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Pantelion's 'Transborderscapes'. Borders, Gender and Genre in *No se aceptan devoluciones* and *Pulling*

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Abstract: This essay concentrates on two bilingual immigration films, both of which conclude in a happy ending on the southern side of the border: *No se aceptan devoluciones / Instructions not Included* (Eugenio Derbez, 2013) and *Pulling Strings / Amor a Primer Visa* (Pitipol Ybarra, 2013) by the transborder media network Pantelion Films. In the context of cultural and economic politics of Latinx media within media, I examine the production and distribution company Pantelion Films as a 'borderscaping' agent, which envisions melodramatic and comic solutions for common problems faced by Latino migrants and their children. Here, I discuss how Pantelion's highly intertextual films aim to reach an international audience through the construction and deconstruction of cinematic clichés and mental and physical boundaries. In my analysis, I assess their transbordering aesthetics and narratives and define the concept of cinematic 'transborderscapes'. Corresponding with 'borderscapes' – which are more concerned with the restrictions in people's mind than with the ones on the ground –, 'transborderscapes' are constantly established and re-established through narratives, images and imaginations, but also focus on the crossing of geographical and linguistic boundaries and thus convey double, multifaceted perspectives, world views and memories from both sides of the border.

Keywords: borderscapes, transborder media companies, Pantelion Films, Latinx stereotypes, bilingualism

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Introduction

Since the very beginning of film history, the U.S.-Mexico border has continuously been staged in world cinema and has become an emblematic topography of geopolitics, national identity and human rights. As one of the most frequently screened landscapes, it has inspired filmmakers worldwide to take a stand on border and gender politics and to follow often highly predictable storylines, characters and patterns. Apart from a few exceptions like the popular 'Borscht Westerns' in Communist and Socialist countries, which reconditioned the genre in order to depict the immoralities and cruelties of capitalist expansionism, immigrants from the South were rarely depicted as positive characters, a phenomenon that is still prevalent in many neo-Westerns, as well as gangster and narco films of the 21st century like *Traffic* (2000), *No Country for Old Men* (2007) or *Sicario* (2015).[1]

In her analysis of American border media, Camilla Fojas distinguishes between the Hollywood border genre, which "reflects hegemonic colonial attitudes about the South" and critical Latino border media that "challenge the hegemony of the US model" (Fojas 2008: 2f.). Many of these latter critical 'bordersploitation films', in which Latinas/os are often the focal characters, "upending the immigrant phobic discourse of white victimization, and often complicating the polarized racial discourse at the border" (Fojas 2013: 37), belong to the global genre of new critical border films. In the midst of a global 'immigration crisis' and internationally resurgent forms of nationalism and xenophobia, many recent border films have directly reacted to the dominant discourse of white victimization and have started to focus on the 'hypervisibility' of migrants' pain, suffering, desperation and fear.[2] With empathizing emotional narratives, focusing on "politics of pity" (Chouliaraki 2006: 98), film makers have taken on the urgent challenge to educate their viewers on the constant infringement of human

[1] For an analysis of so-called 'Easterns' or 'Red Westerns' produced in the German Democratic Republic, see Denzel de Tirado (2018). For the depiction of violence and crime on the US-Mexico border, see Tabuenca Córdoba (2010) and Schubert (2018).
[2] See Cava (2016: 596).

rights that is happening every day in refugee camps and detention centers in various border regions worldwide.

This essay concentrates on a third form of border films that transcend the aesthetics of 'hegemonic discourse' and narratives of 'pity'. I argue that the two comedies *No se aceptan devoluciones / Instructions not Included* (2013) and *Pulling Strings / Amor a Primer Visa* (2013) by the relatively new transborder network Pantelion Films have created new perspectives on transborder issues and aesthetics, based on bicultural and bilingual references to North and Latin American pop culture and film history. Pantelion Films was founded in 2011 in the midst of a rise of transnational US Latino/Latin American media companies and is backed by the American entertainment company Lionsgate and the Mexican multimedia company Televisa – "the largest and most powerful Spanish language media company in existence […] serving the entertainment needs of Hispanic audiences around the world", according to the studio's website.[3] Thus, it is not only the first Latino studio in Hollywood but also reaffirms Mexico's persistent domination in the US Latino market. Known for its niche market movie productions, Pantelion has produced, acquired and distributed over 45 comedies, animated films and family dramas with top-rated Latino actors, directors and writers, mainly aiming at Latino audiences in the US and South of the border. Most of Pantelion's films gross quite high among viewers despite rather mediocre film critiques. The films are more or less bilingual and released in English and Spanish. As "Latinos don't see themselves reflected in Hollywood movies" (McNamara in Wollan 2011), the studio's declared goal is "to speak directly to acculturated and Spanish-dominant Hispanics alike", to feature Latino themes with a universal appeal to broad commercial audiences and to avoid negative stereotyped clichés of Latino representations in Hollywood films.[4] In order to fulfill these criteria, Pantelion films conform to familiar aesthetics, storylines, plots, characters, and spaces, and are highly intertextual. Titles like *Saving Private Pérez* (2011) or *Overboard* (2018) refer explicitly to American films, whereas other films like *Casa de mi padre* (2012) or *No manches Frida* (2016) are less obvious pastiches and parodies of classic film genres or adaptations of contemporary popular formats from other countries. The majority of Pantelion's films refer to border-crossings, either by representing the life of Latino immigrants in the US and the life at the border in Mexico, or by showing more or less explicit border-crossings and related experiences. Due to its reiterative and predictable plots, in which transborder issues are always solved in the end, Pantelion's films have become an active agent in 'borderscaping', imagining melodramatic and comic solutions

[3] See https://www.pantelionfilms.com/.
[4] See Fritz (2013).

for common problems of Latino migrants and their children, such as poverty and stereotypes in *From Prada to Nada* (2011) or Latina girls who try to fit in and are ashamed of their cultural heritage in *Girl in Progress* (2012).

In order to examine Pantelion Films as a 'borderscaping' agent and to explore how *No se aceptan devoluciones* and *Pulling Strings* play with the construction and deconstruction of mental, physical and aesthetic borders, I define the concept of cinematic 'transborderscapes' and 'transbordering' aesthetics, politics and narratives. The concept of 'borderscapes'[5], which has become more and more popular in international border studies since the conference *Spaces in Conflicts: Symbolic Places: Networks of Peace* (2006)[6], is very inspiring for the analysis of border films, as borderscapes are less concerned with the shaping of borders on the ground, but more with the borders in people's minds. The portmanteau term 'borderscape' combines the fluid ambiguities of the two separate notions of 'landscape' and 'border' and is formed through representations of all kinds, which rely on narratives, images and imaginations and are constantly reestablished, negotiated and represented by discourse, practices, relationships and bodies in motions. Thus, 'borderscapes' provide "alternative perspectives" (Brambilla 2015: 19). Borders are in motion, they "happen at a distance, as well as at the borderline itself" and it is not only relevant "what happens on the border or in the immediate borderlands, but also of what happens at any spatial distance from it, at any scale, on any level, in any dimension" (Schimanski 2015: 36). In this context, borders are seen as 'shifting spaces', as they define new socio-spatial identities and geographies in order to discover alternative epistemologies and topologies to the traditional binary oppositions of center and periphery and inside and outside. For film makers and critics 'borderscaping' entails that film is seen as an aesthetic and political medium, as directors construct and deconstruct borders in their audience's imagination, allowing them to gain an understanding of transitional spaces in film. The majority of films about the 'westward movement' have created one-sided views of the US-Mexican borderscape from an American point of view. In early Westerns, the 'border' was not clearly distinguishable and moved West with the pilgrims. Thus, Native Americans or Mexicans did not appear as guardians of their territory, but as trespassers and threat to the peaceful migrants. In more recent borderscape representations like Tony Richardson's *The Border* (1982) or Julia Montejo's and Jesús Nebot's *No Turning Back* (2001), the frontier between Mexico and the US is clearly

[5] See Dell'Agnese / Amilath Szary (2015)

[6] The conference was organized by Elena Dell'Agnese at the Università degli Studi di Trento, located in the autonomous Italian border region Trentino-Alto Adige (South Tyrol), which was part of Austria-Hungary until 1919 and has German and Italian as official languages. For the conference program, see Università di Trento (2006).

noticeable and represented in the form of a barbed wire fence, a border fortification or the Rio Grande. Here, the camera always remains on 'American' ground and migrants from the South are perceived as intruders of American territory. This static aesthetics changed with Gregory Nava's groundbreaking transborder migration film *El Norte* (1983), which adopted more mobile camera perspectives and became one of the first examples of the filmic and narrative aesthetics that create what I call 'transborderscapes'. In contrast to the partial perspectives in borderscape-films, transborderscape-films allow the viewers to cross the border with the migrants. Here the camera does not remain on one side of the border, but often takes the point of view of the focal characters. In addition, the viewers empathize with the migrants and undergo feelings of claustrophobia and the fear to get discovered through rapid montages of series of close-ups on faces of migrants hiding in cars and trucks and faces of border officials, checking diligently for illegal immigrants and products. Through aerial and extreme long shots of large, open spaces of the borderlands the viewers experience the vastness of the wilderness that the protagonists have to cross. Thus, nature and men – criminals, 'coyotes' and border officials – seem to make it "nearly impossible to illegally enter the United States" (Denzel de Tirado 2015: 289). Films like *Sin nombre, La misma luna, Sangre de mi sangre, The Girl* and many others do raise empathy for their likeable protagonists, but they also nourish the discourse of fear that border controls are not strict enough and that uncountable masses of clandestine migrants are constantly crossing the border from the South. In contrast to these transborder-films, which construct the border as a dangerous place, 'transborderscaping' writers, directors, producers and distributors of Pantelion Films create new, more relatable 'transborderscapes', as they aim to generate alternative marketable aesthetics and formulas to reach their audiences on both sides of the border.

The Two Sides of the Border and the Polymorphous Palimpsests in *No se aceptan devoluciones / Instructions not Included* (2013)

Eugenio Derbez's *No se aceptan devoluciones / Instructions not Included* (2013) is certainly the unsurpassed exemplar of Pantelion's strategy to invest in familiar themes and story patterns put into a transborder context as it became the "top-grossing Spanish-language film of all time at the North American box office" (McClintock 2013). *No se aceptan devoluciones* follows the typical premise of cross-border family reunifications in recent border films. Like in so many other films, the main protagonist Valentín, a single parent, illegally crosses the border to the

United States with his child.[7] But the film also offers various twists to this well-known family reunification theme. First, the mother who lives in the United States is not a hard-working immigrant Latina who is sending remittances to the family in Mexico. Instead, Julie is a blond American woman who had met Valentín (played by Derbez himself), a notorious playboy in Acapulco, only twice in her life: the first time, when she got pregnant during her romantic vacation fling, and the second time, when she returned with their daughter Maggie. It was during this second meeting that she then just disappeared to the airport, leaving Valentín alone with the baby. Here, the familiar *Three Men and a Baby* premise is intensified by the notorious reputation of Latino men as shallow lovers and absent fathers, which Ramírez Berg has identified as typical character descriptors for Latino men in American film.[8] Not surprisingly, the Latin lover, who does not know how to handle babies, decides to hitchhike across Mexico to Los Angeles to leave the baby with her mother, which leads to an interesting mix of familiar immigration themes with popular family comedy tropes.

No se aceptan devoluciones follows the aesthetics of many border films by depicting Mexico as a transit borderscape for immigrants, deploying typical road movie frames. Several sequences represent Valentín walking on endless roads, but with his punkish hair-cut, blondish highlights, converse shoes and bright blue backpack, which he uses as a baby carrier, this familiar road movie framing gets a comic twist as Valentín does not conform to the typical exemplifications of immigrants on their journey to the North. Besides, the characteristic visual components of immigration films are contrasted with Valentín's shallow monologue, in which he is trying to convince the baby why they have to cross the border and why she "will be better off there". While he mentions the classic 'disadvantages' in Mexico – "corruption", "drug dealers", "politicians" –, he also adds more unconventional reasons like "demonstrations", "the national soccer team", or "if you grow up there, you'll be probably blond, blue-eyed, tall" (Derbez 2013: 15':32"-16':27"). When Valentín runs to a truck that stopped for them and the dangerously looking truck driver holds a gun in his face, we think of the many examples in international cinema when migrants become victims of local gangs. Here, like in many other instances in the film, the casting adds a humorous dimension for Mexican audiences that an American audience might miss. While Mexican audiences will recognize the truck driver Agustín Bernal, "el célebre villano del cine mexicano" (Candedo 2018), an actor who appeared in more than 150 films, American audiences might be just surprised by the phrase of the scary-

[7] Women with their babies are stock characters among secondary migrant protagonists. For an analysis of films focusing on child migrant characters, see Denzel de Tirado (2015).
[8] See Ramírez Berg (2002: 121).

looking driver: "Get in, my name is Lupe" (Derbez 2013: 17':23"). Lupe is very friendly, despite his ugly looks. The familiar panoramic shots of sunrises and sunsets of transit borderscape representations are comically underscored by the constant crying of the baby and Valentín's and Lupe's arguments about diapers and babies: "Tu sabes cambiar pañales?", "Ya cámbialo, no?", "No seas payaso, cámbialo! Ahorita!" (Derbez 2013: 18':30"-18':34").

Instead of constructing the border as an insurmountable obstacle, where illegal immigrants try to storm the border, and the representation of the guardians of American ground who are diligently defending their territory against illegal intruders, *No se aceptan devoluciones* then presents a quite rare borderscape in immigration films: the tedious and boring phenomenon of very long waiting lines, bumper to bumper, the profane and unexciting border experience for all travelers who want to enter the United States from Mexico by car. At the checkpoint, it turns out that Valentín does not have a visa and the baby does not have a passport. But unlike in other transborder films, this does not result in stress and fear. The next sequence shows Valentín and Maggie in a dark room with other passengers and it turns out that Lupe had been hiding several people in a hidden compartment in his truck all along. Yet, the typical transborderscape aesthetics that are usually associated with danger and anguish of passengers hidden in a truck – e.g., in films like *Trade*, *The Girl*, *Sangre de mi sangre*, *Desierto*, *Guten Tag Ramón*, etc. – are left out. Instead of showing the protagonists crammed into confined spaces with the characteristic rapid montage of series of close-ups and extreme shots in order "to create feelings of claustrophobia and fear of suffocation" among the viewers (Denzel de Tirado 2015: 283), the next cut just shows Lupe removing the second wall in his truck, greeting his undocumented passengers by name and sending greetings to their friends and relatives. The emblematic transborderscape scenes with close-ups on the faces of highly professional border officials, their dogs and their flashlights are missing and the comedy plays instead with other 'borders' and restrictions.[9] For instance, in Los Angeles, Valentín is not allowed to enter the hotel where Julie used to work because she has a baby with him, while dogs are easily admitted to his dismay. But Valentín and Maggie manage to sneak into the hotel with the cleaning personnel, where he

[9] Here it is interesting to mention the French remake of the film, *Demain tout commence* (Gelin 2016) starring Omar Sy, one of the most popular actors of foreign descent in France. In contrast to the long border-crossing sequences in *No se aceptan devoluciones*, which are full of references to border-crossings in other border films, the French film avoids any hints of legal complications to travel abroad with a baby without a passport. Here, the French version of Valentín, Sam, just boards a plane to London in order to return his daughter to her mother. This is possible because the French gigolo happens to meet a flight attendant whom he knows very well, who helps him to get onboard. While the French film cuts out any complications of travelling without a passport and just cuts from the sequence at the French airport to the sequence at the English airport, the remake keeps the theme of the baby's digestion problems and we see the pilots of the plane changing diapers, as well as the passengers of the London underground suffering from the infant's gas and flatulence. Despite mediocre critiques, *Demain tout commence* was a big box office hit in France, certainly due to Omar Sy's popularity in France.

hides his sleeping baby among the freshly washed towels for the swimming pool. After his heroic dive from the presidential suite into the pool to save Maggie from drowning, a film director offers him a well-paid job as a stuntman. At first Valentín is not interested to stay in the US as a "mojado", a 'wetback', a Mexican in the US without an official working permit (Derbez 2013: 25':46"-25':48"). The film director chooses to misunderstand him, immediately asks for towels for his soaking wet hero and convinces him to take his offer, suggesting that Valentín might be separated from Maggie at the border to Mexico. Valentín – who is continuously constructed as a coward since the beginning of the film – absolutely hates his perilous profession but never gives in to his fears throughout the film. I suggest that this perseverance for Maggie's sake could be interpreted as a metonymy for the determination of many undocumented parents who endure dreadful and unsafe working conditions in order to provide a better life for their children.

From frame to frame, *No se aceptan devoluciones* then creates multiple metacinematic exposures to narrative, aesthetical and self-referential allusions, constantly evoking tropes, images and paratexts from American, European and Mexican pop culture. Here, Valentín's employment as a stuntman in the Hollywood film *Aztecman* is an especially thought-provoking multi-layered example of a cinematic palimpsest, as it does not only refer to American pop culture but also to several transborder issues. While Valentín's unacknowledged role as a stuntman refers to the many 'invisible' contributions of Latinos who often work unnamed and unrewarded for the American film industry on the intradiegetic level, the stunt scene also implies various prevailing fervent debates about Latino employment and recognition in Hollywood on the extradiegetic level. Viewers who are familiar with *The Pirates of the Caribbean* immediately recognize an obvious allusion to Johnny Depp as Jack Sparrow in the scene of the *Aztecman*, as the film restages an iconic scene from Depp's popular Disney film. But the *Aztecman* is not about a pirate but about Cuauhtémoc, 'The Descending Eagle', the last Aztec leader. This becomes clear in the short dialogue between Aztecman and the Spanish soldier. In an evidently exaggerated and markedly artificial Spanish accent, the evil Spaniard asks the Aztecman where the gold of his people is hidden. Jonny, the actor impersonating Aztecman, replies in an even more overstressed American accent: "Over my burning feet!" (Derbez 2013: 30':41"-30':50"). With the direct reference to Johnny Depp, the film satirizes contemporary fervent debates about Hollywood policies to cast white actors for Latino characters – e.g., Ben Affleck as Tony Mendez in *Argo* (2012) – as well as Disney's strategy to endow their main protagonists with American accents, whereas the 'enemies' are bestowed with

foreign accents.[10] Here it is interesting that the actor 'Jonny' in the Pantelion film is played by Daniel Lopez, a Latino actor who physically resembles Depp but is still failing to fool the audience to be the 'real' American actor due to his Latino heritage. This 'failure' can be read as a reference to Depp's refusal to play the lead role in Emir Kusturica's film *The Seven Friends of Pancho Villa and the Woman With Seven Fingers*, as he argued that a Latino actor should play that role.[11] Besides, I propose that the Aztecman's costume as an eagle and the film's title are a direct reference to Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Birdman* and the complaint that the Oscar-winning director preferred an all-white cast, just like his Oscar-winning friend Alfonso Cuarón did for *Gravity*.[12]

When Maggie's mother comes back and wants full custody, Valentín gives up his risky job as a stuntman and takes on typical jobs of immigrants. But it turns out that walking dogs, fixing electric problems and cars are far more dangerous than expected and he gets hurt several times.

Despite all expectations, the American judge grants Valentín full custody under the condition that he "must learn to speak English with full command of the language" (Derbez 2013: 1:38':55"), whereas his illegal residence status is not mentioned at all. When it turns out that Valentín is not Maggie's biological father, he decides to escape with the child. While Julie is accusing Valentín of "kidnapping an American child" and tries to convince the police to go after him, they inform her that they "cannot just break into Mexico like that" and that they can only "alert airports and borders so they can keep an eye on him" (Derbez 2013: 1:46':00"-1:46':12"). Despite these alerts, Valentín and Maggie easily hitchhike across the border to Mexico again. This seems to be a typical ending according to genre conventions of the border film: in American film, Latino men are usually not allowed to stay in the United States and are deported.[13] But throughout the film, viewers saw Maggie and Valentín go to the doctor's

[10] The National Hispanic Media Coalition (NHMC) and other media monitoring organizations have been pointing out for many years that Latinx have been mis- and underrepresented in the United States. While the exclusion of Latinx on national television has been the target of NHMC for many years, they recently demonstrated during the 2018 Oscar Awards to ask for more representation in Hollywood films. For more information on Latino Media Activism, the "blatant omission" and the "proactive and decisive stand against the Spanish language" in Hollywood, see Ross (2017) and Denzel de Tirado (2013: 3). On mock Spanish, linguistic racism and linguicism in the movies, see Bleichenbacher (2008: 13-35).

[11] See Lyttelton (2011).

[12] Later in *No se aceptan devoluciones*, Derbez gives another explanation for the lack of Latino actors in *Gravity*: Jesús Ochoa, one of Hollywood's most famous Latino actors, plays himself as participating in the wrong audition, trying to impersonate an embryo because he falsely believes that he is in one of the casting sessions for Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity*. Also this scene could be read as an allegory for the invisibility and silence of Latin actors and actresses who only were cast for 3% of speaking film character roles during the last ten years, see Smith (2017).

[13] For an analysis of the deportations of Diego in *Sangre de mi sangre*, Jaime in *Amexicano*, Enrique in *La misma luna*, Carlos in *A Better Life* and many others, see Denzel de Tirado (2015: 289f.). Here, I also examine the fact that women and children are normally allowed to stay. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's observation of hegemonic texts depicting "white men saving brown women from brown men" is especially obvious in *Trade*, *Sin nombre* and *The Gatekeeper* (Denzel de Tirado 2015: 293-295).

because of a severe illness that will soon be fatal. Despite a lot of clues that Maggie could be the one affected by the disease, the viewers automatically follow the indications that it is Valentín who is fatally ill. This is certainly due to the fact that at the first scene at the doctor's, Valentín gets an injection and Maggie just gets her 'vitamins'. The expectation that Valentín will have to die is also nourished by the many plots of border films in which the male immigrants meet their death at the end of the film.[14] When Julie finds out that Maggie has only a few weeks to live because of a complicated heart disorder, she agrees to live with Valentín and give Maggie a 'happy family life' in Acapulco for the last two weeks of her life. Here it is important to note that *No se aceptan devoluciones* constructs a paradisiac Acapulco from the beginning of the film without contrasting it to a grey and depressing portrait of the United States, a phenomenon that has recently become more prevalent in border films.[15] Like Acapulco, Los Angeles is constructed as a colorful beach city and the aesthetics of the sequences on the beach in Mexico and the United States are nearly identical, which creates a neutral space without national, geographical or cultural distinctive markers and thus a transient transborderscape.

The second film of this analysis, *Pulling Strings / Amor a primer visa*, was released only a month after *No se aceptan devoluciones* and critics claimed it was "riding the wave of Derbez's success […] making it the second consecutive bilingual hit by Pantelion Films" (Suarez Sang 2013). The comedy is intriguing for this analysis as it represents one of the very few films that stage a Mexican-American love relationship in Mexico and one of the rare cases in international cinema that dislocate the border from its actual geographic topography and redraw it on a bureaucratic level in an embassy.

Pulling Strings / Amor a Primer Visa (2013) and the Dislocation of the Border

In this border film, the common theme of family reunifications also builds the premise of the plot as single father Alejandro feels that his daughter is not safe in Mexico after her mother's death and should rather live with her aunt in the United States. What is new in this romantic comedy is the fact that the US-Mexican border is generated in an embassy and that the main protagonist tries to legally relocate with the adequate papers. However, the young successful American consular officer Rachel rejects his visa application, because Alejandro, a professional mariachi, cannot provide any supporting documents for current proof of income, property or

[14] For a detailed analysis of the death of male migrant protagonist in *Amexicano*, *No Turning Back*, *Sangre de mi sangre* and many others, see Denzel de Tirado (2015: 290f.).
[15] For a detailed analysis of this phenomenon in *The Girl* and *Trade*, see Denzel de Tirado (2015: 293).

business ownership, or any other assets that are relevant for the authorization of a visa to the US. At the embassy, the border is depicted according to early approaches from political geography as a "mute, solid, objectifiable object with foremost geopolitical and economic implications" (Vanhaelemeesch 2018: 67). Far away from the actual geographical US-Mexican border, the individuals remain anonymous and lonely at the embassy – a space of transience, "a nonplace", according to Marc Augé – social references are ignored and boundaries remain static (Augé 1995: 121).

But later the same day, Alejandro sees the 'gatekeeper' Rachel again in another space that unites people from different economic and national backgrounds: a restaurant. Alejandro plays in a mariachi band during a farewell party for Rachel, who just got a promotion to work in London. While he immediately recognizes the woman who destroyed his hopes for a better life on the other side of the border, she does not pay any attention to him. Even when Alejandro brings the drunk American woman to his apartment because she forgot her own address after she fell asleep at a bus station, she does not remember him. Now, at Alejandro's home – an "anthropological place", a space where people can meet and share social references, empowering their identity (Augé 1995: 123) –, the anonymous bureaucratic border gets more subjective and personal. Until the breakfast that Alejandro carefully prepares for Rachel, he is constructed as an honest and likable person without any intentions to take advantage of the vulnerable situation of the woman who destroyed his dreams. Only when she panics because she thinks that she lost her laptop with highly confidential information on it, and Alejandro pretends that the laptop is 'not' in his home, the power dynamics are reversed. Now Rachel seems to depend on Alejandro, as the 'lost' laptop represents Rachel's 'visa' for a better job in London. On their 'mission' to find the laptop, Alejandro takes Rachel to beautiful cantinas and restaurants in Mexico City in order to stage his apparent fame, wealth and influence, hoping to change her mind about his visa application. Here, the film plays with the potential of the verb border-'scaping' which holds the potential of 'being' as well as 'doing', according to the social geographer Anke Strüver.[16] Space is now transformed through individual actions and perceptions. In the line of other borderscaping practices, the acts of 'seeing' and 'doing' morph the city-scape in this Pantelion film into a "liveable organic, identitarian, relational and historic places" as identified by phenomenological philosophers Martin Heidegger and Maurice Jean Jacque Merleau-Ponty (Vanhaelemeesch 2018: 67). The film reproduces the already described particular aesthetics of recent transborder films, which contrast the beautiful colorful Mexico

[16] See Strüver (2005: 170).

with the ugly and grey United States. The contrast between the professional, grey, anonymous, non-anthropological space of the American embassy to which the ambitious Rachel had confined herself to during her stay in Mexico and her discovery of the colorful beauty and liveliness of Mexican culture, food and lifestyle represents a new real-life transborder-involvement for Rachel, who had never experienced Mexico despite the fact that she had been working there for several years. Rachel's character as workaholic, who had missed out on life, is emphasized by Rachel's mother, supervisor and best friend, who constantly tries to convince her to work less and to enjoy life. While Alejandro's neighborhood in Mexico City was depicted as dangerous, the places that Alejandro shows Rachel on their search for her laptop are magical. Here, the staging of the city and Mexican culture goes beyond the common contrasting of colors. Similar to the strategy of *No se aceptan devoluciones*, *Pulling Strings* offers several layers of references to internationally known products, professions and stars of Mexican culture. The fact that Alejandro is a mariachi is crucial as the figure of the mariachi is a national icon, myth and symbol deeply embedded in Mexican consciousness, representing a particular type of machismo and mestizaje, which has "long penetrated the production of 'an authentic national type'", producing an image of "'false Mexicanism'" in Mexico and abroad (Mullholland 2007: 249).

The mariachi also happens to be one of the most prominent border masculinity types in American film due to John Landis' cult classic *Three Amigos* (1982) and Robert Rodriguez's successful *Mexico Trilogy*. While the first film of this series, *El Mariachi* (1992), was selected for preservation in the United States Library of Congress's National Film Registry of culturally, historically, and aesthetically significant films, the other two films, *Desperado* (1994) and *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* (2003), became extremely popular due to the cast of the famous Latino icons Antonio Banderas, Salma Hayek, Cheech Marin and Danny Trejo, as well as Quentin Tarantino, Johnny Depp and Willem Dafoe. In contrast to Rodriguez's hypermasculine resilient mariachi character, *Pulling Strings* constructs a softer version of the iconic mariachi figure and endows Alejandro (played by Jaime Camil) with charming and romantic qualities. With the full name of the mariachi character, Alejandro Fernández, screenwriter Gabriel Ripstein adds another dimension of iconic Mexican familiarity for American audiences, as this happens to be the name of a famous Mexican singer, also known as 'El Potrillo' ('The Colt'), who received two Latin Grammy Awards and a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame for his particular blend of mariachi, ranchera and pop music. The resemblance between Jaime Camil and the famous singer is so obvious that Camil and Fernández were casted as brothers in Alfonso Arau's film *Zapata*. Just when Rachel has fallen in love with Alejandro and his beautiful culture of tequila,

cantinas and music, she finds out that he has been misleading her the whole time and decides to choose her career over her feelings for Alejandro. Despite the advice of her mother and her American supervisor to reconsider this move and to follow her heart in order to find happiness – "If you find something that makes you feel part of life, go for it" (Ybarra 2013: 1:30':33"-1:30':59") – she decides to go to London, describing herself and all the expats as 'gypsies' and 'vagabonds' who do not have any roots and will never be able to settle down (Ybarra 2013: 1:26:23-1:26':26"). Alejandro's rush to the airport – where he is able to pass all the barriers separating him from Rachel by buying a ticket and taking off his mariachi-pants in order to go through the metal detector – and his moving speech at the finale of the film are not enough to convince Rachel to stay in Mexico and she flies away. One month later Alejandro and his daughter have moved and are happy. Unlike many other Mexican male protagonists who risked their life to cross the border to make their American dream come true, Alejandro just moved to a better neighborhood with a safer school and seems to have come to peace with their life in Mexico. Thus, *Pulling Strings* is not a typical transborder film as the camera never leaves Mexican territory. But if one considers the American embassy and the international airport as sovereign territories, it is interesting that the film does not show the typical high-security checks of American embassies. At the embassy, Rachel is the only metonymy for the frontier. At the international airport in Mexico City, security checks play an important role in the film but are also easy to pass. Despite the fact that the camera never leaves Mexico, the film insinuates a transborderscape as Rachel left to London but then returned, giving up her job in Europe. Her return to Mexico represents a new cinematic 'transborderscape', as it suggests that a happy life could be lived on the Southern side of the border as well. While Rachel makes clear that she returned for Alejandro and not for the'tostadas' (Ybarra 2013: 1:42':43"), she does embrace his culture when she asks him for forgiveness with a mariachi serenade, sung by a female mariachi. Alejandro's two main motivations for migration –the lack of safety and a female caretaker for his daughter– are now filled and there is no need for them to emigrate to the US anymore. Rachel did not officially immigrate to Mexico and we cannot know if this bicultural couple will last, I interpret Rachel as one of the very few cinematic representatives of the nearly two million Americans who have chosen to live in Mexico – the home of the largest community of US citizens living outside the United States – a fact that very rarely appears in fiction feature films from both sides of the border.

The Reproduction of Conventional Gender and Ethnicity Stereotype Limitations

Despite being a dynamic genre, which constantly undergoes transformations, the border cinema still has to meet capitalist industrial demands. Genres are "symptoms of culture" and often reveal and explore "prevailing sociopolitical issues and preoccupations" of society (Fojas 2013: 36). While the Pantelion comedies present new alternative spatio-temporal story lines, settings and 'transborderscapes', they also remain truthful to familiar depictions of ethnicity, gender and power politics in films about immigrants and the Southern border. Valentín represents the notorious Latino stereotype of the buffoon, "second-banana comic relief" and goofy sidekick that has haunted Hollywood cinema since the silent film era (Ramírez Berg 2002: 71). While this representation always sells – Sofia Vergara in *Modern Family* is another example of popular Latin buffoonery –, it does not necessarily entail that Pantelion comedies are 'racist'. The buffoon and comic sidekick has a long history in world literature, theater and film and has been extremely popular in Hispanic culture since Sancho Panza in *Don Quijote*. Indeed, Derbez – who is frequently described as the 'Latin Jim Carrey' (Kaufman 2013) – has long embodied the buffoon in Mexican media very successfully. When cultural, ethnic and linguistic identities and alterities become essential plot elements, however, characters are perceived as representations of their particular group. In this way Derbez is also often called the "Tyler Perry of the Latinos" (Rivas 2013) as he serves an underserved ethnic audience and brings them to the theaters. Just like Perry, he feeds his viewers "the same images of ourselves over and over and over because they sell", while Hispanics like "black people need new stories and new storytellers" (Lemieux 2009). Pantelion films and Derbez want to "conquer another market, another audience" and "do something different" (Batista / Derbez in Rivas 2013: 00':48"-00':55"), but they are still far from it. Julie and Rachel repeat recent television and film stereotypes of modern, emancipated, professional, self-centered American women who represent "superficiality, pretentiousness, untrustworthiness and artificiality" and are often contrasted with reliable, modest, affectionate, motherly and virtuous Latina nannies in American media standing for "moral forthrightness, emotional empathy, intuitive honesty and authenticity" (Denzel de Tirado 2013: 25). Julie looks like a barbie and is an egocentric, unempathetic, bisexual former drug-addict, who cold-bloodedly left her baby behind, became a successful lawyer and always just takes what she feels she is entitled to. After his evolution "from Latino 'macho' to Latino 'mandilón' (a man who takes over feminine chores and responsibilities)" – a character development which connects him to several recent counterstereotypes of Latino father figures on American television, as he shares their characteristic "strong American work ethic, their ambition and their dedication to the family"

(Denzel de Tirado 2013: 10) –, Valentín is constructed as Julie's contrasting figure. Rachel is not pleasure-seeking, but she is confident and adventurous and decided against any form of human relations. She has always put her career first and is not even talking to her mother who is visiting. Like the Puritan heroines in traditional Western films, Rachel gets herself in a position of vulnerability and has to be rescued by a 'noble savage'. She does not faint like the customary damsels in distress in traditional Western films, but she does fall asleep after too many shots of tequila, which fulfils familiar recognizable narrative implications. Like in traditional 'captivity tales', the 'white captive' falls in love with her passionate alluring and exotic saviour, as it is through him and her trials in the 'wilderness' in Mexico City that she develops a different kind of power, independent of her social status as a (Puritan) woman.[17] Not surprisingly, the mariachi, who also resembles the popular figure of the irresistible 'singing cowboy' in Mexican and American film, finally gets the girl because she just cannot live without him anymore. Despite these narrative clichés, the two analyzed films from the year 2013 created original 'transborderscapes'. Both films showed interethnic love relations, crossed borders and showed that immigration is not a one-way movement to the United States, a fact that is still underrepresented in American film. And while the shallow, predictable and superficial Pantelion comedies do represent an important third subgenre of the border film between the alarming 'cinema of criminality' and the worrying 'cinema of pity', they still do not exploit their 'transborderscaping' potential and tend to fall back on old stereotypes. If we look at recent Pantelion productions like *How to Be a Latin Lover* (2017), in which Eugenio Derbez plays a lazy gold digger and gigolo who is constantly looking for American elderly ladies that he can exploit, I could not agree more with Lemieux, that we need 'new stories'. While the transborder venture of Pantelion Films does create employment and audiences in Mexico and the United States and thus produces an affective dynamic of distancing and approaching across the US-Mexican border, generating new alternative production circumstances, it rarely translates these intriguing circumstances into new plots and perspectives. As Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado has pointed out, most of Pantelion's more recent plots do not articulate political standpoints anymore and rather reconcile political concerns that reflect neoliberal ideologies of racial hierarchy, middle-class respectability and meritocracy.[18] Also 'transborderscapes' and bilingualism have become less prominent in recent Pantelion productions. Here it is important to mention that Catalina Aguilar Mastretta's "bilingual delight" (Lewis 2017) *Everybody Loves*

[17] For more details about 'captivity tales', the figure of the 'white captive', the 'noble savage' and their presence in modern media, see Bird (2001: 66-75).
[18] See Sánchez Prado (2018).

Somebody (2017) – one of the very rare examples of recent Pantelion films that play with transborder experiences – was a tremendous success among critics as it "manages to take the formula, shake it up a bit, and come up with something that feels fresh and inventive" (Cordova 2017). After Carmen Marron's *Go For It!* (2011) and Patricia Riggen's *Girl in Progress* (2012) *Everybody Loves Somebody* is only the third Pantelion film by a female director and one of the few Pantelion films of the last years that focuses on a Latina lead character. For Aguilar Mastretta's focal character Clara, border crossings are routine experiences as she lives and works in LA but often returns home to Ensenada to see her parents. The film moves several times between Mexico and the US, but only sporadically features the border. The first time, the border crossing goes fast and Clara assures her Australian travel companion that he will not need his passport to cross the border to Mexico – "only on the way back […] they can sense that you are a harmless soul" (Aguilar Mastretta 2017: 09':59"-10':09") – while she is changing into her maid of honor dress and fumbling around with her silicone bra inserts in front of the border officials, showing that she is not afraid at all of border controls. The second time Aguilar Mastretta delivers a shot of the long waiting lines at the Southern side of the border, but most of the time she films Clara in her car or just cuts from scenes in Mexico to the US and vice versa. Not only her geographical but also her linguistic 'transborderscape' is represented in ordinary routines, as all the characters –including Clara's Australian boyfriend Asher– switch easily between Spanish and English and ethnicity, culture and geography function as mere decor in this film. It is in this kind of transborder narratives and aesthetics that Pantelion exploits its true bilingual and transcultural potential.

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