



# DECENTERING THE NATIONAL IN HOLLYWOOD: TRANSNATIONAL STORYTELLING IN THE MEXICO WESTERN VERA CRUZ (ROBERT ALDRICH, 1954)

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**CHAPTER 3:**  
**DECENTERING THE NATIONAL IN HOLLYWOOD:**  
**TRANSNATIONAL STORYTELLING IN THE MEXICO WESTERN *VERA CRUZ* (ROBERT**  
**ALDRICH, 1954)**

Hervé Mayer

The transnational dimension of Hollywood Westerns can be approached from multiple standpoints. If the fields of distribution and reception systematically involve the crossing of national borders, those of narrative and production do not necessarily do so. Yet in the history of classical Hollywood Westerns, one cycle of films stands out as a narrative exploration of border crossing that shifted the genre's focus from the exploration of American history and mythology to its critical articulation with foreign contexts and perspectives. That cycle of films was labelled the "Mexico Western" and identified as a "subtype of the Western" by cultural historian Richard Slotkin (410). It comprises films of the 1950s and 1960s that were produced by American studios, often involved location shooting with local crews in Mexico, and focused on white male characters of the late 19th or early 20th century American West crossing to Mexico and meddling in Mexican history. Usually these characters bring US technological and military superiority into a local political struggle (the Second Mexican Empire of 1864-1867 or the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920), their support to one side or other of the conflict determining the course of national history. According to Slotkin, this cycle developed in parallel with the United States' increased international activity after World War II and was specifically concerned with exploring the conditions and consequences of US interference in Third World nations. The setting of numerous historical dramas since the silent period, Mexico was the most well-known of Third World countries in Hollywood. For some of these films which focused on the Second Mexican Empire, the post-American Civil War setting also conveniently reflected the post-World War II context of their production. For

those reasons, the Mexico Westerns provided fertile ground for an evaluation of US foreign policy in the years of the Cold War and decolonization (434). Complementing such readings of the cycle in terms of its relation to US foreign policy, this chapter highlights the impact of the cycle's transnational dimension on Western genre conventions and on the representations of American imperial myth and history.

Bringing together elements of the historical drama set in Mexico and of the pro-Indian Western of the early 1950s, *Vera Cruz* (1954) was the first film of the cycle and set the course for later productions (Slotkin 410). As the opening titles of the film indicate, the film is set in Mexico after the American Civil War and follows American mercenaries looking for fortune in the conflict opposing Benito Juarez and the Mexican people to the French-supported, Austrian Emperor Maximilian. The story focuses on two American characters (Joe Erin/Burt Lancaster and Ben Trane/Gary Cooper) who sell their fighting skills to the wealthier Emperor, until one of them (Trane/Cooper) eventually recognizes the liberal ideals of the Juarista resistance as a higher political cause. *Vera Cruz* was “one of the first Hollywood films set and filmed entirely in Mexico” (Fojas 68), a decision the producers turned into a promotional argument. The American crew of a hundred people lived and worked in the Cuernavaca valley near Mexico City during the two-month-and-a-half shoot in the spring of 1954, alongside two hundred Mexican crew members and uncounted extras who were hired locally. Filmed in Technicolor and SuperScope for a total budget of \$3 million, *Vera Cruz* was director Robert Aldrich's and independent production company Hecht-Lancaster's most ambitious film to date. It was also a popular success, earning \$9 million in its initial theatrical release (Fuller 28). It is likely that the film was conceived as a political project as much as a big budget production. The emphasis on the Mexico setting in the promotional material capitalized on Mexico's significance in the American imagination as “a radical, left-wing and even subversive space” (Fuller 22). Mexico also occupied a specific place for postwar liberal

writers, artists and filmmakers as a site of exile from the investigations of the HUAC and the Hollywood blacklist. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the largest number of exiles found refuge in Mexico City and the Cuernavaca valley where *Vera Cruz* was shot, and their creative activity gained a “distinctly transnational mode of production [that] contributed to a deliberate aesthetic and political critique of US racism, nationalism, and imperialism” (Schreiber xii). The filmmakers of *Vera Cruz* were not among those US exiles, but most were known liberals who had been directly or indirectly targeted by HUAC investigations, including producer Harold Hecht, actor and producer Burt Lancaster, director Robert Aldrich, and scriptwriter Roland Kilbee (Fuller 28). As a result, their film, as I will argue, partakes in what Schreiber identified as the “aesthetic and political critique” produced by the left-wing exiles in Mexico.

Building upon existing research on *Vera Cruz*, this chapter seeks to contribute to the discussion of transnationalism within Western films and the ways in which transnational perspectives consolidate the critical work of the genre in exposing the imperial myths and history of the US. It draws both on Richard Slotkin’s analysis of the ways in which the Mexican setting of *Vera Cruz* fosters a redefinition of the Western formula and on Stephanie Fuller’s conclusion that border crossing into Mexico “enables *Vera Cruz* to explore and critique the concepts of US expansionism and capitalism from without” (Fuller 28). Its specific contribution is to consider how the film’s generic hybridity and construction of Mexico as a historical space are exploited in *Vera Cruz* to reflect upon the United States’ history and mythology of colonization. Qualifying and complementing some of the earlier scholarly studies of the film, I argue that *Vera Cruz* introduces a decentered perspective within the Western by using a non-American historical setting to redefine and invigorate the genre’s reevaluation of Frontier mythology. The transnational narrative and production of *Vera Cruz* thus serve to expand and enrich the genre’s critique of American imperialism. I

will first focus on the ways in which the Mexican setting of *Vera Cruz* supports an anti-imperialist redefinition of Western generic conventions, casting the native Juaristas as a regenerative force against imperial savagery. I will then discuss how the construction of Mexico as a historical space of colonialism serves to highlight the contradiction between American liberal mythology and imperial history. Finally, I will analyze the relationship between genre and national identity within the film and the ways in which generic hybridity aesthetically serves the criticism of American imperialism.

### **Redefining the Western from Mexico**

*Vera Cruz*'s Mexican setting introduces an unfamiliar element in the Western that troubles genre expectations and opens up a creative space for the redefinition of generic conventions. Preceding the opening titles that set the story's time and place to Mexico after the American Civil War, the first shot of the film frames the main street of a small town with arid mountains in the background and two characters on horseback approaching the camera [00:10-00:19]. This shot would suffice to firmly establish the film within the Western genre if not for one strange element: the towering presence, center-frame and sunlit, of a Spanish colonial church that indicates the setting is not exactly the usual movie West. The presence of Spanish colonial architecture, rare though not uncommon in Westerns before 1954, connects *Vera Cruz* to an alternative narrative of the West, one that acknowledges the transnational history of the border region and that points to non-American perspectives on the colonization of North America. The opening shot also subtly introduces a tension between the American and Mexican elements in the frame, as the approaching American Westerners gradually replace and conceal the church as the center of composition. The exaggerated depth of field, combined with frame-within-the-frame composition created by the wall corner in the left foreground, invites viewers to adopt a reflexive position on such transnational negotiations within the Western rather than customarily siding with the American element.

<INSERT fig03\_01 NEAR HERE>

Fig. 3.1: The presence of a Spanish colonial church in the opening shot introduces an unfamiliar element in the Western genre.



*Vera Cruz* furthers the opening shot's suggestion of alternative perspectives by embracing the point of view of the Mexican Juaristas rather than the American protagonists. This perspectival decentering is partially mediated through conventional elements of the Western formula, but in ways that revise the mythical story of westward expansion. Indeed, *Vera Cruz* takes its cue from a cycle of Westerns of the early 1950s that sought to adopt an indigenous perspective on the history of American colonization. This cycle of Westerns, labelled the "Cult of the Indian" Western by Slotkin (366), comprises films such as *Broken Arrow* (Delmer Daves, 1950), *Devil's Doorway* (Anthony Mann, 1950) and *Apache* (Robert Aldrich, 1954), in which an Apache warrior continues to resist American imperialism after the surrender of Geronimo.<sup>i</sup> In *Vera Cruz*, the pro-Indian narrative is, in effect, displaced onto the historical conflict in Mexico. As native people resisting imperial rule and as a people of mixed indigenous descent opposing Euro-American colonization, the Juaristas are aligned with movie Indians. This association is reinforced by the visuals: the Juaristas are identified with the wilderness, emerging from, and disappearing into it at will; and apart from their leader General Ramirez (Morris Ankrum) and his lieutenant Pedro (Mexican actor Juan

García), they are characterized collectively. Fuller has noted that the Juaristas in *Vera Cruz* are associated with high-angle shots, and that the repetition of such shots serves to invite viewer identification with them (25-26); if such high angle perspective in representations of Mexicans or Latinos usually signifies banditry (26), it is also the favored perspective of movie Indians on white intruders, further associating the Juaristas with Native Americans and repositioning the American and European imperial presence as an invasion of indigenous Mexican territory.<sup>ii</sup>

In keeping with the narrative structure of the pro-Indian Western, the adoption of an indigenous perspective serves to reverse the conventional distribution of civilization and savagery. Instead of identifying the Juaristas with violence, *Vera Cruz* positions them on a higher moral ground in the defense of civilization. As General Ramirez says to the Americans right after Joe Erin shot two challenging mercenaries dead, “We are not savages, we do not kill in cold blood” [19:30]. In the preceding shooting, the American preference for the rule of force had been emphasized in a low-angle shot foregrounding the corpses of Charlie and his friend after Joe Erin asked, “Anybody else string with Charlie?” [17:20]. Savagery is on the side of the Americans who molest children [20:00-21:33] and rape women [50:00-51:05], whose only law is violence and sole motivation is money.<sup>iii</sup> Savagery is also on the side of the Empire which, despite its aristocratic outlook and mannered speech, not only grounds its power exclusively in force but draws pleasure from gratuitous assaults on the bodies of the Mexican people; one scene shows imperial lancers laughingly playing with a prisoner’s life before killing him [56:35-57:25]. The brutal execution of the anonymous Juarista and the inhumanity of imperial rule are rendered through a POV shot of the fatal spear from the victim’s perspective at the moment before death [57:20], the death itself being mediated through the proud posture and sad face of the Juarista spy Nina (Spanish actress Sarita Montiel) in medium shot [57:20-57:25]. Both the POV and reaction shots align viewers with

the plight of the natives. The reversal of civilized and savage is also, as Slotkin noted, played out in the characterization of the female protagonists, the dark woman Nina embodying virtue and redemption for Ben Trane, while the blonde Countess Marie Duvarre (French actress Denise Darcel) embodies and inspires corruption (437). As in the pro-Indian Western that would bloom in later years, whiteness, technological progress and Americanness are, because of the Mexican setting, dissociated from moral superiority, and the more primitive Juaristas, although they wear sandals and wield “ancient weapons” [19:25] against the Americans’ Winchester repeating rifles, are the more civilized. If anything, American technological superiority endangers the values of civilization and the establishment of democratic governments in the less developed countries in which it is projected. The film thus openly belies the liberal rhetoric of American Cold War policy and exposes instead its imperial operations.

*Vera Cruz*, however, also shares in the political pitfalls of pro-Indian Westerns as the dominant figures in the story remain white, American, and male, while Mexico and the indigenous perspective are American constructions. This can be more largely attributable to the film’s reliance on the Western formula and its focus on individual heroes, which Fuller sees as the limit in the film’s progressive agenda; several shots literally turn the Juaristas into a mere background for the Hollywood stars (26). While such choral use of the Juaristas is undeniable, the film’s focus on the American protagonists actually serves to highlight their numerous flaws. Joe Erin is a cynical, cold-blooded mercenary who resorts to lying and killing to get his way and fortune; his character arc reveals the moral depths to which he is ready to sink in the service of his material ambitions. Ben Trane is the more heroic protagonist, his arc leading to redemption as he eventually supports the cause of the Juaristas. In spite of Gary Cooper’s alleged efforts to tone down any line or gesture that might tarnish his persona (Williams 35), his character is a slaveholder and ex-Confederate from Louisiana

who needs money to rebuild his plantation. Although his Lost Cause is identified with the Juaristas', General Ramirez even congratulating Trane for a "brave struggle" [18:06], Trane's Southern identity primarily strengthens his association with the Empire: he is the only American at ease in the Emperor's palace, speaking French to the Countess and boasting of the South's "one or two homes that once might have stood beside all this" [23:38]. The un-Americanness of a Confederate hero could not have been lost on director Aldrich and producers Hecht and Lancaster, whose progressive racial views at the time are manifest in the sympathetic portrayal of black characters both in *Apache* and *Vera Cruz*.<sup>iv</sup> Trane negotiates on an equal footing with the Mexican and European imperialists, not by force as Erin does, but because they are culturally alike.

While *Vera Cruz* is structured by the individualistic thrust of Western narratives, it also tempers it. Not only does the film tarnish the image of the mythic American Westerner, but it either holds it at a distance or works to erase it from the screen. The introducing shots of Trane are quite telling in this respect. The opening credits [00:40-02:32] feature a series of extreme long shots framing a minuscule rider in wide open spaces whose figure is consistently concealed by the huge blood-red lettering of the credits. The distance with Trane and Erin is maintained in early scenes through recurrent long shots with deep focus composition, the protagonists positioned in the background while an element of the set (tree trunk, cactus, wall, boulder, etc.) occupies the foreground (for instance, when Trane arrives at the trading post [03:17-03:49] or Trane and the group of mercenaries travel through the country [13:36]). Similar shots are later used to depict the column of American mercenaries and Mexican lancers, as they ride through the wilderness [33:45], or when they reach and then leave the convent [36:10, 43:55]. These shots suggest the presence of a hidden observer that later materializes as the Juaristas, but they also maintain a distance between viewers and characters that troubles identification. The concealment of characters within the frame is again

performed when Trane arrives at the cantina where he meets the American mercenaries; his progression and arrival is blocked from view by a wall [10:10-10:17]. The film thus challenges and undermines the visual centrality of its American protagonists, furthering identification with the Mexican collective. By focusing on anti-heroes, foregrounding the savagery of imperialism, and embracing the indigenous perspective of the Juaristas, *Vera Cruz* redefines Western conventions from a Mexican standpoint to critically evaluate the values the genre traditionally associates with national identity. In doing so, the film does not treat Mexico as the source of an alternative mythology, but rather as an alternative historical space of colonization in North America.

### **Mexico as historical space**

As the presence of a colonial church in the opening shot suggests, the Mexican setting of *Vera Cruz* introduces a competing set of historical referents that the film articulates with the history of American colonization. Certainly, Mexico had been constructed by Hollywood as a “mythic space” since the 1910s (Slotkin 411), and *Vera Cruz* merely followed suit in this respect, using architecture to “creat[e] a Mexican mythology evoking an ancient lineage and epic beauty” able to vie with the grandeur of the movie West (Fuller 24). That said, the Western remains essentially a historical genre with “profound and multifaceted historical and historiographic functions” (Walker 7) and demands to be evaluated as such. The function of the Mexican setting and architecture in *Vera Cruz* is thus to introduce within the Western a non- US colonial history that can be compared to, and contrasted with, US colonization. The opening titles inform us that the story takes place at the end of the American Civil War during the Second Mexican Empire, which corresponds to the years 1865-1866. In 1867, under US pressure, France withdrew its military support to the Austrian emperor Maximilian and Mexico fell back into the hands of Juarez and the Liberals. The figure of Benito Juarez, a rural man of indigenous descent, and his struggle for liberalism and independence against European

rule are remembered in Mexican memory as a foundational symbol for the modern, democratic Mexican nation (Weeks 12-14). During the Empire, the city of Veracruz was the stronghold of Juarez and the Liberals, the pro-Maximilian Conservatives holding Mexico City. In the 1954 film, the Western's conventional focus on national birth is displaced onto Mexican history, while the title asserts, for those with a sense of the history, its indigenous, anti-imperialist perspective. The impact of such displacement is to steer the Western away from the imperial narrative of national birth through colonization--the Frontier myth (Slotkin 10)--and emphasize instead a liberal narrative of national birth through decolonization. Articulating Mexican and American historical experiences, the film then uncovers an alternative master narrative of US genesis: the nation was not born out of the frontier, the Indian wars and territorial expansion, as the Western routinely shows, but out of the Enlightenment, the Revolution and the struggle against British imperialism. The Juaristas are associated with Native Americans resisting American imperialism, but they are also the Mexican equivalent of the patriots fighting for freedom and independence against European imperialism. The parallel is made explicit by General Ramirez in an attempt to win over the mercenaries: "Certainly as Americans you can appreciate our fight for independence" [17:53]. The Mexican setting here allows the film to contrast antithetical myths of US origins. The fact that the mercenaries would renege on such historical legacy of revolutionary independence and accept imperial money over a liberal cause only demonstrates the practical malleability of American ideals, especially when tested in foreign contexts.

The film's visual treatment of architecture is especially important to develop a historical discourse on colonialism and decolonization. This discourse stems from the different characterizations of Spanish colonial and pre-Columbian architecture, which is associated with differing regimes of power. Spanish colonial architecture evokes the oppressive power of imperial rule and the American presence in Mexico. The film multiplies

low-angle shots of characters wielding power over others against a background of monumental arches and bell towers. When Erin, in the opening scene, sells a bad horse to Trane for \$100, a clear abuse of power, the shot/reverse shot of the transaction shows Erin in low angle backed by the flat bell tower of a mission church [05:36]. Similarly, when the Americans later escort the imperial caravan to a convent, the captain of the lancers (Henry Brandon) [36:00], then Trane [37:05], are shot in low angle with the high bell tower of the church.<sup>v</sup> The film also frames colonial architecture to convey shifting power dynamics. When the mercenaries meet the Emperor's aide (Cesar Romero) and General Ramirez, the same building corner (with a second-story arcade) in low angle is associated with a succession of characters, as power changes hands within the scene: Little Bit (James McCallion) on horseback molesting a Mexican woman [14:00], Trane on horseback humiliating Little Bit [14:34], and finally the Juaristas taking everyone prisoner [19:18]. Whereas Little Bit and Trane were shot in the foreground with the building above them, the Juaristas are lined up on its top, appropriating the material expression of colonial rule.

If Spanish architecture is associated with Americans and colonialism, pre-Columbian architecture is identified with indigenous power and resistance to colonization. One scene of the film is shot in the site of Teotihuacan and features the eighteen-century-old pyramid of the Sun and the two-mile-long avenue of the Dead. The sequence opens with a full frontal shot of the massive pyramid [53:28], followed by a medium shot of the pyramid that dwarfs the imperial caravan and their American escorts as they progress around its base in a very slow pan [53:32-54:09]. The frailty of the caravan is then underlined in a high angle from the side of the pyramid embracing the perspective of a Juarista scout [54:10-54:24]. These opening shots use architecture to construct a striking image of indigenous power over Euro-American imperialism. Such power is brutally challenged later in the sequence when the imperial lancers capture and execute a Juarista in a series of shots whose composition is organized

around the now distant pyramid [56:36-57:09]. *Vera Cruz* thus uses architecture to distinguish between two regimes of power in Mexican history: Spanish colonialism and pre-Columbian native society. By aligning the Empire and the Americans with colonialism, and the Juaristas with political autonomy, the film further suggests the likeness of American and European imperialism as common enemies of indigenous peoples in a long-lasting struggle for decolonization.

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Fig. 3.2: Pre-Columbian architecture is identified with indigenous power and resistance to the imperial presence in Mexico.



Mexican history is not only evoked through architecture, but also through other music. Although *Vera Cruz* may be accused of dishing out the exotic image of Mexico for American audiences, it also foregrounds a form of syncretic culture known as “fandango,” which is explicitly referred to in the film [66:19]. Originally, fandango is a Spanish dance that became popular across Europe in the late 18th century, but gained a more specific meaning in the State of Veracruz where it developed as a popular celebration mixing various cultures of colonial society. This specific folklore is celebrated in the fiesta scene at the fictional town of Las Palmas [59:52-64:30], and is used both to construct the image of a unified and inclusive Mexican people (accommodating American folk dance as well as the harmonica) and to

further establish the Empire as an alien element (the arrival of the caravan interrupts the fiesta [60:32]). The Spanish guitar, an instrument which had been appropriated in popular music of rural Mexico since the 18th century, is also prominently featured in the film as an attribute of the Juaristas. Its soft melody, played on screen by Pedro, gives a gentle, humane touch to the assertion of Juarista power when General Ramirez takes the Emperor's aide and the Americans prisoners [18:20-19:45]. The same melody is reprised on the eve of the final battle, in an evening scene at the Juarista village where the anonymous peasants rest with their family and quietly prepare for the morning assault [82:40-84:50]. In both instances, long takes and slow panning or tracking movements emphasize gentleness and mastery. More than a mere mythical backdrop or a new frontier for American expansion, Mexico in *Vera Cruz* is a distinct historical and cultural space, whose specificity and complexity is exploited to identify American actions with European imperialism and establish the Juaristas as the heirs and representatives of a liberal, popular, and native history.

### **Genre hybridity and formal tension**

The setting of *Vera Cruz*--Mexico during the Second Empire--seems to have incited the filmmakers to hybridize the Western with another genre or, more specifically, a subgenre of the Hollywood costume drama: period pieces about the aristocracy of early modern Europe. Hybridity is not an unknown phenomenon in the history of Hollywood genres or the Western; in fact, many contemporary researchers in genre theory tend to think that hybridity is the norm rather than the exception in the history of filmic genres (Carter 87). Although the phenomenon has been especially noted since the 1980s in discussions involving postmodernity, hybridity in the Western is a constant feature of the genre's developments. The Western has borrowed from and influenced almost every other Hollywood genre, the most conspicuous exchanges concerning war and empire films (Abel 161; Chapman 7), science-fiction (Morgen 3), and noir (Simmon 207). *Vera Cruz*, for instance, features an

interracial group of mercenaries inspired from World War II films, a motif that became a staple of the Mexico Western in the 1960s from *The Magnificent Seven* (John Sturges, 1960) to *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah, 1969). The most conspicuous instance of hybridization in *Vera Cruz*, however, is to be found in the articulation of two subgenres of the historical costume drama and their very distinct filmic imaginaries: on the one hand, the Western and its images of late 19th-century American colonization; on the other hand, films focusing on the imperial courts of early modern Europe. *Vera Cruz* features six-guns and Stetsons, desert landscapes, horseback chases, and the final showdown of black and white hat. But it also features a French Marquis and Countess, lancers in metal armors and court ladies in colored dresses, as well as a ten-minute scene in an imperial palace, complete with banquet and ball [22:41-33:10]. The introduction of early modern Europe into the Western comes with the first appearance of the imperial lancers chasing the American Westerners [6:25-6:32]. The disruption in shot size, from an extreme long shot framing a cloud of dust on the horizon of a Western landscape to a full shot of a group of shiny-armored lancers who would look at home in a royal drama, suggests that the two imaginaries will be contrasted rather than merged. This is confirmed by the rest of the film. To the visual contrast is weaved an aural one when, a few moments before Pedro plays his gentle melody on the guitar, the Marquis is introduced by blaring fanfare trumpets [15:26]--as will the imperial palace [22:40] and the Emperor [27:20]--displaying imperial regalia. Genre hybridity in *Vera Cruz* is exploited in such confrontational fashion to suggest the tension and incompatibility of both historical imaginaries.

*Vera Cruz*'s oppositional approach to genre crossing reflects back on both the Western and the imperial costume drama in ways that strengthen their distinct national identities. *Vera Cruz* mobilizes the association of the Western with the agrarian and liberal ideals of Americanness, while the imperial costume drama in the film is characterized by elements that are more typically associated with Europe: class difference and autocratic rule. Interestingly,

*Vera Cruz*, in doing so, underlines the un-Americanness of the American Westerners and establishes the Mexican people and the Juarista cause as the true representatives of American liberal mythology. Indeed, the elements in the film consistently identified with the Western are the Mexican landscape, which very much resembles the movie West, and the Juaristas, visually treated as movie Indians.<sup>vi</sup> Also Western-like are the Mexican people and their rural towns, whose ruggedness, communal life and inclusiveness evoke the pioneer communities celebrated in John Ford's films. Because the Western remains the dominant genre, and the Mexican setting is identified with it, all the elements associated with the imperial costume drama appear out of place, aesthetically conveying the invasive presence of the Empire/Europe in Mexico/the West. The point where both subgenres meet and collide is in the characterization of the American protagonists. As riders in cowboy garb, and as actors and stars associated with the genre, they are immediately identified with the Western. Although most of the mercenaries are little more than white savages, the main characters Ben Trane and Joe Erin are heirs to recognizable Western types: respectively the Virginian and the gunfighter. And yet they are narratively associated with the Empire, which they serve up until the last fifteen minutes of the film [79:58]. The otherwise contrasting of both genres amplifies the tension between the visual and narrative allegiances of the American characters, and underlines the contradiction between the liberal image of Americanness and the imperialist actions of Americans. Through the articulation and confrontation of distinct historical imaginaries in the conflation of American Westerners and European aristocrats in Mexico, *Vera Cruz* formally unfolds its scathing indictment of American imperial history and policy.

## **Conclusion**

The transnational narrative of *Vera Cruz* decenters the Western's perspective on the history of American imperialism by introducing the specificities and similarities of a non-American colonial context within the genre. The Mexican setting operates on different levels,

all of which contribute to cultivate the anti-imperialist discourse in the Western genre. The unfamiliar visual and narrative elements open up a space for the critical rewriting of generic conventions along the lines of the more liberal productions released in the early 1950s. *Vera Cruz* converges with the pro-Indian Western in its dignified depiction of noble Juaristas fighting for freedom, and the film exploits the narrative distance with American history to approach colonization from an indigenous perspective. Although it partakes in the genre's individualistic and racist drive when contrasting Euro-American protagonists with a background of Mexican extras, it also works against that very drive by erasing or marginalizing its white heroes in ways that ultimately foreground collective values at the expense of individual interests. The Mexican setting also provides the Western with a competing historical perspective that displaces the Western's structural focus on the US frontier and Indian wars to mobilize another (and earlier) foundational episode of American history, the American Revolution. The Juaristas are Mexican equivalents to the American patriots of old, calling upon Americans to remain true to their original myth of liberation. The legitimacy of the Juaristas' struggle against European imperialism is even greater than that of the patriots, as they are characterized as the genuine heirs of pre-Columbian peoples. Indeed, the colonial dynamics of Mexican history are played out through the visual treatment of architecture, identifying the Empire and the Americans with Spanish colonization whereas the Juaristas embody the powerful and inclusive culture of a popular and more indigenous Mexico. Finally, the Mexican setting offers a possibility for generic hybridization, the political implications of the narrative being played out in the conflicting articulation of different imaginaries. *Vera Cruz* emphasizes the association of the Western with American identity and treats the European costume drama as an alien intruder in an otherwise coherent genre to formally express the imperial invasion of Mexico by a foreign power and condemn the actions of its American gunfighters. The Mexican perspective eventually exposes the gap

between the liberal myth of Americanness, expressed through the Western and projected onto the Juaristas, and the imperial policies of the United States, stifling democracy and independence abroad in the name of power and profit. In articulating histories and imaginaries across national and generic borders in ways that reflect back upon the Western and its construction of national identity, *Vera Cruz* exploits transnational perspectives within the Hollywood Western to expand the genre's critical reevaluation of American imperial mythology and policies, both in the past and in the present.

*Vera Cruz* inspired some later Mexico Westerns to reprise its decentered criticism of US imperial myth and history. *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah, 1969) and, to a lesser extent, *The Professionals* (Richard Brooks, 1966) expanded on some of the narrative and visual themes condemning American political choices abroad, while *Major Dundee* (Sam Peckinpah, 1965) further explored the problematic implications of post-Civil War divisions. Other Mexico Westerns instead took a less critical turn, celebrating the liberating use of American force abroad (in John Sturges's *The Magnificent Seven*, 1960, and its three sequels) or using Mexico as a foil against which divided Americans can regain unity (in Andrew V. McLaglen's *The Undefeated*, 1969).

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<sup>i</sup> Directed by Robert Aldrich, *Apache* also starred Burt Lancaster and was produced by Hecht-Lancaster Productions. The action takes place in the late 1880s strictly on US soil, between Arizona and Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma). The film was released in early 1954 and, in addition to its star, shares some of its cast with *Vera Cruz*: Morris Ankrum plays an assimilated Cherokee farmer in Indian Territory and Charles Bronson plays an accommodationist Apache warrior and the protagonist's rival.

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<sup>ii</sup> The high angle shot of a Juarista overlooking the stagecoach and imperial caravan at the foot of a pyramid [54:12] is reminiscent of Geronimo (Chief White Horse) overlooking the stage crossing Monument Valley in *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939) [69:14]. Another example would be Lance Poole (Robert Taylor) watching the shepherders trespassing on his land in *Devil's Doorway* [56:40]. Such staple shots in Westerns (see D. W. Griffith's *The Massacre*, 1912 [16:18]; or later John Ford's *The Iron Horse*, 1924 [10:27]) reposition American westward expansion as a territorial invasion and colonization.

<sup>iii</sup> In favoring collective causes over individual greed as a legitimate basis for action, the film also develops a scathing critique of American capitalism as predatory and socially harmful (see Fuller 26).

<sup>iv</sup> In the former, two black Union soldiers are more sympathetic to the Apache than their white officers. In the latter, the character of the African American Union veteran Ballard (played by famous dancer and choreographer Archie Savage) is interestingly fleshed out as the better end of the bunch of mercenaries. His actions serve to debunk racist stereotypes--when he rescues Nina from rape at the hands of white mercenaries [51:08-51:26] or when he fights imperial troops bravely [88:55-89:10] and dies betrayed by Joe [89:50]--or to evoke Savage's artistic career through dance performances fusing American and Mexican folklore [62:30-62:55; 64:12-64:23].

<sup>v</sup> The association of Trane with religion also evokes his redemptive path, as shown towards the end of the film when Americans finally side with the Juaristas, and Trane is repeatedly shot with a conspicuous cross in the background [78:30; 78:46].

<sup>vi</sup> The Western genre has overwhelmingly favored the desert landscapes of Southern California, Utah or Arizona where most films were shot, even when the action was set in other areas of the historical West (Simmon 53; Henriët and Mauduit).