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## THE UNMAKING OF INDIGENEITY

### INDIGENOUS REPRESENTATIONS IN THE GOLDEN AGE OF MEXICAN CINEMA

**ABSTRACT** This paper contributes to the debate on racialized and deracialized representations of the category of indigeneity in Mexican cinematography during the Golden Age (1935–1959) as a response to the post-revolutionary nation-building project. Based on the analysis of representative movies of that period, I argue that the cinematography reflected *indigenista* public policies, aimed at homogenizing the society by incorporating indigenous people to the society as Mexicans. Insofar as the state narrative displaced the notion of indigeneity towards the “past” – as a foundation of the national cultural heritage – movie industry romanticized and exoticized the indigenous, but at the same time, it portrayed indigenous characters as submissive and even obsolete, thus perpetrating the colonial archetype of oppression. Images situated in the present, however, rejected any ethnic differentiation, and instead replaced it with a class-based model of social interactions, but in reality the “raceless” ideal of national identity would continue to ascribe indigeneity to lower social strata.

**KEYWORDS** *Mexican revolution, Mexican Golden Age, Mexican cinematography, indigenous representation, national identity*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper explores racial constructs of indigenous people in Mexico (and Central America) in the aftermath of the Mexican revolution (1910–1917). Drawing on the scholarship in various disciplines, such as film studies, history of art, gender studies, socio-political studies, and philosophy, I discuss the main themes of Mexican indigeneity conveyed through the cinema lens, and how they fit the imaginary spaces of *mexicanidad*. The objective of this analysis is to examine the formation of national identities grounded in racial and class-based notions of “Mexicanity”, as pursued by the mass media. I argue that the novel cinematographic language both reflected and influenced the mass perception of social composition, reinforcing cultural and racial whitening of the Mexican nation.

The paper is organized around two intertwined yet contradictory notions, reinforced by *indigenista* policies, namely, the social incorporation of the indigenous as carriers of historical and cultural greatness, contrasted with the rejection of the “exotic” indigenous identity due to its backwardness and the nation-forging agenda.<sup>1</sup> This division corresponds to the critique of *indigenismo* originating from the works of anthropologists Pablo González Casanova, Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, Arturo Warman and others. “Internal colonialism”, an intricate network of public policies designed to include the indigenous in the society and to exclude them from it,<sup>2</sup> rose to the level of the main narrative in which the imaginary indigenous could function. Officially, it rejected the definite lines of the pre-revolutionary Indian/Spanish polarity, now employed in the governmental rhetoric only as a “dread” remainder of the *ancien régime*. However, the tension between the appreciation of the heritage and the resentment of the present-day misery ascribed to the indigenous condition, remained and eventually led *indigenistas* to subject indigenous identity to transition from ethnic-based representations of the “anachronistic” Indian towards a class-oriented mass *campesino/albañil* with a heavily restricted space to express ethnic differentiation.

From the perspective of cinematography, I will argue that during the period discussed, the indigenous would gradually disappear from the mainstream entertainment, but never completely, given their social immobility and continued association of the indigenous with poverty, laziness, and ignorance. With the rise of a new society they would simply refresh their costumes, blending in along the class-based lines, and therefore, fitting neatly in the illusory roles of impoverished *mestizos*, but within a social reality that reproduces the same patterns of the vertical *porfiriato*.

This argument expands partly on Alan Knight’s claim that Indian participation in the revolution itself was motivated by “genuine popular (...) grievances”,<sup>3</sup> not caste

<sup>1</sup> R. Pérez Montfort, ‘Un nacionalismo sin nación aparente: (la fabricación de lo ‘típico’ mexicano 1920–1950)’, *Política y cultura*, no. 12 (1999), p. 187.

<sup>2</sup> P. González Casanova, *La democracia en México*, Mexico 1965, p. 104.

<sup>3</sup> A. Knight, “Racism, revolution, and indigenismo: Mexico, 1910–1940”, in R. Graham et al., *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870–1940*, Austin 1990, p. 76.

membership. His reasoning, however, goes even further when he argues that Indian consciousness was born only in the aftermath of the revolution: “on the eve of the Revolution, there was scant evidence of a broad ‘Indian’ consciousness (comparable to the nascent ‘peasant’ consciousness [...]).”<sup>4</sup> It is surely arguable, at least to some degree, that “it was the European who created the Indian,”<sup>5</sup> given that for the indigenous identity to crystalize – regardless of the nucleus of this identity (whether it was anchored in ethnic, race, class, cultural point of contention or other) – it needed to arise from the contestation of social reality.<sup>6</sup> In this particular context, it was the experience of colonization that established the asymmetric organization of social spaces and the boundaries to access power – steered by both the legal system and customary norms. However, the claim that there was no “supra-communal”<sup>7</sup> indigenous identity should not mislead anyone into denying the existence of a widespread “ethnicized” perception of the category of the indigenous. Knight rightly discounts the importance of local indigenous identities and communal allegiances during the revolution, as that did not determine the direction of the political agenda, since “the Revolution [...] was fought on the basis of considerable Indian participation [...], but in the absence of any self-consciously Indian project.”<sup>8</sup> At the same time, he too easily discards the possibility that the top-bottom creation of the sense of ethnic or class belonging can still be nevertheless a valid mechanism of affecting a group’s identity.

Although the relationship between the revolutionary mind-set and indigeneity will not be dealt with extensively here,<sup>9</sup> it is of utmost importance to recapitulate that in the light of the aforementioned lack of “the self-conscious Indian project”, the focus of this paper is directed towards the exogenous perception of the category for a number of reasons. As suggested above, the category of the indigenous can only resound properly in juxtaposition with the non-indigenous,<sup>10</sup> which signals the necessity to examine it in a broader context of the ethnic gaze of both movie producers and the audience itself. Analysis of the indigenous condition as imagined by cinematography – an art inherently external to its subject – does not allow drawing direct conclusions on the indigenous identity *per se*, but rather on how others perceive it. In addition, one should always consider the propaganda aspect of the movie industry, whose products would frequently go along with the nationalistic precepts of the government and would have the capacity to affect the audience, an extension of the society.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> G. Bonfil Batalla, *Utopía y revolución: el pensamiento político contemporáneo de los indios en América Latina*, Mexico 1981, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> C. Jung, *The Moral Force of Indigenous Politics*, Cambridge 2008, p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> A. Knight, ‘Racism...’, p. 76.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> M. León-Portilla, A. Meyer González (eds.), *Los indígenas en la Independencia y la Revolución mexicana*, Mexico 2010.

<sup>10</sup> G. Bonfil Batalla, *Utopía...*, pp. 19–21.

The remaining question is who was at the end of the communication chain. Was the new portrait of Mexico a response to Hollywood's demeaning depiction of Mexicans? Were indigenous people even part of the audience? Were the movie producers even concerned about the artistic execution and the political message, or rather they were simply presenting images digestible for *mestizo* sensitivity? Since the vast majority of the film industry was closely associated with the nation-building project, and most movies were created by *mestizos* for the urban *mestizo* audience, it stands to reason that the indigenous on the Golden Age screen served primarily to comfort and reassure the *mestizo* himself, not the indigenous, about the superiority of the one national identity. This limitation of my research does not undermine, however, the fact that the mass culture permeated many layers of Mexican socio-political life, ultimately affecting the indigenous people too. And in fact, it shows yet another dimension of the paternalistic relationship between the *mestizo* movie-makers and the indigenous "study objects" of their movies, with not only their voice muted in the narrative, but even their physical presence in the audience rendered redundant.

The paper consists of two main parts. In the first section I present an overview of *indigenismo* in the region, focusing on how *indigenista* policies, with their concern over the pluri-ethnic composition of the fractured nation, reshaped the image of the indigenous in order to forge one national identity. In particular, I examine the by-product of the approach advocated by the leading Latin American scholars and policy-makers of the time, that is, the simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of indigenous Mexicans from the socio-political and cultural domain. The following subsections concentrate on the representations of the indigenous in the Mexican cinema, with a particular emphasis on the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema (1935–1959).

## 1. UNITED IN SAMENESS

After a century of independence (1810–1917), Mexico lacked a well-defined national imagery that would unify its population into one collective. The rule of authoritarian-minded Porfirio Díaz between 1876 and 1911, directly preceding and prompting the revolutionary outbreak, not only postponed the necessity to recast Mexican society as one socio-cultural entity, but also contributed to its further fragmentation and exclusiveness through explicitly discriminatory *latifundista* policies towards indigenous people. Rooted in egalitarian values, the Mexican revolution that overthrew the elitist *porfiriato* regime elevated the concern over building a homogenous nation to a priority on the political agenda. By explicitly eliminating racial differentiation from the official rhetoric, it sought to contest boundaries of the traditional social hierarchy, that is, the widespread systemic exploitation of the indigenous population in order to channel *mexicanidad* into modernity.

The nation formation project continued after the political situation stabilized in the late 1910s, and a number of intellectuals concerned with the contentiousness of

racial diversity, including José Vasconcelos, Manuel Gamio, Andrés Molina Enríquez, Alfonso Caso, directed their attention to formulating a cultural base for nationhood.<sup>11</sup> The main premises of those theories were the distinctiveness of each Latin American state from the former metropole and the necessity to build a harmonious, “raceless” Mexico. These considerations led the scholarly debate to the conclusion that the uniqueness of Latin American societies stems from miscegenation as a unique social feature of Latin America and a symbolic expression of the embracing rich cultural heritage. As a result, the national discourse began to revolve entirely around the category of *mestizaje*, understood both as a cultural and biological parameter. Unlike in Europe, however, ethnicity and race were not conceived of as explicitly excluding some groups from the society on the quasi-scientific grounds. Advocates of the emerging *indigenismo*, the dominant ideological current translated into an official policy towards indigenous people in Latin America since at least 1940s,<sup>12</sup> claimed that their vision of social order did not entail racism, for it “[sought] a vital renovation of mankind by means of a racial synthesis.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, ethnic attribution was fluid to some extent, and eugenics could be “overcome” on cultural basis. For instance, an Indian who received education, enshrined “Mexican” culture and moved to an urban setting, would theoretically be welcomed as a reformed Mexican citizen.<sup>14</sup>

Nonetheless, the national homogenization based on a denial of ethnic differentiation was, in fact, deeply embedded in the process of social whitening. *Mestizofilia* valued ethnically blind social mobility, but it was a one-way movement that aimed at modernizing and developing Mexico through “the road already cleared by Latin civilizations.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, although one could become a *mestizo*, one could never become an Indian, unless they had been born one, which indicates that development was projected as racially and biologically conditioned, and the cult of *mestizaje* rejected ethnic equality.

As a matter of fact, early *indigenismo* contained some elements of hard-line scientific racism. In a famous study of Teotihuacán people, Manuel Gamio applied anthropometric categories like the skull and nasal index to define racial affiliation. Furthermore, he categorized every civilization as either modern or indigenous, openly suggesting that indigeneity is inherently associated with backwardness.<sup>16</sup> Even though two years after Gamio undermined the scientific objectivity of his research by referring to it as “purely hypothetical and in no sense to be taken seriously,”<sup>17</sup> his ideas continued to spread

<sup>11</sup> C. C. Chorba, *Mexico from Mestizo to Multicultural: National Identity and Recent Representations of the Conquest*, Nashville 2007, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> C. Jung, *The Moral...*, p. 94.

<sup>13</sup> J. H. Haddox, *Vasconcelos of Mexico: Philosopher and Prophet*, Austin 1967, p. 54.

<sup>14</sup> A. Knight, ‘Racism...’, p. 73.

<sup>15</sup> J. Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race*, Baltimore, MD–London 1997, p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> A. S. Dawson, *Indian and Nation in Revolutionary Mexico*, Tucson 2004, pp. 9–20.

<sup>17</sup> M. Gamio, ‘The Sequence of Cultures in Mexico’, *American Anthropologist*, vol. 26, no. 3 (1924), p. 314.

across the region.<sup>18</sup> Vasconcelos expressed similar views in *La raza cósmica*, stating that, “the Indian has no other door to the future but the door of modern culture.”<sup>19</sup>

The racialized perception of the indigenous was explicitly manifested in official *indigenista* policies. The ideology consisted of three main components, implemented mainly by the National Indigenist Institute. Other state agencies that contributed to popularizing *indigenista* precepts included the Ministry of Health and Assistance, the Ministry of Agrarian Reform, and the Ministry of Public Education.

First of all, the notion of indigeneity was married with developmental programs. In its broadest sense, the category of the indigenous was incorporated into the narrative of “state guardianship”, under which indigenous people were conceived of as passive recipients of governmental aid.<sup>20</sup> By focusing the attention on eradicating poverty or unequal access to social welfare such as education or medical assistance, the state reinforced the perception of class-based asymmetry, indigenous hopelessness, and incapacity to self-develop. Not only did the policy-makers frame the indigenous as a synonym of poverty, but their ethnic belonging was also portrayed as the cause of their life conditions. They were a problem to be fixed through “Mexicanization” mechanisms, and there was no space for the indigenous people to play any active role in the process.

The second goal of *indigenismo* was to culturally assimilate indigenous people into society, which would be achieved primarily through education. Contrary to the educational system between 1910–1921 that focused mostly on teaching Spanish,<sup>21</sup> the creation of the *Casa del Estudiante Indígena* was a relatively pioneering project. Operating between 1926 and 1933, this peculiar experiment targeted transforming “pure” Indians into “sophisticated Mexican gentlemen” that would later return to their rural setting and pass on acquired knowledge.<sup>22</sup> However, it is of paramount importance to recognize that the main idea behind the indigenous schooling was not “a sense of popular, multi-ethnic inclusion based on the right to protest exclusion and injustice,”<sup>23</sup> as some would argue, but to enforce a denial of indigeneity among the indigenous people, perceived as a source of underdevelopment.

The last component of *indigenismo*, i.e. the glorification of the indigenous past, corresponds directly to the nation-building efforts, for the exaggerated pride in the pre-Columbian civilizations served to consolidate collective memory, which, in turn, laid the foundations of the national identity.<sup>24</sup> Mexican nationalists felt threatened by a fresh mem-

<sup>18</sup> J. Irving Reynoso, ‘Manuel Gamio y las bases de la política indigenista en México’, *Andamios*, vol. 10, no. 22 (2013), p. 338.

<sup>19</sup> J. Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic...*, p. 16.

<sup>20</sup> C. Jung, *The Moral...*, p. 95.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>22</sup> A. S. Dawson, “Wild Indians,’ ‘Mexican Gentlemen,’ and the Lessons Learned in the Casa del Estudiante Indígena, 1926–1932’, *The Americas*, vol. 57, no. 3 (2001), p. 330.

<sup>23</sup> M. K. Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930–1940*, Tucson 1997, p. 7.

<sup>24</sup> M. K. Vaughan, S. E. Lewis, *The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico*, Durham 2006, p. 6.

ory of the divided pre-revolutionary Mexico, which was “less a nation than a geographical expression, a mosaic of regions and communities, introverted and jealous, ethnically and physically fragmented, and lacking common national sentiments.”<sup>25</sup> By envisaging pre-colonial achievements as part of *lo mexicano*, the policy-makers sought to legitimize state formation both domestically and internationally.<sup>26</sup> This narrative was mainly reflected through the exaltation of indigenous past in the Mexican art, which at some point became characteristic to a degree that eventually made it unbearable even for Mexican artists themselves. In a letter to Jean Charlot, José Clemente Orozco complained that due to the popularity of “Diegoff Riveritch Romannoff”, Mexican art was perceived only as promotion of folklore.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, the exaggerated interest in the past heritage disempowered indigenous people as an anachronism, since their appreciation consisted in what belonged to the by-gone era, rather than any potential future contribution to the society.

The process of “deindianization” and substituting the indigenous with the national – propelled by *indigenista* ideologists – was not limited only to Mexico. In fact, the broad appeal of nation formation arguments fostered its popularity in the whole region. For instance, in Nicaragua “the myth of *mestizaje*” was channelled through various canals, including the state, the Church, landowners, intellectuals, etc.<sup>28</sup> Practices that targeted indigenous “misery” – like land expropriation, military recruitment, or forced labour, commonly occurring at the time – benefitted only the elites, but as long as they presented the indigenous as an obstacle to progress, the dominating *ladino* discourse was fully justified.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, Guatemala sustained ethnically discriminatory policies that manifested themselves in practices like vagrancy laws introduced in 1936, requiring Indians without land titles to undertake agricultural labour.<sup>30</sup> In this way, the law both discriminated Indians as economically disadvantaged and favoured private ownership, incompatible with traditional indigenous tenure patterns.

## 2. SCREENING THE INDIGENEITY

### 2.1. Children of the past

The end of the revolutionary upheaval, incarnated in the 1917 Constitution,<sup>31</sup> brought a relative political stability, visible in the gradual revival of the film

<sup>25</sup> A. Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, Cambridge 1986, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> C. Jung, *The Moral...*, p. 97.

<sup>27</sup> J. C. Orozco, *The Artist in New York: Letters to Jean Charlot and Unpublished Writings, 1925–1929*, Austin 2011 [1974], p. 40.

<sup>28</sup> J. L. Gould, *To Die in This Way: Nicaraguan Indians and the Myth of Mestizaje, 1880–1965*, Durham 1998, p. 10.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>30</sup> R. N. Adams, ‘Ethnic Images and Strategies in 1944’, in C. A. Smith, M. M. Moors, *Guatemalan Indians and the State, 1540 to 1988*, Austin 1990, pp. 141–142.

<sup>31</sup> J. Krippner et al., *Paul Strand in Mexico*, Mexico 2010, p. 267.

industry.<sup>32</sup> Filmmakers resumed the historical storytelling narrative from before the revolution, and combined it with the emerging tendency to glorify pre-Columbian heritage in movies like *Cuauhtémoc* (1918) and *De raza Azteca* (1922), historical epics depicting the Spanish conquest and *mestizaje*. These productions were fairly romanticized in the presentation of heroism, abnegation, and other virtues ascribed to indigenous Mexicans.<sup>33</sup> Between 1889 and 1928, the Mexican film industry produced over 100 documentaries and feature films;<sup>34</sup> nonetheless, the full heyday of cinematographic *indigenismo* coincided with the advent of sound films that marginalized Hollywood productions.<sup>35</sup> In fact, the popularity of pre-colonial themes – reflected not only in film plots, but also in names of film companies like Aztlán Films, Popocatépetl Films, or Quetzal Film – is to some extent attributable to the cultural defence of *mexicanidad* against Hollywood's notion of the drunk and lazy *mestizo*<sup>36</sup> and the seductive Hollywood cinematography in general, believed to constitute an imminent threat to the consolidation of nationalist sentiments.<sup>37</sup>

The embodiment of the *indigenista*'s admiration for pre-colonial civilizations and a vital inspiration for other filmmakers was the never completed ¡Que viva México! of the Soviet artist Sergei Eisenstein (1932). Due to budget shortcuts and conflict with the primary producer Upton Sinclair, the production was stopped before the shooting of the last sequence and the editing. Ultimately, after many complications, the picture was put together over forty years after the initial shooting by Eisenstein's film assistant Grigori Aleksandrov. The version presented in 1979 draws on Eisenstein's notes, working scripts, and around forty hours of footage shot during the director's one-year journey across Mexico.<sup>38</sup>

In the prologue, the narrator signals that the image built in the course of the movie will seek to transcend time constraints. For Eisenstein, the indigenous represents a crucial particle of *mexicanidad*, the main theme of the project. Eisenstein constructs his work around the dualism between death and birth, and the poetic variation on the eternal Mexican soul. For that reason, he divided the film into a prologue, four chapters called "novellas" and an epilogue. Each episode represents a different stage of the Mexican evolution, or a different component of "Mexicanity": *Prologue* symbolizes past and death, *Sandunga* – primitivism, *Fiesta* – Catholicism, *Maguey* –

<sup>32</sup> C. J. Mora, *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1896–2004*, Jefferson 2005, p. 21.

<sup>33</sup> A. De los Reyes, *Medio siglo del cine Mexicano (1896–1947)*, Mexico 1988, p. 72.

<sup>34</sup> J. Hershfield, 'Screening the Nation', in M. K. Vaughan, S. E. Lewis, *The Eagle...*, p. 260.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 264; F. Dávalos Orozco, 'The Birth of the Film Industry and the Emergence of Sound' in J. Hershfield, D. R. Maciel (eds.), *Mexico's Cinema: A Century of Film and Filmmakers*, Wilmington 1999, p. 18.

<sup>36</sup> R. Pérez Montfort, *Estampas de nacionalismo popular mexicano: diez ensayos sobre cultura popular y nacionalismo*, Mexico–Cuernavaca 2003, p. 179.

<sup>37</sup> C. J. Mora, *Mexican...*, p. 30.

<sup>38</sup> M. Salazkina, *In Excess: Sergei Eisenstein's Mexico*, Chicago 2009, pp. 1–2.

the revolution, the never filmed *Soldaderas* – modernity, and the *Epilogue* – the re-birth of Mexican nation.<sup>39</sup>

“The Film-Symphony about Mexico”<sup>40</sup> plays with the notion of indigeneity from the initial scene, in which Eisenstein juxtaposes human figures decorating Chichen-Itzá pyramids with real Mayan *yucatecos* to emphasize continuity. This motive will re-appear in the opening scene of Fernández’ *María Candelaria* (1947), where a painter praises the model from his painting for her “pure Mexican race.”<sup>41</sup> The indigeneity is suspended in time: the physiognomy has not changed, ergo the indigenous is beyond any time framework. The indigenous does not belong to the present, is rather an anachronistic symbol, a reminder of *lo mexicano*. “Slow, semi-vegetative existence that hasn’t changed for centuries”, notices the narrator. The continuity between pre-colonial and contemporary contexts, reproduced in the *indigenista* art, rather than ennobled,<sup>42</sup> creates an impression of inadaptability.

This approach is even more visible in *Sandunga*, where Eisenstein illustrates a primitive utopia of Tehuantepec. “I began to draw (...) a paradise lost and found”, notes Eisenstein.<sup>43</sup> Working in an exotic romanticized context, Eisenstein frees himself from social conventions, and for the first time in his career, the artist resorts to nudity. Those images, meant to reinforce the pre-modern relationship between nature and the indigenous, engage the same dimension of aesthetic sensibility to simplicity and sincerity of human body as the Mexican murals. When Jean Charlot wrote that “Siqueiros was the first to erect a naked Indian body as removed from picturesqueness as a Greek naked athlete, a figure of universal meaning within its racial universe,”<sup>44</sup> he could have easily been referring to Eisenstein.

Similarly to the muralists though, who encapsulate the essence of indigeneity in a lyrical vision of the elusive eternity, depriving indigenous people of space in the present, Eisenstein’s work does not escape preconceptions behind the beautiful exoticism he narrates. In fact, the purity of his “noble savages” is a projection of inferiority, obsolescence; and his protagonists are nothing if not voiceless, powerless individuals that fail to become compatible with the contemporary world. These connotations are reinforced through gender, as willingly posing native *tehuanas* are the primary protagonists of this sequence. The narrator tells a story of indigenous women’s typical patterns of behaviour: their only dream – he claims – is to acquire a golden necklace; they’re breast-bared and laugh “with joy and happiness.” He lays emphasis on feminine activities and indigenous women who through their reproductive role ensure the continuity between the indigenous family and the world of nature. This reconciliation of both the feminine

<sup>39</sup> I. Karetnikova, *Mexico According to Eisenstein*, Albuquerque 1991, p. 19.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>41</sup> J. Tuñón, *Los rostros de un mito: personajes femeninos en las películas de Emilio Indio Fernández*, Mexico 2000, p. 45.

<sup>42</sup> D. Tierney, *Emilio Fernández: Pictures in the Margins*, Manchester, New York 2007, p. 82.

<sup>43</sup> I. Karetnikova, *Mexico...*, p. 17.

<sup>44</sup> J. Charlot, *The Mexican Mural Renaissance: 1920–1925*, New Haven 1963, p. 207.

submissiveness and the matriarchal utopia<sup>45</sup> ascribed to the typical indigenous society as a whole additionally legitimizes the feminized image of the indigenous. As explained through the perspective of psychology, Mexican culture has developed a binary perception, according to which “[w]oman has been devalued in a sense that she gradually becomes identified with the indigenous. Man has been overvalued in a sense that he is identified with the conqueror, dominant and prevailing.”<sup>46</sup>

Eisenstein projects himself as an objective observer of the natural habitat of an indigenous community. Given that the narrator provides the only commentary and most participants are not professional actors, the film seems to be designed as a quasi-scientific research of animal-like objects of study. In fact, the director fails to recognise that the lazy, innocent image he has created perpetrates the notion of indigeneity as naïve and lacking in agency. Even more, the top-bottom nature of relationship between the narrator (or the author in broad terms) and the protagonists (or indigenous people in general) further reinforces the impression that indigenous people are unable to tell their own story, and only an external observer can accurately study them. It could be explained in terms of de Saussure’s interplay of the signifier and the signified, in which the passive indigenous – the signifier – would be perceived as an empty vessel, not carrying any meaning on its own until the particular interpretation of the indigenous is brought to life through the narrator’s study.<sup>47</sup> Even the mere prerogative to be in complete control over the filmed object represents a gesture of colonization; the director exerts the power through the artistic process of framing, narrating, and illustrating the indigeneity, all of which requires his active engagement (as contrasted with the submissive role of the subject matter).

Another notion that Eisenstein intends to incorporate into his vision is the fluidity and fusion of the pre-Hispanic with the colonial that emanates from Mexican spirituality. He is fascinated with “the blood and sand of the gory *corrida*, (...) the aestheticism of the flagellant monks, the purple and gold Catholicism, or even the cosmic timelessness of the Aztec pyramids.”<sup>48</sup> According to Eisenstein, spirituality cements *mexicanidad*, and he articulates that view in the structure of ¡Que viva México!. The *Epilogue*, an exaltation of “vitality of life”<sup>49</sup> in a “final joyous farandole”<sup>50</sup> is a reversal of the *Prologue*. As opposed to the silent Catholic funeral cortege from the opening scene, the *Epilogue* culminates in an All Saints Day fiesta, where all Eisenstein’s protagonists reappear in a frenetic *calavera* puppet dance.<sup>51</sup> He does not address, however, the power asymmetries between

<sup>45</sup> Cf. A. Taylor, ‘Malinche and Matriarchal Utopia: Gendered Visions of Indigeneity in Mexico’, *Journal of Women in Culture & Society*, vol. 31, no. 3 (2006).

<sup>46</sup> S. Ramírez, *El Mexicano: psicología de sus motivaciones*, Mexico 1977, p. 21.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, New York [1916] 2011.

<sup>48</sup> S. Eisenstein, *Beyond the Stars: The Memoirs of Sergei Eisenstein*, Calcutta 1995, p. 414.

<sup>49</sup> I. Karetnikova, *Mexico...*, p. 178.

<sup>50</sup> M. Seton, *Sergei M. Eisenstein, a Biography*, New York 1952, p. 510.

<sup>51</sup> R. Robertson, *Eisenstein on the Audiovisual: The Montage of Music, Image and Sound in Cinema*, London 2009, pp. 94–95.

the culture of the Conqueror and the abnegated indigenous. Instead, tensions between the clashing tides of Mexican culture crystalize as one harmonious entity – *mexicanidad* – and the indigenous becomes coalesced into body politic without any objections.

A fundamental dimension of *¡Que viva México!* is the cultural and ideological intertextuality in which Eisenstein embeds his work.<sup>52</sup> The artist was captivated by Mexican art and culture, even before his journey,<sup>53</sup> and the film was a transparent homage to the Mexican muralists, as he constantly alludes to their art with aesthetics, themes, and symbols. The funeral scene from the *Prologue* is a repetition of the *Burial of a Worker*, the famous painting of Siqueiros;<sup>54</sup> *Maguey*, depicting peons' work and struggle against cactus plantations and sun-dried landscapes, is dedicated to Rivera;<sup>55</sup> *Soldaderas* was inspired by Orozco's paintings.<sup>56</sup> It should not be overlooked that the director also engages in a dialogue on the national identity from the personal Soviet perspective, as the national identity quest in the aftermath of the revolutionary overthrow of the Russian tsarism was marked by similar dilemmas over the social mission of art, the need to modernize the Russian soul, the anxiety of the marginalized geopolitical position of the country, the place of the avant-garde in the culture destined for the mass audience etc.<sup>57</sup> In a way, however, his variation on the *indigenista* vision of Mexican society – even though painted by an outsider – constitutes also an audio-visual extension of Mexican art.

A different construction of the indigenous emerges from the work of Emilio "El Indio" Fernández, and his flourishing collaboration of over thirteen years with the cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa.<sup>58</sup> Despite frequently discussed similitudes between those two schools and an alleged inspiration Fernández had derived from Eisenstein filmmaking,<sup>59</sup> the personal tone of his moralistic allegories, combined with explicit submission to *indigenista* social patterns distinguishes his work from that of other directors. In any case, whilst Fernández would frequently highlight his indigenous self-identification and the effort "to dramatize their lives through [his] work in order to touch and raise awareness of the wretched governments that marginalize our true race [...] [because] it is our race and they are the victims",<sup>60</sup> he would condone the *machismo* of his own protagonists, subjecting feminized indigenous "purity" he represented – the figure of the indigenous female in particular – to a circle of exploitation and discrimination.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>52</sup> M. Salazkina, *In Excess...*, p. 15.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> R. Robertson, *Eisenstein...*, p. 136.

<sup>55</sup> I. Karetnikova, *Mexico...*, p. 21.

<sup>56</sup> R. Robertson, *Eisenstein...*, p. 135.

<sup>57</sup> L. Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, New York 2009, p. 87.

<sup>58</sup> D. Tierney, *Emilio...*, p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> J. Mraz, *Looking for Mexico: Modern Visual Culture and National Identity*, Durham 2009, p. 108.

<sup>60</sup> J. Tuñón, *En su propio espejo. Entrevista con Emilio 'El Indio' Fernández*, Mexico 1988, p. 84.

<sup>61</sup> J. Tuñón, 'Femininity, Indigenismo, and Nation: Film Representation by Emilio 'El Indio' Fernández', in J. Olcott, M. K. Vaughan, G. Cano (eds.), *Sex in Revolution: Gender, Politics, and Power in Modern Mexico*, Durham 2006, p. 89.

Fernández depicts a conflicted landscape of social relations, in which the indigenous is pure, uncorrupted, and living in harmony with nature. Nonetheless, the noble savage is vulnerable in the face of the “outside” world to which he is not adapted. Therefore, the main theme of Fernández’ stories is a tragic collision of those two worlds, nature versus civilization,<sup>62</sup> usually ending in the defeat of the indigenous protagonist. The power of enigmatic and intense images is reinforced by frequent references to nature, like violent waves or sinister clouds. In Ayala Blanco’s opinion, the racial polarity, by breaking the bucolic vision, adds to the dramatic effect of the storyline: “[t]hrough elaborate images and a very slow interior rhythm we make contact with the primitive paradise of Rousseau’s savage, who lives in harmony with nature, but the paradise is incomplete, for [...] the white men sullies it.”<sup>63</sup> The indigenous of Fernández are heroic figures, but similarly to Eisenstein’s creation, they lack control over their fate, which tragically blends in with crude images of nature. Additionally, both artists deliver a harsh judgement on the social injustice, but unlike ¡Que viva México!, which is deeply rooted in the Mexican context, Fernández’ motion pictures could also be interpreted in more universal terms, for instance, as allegories of cruelty, solitude, or fate. What all of Fernández’ protagonists share is then their invariably tragic condition, which they are unable to change due to their naïveté. For instance, the innocent María Candelaria, a young indigenous girl incapable of escaping the stigma of being a prostitute’s daughter, ends up stoned to death by angry villagers wrongfully assured about her disgrace; protagonists of *La perla*, doomed once the husband fishes a unique pearl out of the ocean, lose their son, trying to escape villain pearl hunters etc.

Fernández’ special contribution to *indigenismo* is his portrayal of women as individuals doubly subjugated to social oppression.<sup>64</sup> What in Eisenstein’s pictures is still a rather intuitive impression takes on a vivid articulation in the work of his alleged continuator and develops into a proclamation of women as sacred subjects of art and, likewise, embodiment of indigeneity. According to Fernández, women’s natural penchant for home, land, and traditions enables the preservation of indigenous culture. He conceives women as intuitive culture-carriers. The nation depends on their virtuousness: “woman is the soul of a nation, she is the inspiration, she is everything [...]. One lives to take care of them, to feel proud of them, right? That’s how their importance manifests itself”, insisted Fernández in the interview with Tuñón.<sup>65</sup> The feminine archetype, impersonated by Dolores del Río, is gentle, humble, and submissive like the Virgin. The feminine ideal corresponds to the Virgin figure too: Fernández’ female protagonists wear long black plaits, preferably covered with headscarf, which arguably explains why the punishment for the protagonist of *Adiós Nicanor* was cutting her hair, the attribute of her femininity and innocence.

<sup>62</sup> J. Tuñón, *Los rostros...*, p. 59.

<sup>63</sup> J. Ayala Blanco, *La aventura del cine mexicano*, Mexico 1968, p. 194.

<sup>64</sup> J. Tuñón, *Femininity...*, p. 102.

<sup>65</sup> J. Tuñón, *Los rostros...*, p. 51.

His selection of indigenous characters and general representation of indigenous beauty raises questions concerning skin colour. Fernández claims to admire indigenous beauty, yet for his lead actresses he chooses white-skin Dolores del Río or María Félix, creating a “perfect illusion.”<sup>66</sup> With the minimal use of makeup and employment of heavy peasant accent, Del Río performs “otherness”, paradoxically, reproducing Hollywood’s stereotype that the Mexican cinema claimed to defy.<sup>67</sup> The whiteness of the protagonists is consequently reinforced through luminosity that highlights their moral superiority<sup>68</sup> and evokes “religiosity.”<sup>69</sup> Perhaps, it could be even better understood in the context of the body politic; after all, “the Indian body is the body that challenges the very definition of the coherent and containable *mestizo* body politic.”<sup>70</sup> By rejecting actors with typically indigenous somatic features, Fernández inserts the repressed Indian body in the national milieu as part of the gradual adaptation towards the *mestizo* identity. Rather than *being* indigenous, they *represent* the stereotyped indigenous, creating distance between the actor and the role, which is yet another dimension to the ambivalent dynamic of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of the dislocated indigeneity.

Additionally, it is worth noting that the indigenous of Fernández are deprived of racial differentiation, that is, they form one homogenous group. Although Fernández provides detailed scenes of rites like the All Saints Day celebrations in Pátzcuaro (*Maclovio*, 1948) or Corpus Christi in *María Candelaria*, those *costumbrista* details do not differentiate indigenous groups between each other.<sup>71</sup> Just as in all other *indigenista* representations of the indigeneity, Fernández’ films exemplify a paternalistic and “exogenous” perspective,<sup>72</sup> and the folklore serves primarily as a decoration of the scenery. The contemporary indigenous groups are still portrayed as incapable of self-development, they are “like children who had to be led to social (and revolutionary) consciousness by the intellectual *mestizo* elite.”<sup>73</sup>

## 2.2. Beyond divisions

A contemporary vision of class-based Mexican identity was primarily manifested in *comedia ranchera*, a properly Mexican genre that valorised Mexican *pueblo* as joyful yet coarse drunks. Films like *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (1936), *Ora Ponciano* (1937), *¡Ay, Jalisco no te rajes!* (1941) were well-received in the Spanish-speaking world; hence, they

<sup>66</sup> D. Tierney, *Emilio...*, p. 84.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>69</sup> R. Dyer, *White*, London 1997, p. 82–144.

<sup>70</sup> A. Noble, *Tina Modotti: Image, Texture, Photography*, Albuquerque 2000, p. 118.

<sup>71</sup> J. Tuñón, *Femininity...*, p. 86.

<sup>72</sup> A. De los Reyes, *Medio...*, p. 194.

<sup>73</sup> J. Hershfield, D. R. Maciel (eds.), *Mexico’s Cinema: A Century of Film and Filmmakers*, Wilmington 1999, p. 86.

contributed greatly to popularizing the stereotypes of boorish and innocent *mestizo*-peasants. The profitable image of a homogenized peasant mass, celebrating popular cultural symbols, such as *mariachis*, *charros*, cock-fighting, *cantinas*, and *chinas poblanas*,<sup>74</sup> soon dominated the Mexican film industry, which led some critics to complain that “the fever of folklore, which paralyzed Mexican film (and radio), has tied it to a inevitable monotony.”<sup>75</sup>

However, the goal of the official cultural policy during *cardenismo* (1934–1940), the apogee of cultural nationalism, was to place the “social content”, i.e. the didactic potential of mass cinema, in the centre of entertainment,<sup>76</sup> which makes productions from that period particularly relevant for the purposes of this study. With the advent of the presidency interested in an active involvement in propaganda, there was an increasing threat of the nationalization of the industry, given that the state had previously exercised control over cinematography in other countries, like in Germany, Italy, or Japan.<sup>77</sup> Although this did not occur, Cárdenas’ government started to subsidize Mexican productions substantially, films of Fuentes – the pioneer of *comedias rancheras* genre – included, in order to exert control over the political message.<sup>78</sup> Additionally, state participation can be explained by the financial aspect, as in late 1930s, Mexican cinematography (exported to Latin America and the United States) constituted the second biggest industry after the petroleum industry,<sup>79</sup> and continued to flourish during the subsequent presidency of Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940–1946) partly due to the downsizing of the American industry in the light of the US participation in World War II.<sup>80</sup> This also supports the assumption of the mass impact of the *rancheras* upon the audience, both domestically and internationally.

The movie that originated the *comedias rancheras* was Fuentes’ box-office hit, *Allá en el Rancho Grande* from 1936, and his success in promoting the style would ensure that for over twenty years it would retain the status of the most profitable Latin American genre. What determined its unremitting popularity was the “Hollywoodized” formula, which intended for the main characters to be constructed in a way encouraging the audience to identify with them.<sup>81</sup> The protagonists were aimed to appeal to a broad audience, and they were tailored to fit the framework of national stereotypes. In other words, even on the level of artistic intentions, so to speak, the protagonists were meant to illustrate

<sup>74</sup> K. T. Hegarty, ‘From Chinas Poblanas to Silk Stockings: The Symbolology of the Female Archetype in the Mexican Ranchera Film’, *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 74, no. 4 (2009), p. 89.

<sup>75</sup> R. S. Mallén, ‘Más calidad y menos cantidad exige el público’, as cited in: E. García Riera, *Historia documental del cine mexicano*, vol. 1, Mexico City 1969, p. 173.

<sup>76</sup> C. J. Mora, *Mexican...*, p. 41.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> J. P. Silvo Escobar, ‘La Época de Oro del cine mexicano: la colonización de un imaginario social’, *Culturales*, vol. 7, no. 13 (2011), p. 13.

<sup>80</sup> J. King, *El carrete mágico: historia del cine latinoamericano*, Bogotá 1994.

<sup>81</sup> J. P. Silvo Escobar, ‘La Época...’, p. 15.

or imitate a specific set of common Mexican traits rather than give the spectator a choice of interpretation by conveying a more complex image of social reality. Undeniably, it was a favourable environment for the thriving of state ideology and the image of national identity it aimed to promote.

*Allá en el Rancho Grande* is situated in an ambiguous time-space that at first sight only emphasizes the incorporation of revolutionary ideals into a raceless social hierarchy, but in reality it encompasses a much sharper symbolic transition from “territorial” colonialism, grounded in modernity, to a de-territorialized neo-colonialism that introduces systemic domination on the basis of “Mexicanized” culture, language, religion, etc.<sup>82</sup> The storyline, bereft of any specific time reference, is suspended at an unspecified, but characteristic moment, which fuels the disagreement on the interpretation: some scholars invoke the importance of the pre-revolutionary hierarchy of *porfiriato* for the interpretation,<sup>83</sup> others focus on the idealized notion of colonization and feudal values,<sup>84</sup> and still others mention the symbolic revolutionary triumph of the final scene.<sup>85</sup> The spatial associations are likewise vague, but are all limited to the idea of the *hacienda*, the titular *rancho*, which depicts both a particular situation and the entire society. It is crucial, however, not to yield to the temptation of simplifying the film to one historic scenario, for its deliberate reluctance to conform to the historicity expresses the necessarily universal condition of national identity. On the contrary, *Allá...* escapes such an unambiguous interpretation exactly because it is supposed to transcend historic notions, and that reinforces the allegorical meaning of the tale. It reflects certain images of *mexicanidad*, but whenever it does so, the viewer needs to bear in mind that the surface of the picture is made of various textures, and therefore, it will show different angles, even though the subject matter will remain unchanged.

What is indeed relevant instead is how the symbolic spaces counteract the cultural diversity, on the one hand, and how they reinforce the pyramid relationships on the other. This tension is achieved through the domination of symbolic fields (spatial, verbal, cognitive etc.) that impose a set of values and patterns of interaction within social reality, which are meant to “whiten” and unify all the individuals, but at the same time, do not erase the vertical structure enforced by colonization. For instance, the director openly bolsters the sense of Mexican unification by employing high-angle shots in group scenes, such as one of the final scenes in *cantina*, in which the camera embraces from above all *sombreros* and their owners *en masse*,<sup>86</sup> which is slightly reminiscent of Tina Modotti’s homogenizing masculine body politic famously encapsulated in *Workers’ Parade*.<sup>87</sup> Or in Monsiváis words, it “resolved around the paradise

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>83</sup> C. J. Mora, *Mexican...*, p. 47.

<sup>84</sup> J. P. Silvo Escobar, ‘La Época...’

<sup>85</sup> K. T. Hegarty, ‘From Chinas...’, p. 99.

<sup>86</sup> D. J. García, “The Soul of a People’: Mexican Spectatorship and the Transnational *Comedia Ranchera*’, *Journal of American Ethnic History*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2010), p. 83.

<sup>87</sup> A. Noble, *Tina...*, p. 90.

lost located in an indefinite time where men were strictly men and women were definitely women.”<sup>88</sup> On the other hand, the initial scene during the feast in the *hacienda* introduces – also through a group scene – a picture of harmonious celebrations involving members of unequal groups co-existing without any objections. Portrayed as generous and merciful, the landlord – *el patrón* – refers to his employees as “mis hijos” (i.e. my children) or “mis pobres peones” (my poor peons), replicating his superior position symbolically via linguistic paternalism, tacitly accepted by the cheerful crowd of grateful people. Evidently, those two images do not correspond to the same context. Whereas the first image shows a gathering of same-dressed men, who all comply with same customary patterns of behaviour (e.g. applauding, drinking tequila, incentivizing the singer with frivolous comments), the second image conveys a clear division into two groups. The difference between those scenes lies in the fact that they correspond to two orders of the society. Arguably, the old *patrón*’s reunion serves as the reminder of the pre-revolutionary reality, which is why it opens the film, whilst the *cantina* gathering elicits the post-revolutionary ideal of integrating *mestizaje*.

But rather than seeking to arrange the sequences in temporal relations, it is more interesting to analyse those two images holistically as two sides of the same national identity. We would see then that the initial scene evokes class-based division with subtle racial differentiation accentuated by the costume and physiognomy of the employees. The second scene would show a complete triumph of the miscegenation and the masculinity. From this juxtaposition, we extract the line of contention between ethnicity and class, as neither the “raceless” *cantina* scene can function without racial and gender reinforcement, nor the class hierarchy of the feast could operate without feminized humility of the “poor peons”. They both reject any mention of the indigeneity, but fail to completely eliminate it from the narrative.

Despite a clear presence of remnants of indigeneity in *Allá...*, it is not explicit who personifies it. It could be Florentino, the town’s drunk.<sup>89</sup> He is ridiculed and laughed at by others as a disempowered and de-masculinized individual who is passive (e.g. he allows a woman to beat him up) and obsolete (e.g. he does not work or assist anyone in any activity). Indigeneity could also be traced back to Cruz, the young female protagonist, who constantly oscillates between the myth of Malinche and the Virgin.<sup>90</sup> Her ennobled passive suffering when she is wrongly accused of unfaithfulness might resemble the plight of María Candelaria; nevertheless, Cruz’ faith will not be sealed with a tragic death, as Fuentes reverses the notion of the colonial abuse on the *chingada* by highlighting the happy-ending redemption of the oppressed indigenous population through the symbolic triple marriage beyond class and race divisions. The romanticized innocence of Cruz serves also to unify the audience itself, as this part of the storyline creates a sense of empathy among the viewers.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>88</sup> C. Monsiváis, ‘Mythologies’, in Paranaguá P. A. (ed.), *Mexican Cinema*, London 1995, p. 118.

<sup>89</sup> K. T. Hegarty, ‘From Chinas...’, p. 95.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96–100.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

In the same year as *Allá...*, Mexico releases the first fully state-sponsored movie – *Redes*, executed by an American photographer and filmmaker Paul Strand. *Redes* – initially conceived as a documentary – aims at portraying the Mexican *pueblo* by evoking revolutionary ideals of equality, justice, *machismo* etc., and, as a result, it also shifts the stress from ethnic to class markers of social division. In *Redes*, the indigenous – marginalized and oppressed, according to Fernández’ narrative – are inserted into the nation-forging project as members of the majority; they become Mexican *campesinos*. Even though the plot centers around a greedy *mestizo* monopolist exploiting poor and humble Indian fishermen, the status of protagonists is based on the labour sector, to which they belong. In fact, *Redes* exemplifies the myth of ethnic mobilization, according to which ethnic boundaries can be eliminated through the effort of building a united *pueblo*, or as Monsiváis phrases it: “the film exalt[s] physical work as epic class consciousness and the beauty of community sentiments.”<sup>92</sup> The peons are dressed in traditional *jarocho* clothing, their survival depends on nature; nonetheless, the cultural differentiation is of minor importance. They are idealized as hard-workers, not as mysterious, exotic creatures, characteristic of Eisenstein’s and Fernández’ works. Unlike in films produced from the viewpoint of “the white race who found [Mexicans] ‘interesting, picturesque and acute’”, Strand’s Mexicans are universal “fellow human being[s].”<sup>93</sup>

Peasants organize themselves on social and economic grounds: initially, they target unjust fishery policies, but the death of the martyred leader of the rebellion Miro – understood as the quintessence of social injustice and power abuse – is what finally unites all surrounding villagers in the struggle. *Redes* corresponds to the pre-revolutionary scenario, with Don Anselmo representing *porfiriato* – the liberalism, the industrialization, and the land expropriation – whereas the villagers, postulating that “poverty is not a natural law, nor God’s!”, embody the mass awakening and the emergence of labour unions. In a sense, both *Redes* and *Allá...* convey the admiration of revolutionary principles through the critique of the *ancien régime*. Nonetheless, despite their focus on social inequalities, they differ substantially in that *Allá...* conceives the pre-revolutionary era as harmonious, and the transition towards the new social order is gradual and relatively peaceful. Whereas *Allá...* exonerates partly the colonial rule by defining the collective “Mexicanity” as all individuals of every class, *Redes* rejects the possibility of annihilating the basis of social oppression through simple reconciliation of classes because it points to those inequalities as the primary obstacle to the national unity. As a consequence, it constructs the collective identity in opposition to the elite class, and defines itself through that exclusionary understanding of “Mexicanity”. An equally important aspect of *Redes* is its ethnic blindness, as the aforementioned contrast does not allow for ethnic differentiation, despite clear racial characterisation of actors.

Mexican cinematography portrays as well the soul of an emerging working class – an outcome of the post-revolutionary modernization. Fostered by mass exodus of pauper-

<sup>92</sup> C. Monsiváis, ‘Mythologies’, in P. A. Paranaguá (ed.), *Mexican...*, p. 119.

<sup>93</sup> W. Alexander, ‘Paul Strand as Filmmaker, 1933–1942’, in M. Stange, R. Adams, A. Trachtenberg (eds.), *Paul Strand. Essays on his Life and Work*, New York 1990, p. 151.

ized Indians to cities, the expansion of slums is denounced in a canonical work of Luis Buñuel, *Los olvidados* (1950). The significance of his reflections lays in his universalism and distance from the subject of his study: urban children. As signalled by the narrator in the initial scene, *Los olvidados* traverses national frontiers: “Big modern cities: New York, Paris, London [...] hide places of misery that harbour malnourished children without hygiene, without schooling, seedbed of future delinquents. The society tries to correct that evil, but its success is very limited. [...] Mexico, great modern city, is no exception to this universal rule.” Buñuel disdains the Mexican stereotype eternalised in pop-culture;<sup>94</sup> unlike other directors, he talks about *mexicanidad* without identifying with it.<sup>95</sup> For the artist, Mexico was not a mythical, picturesque landscape of heroes, a land of colourful folklore, but rather a blatant example of inequality and misery – a secondary effect of post-revolutionary modernization.

Ethnicity does not explicitly articulate itself in Buñuel’s work. The diagnosis of Buñuel is that the origin of misery in the increasingly authoritarian Mexico is class-based, and his critic defies the premises of *indigenismo*.<sup>96</sup> However, whereas most of the portrayed children could be described as universal *mestizos*, there is one protagonist in particular that enshrines more indigenous characteristics. Abandoned by his father, Ojitos is an indigenous boy accustomed to loneliness and hunger. He refuses to acknowledge that his family deserted him, and he continues to passively wait for his father. He is pure, servile, and timid; he endures his misery with childish innocence. Ojitos is the only truly Mexican character in *Los olvidados*.<sup>97</sup> Conceivably, this is why he creates the impression that he does not belong to the rest of the boys’ clique. Ojitos symbolizes the transition of identities; he is deprived of the cultural indigenous roots, yet he does not accommodate to the urban alternative. He is also the source of popular wisdom: he presents Meche with a tooth of a dead man, claiming that it has healing powers; he advises her to moisture her skin with milk<sup>98</sup>.

## CONCLUSIONS

The post-revolutionary Mexico’s pursuit of a homogenous national identity, manifested through *indigenista* policies, manifested itself in a number of socio-cultural practices aiming at neutralizing fissures on ethnic harmony. Mexican cinematography proves that the ethnically blind *indigenismo*, in reality, was deeply ethnocentric. Key film productions of the Golden Age show a broad repertoire of idealized identities, ranging from feminized

<sup>94</sup> J. C. Ibañez, M. Palacio, ‘Los Olvidados / The Young and the Damned’, in A. Elena, M. Díaz López, (eds.), *The Cinema of Latin America*, London 2003, p. 59.

<sup>95</sup> M. Polizzotti, *Los olvidados*, London 2006, p. 12.

<sup>96</sup> A. Moraña, ‘Young Outlaws and Marginal Lives in Latin American Cinema’, in R. Stone, J. D. Gutiérrez-Albilla (eds.), *A Companion to Luis Buñuel*, Chichester 2013, p. 261.

<sup>97</sup> J. R. Barcia, ‘Luis Buñuel’s ‘Los Olvidados’’, *The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television*, vol. 7, no. 4 (1953), p. 397.

<sup>98</sup> M. Polizzotti, *Los olvidados...*, p. 47.

indigenous identity limited to its pre-colonial heritage, through transitory identity that clashes with the corrupted modernity, to a fully reordered position in the class-based social constellation. Despite significant disparities between those poeticized visions of indigeneity, they share similar characteristics. Indigenous Mexico represents deplorable underdevelopment that can only be remedied through the remapping of its cultural markers to a modernized *mestizo*-oriented identification. Although most representations of the indigenous populace romanticize them as innocent, beautiful individuals, they also label indigeneity as an obsolete burden on Mexico's aspirations. Paradoxically, filmmakers praise indigenous cultural legacy for providing continuity and uniqueness to *mexicanidad*, yet they locate all indigenous characters at the bottom of social stratification. Having displaced the responsibility for the preservation of ethnic diversity to the margins of collective consciousness, the inconsistent *indigenista* project had, however, a major impact on the popular perception of national unity, which has legitimized racialized discrimination of the indigenous population since the Revolution.

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