

Masculinities in Robert Rodríguez's *Mexico Trilogy*

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1) Introduction

The aim of this article is to deconstructively unveil and critically discuss the various layers of masculinity and the notion of *machismo* used by Robert Rodríguez in his *Mexico Trilogy*, which comprises the films *El Mariachi* (1992), *Desperado* (1995), and *Once upon a time in Mexico* (2003). For the theoretical framework, I am interested in the interplay of socio-historical concepts of (Latin American) masculinity and the usage of masculine stereotypes in motion pictures, for which Connell's (1995 and 2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity and Berg's (2002) notions on Latin American stereotypes proved applicable. Connell presents hierarchically organised key categories of masculinity in terms of patriarchal power, starting with hegemonic masculinity which guarantees the continuation of men's dominance over women because it can be perceived as "the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity)" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 832). According to Bradley (2007: 46), this form of identity is what "we refer to as "macho": tough, competitive, self-reliant, controlling, aggressive and fiercely heterosexual." Complicit, marginalized, and subordinate masculinities serve as associated categories, although the main emphasis for the analysis of the selected films will be placed upon hegemonic masculinity. In addition to this, I argue that Connell's typology needs to be enhanced by including more hybrid types of masculinity as a means of resistance to patriarchal masculinity, as hybridity can be considered a means of "strategic reversal of the process of domination" (Bhabha 1994: 112). With reference to Carpenter (2010: 668), I consider "the representation of hegemonic masculinity as a fluid process with changing role boundaries and the absence of a clear-cut dominating male/dominated female gender dichotomy." Rodríguez's trilogy, as I will show, can be seen as a symbolic allegory of Western colonialism, and therefore seen as questioning images of hegemonic masculinity.

As far as masculinity studies are concerned, they are usually considered as complementary to, and not in competition with, Gender Studies and Feminist Theory, though they were comparatively disregarded at their beginnings. This neglect of the other gender ultimately led to the "current academic fascination with masculinity" (Breger 2008: 155), which was encouraged by the second wave of feminism in the mid- 1970s when the first conferences on masculinity took place in 1974 and 1975. Soon after Joan Scott's (1986) article "*Gender: A*

Useful Category of Historical Analysis” was published, many historians started to use gender as a constructive category of analysis with regard to masculinity. Research on this particular topic became increasingly popular, as Paul R. Deslandes’ book review on recent publications demonstrates, in which he emphasises (Deslandes 2011: 189) the late “attempts to privilege the study of emotion and friendship, noting how the bonds forged between men in a variety of contexts could satisfy a broad range of social, cultural, and political demands.” Past scholars have often opted for a sociological perspective on masculinity, for example authors such as Michael Messner (1992), Michael Kimmel (1994), and Harry Brod (1994), among others. Pivotal to this development are the sociological works by Raewyn (Robert) W. Connell, often in joint collaboration with Tim Carrigan (1985), John Lee (1985), and James Messerschmidt (2005). Up until now, Connell’s *Masculinities* (1995) remains a classic reference within the field of masculinity studies, as it provides a theory on the plurality of masculinities, for which reason it will serve as one of the main scientific references used in this study.

However, an essential methodological question arises as to whether the mentioned theories are fully applicable in a Latin American context, or if they only partially fit. Histories of gender and sexuality have formed constituent element of Latin American studies for almost three decades, and have been significantly imperative “to challenging essentialist notions of Latin American difference (backwardness) and narratives of unidirectional change” (Strasser and Tinsman 2010: 84). For historians, this affects studies of Spanish and Portuguese colonialism, literary studies of gender and modernization, and labour history. Masculinity is a mutable category and does not possess any “universal standard of manhood that transcends time and place”, because its “codes are socially and culturally constructed” and may alter by age and class, among other factors (Lehfeldt 2008: 464). According to López-Vicuña (2004: 243), “[a] critical revision of discourses on masculinity in Hispanic and Latin American culture is beginning to emerge” by introducing “more nuanced discussions of how different models of masculinity are reproduced and disseminated in Latin American culture.”

I was particularly intrigued by how this topic is dealt with in rather entertaining and, at the box offices, successful films, for we can detect as much useful social criticism, symbolic hints, and cultural allegories as in independent Chicano films. Rodríguez himself, in an interview with Berg, refers to this idea in the same way:

RR: [...] I think that one of the problems is that when Latin filmmakers get that chance to make a film, they try to do too much, and make up for all the movies that were never made before. And then it becomes too preachy. You can be much more subversive, you can be much more sly than that, and get everything you want in there. If you’re just conscientious about it and try to trick people by getting them to watch something

entertaining and show them something else at the same time. Slip it in the genre. (Berg 2002: 270)

Section 2 of my study presents a synopsis of each of the three films of the *Mexico Trilogy* by already considering questions of masculinity, and then they are discussed in greater detail in section 3 before I present my conclusions.

2) The Mexico Trilogy

In each of the three films that constitute Rodríguez's *Mexico Trilogy*, the plot and the leitmotiv remain the same, although changes in appearances and characters occur. In *El Mariachi*, a young musician (Carlos Gallardo) arrives at a small Mexican town in order to find employment as a mariachi. He goes from bar to bar asking for work, but there seems to be no market for traditional Mexican music, which is ironically demonstrated in the first bar scene when the bar owner shows him a machine that replaces an entire music group. Dressed in black and carrying his guitar case, the mariachi resembles Azul (Reinol Martínez), an escaped criminal who carries his guns in a similar guitar case while seeking revenge on Maurice, nicknamed Moco (Peter Marquardt), a white American drug lord. Moco's men mistake the mariachi for Azul and try to kill him, but the innocent Mexican shakes-off his pursuers by, in self-defence, killing several of Moco's hitmen. The mariachi finds shelter at the second bar he visits, which is owned by Dominó (Consuelo Gómez), who helps him to hide in her flat above the bar. He soon falls in love with her, oblivious of the fact that Dominó used to be Moco's lover who had bought her the bar, the flat, and a motorbike that should quickly bring her to his heavily guarded villa on the outskirts of town whenever he wants to see her. When Moco's men finally find the mariachi, they bring him to his villa, but Moco, who is the only one who knows what Azul looks like, realizes the mix-up and sends him back. Meanwhile, Azul, being deprived of his guns because of an accidental case switch, takes Dominó hostage who, unaware of the mariachi's safe return, reveals Moco's address for she fears for the Mariachi's life. Azul and Dominó arrive at Moco's villa, where Moco kills both Azul and Dominó, since he finds out about her feelings for the mariachi. The musician returns to the villa shortly after being told that the woman he loves has been taken there, but upon arrival, he only finds her dead body in front of Moco and his men. The drug lord now cripples the mariachi by shooting his left hand. In an act of rage and revenge, Moco is finally killed by the mariachi, who then leaves the town on Dominó's motorbike, taking with him Azul's guitar case full of guns, Dominó's dog, and her knife. It is a very sad ending as the mariachi has not only lost his love, but also his old life as a musician, and the only means of survival will be to become an outlaw

like those who he despises. Filming took place in Gallardo's hometown, Ciudad Acuña, which was also very well known to Rodríguez, and the independent and low budget character of this film is emphasised by the fact that, for example, all of the actors brought their own wardrobe to the set. Rodríguez and Gallardo had already been familiar faces in Ciudad Acuña, and "[most] of the props had been found or borrowed, and Rodríguez achieved his tracking shots using a wheel-chair "dolly" on loan from the local hospital" (Macor 2010: 155). To hunt and to be hunted, and loss and vengeance are the most important leitmotifs of *El Mariachi*, which will be further developed in the following sequels, and which can be considered important categories of masculinity within the (post)colonial process, as, according to Thakkar (2010: 710),

[hunting] marks the colonizer's identity from the very outset of the colonization process, whereas *being* hunted is the mark of the defeated, the underdog, the downtrodden. But neither of these categories is entirely static or distinct and, as we shall see, the identities of hunter and hunted are gender-coded in ways that are equally shifting."

The sequel *Desperado*, now starring Antonio Banderas as the mariachi, reprises the idea of revenge and mistaken identity. The mariachi arrives in another small Mexican town, looking for Bucho, real name César (Joaquim de Almeida), who he holds responsible for the killing of his late girlfriend, Dominó. In a flashback scene, the audience is taken back to the penultimate scene of *El Mariachi* in which Dominó is killed by Moco and in which the mariachi (Banderas takes Gallardo's role in the flash-back scene) is wounded. This flashback scene is motivated by introducing the topic of justified vengeance while simultaneously exposing the mariachi's pain as he is still haunted by his past. The flashback scene is embedded into a dream sequence that shows the mariachi, accompanied by two other mariachis, singing and playing the guitar in a bar. The opening credits for *Desperado* are shown throughout that dream sequence in which, suddenly, the dead Moco and one of his hitmen appear. This surreal scene is highlighted by different lighting setups and leads to the flashback scene of Dominó's death. Tormented and visibly shaken, the mariachi awakes from this nightmare, by doing so the previous scene's dream character is exposed, and the proper plot begins. After a shooting in a bar, during which he killed many of Bucho's men, the mariachi is badly wounded, but saved by Carolina (Salma Hayek), the owner of a bookstore. Like in *El Mariachi*, he is rescued by a woman, finds shelter at her place, and eventually falls in love with her, not knowing that she was Bucho's lover before. Although explicitly understood as a parallel storyline, *Desperado* differs from its predecessor by emphasising the erotic relationship between the female and male protagonist, which culminates in a love scene that contains a variety of camera shots, ranging from mid-shots to medium close-ups to close-ups. The issue

of mistaken identity manifests itself now in the role of Navajas (Danny Trejo), the knife-throwing assassin sent by Bucho's superiors to kill the mariachi, but Bucho's men erroneously kill Navajas. Realizing this mistake and Carolina's betrayal, Bucho sends his hitmen to kill them both, but they escape. When the mariachi has the opportunity to shoot Bucho from the rooftop, he can see his face and suddenly hesitates to shoot him, incomprehensible for Carolina. Instead of killing the man he was so long after, he reunites with his old friends Campa (Carlos Gallardo, who played the leading role in *El Mariachi*) and Quino (Albert Michel J.) for a final showdown with Bucho's men during which many of the hitmen, but also Campa and Quino, die. In the third-last scene, which bears significant resemblance to the penultimate scene of *El Mariachi*, the couple arrives at Bucho's farm where it is disclosed that Bucho and the mariachi are brothers. Both of them had been ignorant of that fact, the mariachi until he saw Bucho's face from the rooftop, and Bucho until the mariachi's arrival at the farm. The brothers do not want to kill each other, but when Bucho aims to shoot Carolina in revenge, the mariachi kills his own brother. In the final scene, the mariachi is shown walking along a desert road, when Carolina drives by and invites him to join her. He throws away his guitar case full of guns, but quickly returns to pick it up again, explaining "Just in case", which can be understood as a foreshadowing of forthcoming events. It was originally planned that Gallardo would resume the role of the mariachi, but "after an executive reshuffling at Sony/Columbia, he was told, that was no longer an option" (Macor 2010: 175), as the studio wanted to cast a famous actor, such as Antonio Banderas. Though not Mexican, but Spanish, Rodríguez was eventually convinced by this choice, and *Desperado*, now budgeted at just over \$7 million, could be shot in Ciudad Acuña again. The most audible difference in comparison to *El Mariachi* is the switch from Spanish to English as the main film language, which occasionally feels strange, in particular when two characters, who apparently have Spanish as their mother tongue, talk in English, for example, all the conversations between the mariachi and Carolina, or between him and his criminal brother Bucho. Inconsistencies in the logical plot of *Desperado* considered a sequel to *El Mariachi* are noticeable, too, especially Bucho's questionable responsibility for Carolina's death. However, this was intended by Rodríguez, who did not consider *Desperado* a true sequel, nor a remake in English, but something in between. This approach is visible in the end, when the mariachi kills his own brother, as "I [Rodríguez] wanted the mariachi character to kill somebody that would make him *not* want to kill anymore. I needed to end that somehow" (Berg: 2002: 263).

The third entry in the *Mexico Trilogy*, though more complex in characters, action, and subplots, follows the same pattern of vengeance, betrayal, and, in a slightly rudimentary form, mistaken identities. *Once upon a time in Mexico* is composed of many flashbacks, which inform the audience of the mariachi's fate of the past few years. In these flashbacks, we see how the mariachi and Carolina (Antonio Banderas and Salma Hayek reprise their roles), confront General Márquez (Gerardo Vigil), a mean and dangerous guerrilla leader, in a bar, where they kill him and his men, at least that is what they think. After some further adventures together, they marry, have a daughter, and seem to live a quiet and happy life in a Mexican village. However, Márquez did not die, and hunts them down, kills Carolina and the child, and leaves the mariachi lusting for vengeance again. His cultural identity of masculinity is shaped by his loss, and he becomes a hero in the village he lives in, appreciated by his fellow villagers as a type of social bandit, comparable to the figure of Zorro:

Zorro's cultural identity is completely in line with his role as a model of resistance. As an outlaw supportive of and admired by the oppressed, Zorro belongs to the category of "social bandits," which includes "persons whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who...are considered by their people as heroes, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation" (Hobsbawm 2000[1969], 20). (Lie 2001: 491)

Although these events are solely told via flashbacks, they are frequently referred to by various characters during the actual plot, which starts with the recruiting of the mariachi by CIA agent Sheldon Sands (Johnny Depp). The mariachi should kill General Márquez who is hired by Mexican drug lord Armando Barillo (Willem Dafoe) to kill the recently elected President of Mexico (Pedro Armendáriz Jr.). The mariachi should not prevent the assassination of the President of Mexico, which is scheduled for the day of the death, *el Día de los Muertos*, one of the highest holidays in Mexico. On the contrary, he is supposed to wait until General Márquez has accomplished his mission, and then satisfy his revenge by killing the General. Sand's goal lays in replacing an honourable national leader, who refuses to cooperate with drug lords and the CIA, with a corrupt one chosen by the CIA. The already familiar topic of loss and vengeance is multiplied in *Once upon a time in Mexico*, as Sands, who is himself a ruthless criminal only having his own profit in mind, tries to use retired FBI agent Jorge Ramírez (Rubén Blades). Years ago, Barillo had murdered Ramírez's partner, and Sands adeptly plays with the latter's feelings of anger to lure him out of retirement so that he would kill Barillo. To monitor Barillo's move, Sands includes the Mexican AFN officer Ajedrez (Eva Mendes), with whom he has a secret love affair, not knowing that Ajedrez is Barillo's daughter who actually spies on Sands and the AFN. Various other subplots enrich the dense web of lies and betrayals in *Once upon a time in Mexico*, such as Barillo's deception by Billy

Chambers (Mickey Rourke) and by Cucuy (Danny Trejo). On the day of the death, the mariachi arrives at the presidential palace pretending to be just a mariachi. He is accompanied by two of his old friends in music and battle, Lorenzo (Enrique Iglesias) and Fideo (Marco Leonardi). He quickly realizes the decency of the recently elected leader and therefore decides to protect the president against any harm. Meanwhile, Barillo and Ajedrez capture Sands, and drill out his eyes before setting him free as a cautionary example and a stern warning to the CIA to never interfere again in Mexican affairs. With the help of a little boy he met before, Sands manages to kill his pursuers and arrives badly wounded at the palace gates. At the end, several showdowns conclude the *Mexico Trilogy*. Sands kills Ajedrez and survives, though crippled as a blind man, whereas Barillo is killed by Ramírez, and General Márquez by the mariachi. The president is saved, and the mariachi walks again along a dusty road, but this time, though still carrying his guitar case full of guns, he proudly wears the Mexican flag around his neck, and continues his walk with a smile on his face.

3) Questions of masculinity

The *Mexico Trilogy*, in particular *El Mariachi*, can be best described as a *mezcla* of two different genres, the so-called Mexican *narcotraficante* film, one of the leading Mexican police genres of the *cine fronterizo* (border films), and the transnational action genre to which Berg (2002: 241) refers to as “warrior adventure film”:

Narratively, *El Mariachi* is in the tradition of a species of the transnational adventure film – the warrior adventure genre – rooted in the Hollywood Western, which has blossomed because of a series of cinematic cross-pollinations between Asia and Hollywood. Principally, the genre includes Hong Kong’s kung fu themes, and Hollywood blockbuster actioners. (Berg 2002: 242)

The protagonist of a warrior adventure film is always a man who is usually skilled in martial arts and/or who possesses extraordinary physical skills. He abides by a code of justice and morality, which is often triggered by the loss of someone beloved or something vital to him. This loss turns him into an avenging angel, who, driven by revenge, seeks comfort in spirituality before the ultimate show-down with his enemy. We can detect these characteristics in all three films, although *Desperado* and *Once upon a time in Mexico* show a stronger tendency towards warrior adventure films than *El Mariachi*. In a way, *El Mariachi* narrates the beginning and the making of such a male hero by simultaneously questioning standard concepts of masculinity. He is a musician, not a martial arts specialist, and in contrast to the other male characters in the film, he has neither a moustache nor distinctive

male features, and offers a more hybrid perspective on masculinity. He is in fact more of an anti-macho. As Berg (1992: 107) succinctly puts it:

Machismo is the name of the mutual agreement between the patriarchal state and the individual male in Mexico. Through it the individual acts out an implicit, socially understood role --*el macho*-- which is empowered and supported by the state. The state in turn is made powerful by the male's identification with and allegiance to it....More than a cultural tradition, then, *machismo* is the ideological fuel driving Mexican society."

El Mariachi redefines this assumption about manhood, as the male protagonist does not drink or smoke (Mariachi: "My voice is my life"), nor is he interested in guns or fights, for which he is ridiculed by both men and women. The bar-tender of the first bar gives him a weird look when he orders "un refresco", as does Dominó upon discovering that he is not a violence seeking criminal. Violence, therefore, becomes "the defining factor in a specific construction of hegemonic masculinity, while non-violence becomes the marker of a subordinate masculinity that is marginalized and ridiculed" (Knight 2010: 692). It is only in the penultimate scene that the mariachi is considered a true man in the eyes of others, and this is because he takes a gun and shoots Moco. The use of violence and the moral code of taking revenge for the loss of a loved one, although this may imply the loss of one's own life (when the Mariachi shoots Moco, all of Moco's men are around and could have easily killed him after the death of their leader), finally gains him respect. As Tompkins already argued, it is not significant "[...] whether a man is a sheriff or an outlaw, a rustler or a rancher, a cattleman or a shepherd, a miner or a gambler. What matters is that he be a *man*" (Tompkins 1992: 17-18).

This change in masculinity is reflected by a rich symbolism, for example the turtle and the scorpion, and is strongly connected to the technique of voice-overs. When the mariachi is introduced in *El Mariachi*, we see an ordinary musician coming along a Mexican road, and by voice-over, he tells us that he is looking for work as a mariachi in the next town. While telling his story, a turtle comes his way and crosses the street. The turtle is of female gender in Spanish, *la tortuga*, and possesses a rich mythology, which ranges from being a creature of both heaven and earth to one of possessing powers of female energies. The animal, as such, is a type of hybrid creature, as its species can be found both on land and in water and the aspect of "crossing borders" becomes evident in this particular scene. The mariachi represents a hybrid masculinity, a masculinity in motion which corresponds to the concept of a borderland because "[gender], mapped on the mind, body, and spirit, "is itself a borderland" (Castañeda 2003: xiii). In a metaphorical way, it equally reflects the geopolitical boundary between Mexico and the United States, that creates hybrid spaces. I will return to this point later.

The symbol of *la tortuga* underlines the anti-macho role of the mariachi, which stands in clear contrast to the symbolism of hegemonic masculinity at the end of the film, when the mariachi straddles Dominó's motor-bike. He drives out of town, carrying with him his lover's bulldog and Azul's guitar case full of guns, telling the audience, again in a voice-over, of his sad misfortune. Though not deliberately choosing this macho role, he has no other choice but to succumb to it in order to survive, for there seems no possibility to cross borders again. In *Desperado*, el mariachi is introduced via a voice-over technique, too, but this time it is an American stranger in a bar in Mexico who tells the story of "the biggest Mexican I have ever seen." This bar is populated by the most stereotypical Mexicans, in a negative sense, which meet Berg's description of popular images of the Mexican: dark, sweaty, unshaven face, antisocial attitude; the "violent, criminal, generally pathological behaviour (he is a bundle of hostility waiting to erupt)" (Berg 2002: 16). This is highlighted by the stranger's ironic remarks about the clients of the "other bar": "real low-lives..., not such high class acts like here...". We then see Antonio Banderas in the role of the avenging mariachi, who could not be more different in comparison to the musician he once was. The opening credits, as such, start after this first introduction, and we see the mariachi singing in his dream sequence. In one of the following scenes, he is on the dusty road again, walking towards another town. It looks like an almost parallel scene compared to the one in *El Mariachi*, as the male protagonist, dressed in black, carries his guitar case and walks along the road. The difference lays in the fact that we already know that, this time, he is not carrying a guitar, but plenty of guns in his case. The turtle will not appear again, but we spot a warning plate that shows a scorpion, and we later discover that the back of the mariachi's black jacket depicts a scorpion. A scorpion can mean both *el scorpión* and *el alacrán* in Spanish, and is of masculine gender, reinforcing the idea of masculinity. Mythologically speaking, the scorpion is often associated with protection, defence, deathly danger, and solitude, all characteristics linked to masculinity, too. Nevertheless, the mariachi still shows hybrid characteristics of masculinity which are reflected in all three films. Firstly, he still does not drink alcohol (he orders a soda pop in *Desperado* and *Once upon a time in Mexico*), secondly, he cares for a little boy who befriends him and whose life he will save at the end of *Desperado*, and thirdly, he lets himself be seduced by Carolina and decides to share his life with her. Defence and protection are idiosyncratic to the idea of a bulldog which is of masculine gender in Spanish (*el bulldog*), like dog (*el perro*), but Dominó's dog does not live up to our expectations. It is a rather cute, timid, sleepy, and harmless dog, which, also given the occasion, does not defend or attack anybody. It is a symbol of masculine versatility.

Masculinity and fatherhood are a crucial narrative strategy in *Desperado* and, most importantly, *Once upon a time in Mexico*, which proves what Judith Franco (2008: 29) suggests: “In contemporary cinema, the exploration of masculinity is often associated with fatherhood.” In *Desperado*, the mariachi meets a young boy who is used by his unemployed father to be actively involved in drug trafficking. He quickly feels responsible for the innocent boy and tries to keep him away from the drug scene by teaching him how to play guitar. Though not his biological father, he becomes emotionally attached to the boy and even puts the boy’s life before his quest for revenge: the mariachi fights Bucho’s men in a showdown during which the boy is accidentally shot. After having killed his adversaries, the mariachi is supposed to go straight to Bucho for the final climax, but instead he and Carolina bring the boy to a hospital for immediate treatment. It is only then that he can engage in the ultimate confrontation which leads to the killing of Bucho. Back at the hospital, he assumes for one last time his role as a father, figuratively speaking, and is only released from his duties when the real father appears at the hospital. The importance of being a father is even more strongly emphasized in *Once upon a time in Mexico* when we learn that he became a loving husband and father who now teaches his daughter how to play the guitar. In a Latin American context, “[to] be recognized as a full adult, a man must be a father [...]” (Collier 2005: 227). When fatherhood is taken away from him by the brutal murder of his wife and daughter, he is equally deprived of his masculinity, which needs to be restored via bloody revenge.

Another form of masculinity is related to disabilities, of which numerous examples can be found in all three films. I argue that it is due to the disabled body that masculinity can be achieved in its highest sexual expressivity. The mariachi was an ordinary man who questioned standard ways of being male, but became the “big Mexican” after the death of Dominó and the mutilation of his left hand. No longer able to properly play the guitar, he developed his physical fighting and shooting skills as a result of being partially crippled. His loss has already been described as an important driving engine behind his revenge, but it can also be regarded as his gain, too, as his physical and mental change render the mariachi a sexualized object. This can be clearly detected in the portrayal of the male protagonist by Antonio Banderas, and the way he is framed in *Desperado* and *Once upon a time in Mexico*. From extreme close-ups (the “eye”-scene in the beginning of *Desperado*) to long shots (his silhouette on the old church ruin when he plays the guitar in *Once upon a time in Mexico*), he is presented as a physically impressive man which is underlined by the way he walks, how he is dressed, and how he fights. According to Connell (1995: 53) “Masculine gender is (among

other things) a certain feel to the skin, certain muscular shapes and tensions, certain postures and ways of moving, certain possibilities in sex.”

A similar case of sexualized masculinity due to mutilation occurs in the case of Sands, who is casually dressed most of the time, including ridiculous shorts and t-shirts with “CIA”-printed on the front. But after being tortured and deprived of his eyes, his former rather average appearance changes into an extraordinary masculinity. Dressed in a black and body tight warrior suit, with black sunglasses covering his empty eye sockets, he suddenly becomes a disabled, but dark vision of masculinity, similar to John Wayne’s in *The Wings of Eagles*: “Wayne came to represent a dark vision of masculinity; it is here that he becomes the Cold Warrior/empire builder who rejects femininity (...)” (Meeuf 2009: 92). Sands rejects femininity in an even irrevocable way: while Ajedrez, his ex-lover who betrayed him, gives him a mocking kiss by asking: “Do you see anything you like?”, he shoots her dead replying: “No.”

The mutilated body as sexual attraction is already noticeable in *Desperado* when the mariachi, badly injured after a fight, is taken care of by Carolina. Although this scene does not dispense with comic amusement (Carolina is completely oblivious of how badly she cleans his wounds, causing the mariachi even more pain), it reflects on the male and mutilated body as something sexually desirable. It is, therefore, not surprising that it is Carolina who finally seduces the mariachi which leads to the only intimate scene of the *Mexican-Trilogy*. All other scenes that show Carolina and the mariachi as a couple focus either on escape and fighting, or on tender family-life, which eventually leads to contingency because “requiring a ‘hard’ masculinity as the standard when defending the nation, yet insisting upon a ‘soft’ masculinity as the foundation of an orderly, responsible home life” (Cohan 1997: xii). Their past “hard masculinity” catches up with them in the character of Márquez, who destroys their family joy by taking advantage of this regained “soft masculinity”.

One form of hegemonic masculinity is reflected in the use of the concept “el chingón/la chingada”, which is detectable in several Spanish dialogues in *Once upon a time in Mexico*. In one scene, for example, Barillo receives piano lessons, and is extremely upset when his piano teacher tells him: “Entonces hay que practicar como la chingada”. As a consequence of this comparison, an allusion to *La Malinche*, colloquially known as *La Chingada*, the piano teacher is killed. The symbol of *La Malinche*, the interpreter, advisor, and lover of Hernán Cortés, who gave birth to one of the first Mestizos during the conquest of Mexico in the 16th century, is of an ambiguous nature in Mexican cultural history. On the one hand, she betrayed her own people by becoming the conqueror’s mistress and confidant, contributing

significantly to the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire. On the other hand, though, she did not choose to be Cortés's lover because she was offered to him as a slave and raped, and it was due to her interpreting skills that Cortés was able to negotiate and to reduce the slaughter. She therefore represents the open wound of Mexico that every male, according to Octavio Paz's *El laberinto de la soledad*, has to avoid:

The macho's sense of self is founded on the desire for bodily integrity; all threats to this closed, 'intact' or hermetic state, to use Paz's terms, are repelled (31). The violence of colonial invasion of the people and the land is overwritten in sexual terms. Penetration enacts a feminisation that macho bodies must avoid. Paz sees this dynamic as deeply impressed in the Mexican psyche, and formative of its sense of the national. The macho is *chingón*, the one who wounds and penetrates. His aggressiveness assures he is not open (77). (Lewis 2009: 199)

La Malinche's ambivalence remains one of Mexico's unique characteristics and is frequently addressed in literature, music, film, and many other cultural productions:

"What is clear is that for many contemporary Chicano/a writers (male and female) Malinche functions as a multivalent sign of their multiple loyalties – the need for *both* fidelity and betrayal – as cultural translators who must mediate between the U.S. and Mexico, the written and the oral, English and Spanish, a dominant discourse and a "minority" one." (Cutter 2010: 1)

What follows is a clear American-Mexican dichotomy of binary oppositions, such as oppression/submission, strength/weakness, wealth/poverty, exploitation/suffering, masculine/feminine, and master/servant. In Rodríguez's *Mexico Trilogy*, allusion to *La Malinche* and the inherent hegemonic dependency between the United States and Mexico are manifested in the portrayal of the Mexican woman who is rendered an object of desire by symbolising the conflicts within the American-Mexican dichotomy because "she illustrates the tensions and breaks within the prevailing social order of the border" (Sugg 2001: 122). In *El Mariachi*, the Mexican woman Dominó is the object of desire of the American drug lord Mauricio, nicknamed Moco, which means "snot" in English. Moco has provided a living for Dominó by giving her property, a bar, a flat, a motorbike, etc. Although it becomes evident that their "relationship" has cooled down (in several scenes, Moco is seen with an all-obedient lover who fulfils the position of both a servant and a lover), he still considers Dominó as his property, and "[in] the context of colonialism, property is acquired by enterprising civilizers who make valid use of what savages have supposedly neglected" (Wickstrom 2005: 176). He "owns" her and claims his pseudo-contractual rights by calling her on the phone, demanding that she comes to see him straight away. When she refuses, he suspects that his powers over her are fading away, which is explicitly confirmed in the penultimate scene, in which Azul takes Dominó hostage. Realizing that Dominó cares for another Mexican, the mariachi, the

American kills his former lover. Allegorically speaking, Dominó represents one type of *La Malinche*: the Mexican lover of a white Conqueror. However, instead of continuing the interracial relationship of hegemonic dependency and hybridity, Dominó betrays the oppressor by falling in love with the mariachi, one of her own people, which can be considered a return to her cultural roots. It is her death, as a consequence, that triggers the mariachi's lust for vengeance. Dominó must die in order to enable the mariachi to stand up against the dominant drug lord, to kill him, and to change the rules of this hegemonic game. Indeed, she lives up to her name Dominó, who is linked to the famous tile game, originally deriving from the Latin word "dominus" ("lord" or "master"). By helping the mariachi, she provokes a domino effect that finally leads to the killing of the American oppressor Moco. In *Once upon a time in Mexico*, a similar reference to games is detectable in the name Ajedrez. Márquez's secret daughter is CIA agent Sands' object of desire that he believes he controls. In one scene, he is consequently irritated when he discovers that she has changed the lock to her flat in order to keep him out. That notwithstanding, he confides in her as he is the important CIA agent and she is just a Mexican police officer who, according to his worldview, must love him. This train of thought proves wrong, as it is her who betrays him and who plays a false game until checkmate. Although Carolina has never been the sexual object of an American "conqueror" before falling in love with (*Desperado*) and then marrying the mariachi (*Once upon a time in Mexico*), the pattern of betrayal remains the same. In *Desperado*, she was Bucho's former lover and betrayed him for the mariachi, whereas she used to be with Márquez in *Once upon a time in Mexico* before "putting a bullet into his heart". Despite the fact that Bucho and Márquez are Mexicans, Carolina's betrayal can still be understood as a rejection of American imperialism because both men are linked to American oppression: Bucho, because he works for Moco, and Márquez, because he is supported by the CIA to overthrow and to kill the President of Mexico. Etymologically speaking, the name "Carolina" already implies colonialism, as can be seen in the Online Etymology Dictionary: "1663, N. Amer. colony named for King Charles II" (cf.: <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=Carolina>, accessed 11.3.2012). Nevertheless, her name implies the idea of freedom, too, and her rejection of Bucho and Márquez is a symbol of freedom and of the affirmation of *mexicanidad*. Thus, the symbol of *La Malinche*, in this particular context, needs to be newly interpreted, as she is not, as Jean Franco puts it, "the root of all trouble" (1989: 131-132), but rather the nation: "In Mexican cinema the woman's body (through motherhood or prostitution/sex and violence) constitutes the site where "the nation" is articulated" (Acevedo-Muñoz 2004: 40).

Another important group of masculinities combines effeminate masculinity with female masculinity, and plays a pivotal role as an antithetical construct in the *Mexico Trilogy*. With effeminate masculinity, I mean the female presumed stereotypes, such as obeying, masochist, narcissist, passive, weak, physically inferior, which become the determining and dominating characteristics within a man. Female masculinity, though, incorporates the traditionally male considered characteristics, such as physically strong, active, demanding, sadistic, in charge, etc. (cf. Halberstam 1998). The character of Chambers, for example, shows multiple signs of an effeminate masculinity, as he is portrayed as a very complex personality, carrying his little dog with him at all times, which contributes to his anti-macho appearance. This stands in clear contradiction to the brutal murders he is forced to commit, e.g. the strangulation of Cucuy. However, this apparent antithesis is weakened by the fact that Chambers commits his crimes under pressure because he works for Barillo, a fact that is very much despised by this multi-faceted minor character. He is a passive narcissist who suffers from both being away from the United States and from being obliged to work for Barillo in Mexico. A reluctant masochist, Chambers endures daily humiliations by Barillo, including assignments for atrocious crimes, and on top of it, he has to suppress his growing homesickness, too. It is not explicitly mentioned as to whether he is gay or not, which offers even more possible interpretations as far as his male portrayal is concerned. Passivity, masochism and narcissism are the main specifics of this type of effeminate masculinity, which can be found in many characters of the *Mexico Trilogy*, starting with Moco and his men in *El Mariachi*. In all scenes with Moco, he is shown to possess an impeccable style, always dressed in an elegant white suite, which underlines his “whiteness” in contrast to the dark skinned Mexicans around him. His vanity and narcissist egocentrism is further emphasised in one scene where his lover carefully manicures Moco’s hands. Being a sadist, he takes particular pleasure in lighting his cigar by scratching a match under the ear of one of his most important hitmen. The hitmen themselves can also be considered reluctant masochists, as they allow Moco to do whatever pleases him. This passivity, in the end, guarantees the mariachi’s survival: when he aims for the gun in order to kill Moco, there would have been sufficiently enough time for Moco’s men to kill him, but they do not, on the contrary, they physically distance themselves from their leader and let him be shot by the mariachi. Female masculinities are a constant leitmotiv recognizable already at the beginning of *El Mariachi*, where a woman holds the position of a corrupt prison officer, not to mention Azul’s lovers know how to handle a gun. In *Desperado*, Bucho feels out of control when he cannot find the mariachi. Killing his own men in frustration, he orders his lover to take control of the house because someone competent needs

to do that. This type of narrating the “inadequately or incompetently masculine male” can be understood as “another way of being male that is not dependent on traditional notions of the masculine” (Buchbinder 2008: 234). But the main point of this scene is that Bucho regards a woman as more valuable, more masculine, more active and competent to get a job done in contrast to his hitmen. In *Once upon a time in Mexico*, this aspect is extended in the character of Ajedrez who is physically strong, powerful, and sadistic. As for the main female protagonists, it is above all Carolina who is convincing with her new physical powers and combat fighting skills in *Once upon a time in Mexico*, and her active seduction of the mariachi in *Desperado*. Dominó may appear less masculine in that sense, but she effectively threatens the mariachi with her knife by almost emasculating him. Her strength is not based on domination, but on taking responsibility for her own life, which, according to hooks, can be considered more a “partnership model” than a “dominator model”:

Feminist masculinity presupposes that it is enough for males to be to have value, that they do not have to “do”, to “perform”, to be affirmed and loved. Rather than defining strength as “power over”, feminist masculinity defines strength as one’s capacity to be responsible for self and others.” (hooks 2004: 117)

At the end of *El Mariachi*, it is her knife that he takes with him because it will always remind him of her.

4) Conclusion

Multiple masculinities are detectable in the *Mexico-Trilogy*, and many of these undergo significant changes leading to a plurality of masculinities by unveiling their hybridity. Most of the characters, as has been demonstrated, bear, each for themselves, a variety of masculinities, whether it is effeminate masculinity combined with violent masculinity in the characters of Chambers and Lorenzo, or female masculinity in contrast to hegemonic masculinity, both combined in the character of Carolina. With reference to Cohan and Hark (1995), who have already criticised traditional assumptions on masculinity, such as activity and sadism, which, nevertheless, are very visible in the *Mexico Trilogy*, the concept of hybrid masculinities opens the gates for a broader perception of the male. As Fouz-Hernández (2007: 12) points out, “[a] more critical masculine paradigm will necessarily have to consider men as spectacle-driven, exhibitionist, masochist, passive and narcissist; it will have to consider their masquerade and their bodies.” This has been evident in all three films, starting with *El Mariachi*, where masochism, passivity and narcissism are inherent in the characters of Moco (narcissism) and his men (passivity and masochism in their unbalanced relationship to Moco).

In *Desperado*, the spectacle-driven element is visible in the showdown when the mariachi is fighting Bucho's men together with Campa and Quino, and, as already discussed in section 2, the character of Chambers implies narcissist, passive, and masochist features in *Once upon a time in Mexico*. None of the characters of the *Mexico Trilogy* is, in the field of masculinity, unilaterally structured, on the contrary, many overlapping types of masculinity are inherent in one and the same person. As Carpenter (2010: 669) argues:

The non-static nature of hegemonic masculinity suggests a parallel with another culturally fluid phenomenon, transculturation, which is aimed at challenging and changing existing static cultural dichotomies. Hegemonic masculinity and transculturation incorporate a variety of manifestations of internal and external interactions and are characterized as processes rather than unchanging states."

Hegemonic masculinity manifests itself not only on the external level of men's dominance over women (Moco-Dominó, Bucho/Márquez-Carolina), but is clearly embedded socially as one group of men ascends over all other men (Criminal druglords-decent people, CIA-AFN, Americans-Mexicans). Masculinity, consequently, is a socially related concept that "[...] is not just an idea in the head, or a personal identity. It is also extended in the world, merged in organized social relations. To understand masculinity historically, we must study changes in those social relations" (Connell 1995: 29). These social relations are defined by their group belonging and are built on "social representations" (cf. Hinton 2000: 179) and the "fictive we of the nation" (cf. Stam/Shohat 2009: 475), which is highlighted via the questioning of hegemonic masculinities and the introduction of hybrid masculinities. As my analysis of gender-coded symbols (e.g.: la tortuga, el escorpión) and cultural allusions (el chingón/la chingada) has proved, masculinities need to be deconstructed from their local and linguistic contexts in order to reveal both their hegemonic and hybrid masculinities. A universal masculinity does not exist, because "[passing] masculinity [...] off as universal and eternal not only naturalizes and essentializes gender difference but also conceals important relations of domination and power" (Eleftheriotis 1995: 237). This is particularly emphasised in the character of Sands in relation to Hispanic culture. By shooting a torero during a *Corrida*, Sands, who has already developed the habit of killing the local cooks after lunch, has demonstrated his powerful masculinity based on the disrespect of local traditions and on his white superiority. This is of particular interest, as the bullfight, by definition, incorporates the game of power and dominance. Dominating and determining this fight, this Hispanic tradition, from an outside position, symbolizes the hegemonic relationship between the United States and Mexico. The most evident allusion to American interference in local and national affairs of Mexico is given by Sands himself after the torero's collapse: "I am creating a

balance.” As my analysis of the *Mexico Trilogy* has shown, masculine images of Latinos and Anglos, to use Berg’s terminology (Berg 2002: 22), need to be considered in their social and historical context, because they belong to the discourse on Otherness in Mexico and in the United States. The stereotype of the macho is very different in an Anglo context than it is in a Latin-American, and especially Mexican context, because

[macho] is also the quintessential virile image of the post-revolutionary Mexican nation, embodied by the *charro* (cattle rancher), an image widely circulated through film, popular music (*rancheras, mariachi*), performance, sports (rodeo, equestrian), the graphic arts (Jesús de la Helguera’s famously illustrated calendars, for example), and literature.“ (de la Mora 2006: 23)

It is pivotal to pay attention to the fact, that “[beyond] their existence as mental constructs or film images, stereotypes are part of a social conversation that reveals the mainstream’s attitudes about Others” (Berg 2002: 19). I showed how the physical change of the mariachi from *El Mariachi* to *Desperado*, and Sands’s changed appearance in *Once upon a time in Mexico*, contribute to new discourses on the male body and disabilities, skin and sex appeal. But it is in the mariachi’s body, in particular, that we observe a Mexican symbol of resistance against American oppression. As Pérez-Torres (2000: 542) remarks:

Through the *mestizo* body, power – in terms of cultural capital, in terms of social control, in terms of political agency – crosses with ever-present discourses creating and delimiting identity. Racial identity, sexual activity, gender formation, class affiliation, linguistic ability, economic mobility, national citizenship, and political engagement are all delineated by the bodies that move through their networks of signification. These discourses are instrumental in ensuring that power gets distributed and imposed unequally.

Disabled by an Anglo, deprived of his family by a corrupt Mexican working for the CIA, the mariachi stands up against the established order of political hegemony which is symbolised via hegemonic masculinities. While *El Mariachi* and *Desperado* question post-colonial issues rather symbolically and less explicitly, *Once upon a time in Mexico* deals with political issues in the main plot: the planned assassination of the newly elected President of Mexico by the American CIA together with Mexican drug lords. By saving the President and taking revenge on Márquez, the mariachi is free again, thus his freedom is an allegory of Mexican independence. He no longer is a father, neither a husband, but he will always be the son of Mexico, as he declares while rescuing the President: “Soy un hijo de México.”

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