theatres in Mexico (see García Riera 152). Even at the height of the Mexican film industry in the 1940s and 50s, more than 80% of all films screened were Hollywood productions.

U.S. domination on the Mexican market included not only film but also music corporations, which were often vertically and horizontally integrated,

¹² "dans un pays à structure capitaliste dépendant".

profiting from transmedia synergies as in the case of the *comedia ranchera* and *ranchera* music. Many of Tito Guízar's Mexican recordings, which he commenced in 1927, were actually made for Columbia and RCA Victor (but also for Mexican labels such as Peerless). The same holds true for other 'Mexicanist' music stars, including Jorge Negrete, one of the most famous Mexican singers and actors of all time, who recorded for RCA Victor. In a way, Negrete would in the early 1940s become Guízar's successor, along with Pedro Infante, the other major actor-singer star of both *música ranchera* and *comedia ranchera* (although he recorded for the Mexican label Peerless). Significantly, Negrete starred in the 1948 eponymous remake of *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, again directed by Fernando de Fuentes. Whereas Jorge Negrete, apart from his first short film *Cuban Nights* for Warner Bros. (1937), exclusively embodied *mexicanidad*, or a supposed 'essence' of Mexican cultural identity in the star persona of 'el charro cantor,' Tito Guízar, despite being a precursor of this Mexicanist figure in *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, represented a seemingly broader spectrum of *latinidad*, though mostly filtered through the prism of Hollywood that depicted highly exoticised imaginaries of Latin American otherness.

Indeed, before Guízar was cast as protagonist of Fernando de Fuentes's *comedia ranchera*, he already had performed as a singer in Hollywood films and his success as a musician and radio performer included his own radio show in Los Angeles, *Tito Guízar y su guitarra*.¹³ Based on his musical success, Guízar's film persona as a Latino singer was established in his first film appearances in the series *Rambling' Round Radio Row* in 1933 and 1934, produced by the Vitaphone division of Warner Bros. Guízar was oriented transnationally both in

¹³ Jorge Negrete also tried to have a career in the USA and worked in New York City in 1937, but he was not very successful and mainly just sang in night clubs. In *El Yumir*, he played with Cuban composer Eliseo Grenet and got the chance to enact the role of a Cuban musician in his first film, the Warner Bros. short *Cuban Nights* (1937), set to the music of Grenet. In the same year, Negrete starred in his first Mexican film, *La Madrina del Diablo / The Devil's Godmother* (1937). Although he soon had a brilliant film career in Mexico, he repeatedly attempted to work in Hollywood. In 1939 he signed a contract with 20th Century Fox to produce Spanish-language films in Hollywood, although they never materialised. His second and last film production in the USA was the medium-length Technicolor film *Fiesta* (1941), directed by LeRoy Prinz and distributed by United Artists.

terms of the film productions he worked for and the roles he played, embodying musicians such as a Spanish singer in the Vitaphone short *See, See, Señorita* (1935) or a singer in Argentina in *Under the Pampas Moon* (Fox 1935). Subsequent to the international success of *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, Tito Guízar starred in numerous Mexican *comedias rancheras* such as *Amapola del camino/Poppy of the Path* (1937), *¡Qué lindo es Michoacán!/Beautiful Michoacan* (1943) and *¡Como México no hay dos!/There is Nothing Like Mexico* (1944); the latter two's titles already verbalise the genre-specific patriotic exaltation of (rural, folkloric) Mexico. Furthermore, Guízar starred in Hollywood productions in Spanish and English. Both the Mexican and Hollywood films capitalised on his star persona as a 'singing Latin lover,' frequently modelled on the *charro* character of his principal role at the Rancho Grande, but sometimes with a self-reflexive touch, as in *The Big Broadcast of 1938* (Mitchell Leisen, Paramount 1938) and *El trovador de la radio/Radio Troubador* (Richard Harlan, Dario Productions 1938). Congruously, Guízar also starred as a 'Mexican singing cowboy' in the Hollywood westerns *The Llano Kid* (Edward D. Venturini, Paramount Pictures 1939) and *El rancho del pinar/The Singing Charro* (Richard Harlan and Gabriel Navarro, Dario Productions 1939). Characteristic for his international career, Guízar also played a 'Mexican singing charro' in an Argentinean production, *De México llegó el amor/The Love Came From Mexico* (Richard Harlan, 1940), featuring Amanda Ledesma, a major star of the popular musical genre *cine tanguero*, or tango film. Equally characteristic for the transnational interconnection of the Mexican film industry, Amanda Ledesma was invited to star in Mexico, where she made eight films, her first being *Cuando quiere un mexicano/When a Mexican Loves* (Juan Bustillo Oro, 1944), starring Jorge Negrete. The film is also known as *La gauchita y el charro/The Gaucho Girl and the Charro* and thus corresponds to the 'national' figures of Argentina and Mexico as well as to the star personas of both Amanda Ledesma and Jorge Negrete, who were widely known as *la 'rubia diosa del tango'* ('the blond goddess of tango') and *'el charro cantor'* ('the singing charro'). Bringing together these singer-actor stars was by no means an exceptional case. Quite on the contrary, 'importing' stars and other outstanding film personnel apparently was a strategy to boost the Mexican film industry and to facilitate market expansion, capitalising both on stars and successful genres,

similar to the common practice in Hollywood, which served as the model for the Mexican studio system. Similar to the *comedia ranchera*, the *cine tanguero* was one of the most popular genres both nationally and in Latin America, with the main stars also being singer-actors. Apart from Amanda Ledesma, Libertad Lamarque and Hugo del Carril, the two other main singer-actor stars of the *cine tanguero* (besides Carlos Gardel, who already died in 1935) were also invited to work in Mexican cinema. Whereas Carril only starred in two Mexican films in the mid-1940s and pursued his career in Argentina (where he also became an outstanding filmmaker), Libertad Lamarque stayed in Mexico and starred in more than 40 films, many of which pertain to the *comedia ranchera*. In her first Mexican film, Luis Buñuel's *Gran Casino* (1947), Lamarque starred together with Jorge Negrete, just like Amanda Ledesma. Though the film is not a *comedia ranchera*, it nonetheless contains elements of this genre such as *rancheras* sung by Negrete, which are complemented with tangos sung by Lamarque.

While U.S. companies and government exerted a strong influence on the Mexican film industry, transnational interconnections were not confined to U.S.-Mexican relations. One of the reasons why principal stars of Argentinean cinema began to work in the Mexican film industry was the political intervention of the U.S. government, whose Good Neighbour policy had lasting effects on the development of Latin American film production (see Schnitman 31-2). In 1940, the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (CIAA) was created within the U.S. Department of State, to promote Roosevelt's Good Neighbour policy. Because Argentina stayed neutral in WWII (until shortly before the end of the war), the CIAA decided to impose a raw film stock quota on the country's film industry, while allied Mexico received support at all levels, including unlimited supply of raw film as well as loans, technological equipment and technical advice. This policy was one of the main reasons for the decline of Argentinean cinema in the early 1940s, and led to Mexico's definite ascent to the most important film producing nation in Latin America.

4. Genre Matrices, Hybridisation and Intra-National Exclusions

The Mexican film industry advanced to be Latin America's leading cinema in the 1940s and the *comedia ranchera* was one of the main genres that helped to bring about this success.¹⁴ *Allá en el Rancho Grande* can be considered as the matrix of the *comedia ranchera*, a genre evolving around melodramatic conflicts of love and friendship in the folkloric realm of an idyllic hacienda, abundant with musical interludes sung by *charros* and occasional comical scenes.



Allá en el Rancho Grande

The *comedia ranchera* was aptly called “el cine mexicano por excelencia” by Jorge Ayala Blanco (69) – in analogy to the famous definition of the western as “the American Cinema par excellence.” Indeed, this parallel is quite appropriate,

¹⁴ The generic impact of the *comedia ranchera* on other Latin American cinemas is not only evident in Argentinean films but also, for example, in the Brazilian *filme de cangaceiro*, that did not only draw to generic regimes from the western but also to the “cine mexicano por excelencia” (see Schulze).

not only because the *comedia ranchera* constructs a nationalist imaginary of Mexico and was a prevailing genre in Mexican cinema for two decades, widely distributed in Latin America and Spain. It is also the generic similarities of the “cine mexicano por excelencia” with the western or rather with the subgenre of the singing cowboy film, which is most evident at the level of the syntax, whereas, analogue to the western, semantic elements like characters, locations, sets, etc., are ‘typically’ Mexican, stemming from the *charro*’s culture. Besides the resemblances with the western, the *comedia ranchera* exhibits other generic matrices, including the rural Mexican melodrama from the silent film era, with films such as *En la hacienda/At the Hacienda* (1920) by Ernesto Vollrath. A pronounced non-cinematic influence is the *género chico* of the *zarzuela*, i.e. the more brief and popular form of the Spanish lyric-dramatic genre that alternates between spoken scenes and singing numbers and dance. In the late 19th century the Mexican *zarzuela* increasingly obtained a nationalist tone, and evolved into a new genre, the *revista de música* or *revista*, which made various singers music and film stars, especially of the *canción ranchera* and the *comedia ranchera*, for instance Tito Guízar or Lucha Reyes (see Brenner 75-6). *Allá en el Rancho Grande* also displays similarities with two immensely successful Hispanic films set in the countryside – *Nobleza gaucha/Gaucha Nobility* (1915), an Argentinean production directed by Humberto Cairo, Ernesto Gunche and Eduardo Martinez de la Pera, which is set in the pampa and idealises ‘national’ folklore; and the Spanish film *Nobleza baturra/Rustic Chivalry* (1935), a remake of Juan Vila Vilamala’s eponymous film from 1925, directed by Florián Rey, that tells the story of an honest girl, whose reputation is tarnished by a rejected suitor.

Similar to the filmic and non-cinematic predecessors, *Allá en el Rancho Grande* and the *comedia ranchera* in general draw heavily on the array of Mexican folklore, mainly from the state of Jalisco, including not only the *charro* and the *china poblana*, but also *canciones rancheras* and a *jarriepo* or bull riding, to name but a few of the ‘national’ traditions represented in the film. The pivotal function of the *canción ranchera* is evident in a central set-piece of the genre, the ‘duelo de coplas,’ a singing duel performed in a *cantina* by the hero, embodied by the film’s star Tito Guízar, and his antagonist. Equally characteristic for the emerging genre, a scene with a cock fight is interrupted by a *jarabe tapatío*, a ‘Mexicanist’

dance performed by *charros* and *chinas poblanas*, played by Olga Falcon and Emilio Fernández, who had already embodied Mexicans in Hollywood cinema and westerns more specifically (with many westerns still to come). Rafael Aviña (152) has aptly called the *comedia ranchera* “un cine exageradamente mexicano,” i.e. an “exaggeratedly Mexican cinema.” Indeed, the *comedia ranchera* is characterised by a certain folkloric ‘excess’ that symbolises *mexicanidad* at many levels, especially in the *mise-en-scène*. For domestic audiences, this representational strategy implies a nation-building function, as elaborated above. However, the folkloric ‘national’ traits foregrounded are, in fact, regional, thus implying certain intra-national exclusions, not only in terms of regional cultural belonging, but also regarding the specific configurations of race, class and gender (a point I will come back to).

Although the ‘national’ particularities are very pronounced in the *comedia ranchera*, they do not bring about a cultural particularism that would result in unintelligibility for foreign audiences and thus obstruct the commercialisation of the respective films. ‘Mexicanist’ folklore is employed as a representational regime that exhibits what Graham Huggan (vii) has termed “postcolonial exotic,” referring to “the global commodification of cultural difference.” For non-Mexican audiences, the generic regimes employed exoticise the cultural particularity represented in terms of ultimately relaying the foreign back to the familiar. This is attained especially by drawing from and altering seemingly ‘universal’ genre patterns popularised by Hollywood cinema. Besides, the strategy of capitalising both on ‘Latino’ folklore and on singer stars in musicals was already proved by Hollywood productions in Spanish, aimed to secure film markets in Latin America and Spain with the advent of sound film. Whereas the greater part of Spanish version films and Spanish-language productions made in Hollywood were unsuccessful (see Jarvinen), the films employing famous singers as actors, notably the musicals of the early 1930s starring the Argentinean Carlos Gardel and the Mexican José Mojica, were big box office attractions and capitalised on exoticised regional music and folklore.¹⁵

¹⁵ Apparently, musical numbers and exoticised folklore only in combination with singer-stars worked as a successful formula. One of the first Spanish language productions from Hollywood with the programmatic title *Charros, Gauchos y Manolas* (Hollywood Spanish Pictures 1930), directed by

Thus, the pronounced auto-exoticising representation of cultural difference serves as a marker of product differentiation in a film market strongly dominated by Hollywood productions (for Hollywood's market leadership in Latin America see Segrave; de Usabel). Therefore, the foregrounding of cultural specificity did not exclude but rather attracted foreign audiences, especially in Latin America. In this regard, Ana M. López's observation that Mexican cinema "produces a continental voice that is, nevertheless, deeply nationalistic" (8) is especially apt for the *comedia ranchera*.

The "continental voice" of the "cine mexicano por excelencia" articulated in *Allá en el Rancho Grande* and the genre in general, is profoundly conservative, if not reactionary. Clearly, the *comedia ranchera* can be read as an apology for the social order of a feudal society, and thus rather corresponds to the bygone Porfirian era than to the present government of President Lázaro Cárdenas del Río, whose leftist politics included the distribution of land to the peasants. In contrast, the *comedia ranchera* idealises social hierarchies, evident in the attitude of the *patrón* of the hacienda in *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, who programmatically explains to his son that the owner of a ranch has to take care of "his poor peasants" as a father/priest, doctor, and sometimes even gravedigger.¹⁶

As Raphaëlle Moine has underlined, genre hybridisation outside of Hollywood can reflect the "need to maintain cultural identity while responding to the dominance and influence of American cinema" (152). This holds true particularly for the "cine mexicano por excelencia," which strongly draws from genre patterns of the western and occasionally subverts them with specific "productions of locality" (see Appadurai 178-99). On the other hand, the *comedia ranchera* propagates a very pronounced nationalism and affirms a conservative imaginary of *mexicanidad* that excludes intra-national alterities. Even though the *comedia ranchera* ostentatiously hybridises the western which is referred to as a generic point of reference, the "cine mexicano por excelencia" is by no means simply

the Catalan musician Xavier Cugat, already tried to capitalise on the folkloric sceneries of Mexico, Argentina and Spain (which would all become central backgrounds for film productions in the respective countries), but the film was unsuccessful, arguably in part because of its incoherence, but mainly due to the lack of familiar and popular personnel.

¹⁶ "como el dueño de un rancho tiene que hacer para sus pobres peones: padre, médico y as veces hasta enterrador."

a *cinéma mineur* vis-à-vis dominant Hollywood cinema. Rather, the *comedia ranchera* not only evolved as a predominant cinema in Latin America from the late 1930s to the 1950s (coming second after Hollywood), but it exhibits marked discursive exclusion within the representation of the hacienda as nucleus of the nation. Traditions from one region, mainly Jalisco, are elevated to the ‘national’ identity of Mexico, whereas other regional and urban spaces are completely dismissed or devaluated – as in the case of *¡Ay Jalisco... no te rajes!*/*Jalisco, Don't Backslide* (1941), directed by Joselito Rodríguez, where traditionally vested men from Jalisco, including the hero played by Jorge Negrete, in a ‘duelo de coplas’ defeat the antagonists from the city in modern western suits.

The *comedia ranchera* affirms a hierarchical social order with the *patrón* reigning over peasants; significantly, the figure of the *charro* is represented as main character and as a national figure. By contrast, the *vaquero* who belongs to the lower stratum of society, in which indigenous people are much more common, has no voice or central function in the narrative of the “cine mexicano por excelencia.” Significantly, indigenes are reduced to an exoticised imaginary of cultural authenticity without being granted any agency or even given a voice in narrative, as demonstrated by the example of *La justicia del Gavilán Vengador*.



La justicia del Gavilán Vengador

Another telling example would be *Fanfarrón: ¡aquí llegó el valentón!*/*The Boaster* (shot in 1938, first publicly exhibited in 1943) directed by Fernando A. Rivero, featuring Jorge Negrete and Emilio Fernández. The opening shots affirm *mexicanidad* in the sense of a ‘Mexicanist’ cultural identity. First, a long shot evokes an ‘archetypal’ Mexican landscape with maguey plants casting deep shadows, thus creating a strong visual rhythm in front of a vast plain. What follows is a shot of the production company’s logo, a tableau vivant of a stylised Aztec Indian in a martial pose, and a *charro* on his horse, embodied by Jorge Negrete, known as ‘el charro cantor.’



Fanfarrón: ¡aquí llegó el valentón!

Both figures, the traditional Aztec and the *charro*, epitomise Mexican culture with the fundamental difference that the indigene is reduced to a symbolic function, whereas the *charro* is the main hero of film. In the *comedia ranchera*, indigenes usually have no function in the plot and are represented merely as emblems of *mexicanidad* in the sense of the nationalist discourses on *mestizaje* and the Mexican “raza cósmica” (see Vasconcelos) that affirm a hybrid cultural identity with nation-building function based on the mixture of races. The figure of the indigene does not obtain any agency in the narrative of the *comedia ranchera*. The same holds true for women. Although women are not simply reduced to emblematic images, in the dominant melodramatic mode of the *comedia ranchera* they are confined to passivity and, frequently,

suffering vis-à-vis their unconditional love for the macho *charro*. What Christine Gledhill has pointedly called the “gendering of genres,” which stabilises a “masculinist national imaginary” (Gledhill 350), is arguably most pronounced in the *comedia ranchera* and its affirmation of Mexico as a macho nation. Rather than a counter-hegemonic cultural practice, hybridisations of the western in the *comedia ranchera* usually result in a national imaginary characterised by a hierarchical social order and discursive exclusions of women and indigenes.

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