# Redefining Zorro: Hispanicising the Swashbuckling Hero

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### Introduction

Such did the theatrical trailer for *The Mask of Zorro* (Campbell, 1998) proclaim of Antonio Banderas's performance as the masked adventurer, promising the viewer a sexier and more daring vision of Zorro than they had ever seen before. This paper considers this new image of Zorro and the way in which an iconic figure of modern popular culture was redefined through the performance of Banderas, and the influence of his contemporary star persona, as he became the first Hispanic actor ever to play Zorro in a major Hollywood production. It is my argument that Banderas's Zorro, transformed from bandit Alejandro Murrieta into the masked hero over the course of the film's narrative, is necessarily altered from previous incarnations in line with existing Hollywood images of Hispanic masculinity when he is played by a Hispanic actor.

I will begin with a short introduction to the screen history of Zorro as a character and outline the action-adventure hero archetype of which he is a prime example. The main body of my argument is organised around a discussion of the employment of three of Hollywood's most prevalent and enduring Hispanic male types, as defined by Latino film scholar, Charles Ramirez Berg, before concluding with a consideration of how these ultimately serve to redefine the character.

### Who is Zorro?

Zorro was originally created by pulp fiction writer, Johnston McCulley, in 1919 and first immortalised on screen by Douglas Fairbanks in *The Mark of Zorro* (Niblo, 1920) just a year later. This masked hero of the people in Spanish California is popular culture's most famous Hispanic adventurer and has been a near constant feature of American film and television culture for almost a century. However, it is my argument in the following discussion of *The Mask of Zorro* that, before Banderas became the first Hispanic actor to play Zorro in an English language film, the character existed on the Hollywood screen as a Hispanic hero in name only.

If Zorro's previous screen incarnations are not representative of Hispanic masculinity – the character being played first by America's hero Douglas Fairbanks and later embodied by swashbuckling Irish matinee idol, Tyrone Power, in the remake of *The Mark of Zorro* (Mamoulian, 1940) – then this enduring figure of American popular culture is really an embodiment of a deeply nostalgic image of heroic masculinity. I use the term 'nostalgia' here in the same sense that Pam Cook defines the term in *Screening the Past*:

> Nostalgia is predicated on a dialectic between longing for something idealised that has been lost, and an acknowledgement that this something can never be retrieved in actuality, and can only be accessed through images.[1]

Indeed, the revival of Zorro in 1998 is a perfect example of the way in which contemporary cinema responds to the nostalgic longings of its audience. The recreation of Zorro himself calls on a cross-generational collective memory of the character and is, above all else, a symbol of Classical, old-fashioned popular entertainment – an adventurer hero in the mode of Robin Hood or The Three Musketeers. The nostalgia that surrounds Zorro, however, goes beyond *The Mask of Zorro*: Upon the character's first screen appearance in 1920, the idea of the noble adventure hero was as a nostalgic ideal of masculinity, as the cowboy of the Old West. Brian Taves notes that, in the action-adventure film, the characterisation is entirely based on established types and the hero is the masculine paragon of all that is good and just. He writes:

> The adventure hero is usually attractive, endowed with personal magnetism, ardent in romance, a natural leader with worthy goals and a sense of duty to a country or cause. While enjoying existence to the fullest, the adventurous life is also serious. The hero is politically motivated and patriotic,

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[1] P. Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (Oxon: Routledge, 2005), p. 4.

> selflessly dedicated to justice. Epitomising altruism, the hero is pure of purpose, brave in war, honourable, fair, and chivalrous, behaving as a gentleman and recognising a code of conduct. Peaceful at heart the adventurer only kills the most dangerous of villains, often in highly stylised duels.[2]

It is the way in which *The Mask of Zorro* combines this traditional construction of the action-adventure hero with a screen identity historically marginalised within Hollywood cinema: the Hispanic male. In my paper, I discuss the redefinition of Zorro which occurs through the hybridisation of opposing archetypes, and consider the consequences of blending the action-adventure hero type with the traditional Hollywood typologies which characterise Hispanic males as incapable of restraining their excessive, demonstrative masculinity within texts such as *The Mask of Zorro*.

## Undressing Adventure and the Latin Lover

The new Hispanic image of Zorro aims to draw its audiences nostalgic longing for the old-fashioned image of masculinity described above, while at the same time attempting to widen the audience appeal of a genre which has traditionally be aimed at the white male viewer through the performance of Banderas and his appeal to a female audience as a contemporary 'Latin Lover'. The enduring Hispanic applicable stereotype the 'Latin Lover' is a figure of excessive sexuality and romantic passion. Berg writes that those cast in the model of this type:

> . . . haplessly reiterate the erotic combination of characteristics instituted by (Rudolph) Valentino: eroticism, exoticism, tenderness ringed with violence and danger, all adding up to the romantic promise that, sexually, things could very well get out of control.[3]

The employment of the 'Latin Lover' type is evident within *The Mask of Zorro*'s most memorable fight scene, in which Antonio Banderas as the young Zorro undresses his love interest, Elena (played by Catherine Zeta Jones), with a few deftly administered slashes of his sword. The duel itself is true to the traditions of the classic adventure film in the nature of its sword play. Even the structure is typical: the hero appears defeated before using his cunning to regain the upper hand over his opponent. Where this scene differs from tradition is in the adding of a further dimension to the adventurer type – equating the hero's sword fighting skills with his prowess as a Latin Lover. This is achieved in part through the romantic Hispanic sound-effects which punctuate the scene: when Elena draws her sword to Zorro's throat castanets sound and, in turn, when Zorro un-sheaths his sword this action is punctuated by the strumming of Spanish guitars. Indeed the duel itself, from the perspective of its sound-effects, more greatly resembles a seductive flamenco dance than a sword fight. The identity of Zorro's opponent clearly redefines the adventurer in this scene, in that she is not an enemy of the people but a beautiful noblewoman dressed in her nightgown; Zorro engages Elena in combat *and* romance. Although the sexual spectacle of Elena's undressing is targeted to appeal to the traditionally young, heterosexual, male audience typical of the action adventure film, the employment of the Latin Lover type arguably renders the two relative equals in terms of their sexual commodification within the scene, and, while it is Elena who loses the most clothing, the already revealing neckline of Zorro's shirt is suitably slashed by the end of the duel. Indeed, the scene is a perfect example of the way in which the body of Banderas (when performing the role of Hispanic action hero) is rendered a site of both action spectacle and sexual spectacle, often with both of these effects occurring simultaneously. As such, this Hispanicised image of Zorro combines Latin Lover and adventure hero, tempting Elena to succumb to passion with his risqué behaviour – in order to appeal to the exotic fantasies of the female audience – while simultaneously retaining the macho mantle of the action hero in the eyes of the male audience.

This re-characterisation of Zorro as a Latin Lover is suitably compatible with the adventurer type and, while Banderas's Zorro could not be described as a gentleman, Taves's conception of the adventure as 'attractive, endowed with personal magnetism . . . ardent in romance' is enhanced through Zorro's performance. However, as I will now discuss, the Hispanic image of Zorro also incorporates types that do represent a significant opposition to that of the action-adventure hero, specifically those of the bandido and the Latin buffoon.

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[2] B. Taves, *The Romance of Adventure: The Genre of the Historical Adventure Movie* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1993), pp. 111-112.
[3] C. Ramirez Berg, *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, Resistance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), p. 76.

## From Bandido and Buffoon to Action Adventure Hero

Indeed, Alejandro Murrieta occupies traditional Hollywood Hispanic roles of buffoon and bandit before he is transformed into a noble adventure hero by Don de la Vega. Alejandro and his brother are first described within the film as 'the notorious Murietta brothers; robbers, horse thieves and bandits!' and are depicted on a wanted poster which identifies them as the consummate Mexican bandidos with devious, narrow eyed expressions and wild, untamed hair. The bandido/greaser type, from which these representations of the Murrietta brothers are drawn, is the antithesis of the noble adventure hero in terms of his temperament and behaviour. Traditionally El Bandido takes the form of a greasy, sleazy and slow-witted Mexican bandit who is behaviourally 'vicious, cruel, treacherous, shifty, and dishonest' while being psychologically 'irrational, overly emotional and quick to resort to violence'.[4]

This depiction of the man who will become Zorro as bandido, however, is rendered innocuous by combining this type with another long-standing Hollywood Hispanic type: the Latin Buffoon. Berg lists the Hispanic male buffoon as one of Hollywood's most prevalent stereotypes of Hispanic masculinity:

> Serving as second-banana comic relief . . . what is funny about this character, what audiences are given to laugh at, are the very characteristics which separate him from Hollywood's vision of the WASP (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant) American mainstream. For example, he is simpleminded (the bumbling antics of Gordito or Sergeant Garcia), he cannot master basic English . . . and he childishly regresses into emotionality.[5]

Banderas himself states that he feels much of the comedy in the film comes from the attempts of the 'mature' and 'skilful' de la Vega to teach Alejandro who he describes as 'pitiful', a 'clown' and a 'thief', and this characterisation of the young Zorro is employed the first time the two men meet as adults.[6] The young man is tempestuous, overly emotional and comically inept with a sword when the men first duel, in a comedic scene which employs the bandit/buffoon typology to great effect. After the death of his brother Alejandro is distraught and turns to drink. As he is about to exchange the charm given to his brother by Zorro for more whisky, Don de la Vega hooks the charm's chain with his walking stick and uses it to pull Alejandro towards him. Alejandro charges towards him but is restrained by de la Vega, who calmly says: 'You are drunk and you are angry, and in no condition to fight a professional soldier.' Alejandro responds: 'Get out of my way old man,' and then de la Vega pulls him back clasping his hands around his neck. De la Vega then throws Alejandro back against the door. Alejandro charges towards de la Vega, but is set off balance and goes tumbling backwards into several bundles of straw. Alejandro pulls himself back to his feet and again charges toward de la Vega, jabbing at him ineptly with his sword. As the final humiliation to Alejandro, de la Vega disables him with three swift blows to the body and a debilitating blow to the nether-regions. De la Vega holds his sword to Alejandro's throat and says: 'Would you care to try again? I can teach you . . . how to move, how to think, how to take your revenge with honour and live to celebrate it. But it will take dedication, and it will take time.' This dialogue neatly encapsulates the way in which the comedy in this scene is created through juxtaposition, between the slapstick comedy of Alejandro's attempts at sword-fighting and the masterful skill of Zorro, the character he will later become.

After presenting us with an image of Alejandro as a bandido/buffoon the film then depicts his transformation into an adventurer hero. Taves posits that there is a history of an adventurer being trained by a more experience mentor in the action adventure film:

> An adventurer may be apprenticed to an understanding mentor who recognises the potential beyond the veneer of inexperience, as in *Prince Valiant,* or learn by emulating an avuncular figure, such as Roger Byam from Fletcher Christian in *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935). This process occurs without consideration of age or race, such as *Kim* from the Tibetan Lama and the native horse trader Mahbub Ali. As a consequence, through all of adventure runs the theme of boys striving for manhood and men who wish they were still boys. In some cases, the lives of two heroes become parallel, as in *Stanley and Livingstone* – the new hero learning from the older one.[7]

*The Mask of Zorro* continues this cycle of action-adventure films; however, in this case an interesting class and racial dynamic is added to a tale in which an older, aristocratic European teaches a young Mexican bandit to become an action hero. The transformation of Alejandro from bandit to adventurer hero can be

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[4] Ibid, p. 68.
[5] Ibid, pp. 71-72.
[6] Antonio Banderas in an interview filmed for the *Zorro Unmasked* documentary which appeared as a special feature on the UK Special Edition DVD of *The Mask of Zorro* (1998).
[7] Taves, *The Romance of Adventure: The Genre of the Historical Adventure Movie*, pp. 112-113.

viewed as a colonial allegory of the civilisation of the savage, through teaching, in this case physical training. The Mexican's wildness and lawlessness is restrained and he is reformed to exist within the hero's balance of restraint and excess, as described by Yvonne Tasker in her analysis of the action genre.[8] The transformation of Alejandro into the action hero is achieved through the employment of the typical training montage sequence which will seem very familiar to the viewer of contemporary Hollywood action and sports films, in which we see the progress of the hero compressed in time. When the training begins de la Vega remarks: 'This is going to take a lot of work' and we see this labour begin within the 'Master's Wheel'. The audience is informed by de la Vega that this series of decreasing circles is to become the basis of Alejandro's training. He says: 'This circle will be your world, your whole life, until I tell you otherwise there is nothing outside of it . . . As your skill with a sword improves you will progress to a smaller circle, with each new circle your world contracts, bringing you that much closer to you adversary, that much closer to retribution.' The 'Masters Wheel' is a physical representation of Alejandro's progress towards the goal of adventurer hero, his civilisation through action.

## Conclusion

The Hispanicisation of Zorro has undeniably led to a redefinition of the character, but what is this new image of Zorro intended to represent? On the one hand, the film's creation of a new Zorro presents its audience with an echo of the American Dream in its message that anyone, even a Mexican bandit, can become a noble hero. This attempt at democratising the figure of the adventurer is undercut, however, by the film's system of representation which, albeit with a marked irreverence of tone, Hispanicises Zorro by re-presenting age old stereotypes of Hispanic masculinity.

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## Author Biography

Victoria Kearley holds a BA in Film and English and an MA in Film Studies from the University of Southampton. She has been studying for a PhD in Film, part-time, since October 2008. The representation of Hispanic masculinity in contemporary Hollywood cinema is the subject of her doctoral thesis, which considers how popular genre conventions can reconfigure traditional conceptions of race, gender and sexuality within mainstream cinema.

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[8] Y. Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Genre, Gender and the Action Cinema* (Routledge: London, 2003), p. 9.