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Star and National Myths in Cold War Allegories: Marlene Dietrich's Star Persona and the Western in Fritz Lang's *Rancho Notorious* (1952)¹

Hilaria Loyo

- 1 Fritz Lang is perhaps one of the most representative European exiles in Hollywood, one of those “strangers in the house” who usually offer an outsider’s gaze “at what is familiar and unquestioned.”² Like many other exiles and immigrants who had fled Fascist Europe for an idealized America, Lang also felt the urgent need to warn against fascist practices and thinking in his newly adopted homeland. Lang, however, did not always have a major creative role in the films he directed in the U.S. His difficulties in adapting to the Hollywood studio system are well known and documented – difficulties that have often been used to explain why Lang changed production companies with almost every film he made. Using archival evidence, Nick Smedley made a clear distinction between Lang’s personal works in which he was greatly involved and those contract projects where he had very limited participation.³ Only those personal works in which he was greatly involved can be seen as “exile films,” which Anton Kaes has defined as those which offer “a double-edged critique from the vantage point that compares and judges the new against the old, the unknown against the known, the present against the past, the indigenous against the foreign.”⁴ *Rancho Notorious* (1952) has been singled out as one of Lang’s most personal works on which he exerted an extraordinary creative control, and hence one of his “exile films” that offer a double focus.⁵
- 2 *Rancho Notorious* was Lang’s third western made in Hollywood – a film released over ten years after *The Return of Frank James* (1940) and *Western Union* (1941). These latter films, unlike *Rancho Notorious*, were contract jobs for Twentieth-Century Fox and, according to Smedley’s reconstruction of their production histories, Lang had little control or creative input.⁶ *Rancho Notorious*, written by Daniel Taradash and based on the story

"Gunsight Whitman" by Sylvia Richards, is basically a revenge Western. Its artificiality and odd use of genre conventions prompted the film critic of *Time* to warn contemporary viewers that the film "is not meant to be taken seriously."⁷ In this film Lang reworks a recurrent theme in his previous films – revenge⁸ – to convey the pessimism that pervaded post-war *film noir*.⁹ This same pessimism led film critic Robin Wood to read *Rancho Notorious* as "a noir Western in colour."¹⁰ The film was released at a time when the Western genre reached its Golden Age and reflected an emerging awareness in post-war U.S. culture that certain values and attitudes assumed immutable were now open to question.¹¹ This awareness was manifested in a conscious use of generic conventions to allegorize, as Richard Slotkin has noted, "a wide range of difficult or taboo subjects like race relations, sexuality, psychoanalysis, and Cold War politics."¹² Lang would offer a critical double focus mainly through the exploitation of Marlene Dietrich's star persona in this film.

- 3 *Rancho Notorious* is also the second Western and the last film conceived as a vehicle for Marlene Dietrich – the first western was *Destry Rides Again* (1939), with which it has important intertextual relations. Dietrich also played a leading role in *The Spoilers* (Universal/Charles K. Feldman Group Production, 1942), another western directed by Ray Enright, the fourth version of a popular western novel by Rex Beach (1903).¹³ The film marks the effective end of her film stardom, even though after 1952 she would combine a new singing career with some central and minor screen roles in various films.¹⁴ Dietrich's star persona started with *Der blaue Engel/The Blue Angel* (1929), a film directed in Germany at the UFA studios by Josef von Sternberg, with whom she would collaborate in six other films made later in Hollywood and who was very responsible for shaping her screen personality.¹⁵ This first film established the main defining features of Dietrich's star persona, foreshadowing its later modulations while at the same time linking her to the fast-growing modernization that Germany underwent during the Weimar years. The rapid economic, social and cultural changes brought about by this modernization process were widely identified as "foreign" and often specifically referred to as "Americanization." The characterization of Dietrich as Lola-Lola in this film incarnated the anxieties and fears of the disruptive potential of modern consumer culture, identified as American, for what were regarded as traditional German national values.
- 4 Paradoxically, once in the U.S., Dietrich would continue embodying the disruptive but also empowering potential of consumer culture for women while still being herself identified as "foreign." Ethnically marked as German in extra-cinematic discourses such as fan magazines, Dietrich's star persona would play important roles in the construction of the U.S. national identity over her long film career as the dark elements of modern consumerism that she embodied were recurrently branded as "foreign" and displaced to a non-American territory. Promoted as "the American way of life" and thus a feature of American national identity, consumer capitalism equally challenged traditional American national values and the construction of the U.S. as a realm of innocence and virtue. Thus, great efforts were made to distinguish between good and bad forms of consumption along gender lines, for which Dietrich would often constitute a negative example. However, the cultural contradictions incarnated in her star persona were often exploited by some foreign film directors, sometimes referred to as "strangers in the house," to expose social and cultural conflicts in the U.S. and thus offering a new perspective to what was "familiar and unquestioned."¹⁶ Certainly, Dietrich's role in the construction of U.S. national identity was modulated by key

dramatic historical contingencies such as the social context of economic depression and World War, but also by the broader German-American relation.

- 5 In his excellent book, *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity*, Tom Gunning reads Lang's films as popular allegories of modern experience. He uses the concept "Destiny-machine" to deal with a central and recurrent theme in the Langian universe: fate or destiny. On the other hand, social commentary in Lang's films is often made, according to Gunning, through the allegorical mode, a mode pervasive in his German films and recurrent in his American *oeuvre*. The allegorical mode then serves to expose the mechanical pattern and force – the Destiny-machine – that drives a legend or tale in Lang's films.¹⁷ However, Gunning excludes *Rancho Notorious*, together with other Lang films – *Moonfleet* (1954), *The Indian Tomb*, and *The Tiger from Eschnapur* (1958) – from his allegorical readings, arguing that as they deal with exotic locales in either time or space, they therefore depart explicitly from his fundamental theme of modernity. In his comparison of Lang's *Rancho Notorious* with Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954), he praises the latter, among other things, for having "a contemporary political reference as an allegory of McCarthy era witch-hunts that the elegiac tone of *Rancho Notorious* avoids." For him, in *Rancho Notorious* Lang "shows a legendary world that seems to be running down and dying out."¹⁸
- 6 Against Gunning's claims that the elegiac tone of *Rancho Notorious* avoids any allegorical reference to the McCarthy era, in this article I will try to prove that the film deals with the central theme of modernity mainly through the presence of Marlene Dietrich and that it does offer an allegorical reading of the McCarthy era and its contemporary American nationalism. My allegorical reading, however, will also differ from the one provided by Florianne Wild in a recent article. Although she does not mention Gunning's book, Wild adopts the same interpretative premise as Gunning on the author as an aspect of the film text to read the film as Lang's personal revenge against both Hollywood's prevailing "realism" and the American ideology of Westward expansion. Wild makes a very clear theoretical distinction between the modernist perception of allegory that sees the Western of classical Hollywood cinema as "a form invested in justice and redemption, featuring innocent tales heavily appended with moral tags," and hence "a prime producer of ideology upholding and reinforcing a social order," and a postmodern redefinition of allegory that is defined not as a literary-historical mode but as "an attitude or perception occurring when one text is seen to double another." She uses this postmodern view of allegory to inform her textual analysis of *Rancho Notorious*, a film she terms "a theoretical western," frustrating and even dismantling our horizon of expectations with respect to the Western genre and to the "naturalistic" mode favoured and fostered by the Hollywood cinema.¹⁹ Wild draws upon Angus Fletcher's psychoanalytical explanation of the nature of allegory – which he compares to obsessional neurosis – to guide her textual analysis accounting for Lang's authorial revenge, but her analysis leaves aside the connections between the film and its socio-historical context.²⁰
- 7 To inform my reading of the film both as an "exile film" and as an allegory of modernity in the early fifties' Cold War years, I will draw both upon Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of genre and upon a postmodern theory of allegory as a way of seeing that derives mainly from the work of Walter Benjamin. For Bakhtin, genres are also "forms of seeing and interpreting particular aspects of the world," ways of "conceptualising reality" that are stored within the "genre memory."²¹ For Bakhtin, genres are "key

organs of memory,” “vehicles of historicity” that, as they move from one generation to the next, “accumulate experience,” allowing for new elements and carrying with them “the layered record of their changing use ..., the record of numerous ‘transfers’ from one social realm to another” over time.²² On the other hand, postmodern redefinitions of allegory have claimed that allegory as a perception occurs when one text is seen to double another. For Craig Owens, the Western, together with the gangster saga and science fiction, are seen as the major vehicles for popular allegory of our time. He also points to the cinema’s mode of representation as one lending itself ideally to the attribution of allegory. As Owens writes,

Film composes narratives out of a succession of concrete images, which makes it particularly suited to allegory’s essential pictogrammatism. In allegory, the image is a hieroglyph. An allegory is a rebus, writing composed of concrete images.²³

8 From the same postmodern perspective, Lloyd Spencer writes that “[t]he representation *becomes* allegorical when its internal coherence, or ‘compellingness,’ is *seen* as secondary to its rigour in representing, or signifying something of a quite different order [*Italics in the original*].”²⁴ But this double perception is made dependent on the reader’s competence to understand certain interpretative clues, for as Spencer also notes, “most allegory in order to function at all depends on the reader’s grasp of an interpretative *context* not given (although it may be referred to) in the text itself [*Italics in the original*].”²⁵ The allegorical perception would provide then another focus from which to see experience registered in the genre memory of the Western.

9 In *Rancho Notorious*, the film’s interpretative context for its allegorical reading is invoked in the opening credits. Over the credits, the sound of a voice singing the first stanza of the “Ballad of Chuck-a-Luck” urges the spectator to “Listen to the legend of Chuck-a-Luck”:

Oh, Listen, Listen well!
Listen to the story of Chuck-a-Luck, Chuck-a-Luck
Listen to the story of the Gambler’s wheel,
A souvenir of a bygone year
Spinning a tale of the Old frontier.
[...]
So, Listen to the legend of Chuck-a-Luck, Chuck-a-Luck
Listen to the wheel of fate.
As round and round with a whispering sound.
It spins, it spins, the old, old story of
HATE, MURDER, and REVENGE

10 As Wild has suggested, “since a legend is, etymologically, that which must be read,” we are thus urged “to read what we see, see what we hear, and to take it both figuratively and literally.”²⁶ In this sense, the Chuck-a-Luck wheel, like the clock in many of Lang’s films, is the literal machine that keeps a metonymic relation with the narrative unfolding of the film and the destiny of the main characters. The original title of the film, *The Legend of Chuck-a-Luck*,²⁷ and the lyrics of the ballad conflate the meaning of the Chuck-a-Luck wheel and the legend as the fused driving force determining both the narrative and the characters’ fate. The ballad introducing the film will continue commenting on the visual narrative at specific moments, fragmenting the story into several parts. The distancing effect created by the ballad, together with other elements in the film such as the painted backdrops, prompt an allegorical reading of the film by stimulating the viewer’s attention towards reading the images as hieroglyphs. The lyrics of the song urge the listener/viewer to be attentive to this “old story,” because

the well-known story of the “Old Frontier” – the words seem to warn us – will reveal other truths about the Frontier myth; particularly now that it has become “a souvenir of a bygone year,” that is, a Hollywood commodity for mass consumption.

- 11 The song explains that “the gamblers’ wheel” is “the wheel of fate” that “spins” the legend and the film’s story of “hate, murder, and revenge.” As critics have already noted, the word “revenge” is stressed when the director’s name, Fritz Lang, appears on the screen – a visual statement of Lang’s authorial revenge. The song also sets the story in time and space: it tells that the story began “one summer day,” “back in the early seventies,” in “a little Wyoming town.” The historical allusion to the period of Reconstruction elicits a historical parallel between the lawlessness attributed to the consequences of the Civil War and the concerns about violence and confused values of the Cold War after the impact of another great war, World War II.²⁸
- 12 The film opens with a close-up of a couple kissing, the typical narrative happy ending of Hollywood films that usually conflates romantic love with the reconciliation of conflicting values, an image that had become a Hollywood emblem of hope for the future. For this newly-engaged couple, this hope is embodied in having their own ranch and family. In tune with the new family ideal of the fifties, the ranch house and the engagement brooch materialize the inextricable connection of romantic love, marriage and upward mobility.²⁹ In this first scene we can recognize the fifties neo-conservative fantasy of a world purified of modernist subversion, a bourgeois world view of an ordered relation between space and time measured by technology and capital.³⁰ The couple will get married in “eight days,” they’ll get a ranch in “eight years” and they’ll have children “one every August.” The family ideal in this “techno-pastoral” fantasy, borrowing from Marshall Berman, is however – by the time the film was made – under the Cold War nuclear threat to which the name of the ranch, *The Lost Cloud*, alludes.
- 13 This domestic dream proves highly vulnerable as Kinch finds no real obstacles in destroying it by his rape and murder of Beth, the woman of the couple, played by Gloria Henry. Before being raped and killed, Beth is seen waving goodbye to Vern Haskell (Arthur Kennedy) beneath a large sign saying “ASSAYER,” a word meaning, as Wild has noted, “a trade involving rational calculation, measurement, and analysis” that invites the viewer to read it as a hieroglyph. The sign can suggest a statement of her belonging to the techno-pastoral model mentioned earlier as well as an invitation for Kinch to “Assay her” or “Try her out,” as Wild has suggested.³¹
- 14 The destruction of this promising future fills Vern with impotence and anger that drive an uncontrollable desire for revenge. The traumatic events of his fiancée’s rape and murder may be read as symptomatic of the United States’s own loss of innocence and a symbolic castration after the traumatic experience of the war. The repetition of this painful experience brings in the same shattered possibility of regaining conventional masculinity through the culturally-sanctioned roles of bread-winning and paternity promoted by post-war cultural discourses.³² The discourse of war advocated the constructions of rough masculinity necessary for combat mainly through the encouragement of an aggressive sexuality that often equated the penis with the gun, but the vulnerability experienced in battle and military life exposed the sham in that model of masculinity – a traumatic experience usually appeased by comradeship. The return to civilian life, however, confronted American soldiers with a reality that brought about the resulting crisis of faith in conventional masculinity, a crisis that post-war culture attempted to overcome by the gradual reaffirmation and

reconstruction of the dominant fiction of male coherence, control and impenetrability in the figure of the breadwinner, the epitome of normative masculinity in the fifties.³³ To stand up against communist threats, national security depended on manly men, heterosexual, sexually potent, and married. "Husbands, especially fathers," Elaine Tyler May asserts, "wore the badge of 'family man' as a sign of virility and patriotism."³⁴ But the trajectory followed by the hero, Vern, in his revenge quest will not help recover the lost innocence through a return to family values, attesting to the futile attempts to disregard the changes brought about by consumer culture and the social and sexual disruptions of the Depression and the two World Wars.³⁵

- 15 The film initially justifies Vern's anger as a response to the violation of the dominant fiction upon which an American sense of unity and identity depended – the belief in the family, the American home, romantic love, and phallic masculinity. But as the film progresses, it is made clearer that what most threatens this dominant fiction is Vern's own pathological masculinity that his encounter with the female figure of Altar Keane (Marlene Dietrich) will eventually expose. His passionate anger and desire for revenge start to be presented as excessive once he crosses the border of the Sioux country. At this frontier line, the sheriff's posse refuses to follow him in his personal quest for revenge. For the posse and the sheriff, the community's security (the Sioux are too close) and business matters (the cattle need branding) are more pressing concerns than justice. Silence is the only response to Vern's complaint, "What if she was your wife or your daughter?," a reaction that reverberates with the rugged individualism upon which national security policies rested during the Cold War, or as Florence Jacobowitz has put it, "despite the claims of unity and nationhood, justice remains within the realm of every-man-for-himself."³⁶ Vern's crossing of the stream separating the community from the Sioux comes to symbolize his departure from the communal values and the private dimension of his obsessional quest.
- 16 The ballad interruptions and various strategies of distancing preclude the viewer's identification with the revenge hero and recurrently present his desperate attempts to regain mastery and control as a spectacle of masculine crisis. The casting of Arthur Kennedy, a reputable stage actor who never reached star status on screen, as Vern Haskell is one of the many distancing elements used in the treatment of the hero, as Wood has noted.³⁷ Vern's cruel behaviour and disgust are initially exhibited when he mercilessly withholds water from the dying Whitey, who has treacherously received a bullet in the back for his disapproving of Kinch's killing of Beth. A montage of silent shots shows Vern riding alone and inquiring about "Chuck-a-Luck" as the ballad explains, which culminates with a close-up of his face with a distorted expression of anger and disgust, underscored by the words "hate, murder, and revenge." The prolonged stillness of his face against a deep blue background and the two-dimensionality of the shot transforms this human face into a mask, an iconic abstraction of hate.
- 17 As the film progresses, the attentive viewer becomes a privileged witness of the hero's incapacity to distinguish between good and evil, innocence and guilt. Vern's obsession with finding the murderer makes everyone guilty. Thus, the film articulates his pathology as a problem of vision and the perception of identities, visually rendered later on in a montage sequence of the outlaws' faces during Altar's rendition of the song "Get Away, Young Man." Vern's discovery of the brooch on Altar's dress makes him relive his traumatic experience and the ensuing montage works to articulate his

paranoid delusion of perceiving all the outlaws as potential rapists and murderers and, as Jacobowitz has noted, the awareness of his failure to perform his manly duty of safeguarding his fiancée and his future.³⁸ After all, this is a man who “uses his eyes,” as Altar/Dietrich repeatedly remarks in the film, always “standing at doorways” to see things that “you never expected to see,” a gaze desperately trying to gain knowledge and control.

- 18 After learning about Chuck-a-Luck, Altar/Dietrich and Frenchy Fairmont (Mel Ferrer), Vern will cross other symbolic borders (the jail bars) leading him eventually to the world of male outlawry that will further expose his pathology in line with current early fifties definitions of deviant masculinity. During the Cold War, especially in the McCarthy years, a time dominated by a fear of, and virulent attacks on, homosexuality, the categorisation of deviant masculinity established a stigmatisation of male “effeminacy.” It also defined the “psychopath” as a pathology that associated male homosexuality with sexual aggression fostered by the war’s ideology of virility that the post-war culture now needed to repudiate. As Estelle Freedman has noted, in fifties popular literature the term “psychopath” often overlapped with “sex criminal,” “pervert,” and “homosexual,” raising “the question of whether psychopath served in part as a code word for homosexual at a time of heightened public consciousness of homosexuality.”³⁹
- 19 Although *Rancho Notorious* associates Vern with Kinch through the same colours of their clothes when Vern is first introduced to the whole community of outlaws, thus suggesting his affinity with the rapist’s pathological masculinity, the film also inscribes the common homo-erotic desire in the Western genre through Vern’s gaze. Kinch, like Altar/Dietrich, becomes immediately aware of Vern’s bizarre stare. As he comments to Wilson, the womanizer, whom Vern initially suspects as the killer, “He was sure lookin’ strange at you last night, all through supper,” concluding with the remark that “He looks right through a man.” The queerness of his gaze is matched by his competitive behaviour with Frenchy in riding, target shooting, and as romantic rival. The stagey display of Vern’s youthful masculinity is addressed not only to Altar but also to the other men in the ranch – an attitude that differs from Frenchy’s principle that “the greatest ability consists in not showing.” Chuck-a-Luck is presented as an all-male realm, except for the presence of Altar/Dietrich, who serves, however, to cement the bonds between men by functioning as an object of erotic desire and exchange, in line with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s theory,⁴⁰ while at the same time averting homosexuality. Altar/Dietrich’s role as an entertainer in this all-male community recalls Dietrich’s participation in the USO-Camp Shows during the war, which was one of the U.S. Army programs to foster a sexually aggressive model of masculinity considered necessary for combat and for forestalling homosexuality.⁴¹ Her sexual allure will prove to be essential to the homo-social regulation of tough masculinity induced by the homosexual desire staged in the outlaws’ masculine stunts and gaze. All men in Chuck-a-Luck share their failure as bread-winners and husbands, which in the specific meaning of the fifties America can be read to equate with homosexuality and communism.
- 20 A different kind of critical comment is made through the character of Frenchy, a representative of marginal masculinity forced to resort to a life of crime by social injustices rather than by any psychological maladjustment. A sequence of parallel shots introduce Frenchy sitting in a prison cell next to a couple of corrupt politicians and the streets of Gunsight on election day. The slogan “Throw the grafters out of town! Vote

Law and Order!" is painted in the centre of the crowded small town imbued with a highly tense atmosphere. The representation of the imprisoned politicians of the Citizens Party, accused of using their political influence to enrich themselves, may allude to the charges of corruption made by the Republicans against the Democratic administration of Harry Truman.⁴² However, the Law and Order party's fascist means (i.e. guns and lynching) do not seem to offer much of a restoring alternative – an allusion to the congressional hearings presided over by Republican Senator Joseph R. McCarthy and the repression induced by the anti-Communist crusade. In line with the tradition of the cult of the outlaw, Frenchy is presented as a social bandit, a victim of political and legal corruption. As he tells Vern after breaking jail, Frenchy has lost his homestead through the corrupt influence of a more powerful man, perhaps echoing the powerlessness of the lower classes against the growing supremacy of large corporations in the post-war years. But, unlike many outlaw heroes of thirties Westerns, he will be offered no hope of redemption. In fact, he represents the melancholic nihilism of the allegorical mode that Lang so often inscribed in his films.⁴³ He had lost the war, his homestead, and the possibility of escaping from the past – everything leading him to a situation of social entrapment that brings him closer to Altar/Dietrich, the central female figure delineating the gendered mythology of the Western in this film.⁴⁴

- 21 The casting of Marlene Dietrich as the female lead, Altar Keane, not only serves to introduce new generic delineations by bringing in melodramatic issues, but also to allude to a historical context that contributes to the reading of the film as an allegory of the early fifties. When Vern, driven by vengeful desire, learns about Chuck-a-Luck, Altar and Frenchy, a series of flashbacks dramatize a number of recollections of Altar Keane's legend and by extension of Dietrich's star persona. The first flashback is from a middle-aged deputy sheriff who reminisces about a day in his youth when there was a kind of horse race in the saloon of a big boom mining town. Laughing he recounts how he was one of the horses and Altar his jockey and the flashback introduces a gay and vital Altar/Dietrich, riding the younger deputy and surmounting various obstacles until she and her "horse" finally win an ace of hearts as trophy. The vitality of Dietrich's character and the overtones of sexual/gender reversal in the scene bring in clear intertextual references to the Dietrich character in *Destry Rides Again* as the bad girl stereotype of the Western and the opposite model of femininity to Vern's home-making fiancée. The red and black lace saloon-girl dress she wears, her long blonde hair, make-up and famous legs connotes the singer/prostitute role that Dietrich often played in films directed by Josef von Sternberg. But in both *Destry* and the deputy sheriff's recollection, Dietrich as a singer/prostitute is no longer perceived as threatening as in Sternberg's earlier films or the later *Rancho Notorious*.⁴⁵
- 22 Further intertextual references to *Destry* are found in the second memory of Altar/Dietrich, supplied by another saloon girl and former friend, Dolly, who recalls Altar's career, and hence Dietrich's star persona, at a moment of high commercial and critical success – when she was a "glory girl." She is verbally and visually depicted as the epitome of glamour and sexual allure – something symbolized by her blinding bloneness, emphasized even further here by her association with white horses and a black maid.⁴⁶ Dolly expresses what she finds most attractive and admirable for women in Altar/Dietrich's persona: the sexual independence gained through the power of her glamour ("she'd shut the door to a cattle baron if she had a fancy for a cowpuncher"). After the shot depicting Altar's elegance in the day-light, an ensuing scene shows the black maid shaking her head (meaning "Miss Keane is not in") to a man who is dressed

foppishly and carrying flowers and a present. The camera pans to disclose Altar enthusiastically gambling with two handsome cowpunchers in what is clearly a prostitute's outfit.

- 23 A third recollection is given by some men in Tascosa, among them Baldy Gunder (William Frawley), the owner of the saloon at which Altar/Dietrich worked. They narrate a moment of waning popularity in her career. Her languid rendition of "Gipsy Davy" seems to catch nobody's attention and her sexual independence will make her lose her job. But her encounter with Frenchy Fairmont, the fastest draw in the West, at the Wheel of Fortune, will mark a new direction in her declining career – and something to cling to for Frenchy (to the point of risking his life to get a bottle of perfume as a birthday present for her). Frenchy knows that the wheel of fortune is rigged and manipulates it to make up for the unfair treatment that Altar has received. In a long-take walk down the street, they become aware of their respective legendary reputations. Their verbal exchange centres on her legend and Frenchy recalls how he once saw "three men fight a gun battle" over her and the three of them got killed; also how she once rode "right through a hotel lobby ... straight up the stairs " on a white horse to meet an important date. Frenchy's anecdote evokes, as Jacobowitz has noted, the Dietrich character as Catherine the Great in *The Scarlet Empress*.⁴⁷ Wood has also observed a visual irony—at the very moment Frenchy mentions that she rode up the stairs, "Altar steps down the boardwalk into ankle-deep mud."⁴⁸ Their exchange shows that they both feel entrapped by their own reputation at a moment when ageing constitutes a threat to their celebrity. Here again, we have to pay attention to what we see in relation to what we hear. The film insists on Frenchy's older age, visually indicated by his greying temples and verbally remarked by the characters in the film, in opposition to a younger Vern. But in fact Arthur Kennedy, playing Vern, was three years older than Mel Ferrer, playing Frenchy, and makeup does very little to undermine Ferrer's dashing looks, or to make their fictional age difference believable.
- 24 This flashback connects the celebrity of the gunfighter to that of the star-performer with modernity through the Chuck-a-Luck wheel, a wheel of fortune conflating two etymological meanings: wealth and fate. In the American doctrine of the self-made man, ambition and material wealth professed a spiritual justification whereby an integral sense of self was assumed to be the guarantee of their success.⁴⁹ From this dominant cultural belief, Altar and Frenchy are both constructed as social fantasies celebrated by their inward qualities and the professionalism that assured their success. But their constructions as social fantasies depend on the modern technologies of communication that are essential, and often hidden, instruments to create, inflate and disseminate their success and, like the Chuck-a-Luck wheel, that are rigged by powerful economic capitalist interests. In the mass culture of late capitalism, where the individual is more and more alienated from the economic and productive systems of gigantic corporations, preoccupation with fame has not only paradoxically become more pressing but the self-made man idea has been replaced by the self-enhancement promised by consumption.
- 25 Dietrich, perhaps more than any other star, incarnates the promises of sexual and social mobility made to women by consumerism. Her expertise in cosmetics, clothes and other consumer products allows her to become any woman, crossing gender, social and even racial barriers. But Dietrich's star persona also epitomizes the dangers of feminized modernity associated with consumerism. While the mesmerizing allure of

new merchandise empowers women, it can undermine masculine qualities of rationality, productivity, and repression,⁵⁰ a threat intensely dramatized in *The Blue Angel* (1929). The disrupting elements of modern consumerism in Dietrich's star persona challenged so formidably the myths on which the national identities of Germany and the U.S. were based that she was always marked as "foreign" in both countries (and even a "traitor" in Germany during the war and post-war years). When Vern confronts Altar Keane, the legend, what he sees is a serious working woman dressed in plain male attire with grease on her shirt and in complete control of her ranch and business, an image that undermines Altar's glamour of the introductory flashbacks but that expands her autonomous character already defined in these initial images. Vern has heard so many stories about her that he wonders who the real Altar Keane is: "a pipe dream," or "a railroad car." The multiple versions of Altar bring in the composite nature of Dietrich's star persona created by the star machinery of the Hollywood studios at a time when the surrounding extra-filmic discourses relegated her to a legend of the past.⁵¹

- 26 But it is Vern's vision of Altar in male attire, challenging men on their own ground, that is perceived as truly "unsettling." The gender reversal, initially seen as unproblematic, is now visualised as a real threat. Presented as a completely reversed version of Vern and Beth's dream house, the Chuck-a-Luck ranch is also a shelter from an unjust and self-serving world. It is a mocking variation of the 1950s ideal home, run like a business venture by a woman who has appropriated the main masculine mechanism of power, that is, money. Altar offers shelter on condition that everybody complies with her rules (no fighting and no questions), does his share of work and gives her ten percent of his earnings. The apparent equalizing terms of these rules, which place every outlaw in the same status position – an ironic representation of the horizontal comradeship of the nation –, are disrupted by the presence of the Mexicans who bring to mind the exploitative character of success. Governed by the same system of capitalist exchange as the corrupt Gunsight community, where, as Jacobowitz has observed, "safety and independence are not inherent rights but can be bought for a price,"⁵² Chuck-a-Luck's apparent egalitarianism is paradoxically sustained by the subordination of Mexicans, either as pay-hands or as sexual victims.⁵³ It is interesting to note here that the publicity posters insisted on this idea of "price." In one of them, we can read a brief description of Chuck-a-Luck as "the West's strangest hideout," where "a guest can hide his crime ... quench his thirst ... betray a woman and knife a man in the back ... for a price." In another poster, a throwaway reads, "Men with a price on their heads ... and a woman without a price!"⁵⁴ Altar is priceless because she will ultimately become the price to be paid for the male crimes.
- 27 Altar's autonomy and control of the ranch depends not only on her appropriation of masculine forms of power but also on the feminine power mechanisms of seduction that her ageing is putting at risk ("Every year is a threat to a woman"). She is well aware that her power depends on her looks and seductive capacity as well as her ability to outsmart the outlaws who try to cheat her. The fact that some of them begin to resent her superiority, accusing her of "riding mighty high," becomes a warning sign of her waning power.⁵⁵ Still looking sexually attractive, in a clear defiance of natural physical decay and perhaps of Lang's insistence on her ageing, Altar sees Vern as a romantic partner offering her the possibility of escaping the world of criminality and of regaining social recognition. Although she is aware that it is too late for her, it is precisely her feminine delusion arising from her unbounded confidence in the power of

her alluring looks to elicit such erotic emotions that will eventually lead to her tragic end. Once the true identity of the killer is discovered, Altar is, however, presented as the real target of Vern's hatred, because of her active sexuality (signalling to her bedroom, he yells "What do you see? A bedroom or a morgue?") and her gender transgression (all the potential murderers come to Chuck-a-Luck "to hide behind your skirts"), as Jacobowitz has noted.⁵⁶ Desperately clinging to the absolutes of the 1950s dominant gender ideology, Vern bitterly and unjustly condemns Altar for her "dirty life" in the past and the present. "You think a dance hall girl was a dirty life," he reviles, "You oughta be proud of that compared to what you are now." Vern even re-enacts Kinch's violation of Beth through his repeated gesture of violently ripping off the brooch from Altar's dress. In the domestic ideology of the 1950s, where the family came to stand for the unity and moral integrity of the nation as a whole, the financial and sexual independence of the working woman was seen as real threat to the moral integrity of the family/nation – she is the one who pays for the male crimes.

- 28 Being aware that she can no longer maintain control of the ranch and command male respect, and forced to bear the burden of Beth's murder and the responsibility for the outlaws' failure to conform to conventional masculinity, Altar decides to leave and hands over the title deeds of the ranch to Frenchy. However, she becomes involved in the final shoot-out at the ranch, where not only Kinch, the real murderer, but also Altar gets killed – by trying to stop a bullet heading for Frenchy, in a similar gesture that her character in *Destry* made to save the life of Tom Destry. But there is an important difference in the dramatization of her sacrifice. In contrast to Tom Destry's awareness and acknowledgment of Frenchy/Dietrich's redemption through her sacrificial gesture, Altar/Dietrich's death is not noticed by Frenchy or Vern. They continue shooting and only realize that Altar is badly wounded and dying when, after forcing the surviving outlaws to leave, they get into the house to settle their romantic rivalry.⁵⁷ With a bullet wound now replacing the brooch, Altar/Dietrich is put on the bed in a position that recalls Beth's dead body at the beginning of the film. Vern comforts Frenchy by telling him that she died for him, and withdraws from the bedroom leaving them together, or as Jacobowitz has rightly put it, returning "her (no longer a threat) to her rightful owner."⁵⁸ By precluding Altar's redemption through love, as well as her pointless sacrifice, this film also cancels out any possibility of re-establishing any form of community and hope for the future, which makes men's desperate attempt to cling to the fiction of conventional rough masculinity more absurdly unjust. In the final shot, only the two men are seen riding and merging in the deserted landscape, an iconic image of the Western's rough masculinity, while the ballad informs us that they died that day, thus underscoring the pointlessness of male aggression celebrated in the genre.
- 29 As has been shown, Lang gradually places Altar/Dietrich at the emotional centre of the film, creating a narrative and ideological tension through the combination of the woman's film thematic interests with the generic conventions of the Western, which serves to introduce the gender and sexual issues so central for national security in the early Cold War years. Lang's casting of Dietrich as Altar and the intertextual references to her past films provide central interpretative clues for the allegorical reading invoked at the very beginning of the film. By bringing in Dietrich' star persona, the film adds another critical dimension to its critique of the American ideology of westward expansion. Through Dietrich, Lang's *Rancho Notorious* also emphasises the social forces conspiring against women's desires for sexual and economic independence in the early

Cold War years and the fragility of mythical female empowerment based on beauty gained through consumption. Dietrich, the legend of the dark elements in American modernity, is once again put at the service of economic and patriotic interests: celebrated in the past to stimulate female consumerism and to boost the U.S. soldiers' morale in the war years, Dietrich is now discarded as an old glory to meet the claims of moral supremacy in the early fifties.

NOTES

1. The research carried out for the writing of this paper has been financed by the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science (FEDER, HUM2007-61183), in collaboration with the Aragonese Regional Government (DGA, ref.: H12). My thanks to Alan Bilton and Melvyn Stokes for their suggestions on an earlier version of this paper. No doubt they helped me make my central argument more cogent, but the mistakes are all mine.
2. Anton Kaes, "A Stranger in the House: Fritz Lang's *Fury* and the Cinema of Exile," *New German Critique* 89 (Spring-Summer, 2003): 34.
3. Nick Smedley, "Fritz Lang Outfoxed: The German Genius as Contract Employee," *Film History* 4.4 (1990): 289-304.
4. Kaes, "A Stranger in the House," 34.
5. Patrick McGilligan, *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 380. Lang, however, had to reconcile such creative control with the problems caused by producer Howard Welsch, who opposed generic innovations such as the use of the ballad as the film's narrator, and by the two main stars in the film, Marlene Dietrich and Mel Ferrer. *Ibid.*, 384-87.
6. See Smedley, "Fritz Lang Outfoxed." Despite Lang's limited control over his first two Westerns, both *The Return of Frank James* and *Western Union* bear, for Mark Williams, the mark of Lang's aesthetic experimentation through elements of generic reflexivity and deconstruction. Mark Williams, "Get/Away: Structure and Desire in *Rancho Notorious*," in Gerd Gemünden and Mary R. Desjardins, eds., *Dietrich Icon* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 264-67.
7. Review of *Rancho Notorious*, *Time*, 10 March 1952.
8. The theme of revenge was explored by Lang in many of his American films: *Fury* (1936), *The Return of Frank James* (1940), *Man Hunt* (1941), *Scarlet Street* (1945), *The Big Heat* (1952), and *The Blue Gardenia* (1953).
9. Kaes argues that this pessimism was already present in *Fury* (MGM, 1936), Lang's first film in the U.S. and, according to Kaes himself, a precursor of *film noir*. Kaes, "A Stranger in the House," 51.
10. See Robin Wood, "Rancho Notorious: A Noir Western in Colour," *CineAction!* (Summer 1988): 83-93.
11. Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), 169.
12. Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 349.
13. In 1955, Jesse Hibbs directed a fifth version of Beach's novel with Anne Baxter replacing Dietrich.

14. After 1952, Dietrich participated in Michael Anderson's *Around the World in 80 Days* (1956), Samuel A. Taylor's *The Monte Carlo Story* (1957), Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958), Billy Wilder's *Witness for the Prosecution* (1958), Stanley Kramer's *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961), Louis Clyde Stoumen's *The Black Fox* (1962), Richard Quine's *Paris When It Sizzles* (1964), and David Hemmings's *Just a Gigolo* (1978). Her singing career in Las Vegas and other international venues expanded until 1975, when she finally retired.

15. The films of the Sternberg-Dietrich collaboration made in the U.S. at the Paramount studios are *Morocco* (1930), *Dishonored* (1931), *Shanghai Express* (1932), *Blonde Venus* (1932), *The Scarlett Empress* (1934), and *The Devil is a Woman* (1935). In the 1930s she would also play leading roles in Rouben Mamoulian's *The Song of Songs* (1933), Frank Borzage's *Desire* (1936) and *The Garden of Allah* (1936), Richard Boleslawsky's, *Knight Without Armor* (1937) and Ernst Lubitsch's *Angel* (1937), when the Independent Exhibitors of America classified her, together with other female stars, as "box-office poison." After two years of unemployment, Dietrich's commercial viability was proved with *Destry Rides Again* (1939).

16. A good example of the use of Marlene Dietrich's star persona to criticize U.S. foreign policies and their clashing with the dominant national values in the post-war years can be seen in Billy Wilder's *A Foreign Affair* (1948). In a previous article I have studied the construction of Marlene Dietrich's national identity in films and their surrounding discourses from the early stages of her film career to World War II. See Loyo, Hilaria. "Los avatares de Lorelei: la identidad nacional de Marlene Dietrich desde Weimar hasta la Segunda Guerra Mundial," *Archivos de la Filmoteca* 40 (February 2002): 108-25

17. Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), 54.

18. *Ibid.*, 392-93.

19. Florianne Wild, "Rewriting Allegory with a Vengeance: Textual Strategies in Fritz Lang's *Rancho Notorious*," *Mosaic* 35:3 (2002): 26-27.

20. Another allegorical interpretation of the film has been given by Walter Metz, who reads Fritz Lang's *Rancho Notorious* as a generic response to the Holocaust, taking into account Dietrich's German origins but ignoring her star persona. See Walter Metz, "A Very Notorious Ranch Indeed: Fritz Lang, Allegory and the Holocaust," *Journal of Contemporary Thought* 13 (Summer 2001): 71-86.

21. Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990), 280.

22. *Ibid.*, 280, 292, 293.

23. Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *October* 14 (Fall 1980): 74.

24. Lloyd Spencer, "Allegory to the World of the Commodity: The Importance of *Central Park*," *New German Critique* 34 (Winter, 1985): 62.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Wild, "Rewriting Allegory," 28.

27. According to Lotte Eisner, Howard Hughes, the eccentric RKO producer of the film, changed the title because the word "Chuck-a-Luck" was too unfamiliar to European audiences and they would not understand it. Patrick McGilligan, however, claims that it was producer Howard Welsch who changed the film's title out of revenge because he hated the song and could not eliminate it from the film. Lotte Eisner, *Fritz Lang* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1986), 301; McGilligan, *Fritz Lang*, 387-88.

28. According to Robert Ray, most post-war westerns were located in a specific period of American history, contributing to an emerging awareness of the changes of some values that the genre traditionally conveyed. Ray, *A Certain Tendency*, 169-70.

29. In the 1950s, as the United States attempted to "contain" communism and at the same time protect the home front from nuclear devastation, the home itself became "the main training

site" for civil defense discipline and the family "a psychological fortress," using Elaine Tyler May's words, for the strengthening of the American character on which American national security depended. The new kind of family ideal emerging in the fifties was the nuclear family, described by May as "isolated, sexually charged, cushioned by abundance, ... protected against impending doom by the wonders of modern technology," and "child-centred." Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 11, 3, 162. The ranch house was the architectural embodiment of the American Dream in the post-war years when the impressive economic advances enabled many Americans to become home-owners and afford household goods and other consumer products. Clifford E. Clark, Jr., "Ranch-House Suburbia: Ideal and Realities," in Lary May, ed., *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 171, 182.

30. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 31; Spencer, "Allegory," 61.

31. Wild, "Rewriting Allegory," 36-37.

32. This traumatic opening, so common in Lang's films, moves the hero inexorably toward his predestined end. Vicente Sánchez-Biosca, "La dimensión trágica del azar en los arranques narrativos de Lang en USA," *Archivos de la Filmoteca* 25/26 (February/June 1997): 21-22.

33. Susan Gubar, among other authors, has studied how the discourse of war in the forties consolidated the construction of conventional masculinity. Kaja Silverman has equally shown the difficulties in readapting this model of aggressive masculinity to civilian life after World War II. See Susan Gubar, "'This is My Rifle, This is My Gun': World War II and the Blitz on Women," in Margaret R. Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel and Margaret C. Weitz, eds., *Behind the Lines: Gender and The Two World Wars* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 227-59; Kaja Silverman, "Historical Trauma and Male Subjectivity," in Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 52-121.

34. May, *Homeward Bound*, 98.

35. The incoherence of the fifties' model of normative masculinity was evident to contemporary social observers who perceived it as a gender "crisis" or "The Decline of the American Male" as *Look* magazine put it. Steven Cohan, *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), xi.

36. Florence S. Jacobowitz, "The Dietrich Westerns: *Destry Rides Again* and *Rancho Notorious*," in Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye, eds., *The Movie Book of the Western* (London: Studio Vista, 1996), 93.

37. Wood, *Rancho Notorious*: 87.

38. Jacobowitz, "The Dietrich Westerns," 96.

39. Estelle B. Freedman, "'Uncontrolled desires': The Response to the Sexual Psychopath, 1920-1960," in Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons, eds., *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 213.

40. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

41. Robert B. Westbrook, "'I Want a Girl, Just Like the Girl That Married Harry James': American Women and the Problem of Political Obligation in the World War II," *American Quarterly* 42 (1990): 595.

42. Ronald J. Oakley, *God's Country: America in the Fifties* (New York: Dembner Books, 1990), 132-33.

43. As Gunning explains, Walter Benjamin linked the allegorical imagination to what Freud called melancholia, or failure of mourning, which is taken as a symptom of a historical trauma rather than of an individualized character. Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang*, 28.

44. Mark Williams has noted how the casting of strong female stars of the classical Hollywood era as leads in the fifties – Dietrich in *Rancho Notorious* (1952), Joan Crawford in *Johnny Guitar* (1954), Barbara Stanwyck in *Forty Guns* (1957) – introduced self-conscious elements about the

genre by bringing in a new iconography that configures “other space,” that of melodrama, along with the magnificent landscape of the vast plains. See Williams, “Get/Away,” *passim*.

45. For Patrich McGilligan, this first flashback is meant as “a parody of Berlin decadence,” and a clear reference to the origins of Marlene Dietrich’s star persona. McGilligan, *Fritz Lang*, 382.

46. The notion of “blinding bloneness” referring to a particular type of white femininity and its relation to blackness and embodied by various female film stars, including Dietrich, has already been elaborated elsewhere. See Hilaria Loyo, “Blinding Blondes: Whiteness, Femininity, and Stardom,” in Wendy Everett, ed., *Questions of Colour in Cinema* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008), 179-96.

47. Jacobowitz, “The Dietrich Westerns,” 94.

48. Wood, “*Rancho Notorious*,” 91.

49. Leo Baudry, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 509.

50. Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (London and Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 4.

51. Quite a few articles and books published in the 1950s telling and retelling Dietrich legend equate her glamour with her out-datedness, presenting her as the “glory girl” of an old time that is depicted in *Rancho Notorious*. See Winthrop Sargeant, “Dietrich and Her Magic Myth,” *Life* (18 August 1952): 86-90, 92-6, 101-102; Arthur Knight, “Marlene Dietrich: Notes on a Living Legend,” *Films in Review* 5:10 (1954): 497-514; Richard Griffith, *Marlene Dietrich: Image and Legend* (New York, The Museum of Modern Art Film Library: Doubleday and Co. 1959).

52. Jacobowitz, “The Dietrich Westerns,” 95.

53. In the flashbacks introducing Altar/Dietrich, the presence of the black maid also brings in the exploitation of blacks underlying the American Dream of success.

54. I found these posters in a clipping folder at the Marlene Collection, Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek, Berlin, now held in the Filmmuseum of Berlin.

55. The name Altar is meant to convey this idea of aging as it resembles the German word “Alter” which can be translated as “an aging man.” Dietrich, however, resisted this feature of the character by looking younger in each scene. McGilligan, *Fritz Lang*, 383-85.

56. Jacobowitz, “The Dietrich Westerns,” 96.

57. *Ibid.*, 97; Wood, “*Rancho Notorious*,” 93.

58. Jacobowitz, “The Dietrich Westerns,” 97.

ABSTRACTS

Fritz Lang’s film *Rancho Notorious* offered Lang himself the chance to direct a western in which he could develop a double focus, contrasting indigenous American against foreign influences. He was helped in this by Marlene Dietrich, who had begun her career as a symbol of modernization and consumer culture. Lang used Dietrich in the film to comment on aspects of modernity and, at the same time, to offer an allegorical reading of American nationalism of the McCarthy era. Through Dietrich’s character, Altar, the boss of the Chuck-a-Luck ranch and the criminal world it embodied, Lang critiqued the emerging Cold War ideology of the man as patriarchal figure and bread-winner. At the same time, by moving Dietrich progressively towards the centre of the film, he produced an amalgam of the women’s film and the Western genre that suggested the pointlessness of the male aggression the Western itself had traditionally embodied.

INDEX

Keywords: Cold War culture, consumerism, gender ideology, modernity, popular allegory, star persona, the western

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