

“El Peladito and the Pachuco: Creating Mexican National Identity and the Transnational Threat”

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Abstract

After the Mexican Revolution the Mexican state underwent a social and cultural revolution where a variety of images, icons, and symbols were promoted to help identify, create, and disseminate *mexicanidad*—Mexicanness. The film industry became an important disseminator of this imagined Mexican national identity. Through examination of the *peladito* and *pachuco* caricatures in Mexican cinema during the 1940s, this paper argues that the former was promoted as a legitimate form of *mexicanidad* while the latter was discarded as unrepresentative of Mexicanness. The paper argues that the transnational influence of the *pachuco* as a border persona was rejected by the Mexican film industry and by extension the Mexican government as a representative form of Mexican national identity because his character was tainted with U.S. cultural incursions that undermined the Mexican state’s nation-building process.

After its armed revolution ended in the late 1910s, Mexico entered a cultural revolution that lasted well into the mid-twentieth century. Despite the cultural revolution’s waning during the 1940s and 1950s, this era ushered in the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema that promoted *mexicanidad*, or Mexicanness, and produced commercial films that became classics. These films disseminated images and ideas of Mexico, its culture, and its people that included symbolic traditional figures like the *charro*, the *china poblana*, *rancheros*, and *indios*. However, during the height of Mexico’s cinematographic Golden Age, two non-traditional figures came to the big screen representing a contemporary reality of Mexico’s mid-century industrialization and urbanization. These two figures, the *peladito* and the *pachuco*, both embodied the urban growth of Mexico during the mid-twentieth century but only one of them was accepted and promoted by the Mexican government as authentically Mexican. The *peladito* encapsulated the idea and the reality of Mexican citizens moving from rural ranches to more industrialized cities in the pursuit of a better and more material lifestyle. The *pachuco* represented urban youth of Mexican descent residing in the U.S. Southwest who possessed a duality of claiming Mexican heritage with U.S.

citizenship while straddling the U.S.-Mexico border region. Through its close relationship with the film industry, the Mexican government rejected the *pachuco* and accepted the *peladito* because the transnational character of the *pachuco*—very much intertwined with the regionalism of the border-states—challenged the government promoted vision of *mexicanidad*.

It is difficult to discuss *mexicanidad* during the mid-twentieth century without mention of Mexican writer, poet, and intellectual Octavio Paz who arguably wrote one of the most quintessential accounts of understanding Mexican national identity during this time period. His classic work, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1952), dives deep into the Mexican consciousness during a time when the laboring and middle classes were beginning to leave the rural countryside in larger numbers, flocking to urban cities. This process prompted some to leave the rural past and enter the urban, modern, and industrial future. Mexico's existence, however, still predominantly reflected a pre-modern society where its people earned their livelihood by working the land or owning small businesses in their humble isolated pueblos and yet the government and social elite promoted the country as a growing modernized state; the working and middle class citizens found themselves in a contradictory reality. Comprehending the precarious situation of the country's predominant campesino population, Paz equated Mexico's fragile psyche with that of an adolescent who begins to find and define himself through the realization of his solitude. In this desertedness, the adolescent begins to ponder his very existence and enters a profound state of self-reflection where he then understands that "[t]he singularity of his being, which is pure sensation in children, becomes a problem and a question."¹

He continues by asserting that, like the adolescent, nation-states must also self-reflect and ask themselves "What are we, and how can we fulfill our obligations to ourselves as we are?"² During the modernization period of Mexico's history, no other question perplexed the officials of

the nation-state more than the one posed by Paz. The country marched exuberantly towards an industrialized future that promised a more fulfilling life, yet did so without the adequate infrastructure or sufficient skill sets to achieve the material wealth heralded by city life. State officials pondered what image best represented Mexico and its national identity in this time of contradiction in the development of the country. Utilizing the “modern” technology of the day, film, the government eschewed aspects of cultural transnationalism as demonstrated by its handling of the *peladito* and *pachuco* figures in Mexican films.

Mexico’s film industry came to the forefront and presented the country with images and characters with whom the country rallied behind and identified with. During the Golden Age of Mexican cinema (1940s-1950s) there was an enormous explosion of film production, such that the industry emerged as the sixth most important in the country.³ Surely this meant Mexico experienced economic benefits but the real importance of Mexican cinema in this period is that it inundated Mexicans with films intended to influence the audience in their social and cultural understanding of themselves. Independent scholar Anne Doremus relates that “[d]uring a period when most Mexicans were illiterate, film—which reached the largest audience of any other artistic medium—likely constructed the predominant image of national identity.”⁴ Mexico had not reached a level of modernity where the dissemination of nationalistic convictions and ideals could be achieved through literary material. The usage of visual figures, icons, and symbols was the most effective manner through which concepts of national identity reached the populace. In the culmination of its existence, the film industry became one of, if not the most important creators and distributors of Mexican identity that encompassed romantic ideas of Mexico’s indigenous, Spanish, and mestizo ancestry but denied and frowned upon cultural influences from elsewhere, especially the United States.

Mexican cinema grew tremendously throughout the 1930's and 1940's, solidifying it as a strong and important industry of the time. During this time financial and technical assistance aided the process of producing films more consistently and less sporadically.⁵ Partially responsible for the industry's growth and stability during this time period was the government's recognition and interest in film's potential to make money (just as Hollywood began to explode in wealth and fame in the United States) and spread national interests. In 1935 the Cinematográfico Latino Americana, SA (CLASA) was founded and funded by state subsidies, which supplied the studios with the best cinematographic accessories.⁶ Moreover, in 1942, film production and distribution was financed by the Banco Cinematográfico, a newly created private institution that became nationalized in 1947 "setting the film financing for the foreseeable future, in which state and private initiatives combined to offer funding."⁷ Mexican cinema and the government collaborated in a symbiotic relationship where the state provided monies for modern technology and development, and in return, the film industry helped promote national ideals. Historian Carl Mora explains that after the creation of a "nationalist cinema," the Banco Cinematográfico funded producers if they created movies that represented "the contemporary Mexican reality on the screen."⁸ To support Mexico's nation building project, the film industry produced nationalistic movies that promoted ideals and images supported by the government and perceived by the masses as authentically Mexican; movies produced and manufactured *mexicanidad*.

Scholars in the field of Mexican cinema agree that the film industry played a crucial role in the creation and distribution of *mexicanidad*. However, there seems to be a debate pertaining to the issue of whether the dissemination of Mexicanness reflected or responded to the country's social, cultural, political and/or economic reality. In his account of Mexican cinema's

development, *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1896-1988*, historian Carl Mora claims that movies are a way of seeing the present condition of any country as they reflect reality from a screen onto an audience. Specifically, he declares that “[t]he movies we see reflect our own attitudes; they are what we are and what our dreams and fears are. By taking them seriously, we might better understand ourselves as well as others.”⁹ Contrary to this stance, Carlos Celli, a Romance and Classical Studies expert, believes that Mexican film responds to the realities of the country. For example, he believes that “the raw material for the sort of nationalist mythmaking exists in Mexico for a romantic vision of Mexican identity fighting against the injustices of a history of colonialism,”¹⁰ and later claims that “[a]s part of the push toward the creation of a national cultural identity . . . Mexico developed a vibrant national cinema in its capital city during the early sound period.”¹¹ Taking these two statements together, Celli suggests that Mexican identity originated as a response to colonialism, and, therefore, when this identity was reproduced on the screen in mid-twentieth century Mexico the images were a response to industrialization and urbanization—the new colonialism of the twentieth century. In their essay, “Mexican Cinema: A Panoramic View,” Manuel Michel and Neal Oxenhandler argue that the film industry in fact did neither. They contend that Mexican cinema centered on a tradition of diverse and irrelevant myths and social stigmas that included patriotism, religion, and sexuality that deny “anything that would mean a close viewing of [Mexico’s] problems” and conclude that the industry suffered from “the tradition of *absolute unreality* [author’s emphasis].”¹²

In actuality, however, the Mexican cinema both reflected and responded to the country’s urbanization initiatives. Films rendered during this time period, promoted ideals and images to unify the country and coalesce its diverse population under the banner of *mexicanidad*. Images that were projected onto the screen were diverse reflections of a reality that simultaneously

responded to social, cultural, political, and economic issues of the time. If they were accepted by the government and received well by audiences, these images continued to re-emerge on the screen. Their variety extended from looking at the country's recent Revolution, its indigenous population, and its present conditions resulting from urbanization. Through re-emerging in later films, these images were solidified and validated as being true reflections of Mexico's problems, existence, and identity. They were "a collection of fragments which in their diversity coalesce[d] to signify Mexican identity at a moment of heightened nationalism."¹³ In other words, cinematic themes, characters, and caricatures first appeared as a response to a perceived reflection of Mexico's reality but were not reproduced if the government and audience did not support or accept them as authentic depictions or critiques of Mexico. Two characters that emerged in Mexican cinema as a response to the industrialization and urbanization that reflected Mexico's modernization initiatives were the *peladito*, or *picado*, and the *pachuco*. Anne Doremus writes that "[i]n both the 'high' and 'popular' arts, national identity was frequently expressed through archetypes of the most disaffected members of Mexican society, including the peasant, the Indian, and the proletariat," who were embodied in film as the *peladito* and the *pachuco*.¹⁴ The Mexican government accepted the former as a true reflection and representation of *mexicanidad* because Mexicans across the country related to his experience while the latter cast aside because his transnational identity reflected a more regional identity.

These characters expressed cultural and social realities in a developing Mexican society and two actors—Mario Moreno and German Valdez—appeared as the embodiment of these characters during Mexico's Golden Age of cinema. However, although both actors portrayed characters who embodied the contradictions and tensions of modern life stemming from Mexico's transition from largely rural bases to a growing urban-centered society, only one

reflected a reality the government embraced as legitimate. The *pachuco* symbolized the transnational character of the border region where populations, goods, and influences from the US and Mexico converged and produced hybridized cultural expressions. The government viewed these cultural influences negatively and as a threat to its national project. Moreover, the majority of Mexico could not relate to life along the border. Therefore, the *pachuco* failed to resemble Mexican culture, *mexicanidad*, and was shunned by the government as an antithesis to Mexican national identity.

As ambassadors of *mexicanidad*, actors played parts in movies that made them famous and supported the government's nationalistic project of creating and disseminating Mexican national identity. Mario Moreno and Germán Valdéz both emerged as successful actors in Mexican cinema during the 1940's. However, Moreno skyrocketed to achieve high profile status, becoming a world renowned figure that still receives reverence today, while Valdéz never reached the stardom achieved by Moreno despite claims by many that he surpassed his contemporary in talent. How is this possible? Why did Moreno emerge as an icon of Mexico's Golden Age, greatly overshadowing Valdéz, whose ability to entertain audiences (arguably) exceeded that of Moreno? To answer these questions there needs to be a closer examination of the caricatures they embodied on screen, the *peladito* and the *pachuco*, respectively. The analysis will first begin with intellectuals' perceptions of these figures' presence in Mexican society and will then examine how the government interpreted their presence in Mexican film.

It is important to conceptualize the understanding of both the intellectuals (high class society) and the masses (laboring and middle class society) because culture and national identity emerge from both social groups and therefore are not homogenous. Doremus summarizes Mexican intellectual Roger Bartra's main argument in his reflection on Mexican national identity

(*The Cage of Melancholy*) that “myths of national identity link the political elite with the masses, primarily through an emphasis on melancholy and metamorphosis.”¹⁵ In other words, elitist and popular cultures are separated from one another but they interact with each other in the process of negotiating what deserves to represent authentic cultural expressions; and in the case of Mexico, *mexicanidad*. The two intellectuals to be examined are Samuel Ramos and Octavio Paz, who both produced quintessential works on Mexican self-awareness.

In the 1930s, Ramos examined the Mexican psyche in *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico*, where he utilized the *peladito* to explain and critique the direction of Mexico’s identity. He makes the argument that Mexicans suffer from an “inferiority complex” stemming from their desire to make themselves feel and appear equal to Europeans by emulating their customs and traditions in a modernizing world.¹⁶ He offers the *peladito* as a perfect character to explain the Mexican state of mind because “he constitutes the most elemental and clearly defined expression of national character.”¹⁷ The *peladito* is therefore presented as a social reality in Mexico and by focusing his analysis of the Mexican mind on the *peladito*, Ramos expresses the concerns of the high class about this figure in Mexican society and culture.¹⁸ He describes the *peladito* as an animal rummaging through the city, representing social parasites, who suffer from economic plight and intellectual inferiority. Ramos writes, “[t]he *pelado* belongs to a most vile category of social fauna; he is a form of human rubbish from the great city. He is less than a proletarian in the economic hierarchy and a primitive man in the intellectual one.”¹⁹ Ramos continues his barrage of the *peladito* by describing him as “an explosive being with whom relationship is dangerous, for the slightest friction causes him to blow up.”²⁰ Ramos criticizes the social outcast for his ill-temper and suggests that citizens of Mexico should avoid contact with him. In addition, he attacks the *peladito*’s corruption of the Spanish language and his tendency to contort

his body while engaged in an offensive conversation. Ramos writes that the *peladito* “has created a dialectic of his own, a diction which abounds in ordinary words, but he gives these words a new meaning. He is an animal whose ferocious pantomimes are designed to terrify others, making them believe that he is stronger and more determined than those around him. Such reactions are illusory retaliations against his real position in life, which is nullity.”²¹ Situated in a modern society, the *peladito* is an insignificant degenerate who Ramos detests, yet, *the peladito’s* existence is real and Ramos cautions against his amalgamation into Mexican culture.

In a similar fashion, Paz also reflected on the consciousness of his compatriots in *Labyrinth of Solitude* but instead of utilizing the *peladito* as his depiction of Mexico’s social problems, he focuses his writing on the *pachuco*. This figure is an “enigma” because he lacks the quality of being defined and has no real origins; his blood and body are located in the United States with roots in the Mexican culture, and yet the *pachuco* rejects both.²² Paz makes this point by succinctly stating that “[t]he *pachuco* has lost his whole inheritance: language, religion, customs, beliefs.”²³ Paz depicts this figure as a social outcast who belongs in neither the United States nor Mexico and who has lost his identity because he cannot (and actually refuses) to be situated in either of the nations that have influenced his being. By negating his ties with society, Paz describes the *pachuco* as an aggressive figure who resembles “an impassive and sinister clown whose purpose is to cause terror instead of laughter,” and therefore, needs to be avoided.²⁴ This figure dresses in a fashion that appears to present him as an entertainer; however, he threatens society because of inability and unwillingness to conform. Paz furthers his denouncement of the *pachuco*, claiming that “he knows that it is dangerous to stand out and that his behavior irritates society, but nevertheless he seeks and attracts persecution and scandal.”²⁵

The *pachuco* understands his irregularity and ambiguity, flaunting it everywhere he goes and systematically pursues confrontation by flamboyantly expressing his enigmatic existence.

Paz clearly deems the *pachuco* as a problem for Mexico and puts forth his conviction that this aggressive figure not be allowed to sustain a presence in the country. Interestingly, the Mexican intellectual wrote many of his reflections in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* while sojourning in the United States during the 1940s. His introduction and exposure to *pachuquismo* was surely influenced by the negative publicity Mexican Americans and *pachucos* received during the Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial (1942) and the Zoot Suit Riots (1943). *The Labyrinth of Solitude* was first published in 1950 but by 1945 the *pachuco* had already made his way into Mexican films and Paz surely took note when publishing his ideas. His reflections were cautions against what he believed to be the corruption of culture—a corruption that in his view occurred because of a transnational identity, of not truly belonging to one place or another.

Both Ramos and Paz express their abhorrence of the figures that emerged during Mexico's modernization campaign. They categorize the *peladito* and the *pachuco* as violent figures, displaced in society with no merit coexisting alongside the noble citizens of the ancient Aztec empire. These figures are demonized in intellectual writing because they are perceived as nuisances and pests who agitate society, diminish culture, and need to be eschewed and ignored for the preservation of pure *mexicanidad* in the country's time of modernization. It is important to note that, the *peladito* and the *pachuco* were *both* rejected by the elitist/high culture of Mexican society. They both earned descriptions and characterizations by intellectual writers, who addressed their presence in and threat to Mexico, casting them as menaces to Mexico's social and cultural condition. However, the Mexican government's acceptance of the *peladito* as a palatable figure of Mexico's reality and true identity, helped propel the figure and actor who

personified him most successfully to great fame. Both actors came from humble beginnings and eventually made their way to entertainment through a similar avenue, making people laugh in Mexico's *carpas*. The *carpas*, traveling carnivals, provided various forms of entertainment for members of the working class in Mexico City during the 1930s. As a result of their "carnavalesque" nature, these traveling camps "exhibited or alluded to all that went against 'good taste' and 'good manners,' particularly those involving the body, such as physical deformities, physiological malfunctions, sexual appetite, and so on."²⁶ The conditions of the *carpas* themselves were as distasteful as their acts:

Conditions inside were deplorable, with haphazard stage lights, inadvertently surrealistic backdrops, uncomfortable seats for the audience, and even worse provisions for the actors. Only the best—one in ten according to an inspector's count—offered toilets. Stagehands hung the canvas top from any available pole, including open streetlights that threw sparks across the combustible fabric. Few impresarios spent money on fire extinguishers.²⁷

Despite the dilapidated conditions of the entertainment provided by the *carpas*, the working class citizens of Mexico City flocked to them in high numbers because they served as "a haven for the disenfranchised."²⁸ The marginalized city folk frequented the *carpas* as a way to escape the burdens of their urbanite lives. Moving into the city, people suffered from the long working hours, dangers, and monotony of industrial work, along with poor infrastructure, and poverty. The *carpas* often used satire to critique local, regional, and national politics that provided the laboring class entertainment and a venue for expression.

Theatrical skits that were filled with "slapstick" comedy and "bewildering displays of verbal pyrotechnics" proved popular and served as a main attraction of the *carpas*.²⁹ These performances were short as actors were only given fifteen to twenty minutes to perform. Therefore, in order to maintain regular employment, these actors had to produce "rapid-fire laughs" in order to "make an immediate impression on the crowd using iconic figures familiar to

all: *pelados* and dandies, cops and robbers, foreigners and floozies, gays and shrews.”³⁰ One of the most popular skits was that of the “country bumpkin” who interacted with the “city slicker.”³¹ Surely this was a favorite because the audience saw a reality in the entertainment that offered a “catharsis for social discontent.”³² However, even the *pachuco* made his presence felt in the *carpas* of Mexico City and in similar traveling shows in the U.S. Southwest.³³ His popularity in Mexico’s *carpas* most likely stemmed from people’s connections to the United States. Immigration persisted as a trend for Mexicans that linked families and social groups across borders. Members of the middle or upper class also traveled to the “land of hope and dreams.” Contacts across borders introduced expressions of popular culture to both countries, which permeated and influenced Mexico and its culture. Nonetheless, the skits that responded to the growing interaction between the peasants from the countryside and the businessmen of the city became the most popular reflection of society; their popularity validated the acceptance of the *peladito* as a vision and reality of Mexico. And it was through his portrayal of the *peladito*, the “country bumpkin” entering the big city, which began to make Moreno popular.

Mario “Cantinflas” Moreno was born August 12, 1911 in one of Mexico City’s poor neighborhoods. The sixth child of thirteen, Moreno came from a large family and his father worked as a mailman to support the family. As a young man, Moreno found work in a diverse range of occupations working as a bullfighter, a shoeshine boy, taxi driver and also a boxer. However, he found his calling with the *carpas*, which frequented his neighborhood.³⁴ Integral to his success as the *peladito* was Moreno’s ability to improvise and speak endlessly without saying much of anything. His skits never followed a script, he preferred on the spot acting and word play as his modes of acting when working for the *carpas*.³⁵ His natural ability to quickly come up with lines and his incoherent dialog generated uncontrollable laughter in his audiences. Early

in his career in the *carpas*, his trademark style led to him claim his stage name. The story goes that during a stand in performance, early in his career, Moreno stepped on stage, forgot his lines, and wet himself out of nervousness. This of course only added to his anxiety, but instead of running off stage, he simply began to talk. He began to speak jibberish and his nonsense brought the audience to laughter. After his performance had ended a fan from the crowd yelled, “*En la cantina, tu inflas!*” which translates to “you’re drunk.” Combining the terms “cantina” and “infla,” Moreno adopted the name “Cantinflas.”³⁶ His success at this moment to subvert the authority of the crowd—which could have booed him off stage—and leave the scene unscathed and victorious was certainly an omen of the success he would achieve using the same antics during the apex of his career.

By 1936 his performances in the *carpas* had earned him success and propelled him to the movie screen where he continued to portray the *peladito*. His debut in Mexican cinema was in the movie *No te engañes corazón* where he played a minor role.³⁷ His character then (and as it remained until the 1960s) appeared on screen with baggy, rugged pants, accompanied with an undersized hat—trademarks that became inseparable from his characters, contrasting with his antagonists who embodied businessmen fitted in the most modern suits and attire. Cantinflas’s *peladito* juxtaposed with members of the elite upper class on screen “represent[ed] the lumpenproletariat created by the impact of the unplanned and uncontrolled urbanization that dramatically transformed Mexico from a society of towns into a conglomeration of unmanageable metropolises, dominated by the largest of them all, Mexico City.”³⁸ As in the *carpas*, the *peladito* entered the world of cinematography responding to and reflecting a social reality, which the movie industry projected out to the country.

However, unlike Ramos' description of the *peladito* as a figure of whom to be wary, the image portrayed on screen depicted a lovable, mischievous rascal. Instead of this dirty mongrel that needed to be avoided and expelled from the country, the film industry and Cantinflas provided an image to the public that was fun and entertaining. In fact, Cantinflas's *peladito* was so friendly that many critics and scholars have equated him with the famous tramp, Charlie Chaplain. For example, Rafael Medina de la Serna states that, "Mario Moreno played a *peladito*, an urban tramp, the Aztec equivalent of Chaplin's."³⁹ In addition, Jeffery Pilcher mentions that the *peladito* and the tramp "both represented the human debris of industrialization, rootless migrants to the big city who survived by their wits in a bewildering and coldhearted environment."⁴⁰ The *peladito* was an underdog who entered urban centers and managed to make his way around, avoiding catastrophe as many may expect from an uneducated, downtrodden campesino having to deal with the complicated and corrupt institutions of the city. The government supported this comedic critique of Mexico and the mass population of Mexico identified with him. Mexican cultural historian John Mraz writes:

[I]t is important to understand the appeal [the *peladito*] had as a representative of underdogs who depend on their quick wit(s) to survive in an ostensibly democratic but profoundly unequal society. Mexicans exhibit a natural inventiveness and an uncommon playfulness with words, so his character finds a resonance in the nation's identity: a neocolonized individual who shapes his being in a situation of oppression.⁴¹

As mentioned above, Cantinflas's ability to champion over the city and elitist members of society through the medium of language was a central feature of how the *peladito* came to be accepted by the public as an authentic representation of *mexicanidad*. He can connect with the diverse population of Mexico, and particularly with the subservient masses of the poor, because "his speech pattern is a sign of extreme poverty and dispossession, as the most extreme poverty is alienation from language."⁴² Therefore, his use of language avails the audience to find

empathy with his character, rendering a common identity with him, and to enjoy the plot as Cantinflas's employment of language undermines authority, allowing him to escape grim situations in an often clumsy manner. A perfect example of this technique bloomed in the film that truly ignited Cantinflas's career and catapulted him to the realm of the stars, *Ahí está el detalle* (1940). Throughout the film Cantinflas's character uses his wordplay to get himself out of precarious situations, but no other scene illustrates this more than the court scene that closes the film. He is on trial for murder and has refused to allow a lawyer to represent him. As he presents his defense he convolutes his statements, subtly disrespects the judge, and confuses both the judge and the prosecution. His quick, incoherent rambles confuse the judge and the prosecutor to the extent that they too begin to speak nonsense and conclude that Cantinflas is innocent.

After *Ahí está el detalle*, Cantinflas' movies continued to utilize the *peladito* as the key character up until the 1960s. The simple fact that his caricature remained on the screen for more than twenty years signifies that the public accepted *peladito* as an authentic part of Mexican culture and national identity. The people saw in Cantinflas the reality of Mexico as a whole; a country moving towards escalated modernization without adequate social, political, or economic institutions to support urbanization and its growing population. For the audiences, Cantinflas “incarnate[d] the chaos of modern Mexican life,” and therefore his image was in fact a reflection of *mexicanidad*.⁴³

Undoubtedly, Cantinflas was a talented and charismatic actor who possessed a great ability to perform spontaneously and entertain the public. His *peladito* brought laughter and joy to a country that saw its reflection in his image; the people of Mexico recognized that, like them, the *peladito* “[had] its roots in the search for identity that marked the post-revolutionary

period.”⁴⁴ However, his talent along with his personification of *mexicanidad* did not go undisputed; in fact, many argue that Moreno’s talent may have even been inferior to one other actor, German “Tin Tan” Valdez. With regards to talent, Paulo Antonio Paranagua contends that “[c]ompared to Cantinflas, Tin Tan (and his mischievous, big-mouthed grin) was the more accomplished comedian, endowed with a more inventive and dynamic personality.”⁴⁵ Complimenting Paranagua’s assessment, Rafael Medina de la Serna describes Valdez as “displaying a level of spontaneous humorous inventiveness that has remained unparalleled in Mexican comedy.”⁴⁶ Tin Tan certainly possessed comedic talent that many view as surpassing the legendary Cantinflas but never achieved Moreno’s international fame.

Valdéz’s *pachuco* character deserves attention as this figure disputably presented an image of Mexican identity; there are some scholars like Jeffery Pilcher, Moreno’s biographer, who contend that the *pachuco* represented a Mexican reality that deserved notoriety as being linked with Mexican national identity. For example, Pilcher explains that “[t]he principal challenge to the Mexico City *pelado*’s representation of the national identity came from the most economically dynamic and culturally elastic region of the country, the border with the United States,” under the characterization of the *pachuco*.⁴⁷ However, other scholars refute the notion that the *pachuco* embodied anything truly and purely Mexican. One such scholar, John Mraz, expresses that “[t]he *pachuco* was an affront to the new nationalism as well as to traditional notions of *mexicanidad*.”⁴⁸ However, it must be noted that the *peladito*, also, did not represent a “traditional” conceptualization of *mexicanidad*; the two figures were products of an industrializing, urbanizing, and more modern Mexico. By examining the *pachuco*’s appearance on the film screen during the Golden Age of Mexican cinema a complex understanding unfolds of his existence in the Mexican consciousness.

Germán Valdéz was born in Mexico City in the year 1919 and at the age of twelve his family moved out of the capital and into a growing border town, Ciudad Juárez.⁴⁹ Here, he began to develop his ability to mimic personalities around him as he began working in radio and often went on the air “doing comic impersonations of Agustín Lara and other celebrities.”⁵⁰ His talent on the radio gained the attention of a ventriloquist, Paco Miller, who ran a performance company that toured Mexico and the Southwest.⁵¹ He eventually returned to Mexico City with Paco Miller and began performing at the *carpas*, where he presented his *pachuco* personality. He developed this persona during his time spent and influence from living on the Mexico-U.S. border.⁵² Tin Tan’s *pachuco* received notoriety, just as Cantinflas’s *peladito* in the *carpas*, and soon began to appear on the cinematic screen.

Similar to the *peladito*, the *pachuco* had a distinct image and use of language that separated him from all other characters presented to audiences. The *pachuco* wore what was commonly known in the United States during the nineteen forties as a “zoot-suit.” The costume featured baggy, crisp, pleated pants worn just below the armpits, with a gold chain hanging from one of the pockets. The attire also included a wide-brimmed hat accessorized with a feather. The flamboyant and over-sized outfit presented the *pachuco* in a comedic manner that rendered a clownish image of oversized clothes and a big smile. When viewed on screen, as was the case with Tin Tan’s first film, *El hijo desobediente* (1945), the *pachuco* does not appear as the aggressive ruffian that Paz describes. Instead, he presents himself as an energetic youth, full of vitality with an eagerness to sing and dance. For example, within the first twenty minutes of *El hijo desobediente*, Tin Tan sneaks onto a train to Mexico City in pursuit of a music career. When confronted by the conductor for his ticket, in a charming, child-like fashion, Tin Tan expresses his desire to sing for the train car’s approval to stay on the locomotive. Moving up and down the

train car he smiles, laughs, plays a guitar, and expounds his vocals for the other passengers.⁵³ This image directly and unambiguously contradicts the bitter, sour, and unfriendly portrayal delivered by Paz.

Another parallel between the two characters is the *pachuco*'s manipulation of language. However, whereas the *peladito*'s handling of the Spanish tongue revolves around his chattiness and incoherence due to nonsense, the *pachuco*'s use of language centers on a new dialect in and of itself. This dialect, known as *caló*, represents a border slang⁵⁴ that possessed unique words but also frequently combines both the English and Spanish languages. By utilizing this unique manner of speech and bringing it to the world of cinema, Tin Tan brought with him "the first evidence on the Mexican screen of what would come to be known as 'Spanglish.'"⁵⁵ Although both played with Mexico's dominant language, Tin Tan received huge criticisms for combining Spanish and English words, while Cantinflas merited no attacks for his corruption of the language.⁵⁶ For example, after the release of his first film, *El hijo desobediente*, Tin Tan experienced censorship; "the government warned him to stop speaking Spanglish to avoid corrupting the speech of Mexican youth."⁵⁷ The government viewed the *caló* language he employed as offensive because it threatened *mexicanidad*; the influence of the English language in Mexico's northern region challenged and subverted the official language, Spanish, and Valdez was pressured to drop his act.

The censorship experienced by Valdez represented the government's rejection of the *pachuco* as an authentic figure of *mexicanidad* because his transnational character, derived from his regional position, threatened the government's ideas of Mexico's national identity. The dismissal of the *pachuco* helped solidify the *peladito* as an acceptable, appropriate, mid-twentieth century representation of Mexico. Tin Tan's *pachuco* experienced a short-lived life in

Mexican cinema; the caricature made his last appearance (and a short one at that) in *Calabacitas tiernas* (1948) and then vanished from the screen, never re-emerging as a character in Mexican cinema again. The “zoot-suit” wearing caricature entered Mexico “as a cultural artifact [but] was eventually ‘deported’ and deleted from the Mexican cultural scene.”⁵⁸ The *pachuco* entered the limelight as a reflection of and response to a reality experienced by Vadez on the border, but Mexico as a whole failed to see the *pachuco* as a national representation. He was seen as something “other” and not original to Mexico and was therefore, not a reflection of Mexican national identity, explaining why Tin Tan did not achieve the high-profile star status that Cantinflas enjoyed.

Undoubtedly, Cantinflas and Tin Tan emerged onto the screen as a response to and a reflection of a reality that existed in Mexico. However, Tin Tan’s emergence as a *pachuco* was a more localized reality responding to issues that affected the border-states, towns, and regions that the Mexican government did not support and the majority of Mexico’s population did not identify with. His flashy clothes and Americanized tongue represented an image foreign to the majority of the Mexican population and, therefore, did not recognize it as part of their Mexican identity. In contrast, the rise of Cantinflas as a *peladito* from Mexico City better represented, and in fact epitomized, the nation’s reality as a whole. Many scholars of Mexican cinema and culture echo this notion by supporting the commentary that during Mexico’s Golden Age of cinema (1940s-1950s) “Cantinflas was an irreplaceable expression of *lo mexicano* [my emphasis].”⁵⁹

Throughout the country, in mid-twentieth century Mexico, campesinos began migrating from their rural towns into the nearest cities in accordance with industrialization and modernization. The film industry recognized both the *peladito* and the *pachuco* as representations responding to the urbanization of the country and displayed them for the

audience's pleasure and approval as renditions of *mexicanidad*. Although both figures manipulated language and had distinct apparel, it was the *peladito* who was embraced by Mexico as the true reflection of itself during the era of modernization. The *pachuco* was abandoned after a few years of attention, leaving Tin Tan to also relinquish his ties with the caricature that had fostered his artistic development and brought him to the big screen. Therefore, Cantinflas soared into the realm of the galaxies and became not just a cultural icon for Mexico, but was also institutionalized, as the word *cantinflar*, meaning to talk a lot without saying anything, was admitted into the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language in the early nineties.⁶⁰ As an iconic figure in Mexican and Latin American culture, Mario Moreno reached a level of immortality through his ability to identify with the entire Spanish-speaking world. However, the relevance of the *peladito* today seems miniscule in an era of globalization where nations promote multinational relations, fostering an environment of cultural exchange. Perhaps, the transnational character of the *pachuco*, in his dual existence as a biological product of Mexico and cultural bi-product of the United States, possesses more significance in today's world.

Notes

¹ Octavio Paz, *Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico*, translated by Lysander Kemp (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 9.

² Paz, *Labyrinth of Solitude*, 9.

³ Andrea Noble, *Mexican National Cinema* (New York: Routelouge, 2005), 14-15.

⁴ Anne Doremus, "Authenticity, the Pelado and the Mexican National Identity: Essay versus Film during the 1930s and the 1940s," *Confluencia*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Fall 2000), 46.

⁵ Noble, *Mexican National Cinema*, 14.

⁶ Noble, *Mexican National Cinema*, 14.

⁷ Noble, *Mexican National Cinema*, 14.

⁸ Carl Mora, *Mexican Cinema* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 62.

⁹ Mora, *Mexican Cinema*, xiv.

¹⁰ Carlo Celli, *National Identity in Global Cinema: How Movies Explain the World* (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 102.

¹¹ Celli, *National Identity in Global Cinema*, 102.

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- ¹² Manuel Michel and Neal Oxenhandler, "Mexican Cinema: A Panoramic View," *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Summer, 1965), 47.
- ¹³ Noble, *Mexican National Cinema*, 2.
- ¹⁴ Doremus, "Authenticity, the Pelado and the Mexican National Identity," 37.
- ¹⁵ Doremus, "Authenticity, the Pelado and the Mexican National Identity," 36.
- ¹⁶ Samuel Ramos, *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico*, translated by Peter G. Earle (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962), 58.
- ¹⁷ Ramos, *Profile of Man and Culture*, 58.
- ¹⁸ Ramos's interpretation is of the elitist social group because the majority of the literate population during the time his book was released were members of the privileged class.
- ¹⁹ Ramos, *Profile of Man and Culture*, 58-59.
- ²⁰ Ramos, *Profile of Man and Culture*, 58.
- ²¹ Ramos, *Profile of Man and Culture*, 58.
- ²² Paz, *Labyrinth of Solitude*, 14-15.
- ²³ Paz, *Labyrinth of Solitude*, 15.
- ²⁴ Paz, *Labyrinth of Solitude*, 16.
- ²⁵ Paz, *Labyrinth of Solitude*, 16.
- ²⁶ Doremus, "Authenticity, the Pelado and the Mexican National Identity," 40.
- ²⁷ Jeffery Pilcher, *Cantinflas and the Chaos of Mexican Modernity* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2001), 24.
- ²⁸ Ilan Stavans, "The Riddle of Cantinflas," *Transition*, No. 67 (1995), 33.
- ²⁹ Stavans, "The Riddle of Cantinflas," 33.
- ³⁰ Pilcher, *Cantinflas*, 25.
- ³¹ Pilcher, *Cantinflas*, 25.
- ³² Doremus, "Authenticity, the Pelado and the Mexican National Identity," 40.
- ³³ Pilcher, *Cantinflas*, 149.
- ³⁴ Stavans, "The Riddle of Cantinflas," 33.
- ³⁵ Pilcher, *Cantinflas*, 26.
- ³⁶ Pilcher, *Cantinflas*, 2-3 and Stavans, "The Riddle of Cantinflas," 33-34.
- ³⁷ Mora, *Mexican Cinema*, 48.
- ³⁸ John Mraz, *Looking for Mexico: Modern Visual Culture and National Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 122.
- ³⁹ Rafael Medina de la Serna, "Sorrows and Glories of Comedy," in *Mexican Cinema*, edited by Antonio Paranagua and translated by Ana M. Lopez (London: British Film Institute, 1995), 167.
- ⁴⁰ Pilcher, *Cantinflas*, xv.
- ⁴¹ Mraz, *Looking for Mexico*, 129.
- ⁴² Paulo Paranagua, *Mexican Cinema*, 5.
- ⁴³ Stavans, "The Riddle of Cantinflas," 41.
- ⁴⁴ Mraz, *Looking for Mexico*, 122.
- ⁴⁵ Paranagua, *Mexican Cinema*, 5.
- ⁴⁶ Rafael Medina de la Serna, "Sorrows and Glories of Comedy," 167.
- ⁴⁷ Pilcher, *Cantinflas*, 148.
- ⁴⁸ Mraz, *Looking for Mexico*, 129.
- ⁴⁹ Mora, *Mexican Cinema*, 82.
- ⁵⁰ Pilcher, *Cantinflas*, 149.
- ⁵¹ Pilcher, *Cantinflas*, 149.

⁵² Mora, *Mexican Cinema*, 82.

⁵³ Gomez Landero, Humberto. *El Hijo Desobediente*. VHS. Directed by Humberto Gomez Landero. Mexico DF, Mexico: AS Films Producciones Grovas, 1945.

⁵⁴ Javier Duran, "Nation and Translation: The 'Pachuco' in Mexican Popular Culture: German Valez's Tin Tan," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Vol. 35, No. 2, Translating in and across cultures (Autumn, 2002), 42.

⁵⁵ Mraz, *Looking for Mexico*, 129.

⁵⁶ Mraz, *Looking for Mexico*. 129.

⁵⁷ Pilcher, *Cantinflas*, 150.

⁵⁸ Durán, "Nation and Translation," 46.

⁵⁹ Stavans, "The Riddle of Cantinflas," 46.

⁶⁰ Pilcher, *Cantinflas*, xvii.