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Antonio Medina-Rivera

Cleveland State University, a.medinarivera@csuohio.edu

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MALE REPRESENTATION IN LATIN AMERICAN FILM AND SOAP OPERAS

Antonio Medina-Rivera, *Cleveland State University*

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MALE REPRESENTATION IN LATIN AMERICAN FILM AND SOAP OPERAS¹

Introduction - US male movement:

In the United States, the male movement of the 1990s rediscovers the concept of archetype to redefine the male character and behavior. Robert Bly attains national and international attention by representing the male character through the hero/warrior archetype in his book *Iron John*. This book uses the image of the warrior to represent the male in all societies, with a desire to conquer, to succeed, and to express his male energy in many different ways. This desire to “hunt” or to “conquer” comes from male primitive ancestors, and it is part of a collective unconscious that males continue to inherit. Regarding the warrior/hero archetype Sam Keen states that “the male mind-set is a warrior psyche because society demands that we constantly resort to power and violence” (37).

Both locally and internationally, this archetype has created much discussion in psychological and religious circles, leading to a deeper understanding of the male mentality in the United States. However, there has also been strong criticism from feminists, ecologists and pacifists towards the elements of violence and dominance which are related to this archetype. Furthermore, some minority groups, as suggested by Allan B. Chinen in his book *Beyond the Hero*, “rise up against the patriarch and dispute his insistence on one law, one culture, and one doctrine for everyone” (1).

In Jungian psychology the archetype conceptualization is represented as part of the collective unconscious, and it is defined as the original universal models in which other similar states of minds are patterned, or that the human behavior is affected by inherited genetic patterns. According to Robertson, an archetype can also be understood as the “ways or models of perceiving ourselves” or the “race memory” (xiii). Moreover, human behavior and the way in which we experience the world can be understood and explained through the concept of archetype. Nevertheless, the way of understanding each archetype — in order to be meaningful— accommodates to the reality, values and cosmovision of each society in the world.

The warrior/hero archetype presented by Bly is associated with positive male roles such as competition, achievement, strength, focus on the outside world, authority, discipline, and being task oriented. However, the hero/warrior is also connected with negative cultural images: battles, guns, bombs, swords, knives, blood. Undoubtedly, the interpretation and definition of a warrior/hero figure as well as the definition of masculinity varies from culture to culture and from time to time, as stated by Rafael Ramírez “Since cultures are not static but rather undergo constant change, within society masculinity is subject to modification through time” (27). For example, in primitive cultures masculinity is associated with strength and ability to provide for the rest of the community, whereas in contemporary neoliberal countries it is associated with wealth, distinction and individualism.

Besides the hero/warrior there are other archetypes used to represent and define the male character. Georges Dumézil identifies three basic male archetypes within the Indo-European culture: the warrior, the priest, and the lover. This is what he called the trifunctional conception that can be observed in the mythologies of many ancient cultures such as Greek or Roman. These three functions or domains represented a reflection of how society and people were organized. There was a god to represent war, physical power and bravery; another god to represent the elements of a priest, magical and juridical with a maximal expression of the sacred; and there was a god to represent the lover in terms of fertility and prosperity. Dumézil, precursor of Bly’s work, did not limit himself or the Indo-European culture to the warrior/hero archetype, but rather focused on other ways of understanding the male character. His view took an anthropological perspective from the ancient times, with the intention of discovering universal patterns of male behavior in society. This perspective does not limit one way of being a male in society.

Chinen in his book *Beyond the Hero* of 1993 suggests that “mature men need to move beyond heroic and patriarchal role” (255). According to Chinen, in order to achieve this goal, men need to acknowledge their feminine side, to recognize their shadow or vulnerability, and finally to return to the real world. The encounter with the patriarch/hero image helps men to “develop a strong ego, a sturdy sense of identity, and consciousness freed from instincts” (259). Later in their lives men must have an encounter with the shaman-Trickster to find the deep masculine, to develop the ability to relate with others, and to balance the feminine and masculine

side of every man. In this sense, in the psychological development of men, it is necessary to go through a process of finding the inner male energy that will lead every man to become “Mediator not monarch, wanderer not warrior, healer not hero, his ideal is exploration not exploitation, dialogue not domination, and integration instead of imperialism” (260).

In a similar fashion, Hicks, in his book *Masculine Journey* of 1993, also perceives male development as a process, and identifies different archetypes for different stages in men’s life. These six stages in malehood are: the creational male or noble savage, the phallic male or mysterious taskmaster, the warrior or glorious hero, the wounded male, the mature man or reborn ruler, the sage or fulfilled man. While Chinen takes an anthropological/ psychological point of view, Hicks’ approach is a more theological and spiritual one; however, both writers provide a broader view of a male’s life and psyche. By presenting male’s life as a process and not as one archetype or as a set of archetypes, Chinen and Hicks allow us to view men from a multidimensional point of view, rather than from a homogenous one.

The Latin American Male:

Most of the male movement studies generally focus on defining and understanding the problems and issues of the middle class white man of the United States. The concept of competition and individualism seems to apply to this specific group of males and to the values and attributes that a neoliberal, progressive and highly tech society associates with being a male. It would be interesting to look at other realities in the male spectrum as suggested by Dumézil with his theory of multiple male archetypes, or as a journey or process as presented by Chinen and Hicks.

The dual representation of the hero archetype — the positive vs. negative attributes mentioned before— leads me to observe the conceptualization of the male in Latin America. The attempts to define the male character in Latin America are generally limited and mostly focus on machismo. Herb Goldberg explains that “This Latin image is only an extreme variation of the American scenario, consisting of the impulsive, alcohol-prone man who runs around while his long suffering, selfless ‘good woman’ is waiting at home” (101).

Mirandé and Ramírez, among some investigators, propose examining the Latin American male character beyond the limited views of machismo. Mirandé proposes to look at Latin American male not from a

homogenous perspective because “there is not one masculine mode but a variety of modalities” (17). He also clarifies that:

though much has been said and written about machismo or ‘excessive masculinity’ among Latinos in general and Mexicans in particular, until recently such generalizations were based on meager, nonexistent, and misrepresented evidence. (5)

Ramírez observes that in Latin America the vision “of masculinity is excessively partial toward oppressiveness” (113), which again is a way of limiting the Latin American male to the image of the violent and the aggressive macho. In the conclusion of his book *What It Means to Be a Man: Reflections on Puerto Rican Masculinity* he challenges his male movement colleagues to transcend the limiting images and definitions we have on malehood.

Octavio Paz, one of the most important Latin American intellectuals and writers of the 20th century in his essay “Máscaras mexicanas,” defines the Mexican man as “a sealed being, closed within himself, guarding himself and guarding anything that others confide. His manhood is measured through his invulnerability in face of the enemy, and against the impact of the outside world.” He considers this behavior to be one of the masks used by men to cover up their inferiority or as a mechanism that Latin American males have acquired to survive in society. In his Latin America textbook, Chang-Rodríguez presents “machismo” as one of the features that defines male character, and observes that “Machismo is the cult Latin Americans have created around the conceptualization of the macho. Man as a risk-taker, self-confident, determined, of great physical and sexual energy” (29). Chang-Rodríguez not only includes culturally undefined terms, but also states that some of the features that defined the Latin American character vary for different social, cultural and economic reasons.

To continue with the discussion it is necessary to understand the concepts “macho” and “machista.” In Spanish, “macho” is a synonym for male/man. “Machista”, on the other hand, as many other words with the [-ista] morpheme is the one with a negative connotation. Both words, however, “macho” and “machista” when incorporated in the English language, seem to have a negative connotation, exemplified by the parody performance of Village People and their songs during the late 70s “Macho, macho man, I want to be a macho man.” Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne explain that:

The term 'macho' is a fairly recent importation into colloquial English, from Mexico via North America. It is used widely, in very different ways, to present multiple masculinities. Though macho derives from the Latin *masculus* the Spanish term *macho*, both of which denote the 'male sex', Chambers' Dictionary has recently defined macho as 'ostentatiously virile.' (12)

Ramírez also indicates that the term machismo "was popularized in the social literature of the fifties and sixties and was initially presented as a Latin American phenomenon that appeared in its crudest form in the peasant and working classes" (7).

In the present study, I examine the concepts of hero and macho, and other male archetypes, applied to the Latin American reality through the eyes of film and soap operas. In regards to the conceptualization of the hero in relationship to the "macho," it is important to mention that every archetype has a counterpart or shadow, sometimes considered an archetype itself. The shadow refers to "All those parts of our personal life which have been deemed unsuitable and denied, collect around a single archetypal core. Everything we regard as bad, as "not us," accumulates around this center" (Robertson 112). Therefore, both the hero and the macho have a positive and a negative dimension.

Latin American male in film and soap operas:

The perception we have of ourselves and the image we give to the rest of the world is depicted by films and the media. The movie industry and the media use both stereotypes and archetypes to portray the human psyche. Hispanic males are generally represented in United States films as sex symbols, gangsters, and typical machos — which is a repository of the shadow archetype—. This view of the Latin American male is generalized and not consequent with the reality of many men of Latin American origin. Mirandé comments on this issue that "the most significant conclusion that can be drawn from recent research and writing is that Latino men do not constitute a homogenous monolithic, unvarying mass (17). This idea of viewing males from a multiple perspective or variety of modalities or masculinities is the main concern of many of the male movement writers who pretend to move beyond the hero image. In the case of Latin America, the intention is to transcend the macho figure.

Latin American films and media try to give us a better understanding of the Hispanic male. In the present investigation I examine the films *El día que me quieras* (Argentina, 1935), *La luna en el espejo* (Chile 1990), *Guantanamera* (Cuba 1994), and the internationally known Latin American soap operas to examine the representation of male characters in Latin America. These three movies, as well as most of the soap operas, give the audience the opportunity to see men in different perspectives.

Examples of Latin American films:

El día que me quieras, a classic with Argentina's tango legend Carlos Gardel, is a film that portrays two males from two generations, a father and a son. The father is affluent and successful, with a strong and dominant personality. He tends to become violent, and unmerciful when things don't go the way he had planned them. He has designed the future for his son: to be the successor of his own business and to marry a traditional woman of the high society. However, contrary to his father's expectations, he is very sensitive, romantic, merciful, and worst of all he is an artist. He wants to pursue a singing career and marry a woman who also sings. The separation of father and son is inevitable — one of the typical topic/issue of the male movement— because of the father's intolerance and dominating character. Life as a singer becomes very difficult for the son who lives a life of misery and poverty. When the son becomes a widow and begins to raise his daughter by himself, both he and his daughter end up becoming very successful performers.

This movie from 1935 represents the contradictions between a "typical macho" and a male with different values. The father who is a business man represents the old values: the male dominant society, the authoritarian/patriarchal figure with lack of understanding and respect for others. But at the same time, he represents society's expectation of males during that period. The son, although born and raised with the same values of his father, represents new values — a new male with new responsibilities (in this case he took care of his daughter by himself) and a different ways of understanding society—. The separation from his father's business world affords him the opportunity to view other perspectives in life. In the artistic world he has the opportunity to be more in contact with women, to work and collaborate with them at the same level of professionalism. The father, on the contrary, is immersed in a world of businessmen in which competi-

tion and wealth are center stage. Both father and son share the qualities of the hero archetype: successful, competitive, hard-working, ambitious, achiever, disciplined, task oriented, and focused on the outside world. However, the father uses his authority for oppression, while the son uses his authority for the formation, guidance and respect of his only daughter. The son goes through a process of transformation, first by separating from his father's world and then by becoming a widow and raising his daughter. The movie offers the audience of that time a new representation of what a male can be. Becoming an artist at that time, surpassed the boundaries of social class and male behavior in that singing was not considered a profession suitable nor serious enough for an upper class person nor for a male.

La luna en el espejo, a contemporary Chilean film, also portrays the conflict between father and son, old values and new values, typical macho and new male. The father in the movie is a former Chilean naval officer who is ill and bed ridden. He is an extremely authoritarian figure, who lives through his memories and medals as an officer. His wife has left him, so now he controls his son and is his only care giver. In his attempt to control his son's life and actions, he has installed a series of mirrors that surround the apartment and reflect everything into the old man's bedroom. Although the father is a representation of the hero archetype, in terms of his qualities as a naval officer, the son is quite the opposite of that hero figure. The son has taken on the role of the mother: nurturing, submissive, passive, gentle. He is a potential hero with dreams of a different life after his father's death. The only element that maintains his identity as a man is his relationship with his beloved neighbor, a woman much older than him. This relationship keeps alive his sexual energy. His father, however, tries to sabotage the sexual encounter by embarrassing his son in front of the woman and by telling him that he doesn't have what it takes to be a "real man."

The son, on the other hand, is a great cook and hopes one day to own a restaurant and live together with his lover. The warrior/hero in him hasn't emerged yet; he is not a naval officer like his father, but he has the capability to succeed. Robert Hicks in his book *Masculine Journey* indicates that "men who never discover the warrior aspect of their being are not real men. They are what Bly calls "mother-bound" boys still in need of a sword to cut their adult souls away from their mothers" (76). In this specific case, from his father. This mother/father-bound relationship is an obstacle for

the son in his attempt to become a fulfilled man. This relationship echoes at the same time the authoritarian government of Chile during Pinochet's years. The father in the movie represents the values of an authoritarian government that matches very well with a machista mentality. The son who is not a military man, is not a real man through his father's eyes.

Throughout the movie one observes that the son embodies new values, although the old values still affect him in one way or another. There is one scene in which the son, who behaved during the whole story as a gentle and sensitive man, hits the woman he loves. This is a moment of confusion for the two characters; for the woman because she perceives this man as a new and reformed male; for the young man as well, because his violent reaction is a replica of his father's behavior. This movie is not as optimistic as *El día que me quieras*, in the sense that by the end of the movie the young man is alone, after the father leaves the apartment, overwhelmed by a feeling of guilt and frustration without the possibility of finding his inner hero/warrior. It seems like the apparition of the new and reformed man is still overshadowed by the typical macho. Nevertheless, the son represents a new way of being a man after the Chilean dictatorial era. The dictatorship incarnates the values of the typical macho: dominant, violent, authoritarian. In this case, society is not yet ready for the emergence of the new male.

The issue about machismo and male dominance is also an important topic in Cuban cinematography. Movies such as *El retrato de Teresa* (1979) and *Hasta cierto punto* (1983) put into evidence the male dominant society created by the communist party in Cuba. The movie *Guantanamera*, the last made by the acclaimed director Tomás Gutiérrez-Aleá also presents the dichotomy between old and new values. But in this case, pre-revolutionary values, represented by old don Cándido, are the values of respect and loyalty for women. The new post-revolutionary values carry the vision of the male dominated society that brought communism to the island. Adolfo represents the values of the communist society and is a representation of the typical macho as well. He once held an important position in the communist government, but the ideas and actions of his wife and daughter affect his political career and he ends up working as an undertaker. His wife was a non-dogmatic economics professor and his daughter defected to the United States. Later on, as a concession to their marriage, Adolfo's wife Gina, abandons her career as a college professor to let her husband ascend again in the communist society. Meanwhile Adolfo has become an

abusive husband, very dominant and jealous. By contrast to Adolfo, there is an old Candido who is romantic, sensitive and has more traits in common with the new and reformed men portrayed in the two previous movies. The other male character is Mariano, a trucker, who was Gina's student and who is deeply in love with her. Mariano is nothing but a womanizer, having a love affair in every single town he visits to sell merchandise. Old Candido serves as the "sentimental education" for both Gina and Mariano. Because Mariano is sincerely in love with Gina, he is open to change and willing to live a new life of respect and fidelity and perhaps to rediscover the real hero he lost when he stopped going to college. Mariano, through the influence of Candido, is in the process of becoming a new man. Adolfo, on the other hand, is "eliminated" having had an encounter with death while giving a funeral speech in the top of a pedestal.

Adolfo had the dream of becoming an important man, a hero. There is one scene in which he sees himself as the figure on the statue of one of the Cuban national heroes — a foreshadowing to his "symbolic death" at the end of the movie—. His desire to become important made him authoritarian and abusive. Candido was a potential hero who was not able to excel in an oppressive society. His inner hero returns when he encounters his love from 50 years ago. Mariano and Gina stay together at the end of the movie with the hope of a new and a better life for both characters. The typical macho is eliminated in the movie, the real hero emerges and that new and renovated man has the opportunity to emerge as well.

All these movies provide either a multidimensional representation of the male or a representation of malehood as a process. This supports Ramírez's idea that : "Not all men are violent, aggressive, and oppressive. There are also men who are understanding, loving, generous, and loyal" (113). The machista prototype is depicted in every movie, but alternative characters are also present or the possibility of changing or evolving in a malehood process, providing a "variety of modalities and masculinities that are not only different, but often contradictory" mentioned by Mirandé (17).

Latin American soap operas:

The pattern of eliminating the macho and allowing the new male emerge, is also typical of most of Latin American soap operas. The standard soap opera tends to include a typical macho— abusive, violent, authoritarian— who functions as the antagonist for a new and reformed male.

This moralistic approach is commonplace among Mexican and Venezuelan soap operas. It is important to mention that soap operas from these two countries are presented in many other non-Spanish countries in the world. Since soap operas have a better and more extended market than Latin American films, it develops a tremendous opportunity to show another dimension of the Latin American male.

Besides the typical macho and the reformed male, many times there is another character: the extremely good man, too good to be true, the extra sensitive man, who tries in vain to attract the attention of the young female protagonist. This "weakened male" is not appealing to the female audience and lacks the traditional male power and masculinity that is generally a characteristic of the reformed male in the story. The weakened male is what some male movement writers call the "effeminate" version of the hero: very docile, submissive, easily dominated by a woman, and deep down not really happy with himself.

"El derecho de nacer" a soap opera from the golden radio era in Cuba (from about 80 years ago), with a first TV version from 1966, and with two Mexican remakes, one from 1981 and the other from 2001, is the classic example of that multiple representation of Latin American males. Don Manuel del Junco is the example of the authoritarian, oppressive, controlling and violent man. María Elena, don Manuel's daughter, suffers the injustices of her father and falls in love with Alfredo, an ambitious and adventurous male. This man cannot emerge as a hero, submitted to his own insecurities, lack of commitment, and by fear and inability to confront the authoritarian father of María Elena. As a result of their love she had a baby. The father orders one of his servants to kill the newborn, but the baby is rescued by a gentle black woman (María Dolores) who raised the boy and named him Alberto Limonta. Alberto Limonta grows to be a man of honor and high morals, a representation of the new male. In the soap opera there is another man, Jorge Luis, who is deeply in love with María Elena. He is the incarnation of the "incredibly good" man, but at the same time a representation of the weakened male, open to submitting himself totally to the love and will of a woman, and to make any kind of sacrifice for her. Jorge Luis, in spite of all his efforts to obtain María Elena's love, lacks the energy and sex appeal to attract her. He is not the hero type, but rather, the man that surrenders to someone's will.

"El derecho de nacer" is still a model for most of the soap operas developed in Mexico and Venezuela. The authoritarian male, the weak-

ened male and reformed male are still characteristic of many soap operas that one can watch on Spanish television. The female audience still has a preference for the adventurous, very masculine, extremely attractive male, and has the tendency to reject the more passive and willing-to-submit male.

Discussion:

The three male representations examined in this paper, the typical macho, the new male and the weakened macho can be perceived as three different stages within the concept of the hero/warrior image: the real hero with the honorable qualities, the oppressive hero or hero's shadow, and the weakened male or oppressed mother/father-bound man. However, these different representations of males can also be interpreted as culturally based or changes in the mentality and ways of understanding malehood in society, as suggested by Ramírez. Even the image of the male protagonist in a soap opera seems to be changing: before it was a man with moustache, wild and with hard features, not very affectionate; and now it can be a clean out guy, who has no beard and tends to be more sensitive.

The typical macho or the machista man is generally eliminated in many films and media. It is like a "moralistic voice" condemning this type of behavior. Is the disappearance of the typical macho a representation of Latin American reality? I don't know. However, the message and the images demonstrate the possibility of change, if we believe that media has an effect on people's behavior. It is important to reconsider that people's mentalities in society change. Latin Americans inherited the culture of machismo through the Judaic/Christian tradition that establishes that men are superior to women. At the same time, in an agricultural society, still typical of many Latin American countries, there is a clear separation of roles between men and women. In post-industrial societies the role of women has expanded (work not only outside the house but in the house as well), while the role of men is still limited to his performance in the outside world. Life in urban centers is evidence that some changes in the Latin American machista society are emerging (Loprete 1995). Many groups serve as advocates for women's rights, however, the "typical macho" still exist in just the same way yet, it is present in a more "advanced" society like the United States.

The image of the new man is represented by many films and soap operas. He is a man adjusted to the accelerated changes in society. He is generally represented as aggressive, non violent, competitive, yet aware of equal rights. He is no longer the "sealed being, closed within himself" nor

the insecure man introduced in “Máscaras mexicanas” by Octavio Paz (1950). The sexual energy is still a central element in the characterization, considering that the main male character in soap operas is generally handsome, strong and young. The expectation of faithfulness has also become a requirement in this new characterization of man. The message of Latin American soap operas regarding the new reformed man is always the same: a man deeply in love is generally faithful. However, that man has to be “un verdadero macho,” a real man with strong will, independent, not submissive, with previous sexual experience, very masculine, a real gentleman in terms of manners, a symbol of male sensuality and energy.

And finally the weakened man goes to the other extreme of the spectrum. He is represented as a man who has totally submitted to a woman. He inherits all the characteristics of a typical woman in a male-dominated society. He is a man without will and his sexual energy is generally diminished. He is the mother-bound figure who hasn't been able to find his independence. As I mentioned before, using the men's movement jargon: this is the man who hasn't discovered his inner hero. In soap operas this type of male behavior is not eliminated, but generally remains isolated in its discovery of his identity as a male.

In the redefinition of the Latin American identity the image of the macho needs to be understood within the context of a society that is changing, that has more than one possibility, and that is not only fossilized in the vile image of the typical macho. I am not denying the existence of machismo in Latin America, the same way we cannot deny its presence in other modern societies like the United States. A society in which women still earn lower salaries than men, even though they are equal in terms of education and experience; where women in non-traditional fields such as science and engineering struggle to obtain tenure as university professors; where the political domain is still dominated by men, is not a convincing example of a non-machista society. The machista mentality is still glorified in the United States through western movies, many contemporary action/violent movies and the great world of US wrestling and football. Soccer, which is the most popular sport in Latin America, is viewed as a game of “sissies” in the United States because it is not as violent as football.

In a post modern era the (de-)construction of national identities and gender identities is a complex issue. One cannot limit a nation, a group, or a gender to a definition or a set of characteristics. The redefinition of the

Latin American “macho” is a necessary attempt to understand the male psyche, behavior and possibilities in a broader and more complex context.

Cleveland State University

Antonio Medina-Rivera

ENDNOTE

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