

JOURNEYS OF DESIRE

European Art Cinema 1929-1968

A Critical Companion



Edited by Alastair Phillips and Ginette Vincendeau



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14 The Latin Masquerade

The Spanish in Disguise in Hollywood¹

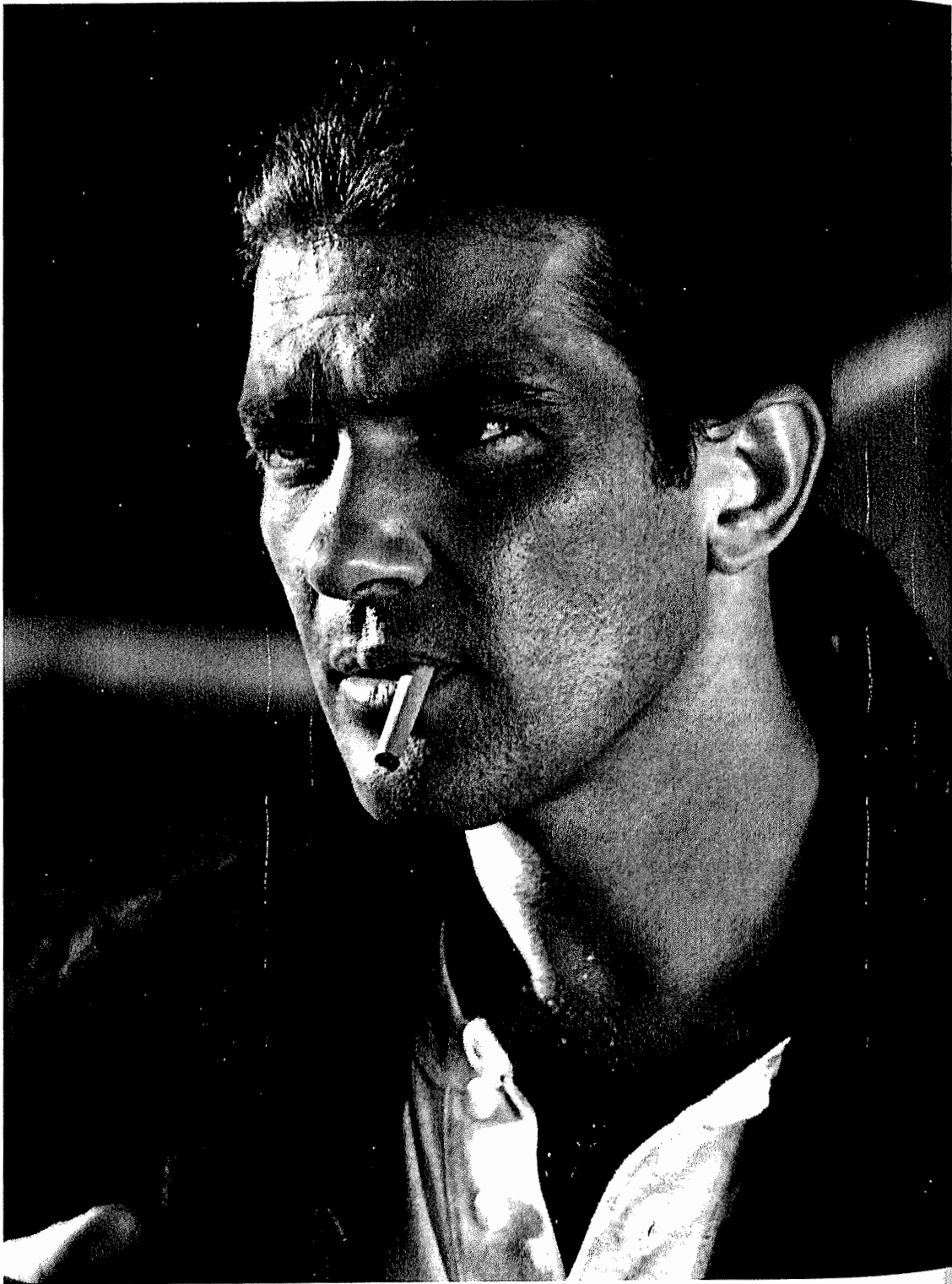
Vicente Sánchez-Biosca

In 2000, a new Spanish star secured her place within Hollywood stardom. Her name was Penélope Cruz*. Her career had begun when she was a teenager, hosting a music television programme targeted at youngsters (*La quinta marcha* [The Fifth March], 1990), and her first success in the cinema came with *Belle époque*, Fernando Trueba's 1992 Academy Award-winning feature as Best Foreign Language Film. For a decade, her film career was astounding, as shown by her emblematic collaboration with three different, yet all fashionable Spanish directors: Bigas Luna (*Jamón, Jamón*, [1992]), Pedro Almodóvar (*Carne trémula/Live Flesh* [1997]; *Todo sobre mi madre/All about My Mother* [1999]) and, finally, *enfant terrible* Alejandro Amenábar (*Abre los ojos/Open Your Eyes* [1997]; Cruz also starred in the Hollywood remake of this film, directed by Cameron Crowe as *Vanilla Sky* in 2001). In her transition to Hollywood, one could argue that Cruz simply followed in the footsteps of other Spanish figures, such as Assumpta Serna*, Victoria Abril* and Javier Bardem*. But it is especially in Antonio Banderas* that one finds a mirror image of the Cruz phenomenon, because of the level of their success and because of her relationship with actor and producer Tom Cruise (which echoes the marriage of Banderas and Melanie Griffith).

What is striking about Cruz's entrance into the American pantheon is that her first lead role, in the banal *Woman on Top* (2000), introduced a new stereotype and brought in a new set of questions about the way in which national identities are negotiated today in American culture. Cruz plays a Brazilian woman from the region of [San Salvador de] Bahia who, after finding out about her husband's infidelities, emigrates to Los Angeles and triumphs on television as the exotic hostess of a programme dedicated to her country's cuisine. A foreigner in California, the Spanish actress embodied a Brazilian woman from the most tropical and 'Africanised' region of Brazil, enabling her to develop her persona into an emblem of 'Latin-ness'. This 'Latin' persona was a composite of diverse features: a strong temperament, overwhelming sensuality, fondness for home traditions, the ability to express musical rhythm through her body and primitive religious beliefs. These aspects of the character were incorporated into the production design and the plot of the film, resulting in a wealth of colour, vivacity, fashionable music and exoticism.²

Cruz's 'tropical' identity, reminiscent of Carmen Miranda, fitted neatly into the history of American cinema. Miranda was the first 'Bahiana' who, thanks to the 'Good Neighbour Policy' between the USA and Latin America, triumphed in Hollywood in 1939 by showing off hyperbolic signs of 'the tropical', taking them to the limits of camp. Cruz's case, however, is different in the way the whole operation seems forced: unlike Miranda, Cruz neither carried on her shoulders a musical tradition nor had striking, easily recognisable Caribbean or tropical features. Moreover, unlike Miranda, who was brought up in Brazil, Cruz hailed from Spain, and her native tongue did not even coincide with the language of her character in the film. This symptomatic deviation of her identity in Hollywood therefore cannot be explained by either her career or her origins. The explanation has to be sought in Hollywood, and in particular the production of the 'Latino' stereotype and how it relates to American identity, because there is no doubt about it: today 'Latino' is fashionable, and not just in the movies.

The stereotype of the 'Latin', the most durable codification of which was the 'Latin lover', could be seen as a successful, simplified version of the tragic figure of Don Juan. This stereotype has been decisive in the destiny of many Spanish actors, such as Antonio Moreno*, Valentín Parera, José Crespo*, Julio Peña* and José Nieto*, but also in that of actors from Italy, Mexico and other Latin American countries. Nevertheless, the stereotype has evolved



134 Ethnic smoothness: Antonio Banderas embodies a 'softer' Latino identity in *Desperado* (1995)

through time in relation to changing social, ethnic and sexual contexts, which the American cinema, always in touch with other areas of culture (art, music, dance, fashion), was trying to shape. The term 'Latin' thus has significantly mutated. To its original, Mediterranean origins, Latin American elements have been added. Now, not only is its meaning exclusively Latin American but, through a further reduction, it has come to refer to the Caribbean or tropical. Such a transformation, however, is impossible to analyse exclusively in terms of film representations.

The Latin lover, the main gateway for Spanish actors in Hollywood, was associated during the classical era with men from the South – dark-skinned, seductive, hot-blooded lovers, but also ruthless with women who succumbed to their charms (the ultimate example being the Italian Rudolph Valentino, although the Mexican Ramón Novarro was another good exponent). Today, however, this seems anachronistic, since Latin-ness, while still encompassing the idea of sensuality and seduction, is more readily associated with what the music industry labels 'Latino music': Caribbean rhythms, whose African rhythmic origins have been simplified in order to reach a mass audience. This is a step forward in a process of hybridisation that, in the 1960s, produced salsa and had its epicentre in New York, through Cuban exiles, Puerto Rican musicians and emigrants from Panama, etc.³ Nowadays, women have also assumed an important place in this new Latin-ness, as the film careers of singer Jennifer Lopez and actress Salma Hayek demonstrate.

My aim here is to examine how Spanish actors are inscribed in this process and the reasons why they have found themselves obliged to hide their European origins under a stereotype that was historically considered subordinate in relation to colonial history. The reasons are not to be found, of course, in the actual relationship between Spain and Latin America, or between Spain and the USA, but rather in cultural dialectics between the 'WASP' and the 'Other'. The Latino, the Chicano, the African-American or the Oriental are all incarnations of 'otherness' that have replaced the old dialectics between Latin American and European identities. Manifestly, the Latino image, into which the Spanish actor or actress has to be subsumed, is not that of the aboriginal people from Peru, Bolivia, Mexico or Central America, in which American cinema has shown zero interest, but the Caribbean type. And it is worth pointing out the hot spots of this imaginary topography: Castro's Cuba, the Colombia of drug-dealers, the Central America of the Revolution and the Contras, a Mexico of a still primitive and savage gusto. These topoi generate highly spectacular – if not openly exotic – narratives, which hinge as much around the present as the (recent) past. The best incarnation of this new Latino personality is Antonio Banderas, but one could also mention other Latin American actors from the music industry, such as Rubén Blades and even Chayanne, although they have represented the type in a less systematic manner.

In other words, while Hollywood has shown interest in the stereotype of the Austro-Hungarian, the French, the German and the Russian, often reflected in the choice of actors and actresses, as well as locations, the Spanish have not elicited much interest in American popular culture, with the exception perhaps of the myth of Carmen. The arsenal of bullfighters and popular songs, gypsies and seductresses, which constituted myths and stereotypes originally suitable for export, had a minor impact in Hollywood, unlike its great success in Europe.

My aim here is to study two different representations of Latin-ness through Spanish actors from two very different periods. First, I will examine Sara Montiel*, a Spanish actress who arrived in Hollywood from Mexico in the 1950s and worked in three films, in which she displayed a range of notions of Mexican-ness. Second, I will look at Antonio Banderas, who, in the 1990s, forged a fashionable stereotype, and whose success reached its zenith in 1999 when he directed *Crazy in Alabama*.

Sara Montiel is an unusual case in the Spanish star system. She is probably the only Spanish female sex symbol to arise during the Franco era, in a film industry characterised by a religious and sexual censorship that was more intransigent, long lasting and paranoid than its political censorship. As a cult actress (with the camp nickname of *Saritisima*), Montiel was one of the few female stars (and the only successful one) to offer an alternative to the Andalusian stereotype. This folkloric type derived from several sources, ranging from the exoticism of Mérimée's *Carmen*⁴ to the popularity of Andalusian music – a smoother, strictly speaking 'corrupted', version of flamenco. The Andalusian female stereotype – *la andaluza* – was in fact promoted by the Franco regime, no doubt because of her prover-

bial chastity, within the dominant Catholic repressive morality. Moreover, *la andaluza* was related to the facile and chauvinistic populism of Spanish music, thereby minimising the gypsy origins of both music and female type, at a time when the gypsy ethnic group was itself perceived with suspicion by the regime.

A comparison between Montiel's trajectory and that of her Andalusian contemporary, Carmen Sevilla, clarifies matters: although Sevilla worked in 1950s multi-language versions in France, Mexico, Britain and the USA (for instance, in *Babes in Baghdad/Muchachas de Bagdad* [1952]; *Spanish Affair/Aventura para dos* [1958]), she never provoked much interest in the USA and was never offered a contract in Hollywood, with the exception of *King of Kings* (1961), produced and shot in Spain.

It was not Montiel's Spanish origin or career that took her to Hollywood. If she became known, it was mainly because of her solid career in Mexican cinema that included fourteen films, many of which co-starred the popular singer Pedro Infante.⁵ In addition, she had the support of prestigious Mexican directors such as Emilio 'Indio' Fernández, Juan José Ortega and Miguel M. Delgado. Her American contract followed the success of the Mexican thriller *Piel Canela* (1953), in which she played the role of a singer whose beautiful face is marred by an awful scar (carefully concealed by her hair) caused by rat bites during a childhood spent in misery. Montiel's presence in Hollywood should also be seen in the context of the policy of good relations between the USA and Latin America, at a time when the dominant American image of the Latino had a lot to do with people from the other side of the Rio Grande, that is to say, the aboriginal.

Montiel's career in Hollywood is limited to three films, all of which draw on the Latino imagery of the 1950s, distanced from both the camp tropicalism of Carmen Miranda and the severe beauty of Dolores del Río.⁶ Montiel's Hollywood films were *Vera Cruz* (1954), *Serenade*, directed in 1956 by the man who became her husband, Anthony Mann, and *Run of the Arrow* (1957). They constitute an interlude between her earlier Mexican successes and her later, very popular Spanish persona – that of a woman from the music hall, the honourable and proud victim of male seducers' hypocrisy, an image crystallised in *El ultimo cuplé/The Last Torch Song* (1957).

What roles did this Spanish woman play in Hollywood, and what do they reveal about the status of Latin-ness in American cinema? In *Vera Cruz*, Montiel embodies a Revolutionary Juarista aboriginal, presented as the purest expression of Mexican-ness; in *Serenade*, she is the Mexican daughter of a bullfighter, whose love is played by the Italian tenor Mario Lanza; in *Run of the Arrow*, she appears as 'Yellow Moccasin', a Sioux woman, a characterisation that required abundant make-up and her hair to be dyed black with bluish highlights. In each case, Montiel embodies a range of visions of 'otherness' within American cinema. In each of these roles, she is dignified and beautiful, never a femme fatale.

It is worth focusing for a while on *Vera Cruz*, since this was the film that launched the Montiel personality described above. Credited as 'Sarita' (to avoid her assimilation to a Jewish character or a black servant, allegedly on the advice of Burt Lancaster), Montiel plays Nina, a member of the Revolutionary Juaristas (followers of leader Benito Juárez). Her aboriginal features are enhanced by make-up and the spectacular production values of the film. The second of five films produced by the Ben Hecht–Burt Lancaster duo, entirely shot in Mexico and distributed by United Artists, *Vera Cruz* deploys luxurious Technicolor and was the first film to use the short-lived Superscope anamorphic process. It became a real blockbuster, one of the very few at United Artists.⁷ Two male stars from different generations (Gary Cooper and Lancaster) play American mercenaries who intervene in the so-called 'War of the Mexican Reformation' (1858–61). Each represents a different attitude and a different background: Ben Trane (Cooper) is an elegant former landowner from Louisiana, imbued with the spirit of the land; Joe Erin (Lancaster) is a shameless rustler from Pittsburgh. The national divide between the two men is solved on the Mexican territory, where the liberal Juaristas are rebelling against the French colonialists led by Emperor Maximilian. The fact that Trane, already honourably defeated in the American Civil War, embraces the Juarista ideals demonstrates the importance of the Mexican stereotype, explicitly associated with the Juaristas. At the same time, it suggests that the spirit of the Old South is more in tune with the essence of the USA than the Northern ethos.

Montiel, as Nina, represents a mythical 'national body', emerging from the arid soil. Although Denise Darcel* is privileged on the credits as the French Countess Marie Duvarre, whom Trane and Erin escort to the city of Veracruz, and she appears on screen longer than Montiel, it is the Spanish actress who symbolises both the earth and a heroic ideal. The national body and the feminine body symptomatically converge in a spectacular space, set within the exotic locations of the film. And that body is part of a production design that includes costumes, make-up and accessories, through which nature and the aboriginal ethnicity the actress represents (her smooth features contrasting with those of the other Mexican characters) are inscribed in the film. The way in which the voyeuristic displays of Montiel's body and outfits are inserted in the narrative is strategic and builds up the semantic coding of her exotic beauty.

Montiel first appears during the ambush sequence. The rustlers, led by the two male protagonists, thwart the attacking Juaristas thanks to their lack of scruples: they threaten to kill some innocent children whom they have taken as hostages. Nina is hardly able to speak English, and her scene is brief, yet, together with the fact that she is a Juarista, her appearance is very significant: she is wearing a white, low-necked shirt that generously reveals her shoulders, her long, straight black hair spread over her back. A pair of wide silver earrings completes the outfit, setting off her intensely red lips, while strong make-up darkens her skin, contrasting with the white wall behind her. This image of Montiel works as a catalyst to the events that threaten her people, since her outfit visually matches the simple white clothes of the Juaristas. Moreover, these graphic matches confirm, without any doubt, the conflation of the Mexican with the aboriginal. Mexican, Revolutionary and aboriginal are synonymous terms within the film, and the distance from the Americans is clear: there is no hybridisation. But the beauty of Montiel's indigenous body is contrived, since, as pointed out earlier, her features are smooth, unlike those of the other actors who play Mexican characters or, indeed, unlike real indigenous – even half-caste – women, as anyone with minimal knowledge of these ethnicities would know.

The next spectacular sequence in the film also coincides with Montiel's second appearance. During an ambush of the Emperor's forces by the Juaristas, Montiel appears in a reaction shot: her hair is untied and the earrings are the same as before, as are her red lips and make-up. But this time she is wearing a blue outfit, finished with white lace at the top. A restless journey through the plains, leading the caravan, creates a kinetic image for which this new outfit seems to have been designed: her hair in the wind, her white petticoat blowing and her figure silhouetted against a limpid blue sky anchor the Juarista woman into the Mexican landscape. It is precisely during this sequence that Nina is the victim of an attempted rape by American bandits, a scene that the trailer retained for the promotion of the film, accompanied by the following words: 'Introducing an exciting new screen discovery, Sarita Montiel, temptress . . .'.

A third outfit crowns the cluster of meanings around Nina, emphasising a folkloric-popular vein. On its way to Veracruz, the retinue stops in the city of Las Palmas, where the villagers are celebrating some local festivities: we are treated to some tap-dancing with an ambiguous Spanish flavour, and some typical Mexican dances. In the darkness of the night, Nina slips away between the carriages to find the hidden load of gold carried by the Countess, pretending that her only motivation is to find a beautiful, low-cut red dress that stands out in the dark, matching her lips, now made up with intense crimson lipstick. Feminine coquetry serves to conceal her Revolutionary belief, yet what the public gets to see is the spectacle of that false vanity. While on the soundtrack we can hear the musical theme of the film – the song 'Veracruz', sung in Spanish with guitar accompaniment – Trane and Nina reunite under a cascade with sparkly foam, in a sequence that seals a pact between them.

Montiel's three costumes, if considered in relation to the settings, the other characters and the narrative, suggest a series of meanings channelled through the beautiful body of the actress: the people (represented by the Revolutionaries and the children); the spectacle of nature and of a 'primitive' temperament that reacts with energy when sexually threatened; and the folkloric, exotic tone of the lovers' meeting.

The climate was very different when, in the early 1990s, Antonio Banderas assaulted the mecca of cinema. The stabilisation of his 'Latin' persona was caught in a series of identity problems relating to both Latino fashion (Latino 137

in the narrow sense of Caribbean and tropical) and the powerful mediation of the music industry that transformed the 'Latin music' genre into a worldwide success. The process of Banderas' implantation was fast.

In March 1990, Banderas presented Almodóvar's film *¡Átame!* / *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* in the USA; at around the same period, he established himself in Los Angeles and appeared in a clothes commercial with actress Laura Harris. He heard about Arne Glimcher's intention to direct *The Mambo Kings*, based on the book by Oscar Hijuelos (*Los reyes del mambo tocan canciones de amor* [The Mambo Kings Play Love Songs]), which had won the Pulitzer prize. The Cuban-American Andy García had been first choice, but he had other commitments, leaving the door open for Banderas.

Symptomatically, *The Mambo Kings* (1992) reconstructs a 1950s nostalgic, pre-Revolutionary Cuban paradise – a hyperbolic Tropicana, with choreography in the style made popular in Hollywood by another Spaniard, the musician and caricaturist Xavier Cugat.⁸ The story begins in a Havana nightclub in 1952. After a fight and a death threat, trumpeter Nestor (Banderas) is forced to migrate to New York with his brother Cesar (Armand Assante), where they eventually make it big in the world of music. Far from exploring the 'erotic animal' side of Banderas introduced by *¡Átame!*, or asking him to play the Latin lover, *The Mambo Kings* makes Banderas' role (subordinate to Assante's) that of a shy young man who, significantly, is a 'one woman's man'. It is his brother who embodies the Latino stereotype: always looking for a fight, a womaniser, irresponsible, as capable of seducing any woman as of rivalling the famous 'Puerto Rican drummer' Tito Puente. Music and dance hybrids are plentiful: for example, the secret passion between Dolores (Maruschka Detmers) – the woman Nestor will marry – and Cesar is expressed through their dancing together, shortly after their first encounter, in a bizarre blend of Caribbean dance styles and Argentine tango.

The setting from which *The Mambo Kings* derives its Latino image is a musical hybridisation that already possessed a long history in North America, especially in New York during the 1950s. It is precisely this atmosphere that the film recreates, much helped by the soundtrack, which mixes different types of music and a variety of performers, such as Tito Puente, the Cuban singer Celia Cruz and Antonio Sandoval, while the repertoire draws on the better-known standards of Latino music (numbers such as 'Perfidia', 'Quiéreme mucho' and 'Guantanamera'). The mixing of bolero music with the theme song, 'Bella María de mi amor', also seems symptomatic. While it is sung in English by Assante in the film, Banderas also performs a Spanish version on the soundtrack CD, perhaps in an attempt to launch the actor as a music star.⁹

To sum up, the Banderas persona in Hollywood emerges at a transitional moment in the definition of the Latino stereotype, at the crossroads of different national identities (Cuban, Puerto Rican, Mexican) and of complex musical models.¹⁰ But the most revealing and decisive film in the construction of this persona was Robert Rodríguez's *Desperado* (1995), the spin-off of *El Mariachi*, directed in 1992 by the same film-maker. The plot of the earlier film is based on a misunderstanding between a young and attractive Mexican and a bouncer: the former is a mariachi guitarist and the latter hides his deadly weapons in a guitar case. The opposition between the two actors who embody the lead characters could not be more striking: the unattractive bitterness of the assassin contrasts with the somewhat bland beauty of his opponent. In *Desperado*, by contrast, the features of both actors/characters have become an aggressive type of beauty, with strong features, dark skin and long hair flowing in the wind. This is the mark of a – discreetly attractive – Latino ethnicity (not a Chicano one, as in *El Mariachi*), Banderas' features smoothing over the disparate aspects of *El Mariachi*. As a guitarist and a dancer in the film, Banderas mobilises part of the Latino arsenal. His ethnic smoothness, attractive yet aggressively masculine, contains traces of a Latino identity that no longer has any real referent. It is a persona that would characterise Banderas' subsequent roles.

Many of the actors and actresses who migrated to Hollywood did it to embody roles (that is to say, stereotypes) that were representative of their respective countries of origin. Unlike some stars, such as Maurice Chevalier* or Greta Garbo*, who portrayed national characters, the more exotic Spanish types – bullfighters, folk singers, gypsies – that had been common in world literature since the nineteenth century were not so prominent in Hollywood. Arguably, the only exception were the numerous Carmen adaptations. However, even though the actresses who played the role

had to have 'different' ethnic features (Theda Bara, Edna Purviance, Dolores del Río), or suggest, in a spectacular manner, Hispanic antecedents (Rita Hayworth among others), a Spanish actress was not considered necessary.

By contrast, Latin-ness is pervasive in Hollywood, and many Spanish actors and actresses have had to camouflage their origin and endorse this image. Yet the American imaginary (and as a consequence its film representations) is not stable by any means. Sara Montiel and Antonio Banderas reveal two different, highly illustrative, clusters of discourses about Latin-ness in the American cinema.¹¹ While Montiel projected a feminine image of the exotic Latino beauty, related to the wild, spectacular nature of the Western, Banderas brings forth a musical scene and merges the image of the Latino with a new type of Caribbean Latin lover, which the American fan magazines refer to – in Spanish – as *caliente, caliente, caliente* (hot, hot, hot).

Translated from the Spanish by Constanza Burucúa.

Notes

1. This chapter has been written as part of the research project 'Presencias españolas en el cine norteamericano' (Spanish Presences in the American Cinema) (CYJT504G), financed by the Spanish Ministerio de Ciencia y Tecnología (2003–5). The author would like to acknowledge Josep-Lluís Fecé's collaboration during the early stages of the work and Marina Díaz for her opportune comments on the Mexican career of Sara Montiel.
2. It is curious that such a stereotyped commercial product should be offered to the Venezuelan director Fina Torres, recognised in Europe as an auteur.
3. The so-called 'Latin jazz' actually dates from the 1950s, when New York big bands began to include Afro-Cuban rhythms in their repertoires.
4. Prosper Mérimée's novella was published in 1845, and was made into an opera by Bizet in 1875.
5. This part of Montiel's career took place during the 'golden age' of Mexican cinema, which showed a huge capacity to create and export its own star system. See Julia Tuñón, *Mujeres de luz y sombra en el cine mexicano. La construcción de una imagen 1939–1953* [Women of Light and Darkness in Mexican Cinema: The Construction of an Image 1939–1953] (Mexico: Colegio de México/Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía, 1998), for an in-depth study of female stars.
6. Dolores del Río was already a symbol of Latin-ness, a feminine version of Rudolph Valentino in Hollywood. However, as Ana López points out, even if Del Río played the role of the foreign woman (Russians, gypsies, dancers, mestizo women) several times, only exceptionally, and very late in her career, was she identified with Latin American characters and, even then, never with Mexicans. See Ana M. López, 'Hollywood-México: Dolores del Río, una estrella transnacional' [Dolores del Río, a Transnational Star], in Paulo Paranaguá and Alberto Elena, *Mitologías latinoamericanas* [Latin American Mythologies] (Archivos de la Filmoteca, no. 31, 1999), p. 20.
7. Tino Balio, *United Artists. The Company that Changed the Film Industry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 79.
8. Oscar Hijuelos' notes for the CD of the film's soundtrack confirm this nostalgic evocation of a mythical Latin and musical New York of the 1950s, which, symptomatically, Hijuelos never knew.
9. Significantly, the CD contains a third version of the musical theme, performed by the group Los Lobos, whose international fame partly followed the release of the soundtrack of another film, *La Bamba* (1986). Later, Los Lobos were in charge of the music for *Desperado*.
10. A very interesting case is that of *Dance with Me* (1998), starring Chayanne, a Cuban singer and dancer who emigrated to the USA and who offers a new style of more sophisticated dancing, called 'sport dancing'.
11. A significant detail demonstrates that this is perceived in a different way, as a continuity rather than as a rupture, by the Latin-American community: in February 2001, Sara Montiel received the Rita Moreno prize, awarded by HOLA (Hispanic Organisation of Latino Actors) to the actors and actresses who contributed to portrayals of non-stereotyped Hispanic peoples and cultures.