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“The Only Defense is Excess: Translating and Surpassing Hollywood’s Conventions to Establish a Relevant Mexican Cinema”* ---



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Abstract

Mexico is one of the countries which has adapted American cinematographic genres with success and productivity. This country has seen in Hollywood an effective structure for approaching the audience. With the purpose of approaching national and international audiences, Mexico has not only adopted some of Hollywood cinematographic genres, but it has also combined them with Mexican genres such as “Cabaretera” in order to reflect its social context and national identity. The Melodrama and the Film Noir were two of the Hollywood genres which exercised a stronger influence on the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema. Influence of these genres is specifically evident in style and narrative of the film *Aventurera* (1949). This film shows the links between Hollywood and Mexican cinema, displaying how some Hollywood conventions were translated and reformed in order to create its own Mexican Cinema. Most countries intending to create their own cinema have to face Hollywood influence. This industry has always been seen as a leading industry in technology, innovation, and economic capacity, and as the Nemesis of local cinema. This case study on *Aventurera* shows that Mexican cinema reached progress until exceeding conventions of cinematographic genres taken from Hollywood, creating stories which went beyond the local interest.

Key words: cinematographic genres, melodrama, film noir, Mexican cinema, cabaretera.

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La única defensa es el exceso: traduciendo y sobrepasando las convenciones de hollywood para establecer un cine mexicano relevante

Resumen

Uno de los países que ha adaptado géneros cinematográficos de los Estados Unidos con más éxito y productividad es México, país que ha visto en Hollywood una estructura efectiva para alcanzar al público. Con el objetivo de llegar a audiencias locales e internacionales, México no sólo ha adoptado algunos de los géneros cinematográficos de Hollywood, sino que también los ha combinado con géneros mexicanos como el de Cabaretera, para reflejar su contexto social e identidad nacional. El melodrama y el *Film Noir* fueron dos de los géneros de Hollywood que más influenciaron la Época de Oro del cine mexicano. La influencia de estos géneros se evidencia particularmente en el estilo y la narrativa de la película de Alberto Gout *Aventurera* (1949). Este filme evidencia las conexiones que hay entre Hollywood y el cine mexicano, ilustrando cómo México tradujo y reformó algunas de las convenciones de Hollywood para crear un cine mexicano propio. Muchos de los países que buscan crear un cine propio han tenido que lidiar con la influencia de Hollywood. Esta industria ha sido siempre vista como líder en tecnología, innovación y capacidad económica, así como también ha sido vista como el némesis de cines nacionales. El presente estudio de caso de *Aventurera* revela que el cine mexicano progresó hasta exceder las convenciones de los géneros cinematográficos tomados de Hollywood, creando historias que fueron más allá del interés local.

Palabras clave: convenciones de Hollywood, géneros cinematográficos, melodrama, *Film Noir*, cine mexicano, Cabaretera.

Hollywood has had an enormous influence in the world cinema industries not only through exporting American productions to the rest of the world, but also through its influence in film genres such as melodrama and Film Noir. One of the countries that most successfully and profitably has adapted these genres is the U.S.'s southern neighbor, Mexico, who has seen in Hollywood an effective structure to reach the public. With an aim of reaching local and international audiences, not only has Mexico adopted some of Hollywood's industry practices and film genres, but also combined them with Mexican genres such as the *Cabaretera*, a genre that local audiences were able to recognize and identify with. For instance, one of the most remarkable adaptations of Film Noir and melodrama, combined with the Mexican film genre *Cabaretera*, was Alberto Gout's *Aventurera* (1949), a film that American audiences were able to enjoy only forty-five years after its creation. *Aventurera* makes evident the connections between Hollywood and Mexican cinema. In this film we see how Mexico translated some of Hollywood's conventions and reshaped them to create a distinctive Mexican cinema that reflected its social context and national identity.

During WWII the export of Hollywood films to Europe decreased. As a result, Mexico became an important market for the distribution of Hollywood films, allowing Mexican audiences to become familiar with the U.S. film genres and styles. Mexican screens were flooded with Hollywood products: 76% of the films premiered in Mexico during the 1930s were from the U.S., 17.5% from other nations and only 6.5% were local productions (De la Vega, 84). In exchange for military cooperation and inexpensive labor, the United States offered technological support and helped to fund the film industry in Mexico, investing in the construction of film studios in Mexico City with the latest technology. However, this aid from the U.S. had also another purpose: to facilitate the creation of films that promoted American ideals among Hispanic audiences (De la Vega, 88). After WWII, Hollywood could distribute its films globally again, ending the economic support to the development of Mexican cinema.

Strengthening a national cinema was difficult for Mexico once the Mexico-USA Pact ended. Changing the people's taste instantaneously and introducing new narratives distant from Hollywood's style was challenging. Once the pact ended, Mexican cinema began to produce its own version of Hollywood genres, one of these being the musical comedies (De la Vega, 86). Given the popularity of American films, it is understandable that Mexico attempted to copy the elements that ensured the success of Hollywood films (Woll, 81). However, Mexican cinema was not a mere copy of Hollywood. In fact, the Mexican cinema of the mid 1940s made great efforts to become a competitive industry while reflecting the Mexican essence in its stories. Media studies scholar Charles Ramírez Berg writes:

The classical Hollywood filmmaking model, both as industrial mode of production (complete with studio star systems, powerful producers, and well-developed distribution networks and exhibition chains) and as signifying practice, was faithfully imitated by Mexico. But it was imitated in the Mexican style (Berg, 15).

To create a distinctive Mexican cinema, the films began to tell stories unique to Mexican people, expressing the ideology and customs of Mexican popular culture and adapting— not copying— Hollywood film genres and modes of production.

The end of the Mexico-USA Pact resulted in a decrease in the production of Mexican films during the mid-1940s. However, through the production of low-budget films focused on the new urban life styles, the Mexican film industry began to thrive. Some filmmakers, such as Alejandro Galindo and Ismael Rodríguez, influenced by Italian Neo Realism and Hollywood Film Noir, began to produce box office hits, such as Rodríguez's *Nosotros los Pobres* (1947) and Galindo's *¡Esquina...Bajan!* (1948), aimed at the large new urban audiences. Melodramas and comedies of this period helped the growth of local production, with an average of 102 feature films per year up to the early 1950s (De la Vega, 88). It is precisely in this context that the film *Aventurera* was created in 1949. The film responded

to the modernization of Mexico and to the efforts of the Mexican film industry to tell stories for popular consumption aimed at the new urban audiences.

Mexican Cinema Context

Aventurera tells the story of Elena (played by Ninón Sevilla), a woman who, after losing her parents, becomes an exotic dancer. Lost in the big border city of Ciudad Juárez and forced to work as a prostitute, Elena takes revenge on her oppressors without knowing that she might be hurting her true love. By reflecting the legacy of Hollywood and through the inclusion of elements of Mexican cinema, *Aventurera* features components of Melodrama and Film Noir mixed with distinctive Mexican musical and dance scenes. However, for *Aventurera*'s story to be told, the Mexican film industry had to evolve, learning from Hollywood, its nearest and more influential neighbor, some of the techniques that would help it become the leading film industry of Latin America.

For Mexicans, cinema has always been considered a symbol of national prestige and modernity. Early Mexican cinema functioned as the state's ideological tool to promote the government's ideology to a point where the difference between films of the revolution and actual combats began to blur (Woll, 11). When Mexican audiences were watching the cinematic display of the Revolution's battles, silent films from Hollywood started to arrive and dominate Mexican screens. Mexicans often saw Hollywood Westerns set in the borderlands of Mexico and the U.S. in which their own cultural identities were addressed in constrained roles that in some way harmed or attacked Anglos (Keller, 39). However, Hollywood's dominance changed with the advent of sound, when the Mexican audiences looked for stories that would bring them closer to their own reality. As a result, the first sound films in Mexico illustrated the features of a national cinema (Hershfield and Maciel, 33). Among these features of national cinema we can see the appearance of new film genres such as the *Comedia Ranchera*

and the display of rural settings, popular songs and happy endings. From this moment, Mexican audiences began to value domestic productions and national talents.

After WWII, the Mexican economy was recovering and the Golden Age of Mexican cinema, which went from 1935 to 1957, was at its best. Since most of its directors, including Alberto Gout, director of *Aventurera*, trained in the U.S. (the first film school in Mexico was only started in 1963), the industry managed to tell local stories using foreign techniques. It was during this period that Mexican cinema began to dominate in Latin America, similar to what Hollywood represented to Europe in the 1920s. By the late 1940s Mexico used to shoot over 70 movies a year, hoping to export them as a means of exporting cultural identity as well as showing other film industries that Mexico had the ability to compete with them. During this same time Hollywood began producing films in Spanish without changing its early Hispanic stereotypes. As a result, Mexico dominated the Spanish language market, not only producing films in Spanish but also films with which Hispanics identify positively. Of those glorious years, 1949 stands out as the year when 108 films were produced, some of them considered today as Mexican masterpieces. *Aventurera* is one of these masterpieces, ranking fourth in the one hundred best Mexican films of all times (Maza, 2006). By the time *Aventurera* was made, movies represented Mexico's third largest industry, Mexican films dominated 40% of national screens, and 15% of the films were fully domestically produced during the late 1940s (Fein, 103). Even though these films were successfully reaching Hispanic audiences, and some of them were screened in the U.S., they were struggling to access other markets. During this same period, however, Hollywood was strengthening its melodramas and developing film genres, such as the Film Noir, that reached large audiences around the world. The melodrama and the Film Noir were the two Hollywood film genres that most influenced the Mexican Golden Age. The influence of these genres is particularly evident in the style and narrative of *Aventurera*.

Melodrama and Film Noir: *Aventurera's* Roots

Melodramas have been present in Hollywood ever since the silent era. Rooted in theater, early melodramas were known for their histrionic performers. This film genre offers the spectator a clear moral universe through punishment and reward. Silent Hollywood melodramas were characterized by dramatic acting that used clear gestures to assure moral legibility. The plots combined emotion and morality through the clash between virtue and villainy, using music to accentuate emotional situations. In Classical Hollywood melodramas, virtue is usually incarnated by an oppressed woman who waits for a hero to come at her rescue. However, villainy can be present in both genders. Villains attack innocence and tempt their victims to commit moral errors. After the tragedy, villainy is identified and justice is restored, ensuring a common happy ending. For example, F.W. Murnau's melodrama *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927) illustrates how, after facing the danger of separation because of a fallen woman, peace and order return to a marriage. This reflects the great influence of Calvinist values in Hollywood melodramas. This characteristic is also present in Mexican melodrama, which was heavily influenced by the Roman Catholic imagery.

Melodramas are considered high literary forms of entertainment in Latin America. Particularly in Mexico, French or U.S. melodramas were the most acclaimed films during the 1920s (García, 154). After that period, the Mexican cinema moved from imitating Hollywood melodramas to making melodramas the core of its national cinema. The acclaimed critic of popular culture, Carlos Monsiváis, even says that there is no Mexican cinema without melodrama (Monsiváis, 49). Media scholar Andrea Noble explains:

The privileged status of Melodrama in Mexico, whilst certainly indebted to the kinds of narrative structures that were prominent in the hegemonic cinema to the North, also partakes of elements that are profoundly marked by themes and issues pertaining to Mexican cultural history and identity (Noble, 101).

To counteract Hollywood melodramas, Mexico used popular language and culture that audiences were able to identify with. Typically, most melodramas began and ended with panoramic shots of Mexican cities, showing streets and buildings that, while giving the local audience a sense of belonging, compared Mexico with foreign metropolises. Further, Mexican melodramas of the 1940s and 1950s reflected the family conflicts that appeared with postwar modernization. Thus, these films showed how the big cities challenged Christian values and caused families to separate. Consequently, family is the center of the Mexican melodrama. Honesty, purity and Catholicism are the core values that these films want to highlight, showing big families in which the devoted, asexual mother is one of the main characters.

Mexican melodramas deal with subjects of love, religion, and nationalism. They use women as the symbol of national identity by comparing them either with the Virgin of Guadalupe (virginal women) or with the *Chingada*, the woman who betrayed Mexicans against the conquerors (the prostitutes) (López, 507). Furthermore, the inherent drama of the Catholic religion is passionately reflected in Mexican melodramas through the portrayal of sin, repentance, sacrifice and punishment (López, 507). As Carlos Monsiváis claims, "If competition with North America is impossible artistically or technically, the only defense is excess, the absence of limits of melodrama" (Monsiváis, 70). In fact, the combination of excess with the Catholic imagery is one of the elements that differentiate the Mexican melodrama from the melodrama in Hollywood. Thus, as part of a visual cultural translation, Mexican melodramas commonly show suffering women wearing the *rebozo* (a kind of veil) over their heads to resemble the affliction, modesty and purity of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Hence, Mexican melodramas, particularly the melodrama in *Aventurera*, used tears, evil and pain as the tools to move audiences.

We can say that *Aventurera* represents a pinnacle of the melodrama genre. Translating and reshaping Hollywood's conventions to create melodramas, *Aventurera* became one of the greatest melodramas of Mexico, giving rise to the

radionovelas and later the *telenovelas*, which according to film critic Ana López are the most popular narrative entertainment in Latin America (López, 4). Notably, many of *Aventurera's* performers, such as Ninón Sevilla, Andrea Palma and Rubén Rojo, later became popular *telenovela* stars, and Sevilla continues to perform to this day. When compared to the Classical Hollywood melodramas, in which the protagonists are innocent, *Aventurera* exhibits a radical change in the portrayal of the heroine, abandoning the stereotype of the naive girl and proposing a vengeful heroine. Scholar Rafael Aviña explains: "Here the oversensitivity and the good thoughts become obsolete, giving way to selfishness, arrogance and a outright immorality that makes this one of the most unusual cabaret films of national cinema" (Aviña, 166). A heroine of this kind can rarely be seen in Hollywood melodramas.

A scene half way into the film (53:03 - 57:17, Facets DVD, 2004) illustrates some of *Aventurera's* melodramatic elements. Here Mario (played by Rubén Rojo), Elena's future husband, takes Elena to meet his mother. The scene begins with panoramic shots of Guadalajara and its streets to emphasize its rising modernity, accompanied with joyful music. Then, as Elena arrives at the mansion where her future mother-in-law lives, the music changes to a romantic tone, as if she is about to live a fairy tale. Elena looks amazed at the mansion, confirming that she belongs to a different social class. However, Elena is about to discover that luxury is a manifestation of malice. In Mexican melodramas the bourgeois mansion symbolizes insensitivity and hard-hearted evil (García, 156). Here Elena will find out that Rosaura (played by Andrea Palma), her future mother-in-law, is indeed her worst enemy.

Our expectations of a different encounter are set when Ricardo (played by Luis López), Elena's brother-in-law, welcomes her, saying: "Welcome to a house dedicated to the pursuit of virtue and boredom." However, as Rosaura walks downstairs, the scene reveals one of the most melodramatic moments of the film. She was Elena's procuress back when Elena lived in Ciudad Juárez. A close-up to Elena's and Rosaura's faces,

along with melodramatic music that underscores the moment, holds the pose for a moral lesson. Victim and villain look at each other and engage in a sarcastic dialogue that for a moment makes us believe that justice will be restored. Instead of being intimidated, Elena talks to Rosaura ironically. Their clear gestures and body stillness make the dialogue more powerful, allowing us to read their intense emotions. Thus, through gestures, music, and the meeting of villainy and virtue, this scene contains the key elements common to Hollywood melodramas. Moreover, by showing a confident, vengeful heroine this scene reveals Mexico's narrative modification of Hollywood melodramas. Exceeding the stereotype of the completely innocent heroine, Mexican melodramas stepped forward to present a heroine that was more realistic.

Film Noir

While Hollywood melodramas cast stars in imaginary situations and in a sophisticated-looking world, the Film Noir sought to get closer to human reality. By the 1940s the U.S. screens were filled with these stylish postwar dramas in which crime, corruption and sex were common themes. The Noir plots, set in urban landscapes, find in the chiaroscuro lighting a tool to camouflage psychopaths or gangsters and to endanger sexualized women. The aesthetics and themes of this genre are rooted in German Expressionism and Italian Neo-Realism, among other foreign film movements. Notably, Neo-Realism's legacy is present in both the black and white on-location shooting and in the portrayal of the horrors of war. Contrary to melodramas, Film Noir endings were often unhappy or hopeless, depicting men and women destroying themselves.

Noir's women are worldly and sexually attractive. Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past* (1947) and Orson Welles' *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947) are examples of Noir films depicting these kinds of women. Notably, this representation of sexualized, suffering women, mixed with urban crime, is also depicted in *Aventurera*. The film reflects the legacy of Film Noir in the Latin American context,

exposing life after WWII and a dark side of the Mexican bourgeois class. The criminal violence mixed with moral ambivalence make *Aventurera* a film with an unclear distinction between good and evil. Elena, as a Noir femme fatale, is a contradictory heroine who tries to achieve her goals by using her sex appeal. The combination of melodrama, Film Noir and controversial topics such as the sexualized heroine, reveals *Aventurera* as the sign of a change in the Mexican film industry.

The legacy of Hollywood Film Noir in *Aventurera* appears in a scene when Lucio captures Elena in her hotel (1:39:27-1:41:49, Facets DVD, 2004). Lucio (played by Tito Junco) is a white slaver who sold Elena to a brothel. They both walk down the street while Rengo (played by Miguel Inclán), a repentant criminal, watches them from an alleyway. Later, Rengo kills Lucio with a dagger and Elena runs to find her husband Mario, who is looking for her around the corner. This scene shocks the audience by bringing an unexpected outcome strengthened by a chiaroscuro lighting that contrasts the warm interior of the hotel with the wet and filthy streets outside. This final segment of the film gives the audience the revenge they want. Although the end of the story seems happy, showing husband and wife together, they are both destroyed inside. Even though the husband is still in love, he has lost some of his innocence because of his mother's betrayal, while Elena's life experience has also left her resentful. In a way she has destroyed her husband just as her own mother ruined her father. Ending the film with crime in the streets, gangsters and revenge, indicates that *Aventurera* is rooted in Film Noir, much like the end of Hollywood's *Noir Touch of Evil*.

According to Carlos Monsiváis, Mexico adapted from Hollywood the film genres that were most suited to the artistic and social conditions of the country. Monsiváis contends that several of the Hollywood genres were untranslatable. For example, he mentions the screwball comedy as a genre that demands a culturally specific sense of humor from the audience. He also mentions the Westerns, which according to him require more skillful directors than the Mexicans during the Golden Age. Monsiváis explains that all the other

genres seen in Hollywood, such as Melodrama and Film Noir, lend themselves to full assimilation, to a point where people believed they were original Mexican projects. Further, a genre in Mexico called the *Comedia Ranchera* attempted to resemble the singing cowboys films of Gene Autry or Roy Rogers (Monsiváis, 141).

Mexican Film Genres: Comedia Ranchera and Cabaretera

Aventurera not only reveals the legacy of melodrama and Noir but also presents key aspects of the two most representative genres of the Golden Age of Mexican cinema, the *Comedias Rancheras* and the *Cabaretera* films. While Hollywood was producing stories that both national and international viewers could identify with, Mexican films of the 1940s dealt with parochial topics that reached a more limited, local audience. By the late 1930s and early 1940s, Mexican audiences enjoyed the *Comedias Rancheras* or Ranch Melodramas. Far from being comedies, as the name in Spanish suggests, these were films filled with nostalgia and pre-revolutionary discourses, often based on the lyrics of Mexican songs (Monsiváis, 41). The main characters were "Horse riding people who were devoutly Catholic and capitalistic, have never intermarried with Indians, and play mariachi music" (Hershfield, 90). The *Comedias Rancheras* depicted the rural lives of peasants and their kind patrons, providing a romantic ideological concept of Mexico that helped to alleviate the anxieties of people moving to work in the cities (Aviña, 153). By watching these movies, people escaped from the disappointment of the cities and their corrupt local governments. One of the most popular *Comedias Rancheras* was Fernando de Fuentes' *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (1936), a film that, like others from the same genre, did not demand much analysis from the spectator, was based on a popular dance tune, presented a straightforward narrative, and was hit at the domestic box office.

Although *Aventurera* is not a *Comedia Ranchera*, we can see the clear legacy of this genre in the film. The *Comedias Rancheras* are characterized by

song and dance numbers, which may or may not be part of the action itself. *Aventurera* adapted this convention to a more urban context, with music that reflected the modernism of the cities and dances that eased the tension between the protagonist and her enemies. Moreover, in the same way the *Comedias Rancheras* were based on popular songs, a Mexican song with the same title of the film inspired *Aventurera* (López, 516). However, the narrative and the structure of *Aventurera* responded to a collective effort in Mexican cinema to tell universal stories that attracted more international audiences than those told by the *Comedias Rancheras*.

Although the *Comedias Rancheras* show some influence from Hollywood musical Westerns, the genre displays elements of a distinctive Mexican cinema (Aviña, 152). For instance, the *mise-en-scène* is filled with elements of Mexican popular culture and the locations are haciendas and cantinas where traditional social rituals are celebrated. Immersed in native landscapes, music and costumes, the *Comedias Rancheras* appeared to be distant from what was happening abroad. In addition, the Mexican cinema seemed to be telling stories that were unaffected by social changes. The Mexican motion pictures industry needed to export its films to foreign markets not only to survive and strengthen the film industry, but also to promote investment, trade and general interest in the country (Fein, 136). For this reason, along with the interest of some film directors to reflect what was happening in the country, a second popular film genre from the Golden Age that traveled beyond the Hispanic market brought new stories to the screens.

By the late 1940s, when *Aventurera* was released, the *Cabaretera*, or Cabaret genre, brought more universal themes to the Mexican screens. *Aventurera* is a masterpiece of the Mexican *Cabaretera* genre, which derives from melodrama. Interestingly, this genre, sometimes called "prostitution melodrama," presents a clear blend of melodrama, Film Noir and musicals, elements that make evident the translation of Hollywood conventions into the Mexican cinema. However, the *Cabaretera* genre not only reveals conventions

taken from Hollywood but also brings to the table situations, characters and narrative structure that are distinctly Mexican. Some of the *Cabaretera* films are based on Mexican serial literature and films of the 1930s dealing with prostitution, such as Antonio Moreno's *Santa* (1931) and Arcady Boytler's *La Mujer del Puerto* (1933). The genre has been acclaimed by many scholars and criticized by others who think of it as the producer of formulaic, rapidly made films that are easily forgotten (Noble, 16). The main theme of the *Cabaretera* genre revolves around women forced to become prostitutes because of their difficult lives. Here the fallen woman functions as the source of relief for the modern man. Merging crime, melodrama and music, the *Cabaretera* genre depicted the growing economy and the social changes of postwar Mexico, such as the dissolution of the strong family structure as they transitioned to the cities. As Ana López says, "The exaltation of female desire and sin and of the nightlife of clubs and cabarets clearly symbolized Mexico's new (post-World War II) cosmopolitanism" (López, 517). By opening the door to stories that other countries were able to relate to, this genre replaced the Ranch Melodramas, steering the Mexican cinema in a direction that would position it as one of the leading film industries in Latino America.

Aventurera seems to be cast to satisfy Hollywood audiences, making physical distinctions that allow the audience to read goodness and badness based on ethnic stereotypes. The early Hollywood Western films seen in Mexico portrayed Hispanics in stereotypical roles. Although the majority of these films dealt with violence, the Mexican bandits were clearly among the most vile (Woll, 7). Hispanic men were assigned specific roles such as the Latin lover or the bandit attacking white cowboys. Hispanic women, in turn, were depicted as cantina girls or vamps (Keller, 39). What distinguished Hispanic villains from American heroes was the phenotype: a darker skin tone symbolized villainy. In *Aventurera*, Ninón Sevilla and Rubén Rojo, who played Elena's husband, look whiter than the rest of the cast, which identifies them as the main characters. Charles Berg clearly

expresses the use of physical distinctions to help the viewer read between good and evil: "Skin color is a marker of morality and social standing. Light skin confers righteousness and high social station; dark skin usually signifies a lower-class villain or clown" (Berg, 27). Elena's blond hair and Mario's light-colored eyes contrast with the other characters in the film. Tito Junco, Andrea Palma and Miguel Inclán, who plays Rengo, look stereotypically Mexican with darker skin, eyes and hair and Indian features.

A scene in this film illustrates *Aventurera's* casting based on the physical distinctions defined by Hollywood to read goodness or badness (1:39:27-1:41:49, Facets DVD, 2004). This is one of the few scenes in the film where we can see more villains and heroes together, allowing us to distinguish the intentional physical differences between them. As described previously, in this scene Elena confronts Lucio because he wants to take her away from her husband, Mario. Lucio and Mario engage in a fight until Lucio forces Elena to go with him. Outside, Rengo, who is now a criminal in defense of the heroine, is ready to help Elena reunite with Mario. Here the two criminals, Rengo and Lucio, look stereotypically Mexican: they both are brown-skinned with dark eyes and dark hair. Compared to the tall and thin Mario, Rengo seems like a short, heavy man. Lucio, in turn, has the stereotypical Mexican mustache. Elena and Mario allow us to read goodness through the light tone of their skin, eyes and hair. Rafel Aviña points out the incongruity of this type of cinematic representation in a country composed of a mixed population: "Mexican cinema strove to 'denounce' the contempt for the skin color, as well as the injustices of the needy and, at the same time, insisted on equally highlighting clear-eyed actors and beautiful blond hair actresses away from any Indian trait" (Aviña, 134). Perhaps this shows a desire of the Mexican cinema to reach international audiences who were already used to associate good and evil with race or skin color based on the conventions from the Classical Hollywood Westerns. Interestingly, the representation of criminals in *Aventurera* resembling the Mexican bandits as previously shown by

Hollywood was not what caused controversy among the Mexican public.

A typical *Cabaretera* film presents class conflict by portraying wealthy environments and cities filled with hypocrites who prey on female singers and dancers. However, the subject of the fallen woman did not originate in Mexico; it was already common in Hollywood in films such as Clarence Brown's *A Woman of Affairs* (1928), and Robert Z. Leonard's *Susan Lenox (Her Fall and Rise)* (1931). Translating and reshaping the conventions of Hollywood Film Noir to correspond with the Mexican cultural identity, the *Cabaretera* films depicted women dancing rumbas and congas in cabarets, betraying the religious traditions of their families. The musical numbers defined the *Cabaretera* films and their protagonists. In these films the melodramatic suffering peaks when women are dancing or singing. Their bodies and gestures, along with the music, are responsible for transmitting affliction. The importance of these melodramatic moments might be the reason a convention of the genre was that of featuring the heroines on a wide stage of a cabaret showcasing the actresses' dancing abilities (Aviña, 164). The drama in the music, especially illustrated by the Bolero, is characteristic in this type of film. The Bolero is the musical genre par excellence of the *Cabaretera* films. This melodramatic musical genre focuses on stories of urban development where the main subjects are sexualized women. Thus, the Bolero is a kind of mini-melodrama that goes perfectly with the prostitutes' singing moments. Some of the actresses who became famous dancing and singing in this genre were Ninón Sevilla, who plays Elena in *Aventurera*, Amalia Aguilar and Meche Barba. Other great exponents of the genre were: René Cardona's *Lazos de Fuego* (1948) and Ernesto Cortázar's *Si Fuera una Cualquiera* (1949).

The story in *Aventurera* resembles the story of the film *La Mujer del Puerto* (LMP) (1933), a gem of Mexico's Classical cinema dealing with the subject of the fallen woman. What is interesting here is that Rosario, the protagonist of LMP, is played by Andrea Palma, the first femme fatale in Mexican cinema, who later plays Elena's mother-

in-law in *Aventurera*. The fact that she performs as the procurer in *Aventurera* functions as a metaphor in which Palma hands her legacy over to Ninón Sevilla to represent the new generation of prostitutes in Mexican cinema. However, this is not the only important connection between the two films. *Aventurera* makes direct reference to LMP, inviting the audience to connect both films and to consider them of equal importance, thereby firmly establishing a Mexican cinema tradition.

The direct reference to an earlier Mexican film in *Aventurera* illustrates how, since the late 1940s, Mexican cinema looked beyond Hollywood as role model to itself, showing that Mexico was proud of its cinema. The reference that *Aventurera* makes to LMP is evident in the scene when Elena is in the cabaret smoking a cigarette while Agustín Lara sings the Bolero song that gives the name to the film: "Sell your love expensively, adventuress..." As the song progresses, she walks around the cabaret remembering how sad her life has been. In LMP, we can see how Rosario, the fallen woman, leans on a doorway outside of a cabaret while Lina Boytler sings: "Sell pleasure to men coming from the sea..." Rosario walks, smoking, while the song continues. Further, in these two similar scenes we can see how Rosario and Elena are unusual women who, while scandalizing society, are also suffering for their own condition.

Cabaretera films were socially condemned by the Mexican upper class, thereby becoming controversial pleasures for the lower classes. Pointing at the hypocrisy and the double standards, *Cabaretera* films criticized the ideology of Mexican's upper class, which was based on Catholic principles and morals that were often not met. As Berg explains, "The best films of the genre were mature discussions of male-female relationships, and the great ones transcended sexual-romantic themes to comment on larger issues" (Berg, 125). For instance, the film *Aventurera* contrasts the border town Ciudad Juárez, the city where Elena works in a cabaret, with the city of Guadalajara, a place of ultra-Catholic conservatism where the hypocrite Rosaura lives (Noble, 154). The film also does this by contrasting the brothel with the mansion, the nocturnal world of the lower class

with the daytime of the bourgeoisie and, finally, by contrasting Elena with Rosaura. "Few have shown as much pleasure in unmasking middle-class hypocrisy as Ninón Sevilla in *Aventurera*" (De la Mora, 21). Both Elena and Rosaura were capable of pointing their fingers at the hypocrites without caring about their own dishonorable work.

Aventurera offers a disturbing portrayal of the upper class mother. Far from exalting the mother, as was the tradition in Mexican Cinema, Elena never hesitated to reject her own mother and mother-in-law, both presented as hypocrites. The fan of Ninón Sevilla, François Truffaut, (under the pseudonym of Robert Lacheney), says of her, "She is an oblique challenge to bourgeois, Catholic, and all other moralities" (cited by López, 516). Moreover, the idea of portraying an authoritarian mother also comes from the desire to challenge the cult of the Mexican macho man, displaying a change in the female role in Mexican cinema.

Mexican women had only two options on the screen: to be mothers or to be whores. Hollywood films also used this paradigm where the good mother or wife was opposed to the fallen woman, as if these two opposites were the only possible representations of womanhood (Hershfield, 14). Contrary to the traditional Hollywood melodramas, however, *Aventurera* reveals a change in the portrayal of women, showing amoral and erotized mothers and fallen women worthy of compassion. Similar to what happened in the U.S. during WWII, women in Mexico also joined the work force while men were away. As a result, by the late 1940s, the time when *Aventurera* was conceived, the woman's role had to be rethought. *Aventureras*, as sinful or prostitute women were called, were openly portrayed as challenging and self-confident women, capable of running nightclubs, sites traditionally protected by men (Aviña, 175). In *Aventurera*, the *malinches* Elena and Rosaura symbolize the modern Mexican woman who can be both mother and whore or neither. The happy ending of the film seems like a tribute to immorality. Despite her bad behavior, Elena walks quietly down the street with her husband, ready to continue her life because having been a prostitute did not deserve a final punishment.

A mother portrayed as a hypocrite villain, a sexualized middle class dancer, a man in love and criminals haunting the new urban life are some of the indicators of *Aventurera's* interesting genre blending.

Aventurera's Film Language and Genre Blending

Using Thomas Schatz's language analogy to study film genres, we could say that *Aventurera* managed to combine two film languages, the melodrama and the Film Noir, to deliver a memorable message. Theorist Thomas Schatz explains, "A genre can be studied, like a language, as a formalized sign system whose rules have been assimilated, consciously or otherwise, through cultural consensus" (Schatz, 643). In the same way that people who share a language understand its rules and grammar, our understanding of a film genre can be based on our knowledge of its conventions. Hence, mixing Noir with Musicals might not seem common for the international industry's standards, but that is what results when Mexico successfully combines Noir with the *Cabaretera* genre. The dance numbers in the film resemble Hollywood's musicals of the 40s, with spinning dancers and high angle shots. These scenes function as a tool to glamorously display Elena's ambiguous sexuality. She doesn't enjoy being a prostitute but at the same time enjoys attracting men with her dances. Furthermore, the musicals seem to be created to reach a masculine audience.

The presence of dancing, suffering or threatening women make evident the superb union of different film genres in *Aventurera*. *Aventurera's* genre blending and the new women's role in Mexican cinema appears in a scene in which Elena and Mario celebrate their wedding with Mario's upper-class friends and family at their mansion (59:56 - 1:02:48, Facets DVD, 2004). Rosaura, unhappy with the wedding, threatens Elena by reminding her of the bad things that can happen to her if she does not behave as a woman who now belongs to a higher class. However, wanting to embarrass Rosaura, Elena gets drunk and starts dancing in front of all the distinguished guests

in the same way she used to do when she was a prostitute. The scandalized guests leave the party while Elena keeps dancing scandalously. "Wasn't I sufficiently high society?" asks Elena. Through the gestures and the meeting of villainy and virtue, this scene contains the key elements common to Hollywood melodramas. The challenge to the bourgeois class, the threats to the sexualized woman and the scandalous dance, are evidence of the presence of *Cabaretera* and Noir elements in the film, as well as the new role of women as confident and controversial. A great *cabaretera* needs to know how to sing and dance and that is why Alberto Gout chose Ninón Sevilla to portray Elena.

Industrial Components of the Film: Following the Hollywood Structure

Ninón Sevilla, the Cuban rumba dancer who had no acting experience, captivated Mexican audiences with her role as Elena Tejero in *Aventurera*. Sevilla arrived in Mexico three years before the production of *Aventurera*. Right after her arrival, she was discovered by the film director Alberto Gout, known for other films in the *Cabaretera* genre. Like many Hollywood filmmakers who usually worked with specific actors, Gout created Sevilla's star persona. They worked together in five *Cabaretera* films: *Revancha* (1948) or *Revenge*, a film where Gout merges crime and drama to tell the story of revenge between a man and a woman who were once in love; *Aventurera* (1950) or *The Adventuress*; *Sensualidad* (1951) or *Sensuality*, a film where a woman falsely seduces the man who once saved her without knowing she is also falling in love; *No Niego mi Pasado* (1952) or *I do not Deny my Past*, a film where once again the prostitute heroine is not punished but finds a better future; and finally, *Mujeres Sacrificadas* (1952) or *Sacrificed Women*, a story of women who became erotic dancers to support their families.

Not only did Ninón star in *Aventurera*, but also she choreographed its dance numbers, using the film as a tool to prove her dancing talent. Sevilla was known in Mexico as a cross between Rita Hayworth and Carmen Miranda, two Latina actresses who attained fame in the U.S. The

Spanish descended actress Rita Hayworth, known as the Love Goddess, was famous in Hollywood for her dancing talent. On the other hand, the Brazilian actress Carmen Miranda was popular among Hollywood audiences for her singing talent. Thus, Mexican audiences compared their artists with Hollywood stars. In fact, Ninón Sevilla seems to be honoring Miranda in one of *Aventurera's* musical scenes when she wears Miranda's trademark fruit hat while singing in Portuguese and dancing.

Sevilla became the icon of the Mexican erotic actress, capable of combining innocence with sensuality. In Monsiváis' words, "Ninón was the vamp who could not be represented in the 20s and the apotheosis of the mistress, the lover who does not confer respectability but gives prestige" (Monsiváis, 121). Perhaps the secret of her stardom lies in her uncommonness, a characteristic that film professor Paul MacDonald identifies as vital for a star (MacDonald, 180). However, as film scholar Richard Dyer argues, stars also become what they are because they are seen as regular people. He explains, "Stars, after all, are always inescapably people in public" (Dyer, 614). Sevilla showed the public her human side. The public came to love her because they knew about her modest early life and all the effort she had to make to become famous in a foreign country.

Aventurera gathered a prominent group of performers that brought together their combined talent to make this one of the most famous Mexican movies. Andrea Palma embellishes this film by playing Rosaura, the hypocrite mother-in-law who seeks to destroy Elena. Palma was one of the most important leading actresses in Mexican cinema, acquiring some of her acting methods from Greta Garbo. The film also features Tito Junco as Lucio, Elena's betrayer. Junco became a Mexican star, working in about 200 films, theater and TV. Further, Agustín Lara, one of the most popular Mexican singers of all times, sings the title song of the movie. Ninón Sevilla, Andrea Palma, Tito Junco, Rubén Rojo and Miguel Inclán became part of a Mexican star system that is analogous to the system in Hollywood.

Although *Aventurera* was conceived to be a popular entertainment with its musical numbers and stars, its release caused a scandal in Mexico. The film was almost censored by local boards because of its controversial subject and the unusual treatment that was given to the image of the mother (Almazán, 2009). However, due to the importance of the stars involved in the project, *Aventurera* premiered at the Cine Mariscala, in the historic center of Mexico City. The reception of the film showed its producers that the content was unsuitable for the audience they wanted to reach. Parents repudiated it and prohibited daughters from seeing it (Donnelly, 2004). *Aventurera* not only scandalized the Mexican audiences but also produced strong reactions in the international markets. According to film journal editor Alberto Elena, the film was not released in Spain, dominated at the time by a nationalist/conservative dictatorship, because it was considered unsuitable for Spanish viewers. The dance scenes with the attractive costumes were meant to be the film's biggest attraction, even though *cabareteras* were socially condemned both off and on the screen (Paranaguá, 238). Rather than appealing to the general public, *Aventurera's* dance numbers attracted mostly a masculine audience.

Judging by the scandal that the film produced in Mexico, releasing it in the U.S. would have caused a worse reaction, considering that by the time *Aventurera* was released, the Production Code was controlling the content of the films shown in the U.S. Although the Production Code was in decline by the 1950s, its effects could still be felt. Despite the precautions that were taken in the film to avoid showing nudity and explicit sex scenes, Elena becomes a prostitute after being raped. Furthermore, the plot is clear in showing suicide, infidelity, extortion, glorification of violence, lust, drugs and violence against women. Perhaps these were some of the reasons why the film was not released in the U.S. until forty-five years later.

In 1995, San Francisco's Castro Movie Palace finally brought *Aventurera* to the American audiences in a reissued 35mm black and white print. However, the reasons it took so long for

Aventurera to come to the U.S. are still not clear. The film was rediscovered by Michael Donnelly, founder of Shadowfax Films, who worked for years to bring *Aventurera* to the United States. Along with San Francisco, the film was screened in Los Angeles and one year later in New York. According to Donnelly, *Aventurera* was ignored by the Mexican film critics of the time, but years later was viewed with fascination in France (where the film was named *Maison de Rendez-Vous*) by critics of the French journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Even François Truffaut highlights the film in a comprehensive article in the journal devoted to the analysis of *Cabaretera* films (Donnelly, 2004). Also, in an article for the French journal *Positif*, the French film critic Raymond Borde called *Aventurera* one of the most disturbing postwar melodramas (García Riera, 134).

Perhaps the previous international recognition aroused interest in the film and helped it to arrive later to the States. The film's reception in the U.S. was remarkable; it received great reviews in *Los Angeles Times*, where it was defined as "A terrific, biting musical" (Thomas, 8). In addition, *The New York Times* described it as "Entertaining as it is shamelessly excessive" (Holden, C14). In 1995 the entertainment-trade magazine *Variety* published that *Aventurera* pulled \$ 3,092 in the first weekend of its re-release at the Landmark Nuart Theater in Los Angeles (Evans, 8), which represents a considerable amount of money for a film that was shot forty-five years earlier and was not recognized among the public in the U.S. This good reception would not have been possible if the movie had been released in 1950 under the declining ruling system of the Production Code.

The popularity of *Aventurera* grew over time in Mexico when the audiences slowly began to realize that the film was in fact one of the classics of Mexican cinema. In love with the story and aware of its potential, actress and producer Carmen Salinas produced a stage musical based on *Aventurera's* original screenplay. In the same way that some Hollywood films are turned into musicals, expanding the cinematic experience, the *Aventurera* stage show makes people feel as if they are within a Mexican film. Today the new

generations in Mexico know the *Aventurera* musical before realizing that is based on a film (which is based on a song). We could think that many people have seen the film because they have enjoyed the musical.

Salinas, who besides producing also plays Rosaura, the brothel's owner, has succeeded in making the *Aventurera* musical Mexico's most popular play, running in Mexico and the U.S. from 1990 until today (Java, 2010). Thus, the story of *Aventurera* has not been forgotten from the screens of 1950 but has transcended through others over the years. It may not be a coincidence that the musical, which was introduced in over twenty U.S. cities in 1995, was in part responsible for generating interest in the film, released that same year in the U.S.

Conclusions

The content, style and production of Hollywood films have made other countries turn their eyes towards this industry in search of new and powerful strategies to reach audiences. Many nations pursuing a distinctive cinema have had to deal with Hollywood's influence. Hollywood has always been seen as a leader in technology, innovation and economic capacity, as well as the nemesis of national cinemas. The high production values and the pleasure its films produce on the spectators have precluded the development of production in other countries (Noble, 13). At the same time, the presence of Hollywood has inspired many nations to seek counter-modes of storytelling. Nevertheless, the fact that Hollywood has served as the starting point for many film industries, particularly the Mexican, is undeniable.

The legacy of Hollywood in the Mexican cinema was particularly evident in the film *Aventurera*, which incorporated elements of melodrama and Film Noir and featured stars that reflected Hollywood's codes of representation. Although the film's initial reception was not as good as expected, considering the censorship, the viewer's complains and the lack of attention that Mexican film critics gave to the film, *Aventurera* proved to be a referent for the Mexican

cinema, breaking its patterns by using Hollywood conventions to tell stories that went beyond the local interest.

The Mexican cinema of the 1940s and 1950s was the only Hispanic film industry that not only adapted some Hollywood genres but also surpassed them. The Mexican melodrama, for instance, is easily recognized in the world thanks to its distinctive style, featuring characters and conflicts that were far more complex than those seen in early Hollywood melodramas. Additionally, the Mexican *Cabaretera* film genre went beyond the boundaries established by Hollywood Film Noir, adding distinctive Mexican characters, music and aesthetics. This reveals that Mexican cinema progressed until it exceeded the conventions of the film genres taken from Hollywood.

Aventurera is not an isolated example of how Mexican cinema of the Golden Age was influenced by Hollywood's genres. Moreover, Alberto Gout was not the only film director interested in adapting Film Noir to the Mexican context. Film directors Roberto Gavaldón and Juan Orol also displayed a great influence of Noir in their films. The latter, particularly, was one of the Mexican directors most recognized for mixing Film Noir and the gangster theme with the *Cabaretera* genre. Roberto Gavaldón's *La Otra* (1946) and Juan Orol's *Cabaret Shangai* (1950) exemplify the fact that, by the time *Aventurera* was produced, other film directors had a simultaneous interest in the Noir genre. Furthermore, the *Cabaretera* film genre, with minor variations, is still an active genre in Mexico today. According to Andrea Noble, the prostitute has been an enduring figure in Mexican cinema (Noble, 117). This proves how such character needs to be considered a central figure in Mexican national cinema.

Recent productions such as Ripstein's *La Reina de la Noche* (1994) and Alejandro Springall's *Santitos* (1999) show an interesting move of the fallen woman from Mexico to foreign lands, particularly to the U.S. Contributing to the affirmation of Anglos as a desirable race, Latina roles in Hollywood cinema tend to be linked to romance or sex, often related to the interests of an Anglo male (Keller, 40). Not only do we see

the typical sexy Latina on Hollywood films but also we are seeing the Mexican woman sacrificing herself in cabarets. For instance, in *Santitos*, the widow Esperanza (played by Dolores Heredia) goes North in search of her lost daughter. She works in brothels in Los Angeles until she falls in love and finds piece. Here Esperanza reinforces the sexy Latina stereotype common in Hollywood, and Dolores Heredia plays the prostitute, the constant figure of Mexican cinema. Hence, one might think that just as Hollywood influenced Mexican cinema, the Mexican cinema can be also influencing Hollywood's characters and conflicts.

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