Hind, Emily. “Starring Pirates: Metaphors for Understanding Recent Popular Mexican Film.” *The Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (2013), pp. 196-207.

STARRING PIRATES:

Metaphors for Understanding Recent Popular Mexican Film

By Emily Hind

Why do audiences buy tickets to Mexican films with themes of stardom, such as *Niñas mal* (2007), *Casi divas* (2008), and *Te presento a Laura* (2010)? Critics have not dedicated much attention to these titles, although each earned a spot in its respective, yearly top 10 Mexican box office list.[1] Fernando Sariñana's *Niñas mal* ranked second among Mexican films in 2007. Issa López's *Casi divas* placed sixth in the domestic list for 2008, and Fez Noriega's *Te presento a Laura* also ranked sixth among Mexican films shown in Mexico for 2010. Besides the star theme, these films incorporate the "child of a pirate" topic. The plot twist of a troubled youth whose father has left the scene, leaving the younger member of the family to strike out independently in what the present analysis terms a "pirate" role, receives more emphatic foregrounding in other commercially successful Mexican works, such as *Voces inocentes* (2004), *Al otro lado* (2004), *La misma luna* (2007), *Abel* (2010), and in less concentrated ways, *No soy yo, eres tú* (2010). To the extent that the academic audience recognizes at least a few of the titles in the aforementioned lists,

Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl (2003). Directed by Gore Verbinski. Shown: Johnny Depp (as Jack Sparrow). *Photo courtesy of Photofest.* (Color figure available online.)

DOI: 10.1080/01956051.2013.771606

Abstract: Critics largely ignore Mexican films such as *Niñas mal, Casi divas,* and *Te presento a Laura* that find box office success. Besides a star theme, these titles incorporate the "child of a pirate" topic, which also informs *La misma luna*. The article suggests academically palatable metaphors of piracy, celebrity, and credit in recent hit movies.

Keywords: Casi divas, credit, *La misma luna*, *Niñas mal*, piracy, popular Mexican film, stars, *Te presento a Laura*

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the salient films probably focus more tightly on the "son of a pirate" theme, which can lend itself to a serious examination of a society in crisis. However, the lighthearted and sweetly sentimental handling of that social crisis in Patricia Riggen's *La misma luna* likely discourages otherwise engaged critics and contributes to what Ignacio Sánchez-Prado labels the "blind spot" in film studies— the tendency among academics to ignore Latin American commercial cinema ("*Niñas mal*"). Sánchez Prado gives the example of the attention paid to Mexican auteur Carlos Reygadas, the perennial academics' darling and perpetual box office flop director, and the critically ignored but commercially successful Fernando Sariñana, whom Sánchez Prado calls "doubtless, the director with greatest impact in Mexican contemporary cinema" ("*Niñas mal*"). The subsequent analysis seeks to keep criticism relevant to a wider audience by exploring the academically palatable themes of piracy, celebrity, and credit as they inform a handful of recent top 10 box office films.

Pirates, Anti-Piracy, and "Son of a Pirate" Films

The "son of a pirate" titles include Luis Mandoki's *Voces inocentes*, which ranked number one in 2005, Gustavo Loza's *Al otro lado*, ranked number six in 2005, Patricia Riggen's *La misma luna*, ranked number two in 2008, and Diego Luna's *Abel*, which ranked number four in 2010. All of these titles focus on the "son of a pirate" story to audiences' delight. These films frame concern for the figure of the son in inverse proportion to the screen presence of the pirate father. For the son to become interesting, the father must in some way disappear, usually in search of elusive treasure—which, if it were at easy legal reach, would not require the father's prolonged absence. The son must handle the consequences of partial or total autonomy, often by attempting some sort of pirate role or extralegal journey of his own. To judge from the historical practice of the "privateer"—a pirate funded by the state—and the contemporary high price of a movie theater ticket, the pirate metaphor does not necessarily glorify wanton criminal practice and can simply offer a more democratic means of access, which explains the lure of watching pirate roles. The movie theater itself encourages pirate moves because of increasing inaccessibility. As Sánchez Prado notes, in the mid-1990s, a movie ticket in Mexico rose from the controlled price of 13 pesos to 45 pesos, the equivalent of 3 days' minimum wage in 1995 ("*Niñas mal*"). In Mexico City today, the price of a regular ticket to a film in the theater, around 50 pesos (<$5USD), approaches the daily minimum wage. In a related observation, another researcher notes, "Mexico is usually listed among the largest producers and consumers of pirated goods" (Cross 305).[2]

The key to the "son of a pirate" theme is the fake adult trick, and some of the most popular, fast-paced exploitation of this cinematic swashbuckling appears with the child lead Carlitos Reyes (Adrián Alonso) in *La misma luna*. In this highly contrived film, the 9-year-old "pirate son" character plays grandmother to his granny in an unnamed Mexican town by making her hot tea or chocolate served on a tray every morning. Despite living in poverty, the boy honors the royal meaning of his last name ("kings"), and through noble behavior he manages to save more than a thousand dollars in cash. Of course, the ethics of this money-making enterprise are relative given that Carlitos works part time for a woman who helps would-be undocumented workers cross from Mexico into the United States. The cash Carlitos earns funds his ambition to travel alone to the United States after he discovers, breakfast tray in hand, that his grandmother has passed away one night. Weird maturity mixed with naive optimism fuels Carlitos' journey to the United States in search of his undocumented mother. After losing his savings and continuing to survive with odd jobs, such as tomato-picking and dishwashing gigs, the "son of a pirate" arrives in East Los Angeles in time to keep his mom, a bushily long-haired, ragtag, pirate-like Kate del Castillo, from losing her remaining glamour by deporting herself in order to find her son. "Son of a pirate" plots, as in *La misma luna*, issue peso-wielding investors a kind of credit to dream on: del Castillo as the mother and Alonso as the son make for a good-looking venture into extralegality. The star character economics of commercial film sometimes require that an older pirate drop out to make way for the next generation's unlawful promise. In *La misma luna* , Eugenio Derbez plays the surrogate father, whose tardy adoption of responsibility changes his character and, in the consequence for sticking to something, the undocumented character likely gets deported. Despite this hitch in the happily-ever-after-for-all ending, the predictability of a pirated plot tends to reassure the audience that practically anyone can successfully go pirate and invent some personal—or persona—credit.

The metaphor of the "son of a pirate" appeared in its most literal form in the Mexican cinema with some twenty-first-century antipiracy spots shown before feature films. Perhaps the most famous antipiracy spot by the Mexican cinematic industry group CANACINE

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("Cámara Nacional de la Industria Cinematográfica") features the line "Tenemos un papá pirata" ("We have a pirate dad") uttered by a disgruntled tiny boy actor to his tiny sister with childish pronunciation. In evidence of its popularity, the spot still circulates on YouTube and can be found by searching the keywords "Tenemos un papá pirata." That line also yields a number of parody videos. The spot attracts so much attention because despite the infantile delivery, the boy actor reveals incongruous maturity by labeling his parents "inocentes" ("foolish") for believing that he and his sister do not recognize that the DVD they are watching is a bad copy ("chafa") and pirated. Unfortunately for the logic of the spot, by exclaiming, "Tenemos un papá pirata," the boy comes to participate in the very pirate theme that he is supposed to repudiate. If the child characters did not issue from pirate parents and if they were not operating (piratically) alone in their living room, the audience probably would not find them so memorable. The humorless moral of the spot scolds, "Las películas pirata se ven mal, pero tú como papá te ves mucho peor. ¿Qué le estás enseñando a tus hijos?" ("Pirated films look bad, but you as a parent look much worse. What are you teaching your children?") The answer has something to do with the lesson of how to manufacture access to key systems of culture and credit. Because Mexican antipiracy spots largely target people who pay the regular price, the campaigns must not turn the paying faithful against the fun of watching pirates, or, actors who are always representing someone else, even when they are playing a star. It is ironic that only pirate viewers get to skip the antipiracy spots and enjoy a more pure aesthetic experience, and so antipiracy ads work best when they do not offend the legitimate audience's interest in cinematic pirates. In an understandably contradictory result, then, the antipiracy spots manage to cultivate even more interest in the "son of a pirate" theme.

Another point of contact between Mexican audiences and the pirate theme consists of Johnny Depp's starring turn in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series. Because of Depp's performance as pirate Captain Jack Sparrow, and the performances of his other Disney collaborators, the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films each made much more money than did any of the Mexican box office successes analyzed here. One admiring critic tries to pin down the enticement of Depp's acting by calling the style an "authentic illusion," and that paradoxical description hints at the difficulty of articulating the piratical, false yet authentic, appeal of the star (Pomerance 60). Another professor-fan of Depp identifies the actor's style through historical influences, such as precedents established by silent actors Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, and the critic surmises, "The great gift which silent comedy gave to Johnny Depp is that 'nothing sticks to him'" (Parrill 9). This principle of "unstickiness" explains the attraction of the Mexican box office hits that feature themes of stardom and successful piracy; the global film audience enjoys slickness. The challenge to critics of articulating the exact principles at work behind the slick in cinema indicate that criticism does not necessarily need to cast its vote when it comes to commercial stardom. As one academic elegantly concedes, "The absolute qualities of the celebrity threaten the evaluations of the critic" (Quinn 157). Reasons of celebrity credit and not academic criticism motivate audience tastes in the "slick."[3] It is obvious that Depp walks an interesting line that touches on mass popularity and academic attention. Hence, the criticism of Depp's performance in *Pirates of the Caribbean* guides the present thought on Mexican "sons of pirates" and stardom films.

That pirate theme crossed with Disney's star leads me to the matter of copyright law, which is violated by a piratical sector of the Mexican population, not to mention the global Internet audience, each time that unauthorized reproduction of films takes place. Interestingly, at the same time that the extralegal tactics of the pirate draw significant audiences for Disney and other film companies that would discourage off-screen acts of piracy, copyright law has become more restrictive and helped to create more real-life pirates. From the original 14 years of copyright permitted in the 1790 law for the United States, renew-

able only if the author was still alive, in 2003 the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the copyright protection now held by corporations for 95 years (Greenhouse).[4] This tightening of the law that creates pirates relates to what one critic calls the attraction of pirate films, namely the reminder that "extralegal political action is sometimes necessary, and in fact may be the 'best' response to a world frequently seen as corrupted and morally bankrupt" (Bond 319). In further legal and cinematic tensions, piracy has much to do with successful branding. That is, historical pirates built their identities on now-familiar functions of reputation, including media reports and flagged brands. During the late seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, pirates functioned under carefully developed branding, including a personalized Jolly Roger flag, which signaled victims that a mutually beneficial deal could be struck through peaceful surrender (Leeson 503–04). Today, celebrities cultivate a brand name, and the metaphor of the pirate seems to explicate rather neatly the allure of stars. Stars are a sort of pirate, given their dependence on largely self-credited reputation. Regarding this intuitive relationship among aspects of stardom, piracy, and credit or reputation, Leo Braudy's book on fame is a reminder that the development of European money systems allowing paper credit coincided with the expansion of journals and publicity in the eighteenth century, "which fostered the expanding leverage of reputation" (388). Today, reputation leverage has begun to pay more celebrities more royally than ever; today's swag is yesterday's pirate booty.

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It is important to note that the audience for pirate films is expected to contain the act and not manufacture its own credit by branding itself as additional would-be famous pirates. In other words, Disney wants the audience to consume its pirated version of historical pirates, but not to repeat it with further piracy because that repetition would be truly illicit. It may seem strange to review U.S. copyright law and Disney machinations in the midst of a discussion of Mexican film, but it is a fact that the United States is never far from the Mexican "son of a pirate" films. For instance, during November and December 2013, for every film ticket purchased at Cinemark venues in Mexico City, the buyer received a scratch-off trivia card, always with the hint, "Rockero en el que se inspiró el personaje del Capitán J. Sparrow" ("Rocker who inspired the character Captain J. Sparrow"). The winning answer, "Keith Richards," granted a 5-peso discount at the concession stand. This trivia question implicitly celebrates the way a sanctioned pirate can duck a lawsuit that might obstruct the piratical performance of a non-star, and beyond the Disney dreaminess, it points to the larger issue of the extralegal pirate tactics, such as that of traveling to the United States with the hope of striking it rich, as shown in the film *La misma luna*, and the similarly themed—although not Mexican—*Sin nombre* (Cary Fukunaga, 2009). The United States in many respects is a pirate nation, one without authentic noble titles and thus with royal-making fame up for grabs, and the U.S. affinity with pirates suggests one reason why Hollywood produces such glamorous stars. Those celebrities embody the utopian dream of the celebrity/pirate role still imagined in the twenty-first century as possible in places like Hollywood.

Failed Pirates and Oscar Nominations

The failed "son of a pirate" plot sometimes attracts less box office interest in Mexico than the successful pirate moves exemplified in *La misma luna*. Unfortunately for the "son of a pirate" character in *Abel,* once the boy's actual father shows up, young Abel (Christopher Ruíz-Esparza) is doomed to return from whence he came: the institution for mentally ill children. It turns out that the excessively pirate father (José María Yazpik), instead of migrating to the United States as his family had thought, merely moved to another city in Mexico and began a second family. Despite his redoubled air of illegitimacy then, the pirate father always trumps the pirate son when they share the screen, and for purposes of logical plot development, the father's temporary homecoming forces Abel's return to the institution. In between his release and readmission however, Abel assumes the pirate role with glee and steals the show by replacing his father at the family dinner table and—more disturbingly—in his mother's bed. In one amusing scene, young Abel speaks in Mexican Golden Age cinematic language in his delusional effort to keep his mother (Karina Gidi), now his supposed wife, in line and his sister (Geraldine Alejandra), now his daughter, sexually pure. If *Abel* spoils the fun, and perhaps a higher box office gross, by returning the "son of a pirate" figure to the mental hospital—and thereby stripping him of his optimistic piracy—the similarly themed *El viaje de Teo* (Walter Doehner 2008), makes the mistake of rejecting pirate fathers altogether. *El viaje de Teo* failed to rank in the top 10 lists, in an absence that perhaps the botched "son of a pirate" thematic helps to clarify. Not only does Teo's father (Damián Alcázar) steal a trumpet that his unimaginative, or rather, *dutiful* son (Erick Cañete) must return to

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the town communal property, but also because the father dies in the attempt to cross with Teo to the United States, the son ends up renouncing the pirate role (and the box office reward) and lawfully returns to his Mexican hometown and relatives. Teo, as a failed "son of a pirate," rejects a flashy extralegal embrace of the desire for a materially improved life, and instead (yawn!) opts for family connections. That plot does not make money, but it does approach the sober Mexican ex-pirate theme needed to attract an Oscar nomination.

The U.S. Academy, the one with the glamour, does not applaud the slick and circular Mexican "son of a pirate" plot, and instead rewards the reformed pirate ending. Demián Bichir scored an Academy nomination for best male lead in recognition of his ultimately ex-pirate turn in *A Better Life* (Chris Weitz, 2011). Bichir joins supporting actor nominee Adriana Barraza from *Babel* (2006) and Hayek as *Frida* (Julie Taymor, 2002) in the list of twenty-first-century Oscar nominated Mexican actors. The quirk of contemplating less glamorous Mexican roles for the most glamorous film award has to do with the Academy's attempt to recognize "serious" film about Mexico that shows gritty, ergo "real" problems. Thus, Hayek earned the nomination for a role filmed in English although touted as factually accurate Mexican biography. In *Babel*, an unglamorous Barraza plays a nanny working without documents in the United States, dangerously close to Mexican superstar Gael García Bernal. In the aftermath of contact with the devil-may-care pirate García Bernal, Barraza's character is deported. Barraza also pairs with superstar Gael in *Amores perros*, and that film may have suggested the casting formula for *Babel*. It is possible that García Bernal looks even sexier next to Barraza, which makes her, in turn, seem like a real Mexican to foreign audiences, and thus worthy of Oscar recognition by those who want to argue movies as a sort of unique intellectual property that needs to be under copyright protection for 95 years. Some critics might simply call this formula "stereotype." Last, in *A Better Life*, a visibly aging and economically depressed Bichir plays an undocumented gardener who, after attempting to fight a pirate attack with correspondingly illicit justice, ends up attracting the punishment of deportation. If the Academy likes its Mexican roles genuine, with this authenticity demonstrable by way of earnest self-destruction or sobering deportation, the more glamorous and successful Mexican pirates applauded with pesos prefer, at most, to *begin* the plot with deportation, as in the case of the Mexican box office draw, *El infierno* (2010), directed by Luis Estrada and ranked number two in the domestic list for 2010. Evidently, deportation to Mexico can hardly lend itself to tragic final framing in a self-respecting Mexican movie. Sadly for Mexican commercial film, the unwritten rules favor gringos when it comes to piratical glamour, and Johnny Depp scored a nomination for his first turn as Captain Jack Sparrow.

Niñas mal, Casi divas, and Te presento a Laura

Significantly for the illumination of those themes, Anne Petersen terms Depp's swishy Captain in the Disney films a "pansexual pirate," which helps to keep open what Disney would otherwise close (and copyright) for secured commodification. This pansexuality also keeps the surface of the plot smooth and the characters' goals static. Petersen cites Depp's and director Gore Verbinski's commentary on the DVD for the first *Pirates of the Caribbean* film in order to argue that Captain Sparrow character lacks any sort of arc: "[Sparrow] merely wants a ship, preferably his own, at the beginning, middle, and end of the film. He is unswayed by appeals to emotion, logic, or authority—his goals and character development remain wholly static throughout the film" (72). It is clear that Depp's slickness and starriness keeps audiences entranced. Depp's performance helps to identify the technique behind Mexican star actor Martha Higareda's superbly skilled comic antics, which are particularly salient in the role of Adela from *Niñas mal*, although they also bolster her star turn as Laura in *Te presento a Laura*, which Higareda wrote. The aesthetic of those two films, with their busy and sometimes depthless plots and attractive young stars, neatly parallels the strong production values and celebrity-theme of a third Mexican box office hit, *Casi divas*. The key to financial success in these contradictory, both inflexibly traditionalist and democratically star-themed Mexican films, rests on quirky plots about young women knowing their place and being simultaneously assimilated into an illusion of mobility supplied by pirate pansexuality, of the sort exhibited by Depp, which serves to puncture otherwise conservative scripts. This cinematic conflict between knowing one's place and inventing one's starring role drives the kinetic illusions of development in the three Mexican star-themed films.

In *Niñas mal*, the glamorous figure Adela (Higareda) slides out of every problem without losing or learning, and she assimilates every other character into her by way of Petersen's labeled "pirate pansexuality." Thus, this ultimately conservative film manages to feature a rebel protagonist by virtue of the supple politics of a pirate, or a rebel with an entirely unmoored, self-centered cause. *Niñas mal* centers on a school for "señoritas," or in the English translation, a "charm school." The five pretty pupils include Adela and Heidi (Alejandra Adame), who study under school director Maca (Blanca Guerra). Adela ends up at the school because as a budding actor—powered with Higareda's talent, no less—she needs her widowed politician father's approval and funding in order to study in London and become a star, "como Gael" ("like Gael"), an allusion, of course, to García Bernal. The plot tangles as the audience realizes that the characters are all connected, in a point that Sánchez Prado has discussed in terms of a Mexican oligarchy ("Innocence" 125). In a less astonishing coincidence than it otherwise might seem then, Adela is studying for redemption at the same charm school as Heidi, the very same Heidi who is the future daughter-in-law of the wealthy backer whose support Adela's father needs. From this plot summary, it should be clear that Adela's "star" pirate logic will supply the necessary conflict and the necessary resolution. The conservative or, in perhaps more positive terminology, the *reassuring* aspect of this dizzying movement, from conflict to resolution in a wink, arrives in the static results. Though all characters are frenetically busy onscreen, none consistently changes from scene to scene in a constant direction. In other words, the open secret of Adela's stationary "journey" to stardom, which comes to seem no more impressive than the feat of boarding a plane to London, has to do with her superficial mutations, or the charms of a screen pirate. In response to the benevolent comment near the end of the film, "Eso de andar cambiando de personalidades te va muy bien" ("This [habit of] changing of personalities suits you really well"). Adela explains the pirate trick, "Sigo siendo la misma" ("I'm still the same").

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Adela's main conflict with Heidi seems to boil down to the latter's homophobia, exhibited against the lesbian character Valentina, played by the director's real-life daughter, pop singer Ximena Sariñana. Heidi gives up her homophobia by way of rather sudden agreement with Adela's idea that Heidi is identical to her. In other words, Adela's pansexuality means that all the characters can be sucked into Adela's star vortex and assimilated to her slick charm. Given the pressures on this interconnected group to get along in the end, Valentina seems wise to ignore Heidi, rather than fight her à la spunky Adela. The tranquil singing pupil contents herself with a pop tune, "Como soy" ("As I am"), which hinges on the refrain "Quiero que me quieren como soy" ("I want them to love me as a I am"). No character is assured of being loved "as she is," however, without bowing to the charisma that Adela wields. That is, assimilation to Adela's star charm and pirate pansexuality explains not only the abrupt disappearance of antagonist Heidi's homophobia and the lasting presence of Valentina's serenity before her victimized secondary-character status, but also it soothes some of the teacher Maca's confusing qualities. Maca's now-you-see-it, now-you-don't same-sex domestic partnership, as opposed to a strict work relationship, with her housekeeper (Zaide Silvia Gutiérrez) appears even in the final credits, when the audience watches the postepilogue clips of the couple's blissful bickering, which has them alternately scolding each other and ogling a male director. By the credits, that pair of pirate pansexuals is free to engage in even more zany pirate moves, now that they have raised the housekeeper's son together—to whom Maca "gave her name"—and educated the five pupils.

The instability present in Maca's and her housekeeper Fina's characters bears examination as a final bit of evidence regarding the pirate strategies at work. Midway through the film, Maca inexplicably changes her beloved domestic skills teacher from one "doña Ximena Sataray" to a supposed "doña Leonora Lerdo de Tejada." Some critics might dismiss the script for its mistakes, but a more creative, pirate friendly approach takes delight in Maca's inability to keep her story straight. In view of the inconsistent background, the possibility emerges that Maca's "intensive course on femininity" is pirated and that is why the lessons never seem to impart a useful tip for the audience on ironing, embroidery, baking, or sex. Apparently, Maca, much like Adela, is making it up as she goes along. Once the audience sees that Maca is a pirate teacher and the pupils are pirate "señoritas" (only one student is a self-declared virgin and for only part of the film), it becomes clear why the

teacher and her students, all studying to be "domestic goddesses," need a maid, especially one dressed in nineteenth-century garb, complete with a black ankle-length dress, a long white apron, and a white cap. The sympathy that surfaces between rebel Adela and Maca elicits additional signs of piracy. Maca and Adela share a taste for cigarettes and tattoos, the latter at least being a perennial pirate joy. Even if Maca had a serious lesson to impart, Adela is hardly a serious student. The absence of an older generation of artistic performers in the film means that two budding artist pupils take their lessons from abroad, a pirated lack of originality evident in Adela's move to England to study acting and Valentina's imitation of global pop music styles. Adela's pirate charm ultimately stems less from being the original personality that everyone else wants to imitate, and more from acting as the character who is fastest to change imitations and thus the most hypnotic and therefore seductive.

Niñas mal overcomes its insults to the non–upper-class audience by insisting on the mobile fascination of being a star pirate. This magnetic mechanism has to do with the "pirate" that threatens to emerge from the middle of the word "aspiration." As noted, piracy is not about originality, and neither are the aspirations in the star-themed plot of *Niñas mal*. The inconsistent characters merely respond to the situation at hand, much like a pirate who exploits without rebuilding the system around him or her. For the characters in *Niñas mal*, and perhaps to the escapist dreamers in the audience, to aspire to status within the known structure is not to imagine a new one, but to want to tweak the system and adopt a credited role within it. This explanation of *Niñas mal* applies to the film *Casi divas*, in which the characters compete as reality show contestants who dream of pirating their own credit by becoming the next "María Enamorada," a soap opera star. That lucky credited role will instantaneously move the winner from the category of "nadie" ("no one") to "alguien" ("someone"), or from a status of anonymity to one of celebrity. Complications abound though. For one thing, because Eva (Patricia Llaca), the "real" María Enamorada, and the former lover whom the director wants to replace, proves irreplaceable by the conclusion, the premise of the reality show turns out to be just another pirate play.

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Like *Niñas mal*, *Casi divas* exploits pansexuality and its accompanying trick homophobia. The would-be star of this pirate plot, the pirate woman character, Yesenia, from Ciudad Neza, turns out to be a gay transvestite, though still played by a woman actor, Daniela Schmidt, whose ambiguous looks suggest that Sandra Bullock might find some luck playing cross-dressers. Schmidt, in the role of Yesenia, kisses a homophobic woman character, Francisca, played by Maya Zapata, in a fake lesbian moment that is, given the presence of two women actors, actually real. For the character Francisca, a conservative young woman from Oaxaca, no matter how she views it, homophobia condemns her friendship, and this predicament perhaps informs her swift decision to overcome her prejudice and keep Yesenia's secret, allowing her transvestite friend to take the runner-up position in the all-female reality contest. Under various angles of homophobic thinking, Francisca is at risk of being judged to have behaved no better than Yesenia had, because Francisca experienced what she thought was a lesbian moment during the kiss with Yesenia, and the two have already been chastely sharing a bed. The character difference between Yesenia and Francisca, as far as a lack of hypocrisy goes, remains murky ,because Francisca shares Carlos/Yesenia's would-be diva aspiration. This pansexuality or star assimilation relates to the complexities of pirate politics. Adrian Johns puts this point about contamination in terms of a "culture of piracy," which by the eighteenth century was thriving "far beyond" home-base London and ensured that the honorable and dishonorable "could never be distinguished into two neat camps" (48). In other words, under a culture of piracy, "Everyone involved was, to some extent, compromised" (Johns 48). By the end of *Casi divas*, Yesenia feels that she has been unfairly denied star status since she is the best actor—after all, no one realizes that she is a transvestite— but the audience is free to realize that, notwithstanding the dream of democratic divadom, fairness is not a value of piracy, because piracy has no stable values, aside from that of the constant instability of immediate

The star piracy inherent in the concept of manufacturing "casi" ("almost") divas by way of a reality show, which in itself turns out to be a false promise, anticipates the superficial handling of serious topics that should be unavoidably sticky, such as homophobia or femicide.

convenience. Yesenia handles the disappointment with pluck and her direct address to the audience near the end of the film delivers a message of perseverance: "Le vamos a seguir chingando. Y un día vamos a ganar nosotras y se van a joder, ¿no? Sí." ("Let's fuckin' keep at it. And one day we girls are going to win and they are going to be screwed, no? Yes.").

Star credit cannot be earned in the mathematical way that regular finances accumulate, and from that radical unpredictability stems part of the appeal of celebrity as a democratic dream force. The star piracy inherent in the concept of manufacturing "casi" ("almost") divas by way of a reality show, which in itself turns out to be a false promise, anticipates the superficial handling of serious topics that should be unavoidably sticky, such as homophobia or femicide. In evidence of the latter theme, contestant Catalina (Diana García) in *Casi divas* leaves the reality show in order to battle femicide in Ciudad Juárez. This supposed life lesson remains hollow because earlier, the film has cut from the presentation of Catalina's world of macho threat and maquiladoras to a conversation by the director (Julio Bracho) on the studio lot in Mexico City, which argues that good ratings demand the inclusion of, "Uno que otro caso patético. Y sabes, eso vende: comedia, melodrama" ("One or another pathetic case. You know, that sells: comedy, melodrama"). The sought-after highly produced personalities make the characters into pirate personalities, able to swerve on a dime, from jokes to tears and back again. *Casi divas* meditates explicitly on the goals of the audience that would watch the aging "Eva" struggle to retain her role as the nationally admired, youthful "María." The film plays on visual tricks, which include the presentation of two television commercials that the film spectators view first without the frame of a television screen. Thus, *Casi divas* at times proposes itself as the filmic equivalent of the experience of watching television, which supplies a pirated consumer "lesson" with one advertisement for bottled water and the slogan, "Deja en el pasado lo que no necesitas." ("Leave behind what you don't need"). The voiceover for the commercial overlaps with an exchange between contestants Francisca and Yesenia, who attempt to remake themselves as pirated stars and fail in the attempt to gain the additional credit. It is no easy feat to become a "María," and the notion of leaving behind aspects of one's personal experience in order to earn the role of celebrity could be understood to instill an ageist ideal of permanent youth that resists gains in wisdom. It seems both unsustainable and yet unchangeable that the plot require the "true" star in the film to retain her status in the face of younger challengers. *Casi divas* explains that Eva attained her pirated role as a star after moving out of a career in prostitution, but in spite of this proof that successful occupational moves can happen on the fly, as the film's "first woman," Eva refuses to evolve. Pirates in the celebrity role are not necessarily a communally minded bunch, and like the "son of a pirate" dynamic that elects either the father or the son in the starring extralegal role, it seems that only one "legitimate" pirate diva can exist per film plot.

Like the simultaneous criticism and celebration of stardom in *Casi divas*, the film *Te presento a Laura*, written by the star Higareda herself, seems jaded and yet helplessly enamored with the unsustainable, inalterable star role. Without presenting another credible option, *Te presento a Laura* hints that aspiring to stardom is not worth the suicidal urge that it provokes. In an exaggeration of the television ads in *Casi divas* that at first seem to be merely another scene rather than a game with (fake) product placement, *Te presento a Laura* makes the meditation on consumerism more blatant and "authentic" with the repetitive and distracting placement of Trident gum, the financial institution Scotiabank, the newspaper *Reforma*, and the sporting goods store Martí. Just as the script advertises consumer products, so it plugs star actors and the concept of stardom. The reputed "star" of *Te presento a Laura* is Sebastián (Kuno Becker), who runs from paparazzi, responsibility, and suicide and into Laura (Higareda), whose screwball predicament (she has hired someone to kill her so that the insurance money will benefit children with cancer) encourages struggling actor Sebastián to get a "real" life,

protect Laura, and meet up with her in not-Mexico-City Mexico. The motive for suicide and the failed benchmark of true stardom in the film appears when a photographer observes that Sebastián's film has been canned and one by "Gael" is premiering. However, by the happy ending, both actor Sebastián and non-profession-attributed Laura join forces in starry heterosexual coupledom with the goal of just "living" or "vivir" ("to live"), as the word appears scrawled across the screen in the overdetermined script during the final moments. The stardom fantasy that this conclusion supports is the notion that for the glamorous, "work" can be subsumed into living and a star is always a star, even after he stops acting in order to "vivir" with his instantly recognizable love interest. An underlying logic supports this quirky idea, as perceived by the filmgoer who finds it impossible to forget that Higareda and Becker are actually stars, regardless of the "non-Gael" roles that they play in a given film.

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Between the first and final acts, suicidal Sebastián and Laura check off the activities on their mutual bucket list, and just in case the audience misses the point of each endeavor, once a goal is completed it materializes on the screen in merry handwriting, punctuated with a checkmark. As anticipated by the star topic, *Te presento a Laura* emphasizes the fun of eating a cake without consuming it, or the magic of credit without debt. Some of the deeds accomplished during Laura's headlong rush to "vivir" include donating money to a group of ill children in need of a (cash) transfusion. Laura somehow manages to witness her donation in life—complete with a party for her—before her planned (and ultimately foiled) assassination by hit man. In another relatively illogical scene we see Sebastián and Laura strip down to their underwear and give their clothes to indigent men sitting on the sidewalk in front of Sanborn's Casa de los Azulejos; the screen message informs us that the star characters have now donated clothes (check), although few men could wear Adela's trim size, and few indigents are allowed to sit in front of the highly policed Sanborn's restaurant in Mexico City. At any rate, this glamorously ineffective philanthropy manages to retain its characters' entrancing self-centeredness. In a quirky intertextual coincidence that proves the shared stylistics of the films, in *Niñas mal*, Adela's father worries that if she does not learn to function in society in an attitude of

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a more compromising and less starlet ("actricita") nature, she will end up in downtown Mexico City (el Zócalo), "a pasear en calzones" ("walking around in her underwear"). Check! *Te presento a Laura* fulfills another life goal for Higareda's repertoire of madcap characters. The audience of *Te presento a Laura* is supposed to want to be absorbed into this star play, after the desire that the characters in *Niñas mal* and *Casi divas* evince for wanting to be or just wanting to sleep with the woman figure perceived as the true pirate star.

It is important to note that the stardom-themed films use young women actors whose roles also play into the "pirate family" metaphor, because many of the ambitious young women characters lack one or more parents. This isolation makes the leads all the more apt for assimilating others, since they stand, in one way or another, incomplete or needy and yet admirably independent. For example, protagonist Adela in *Niñas mal* lost her mother to illness, and Laura in *Te presento a Laura* seems to have been at the wheel during a car accident that killed her parents or at least her little brother, who was sick with cancer on top of it. Most of the characters in *Casi divas* lack visible fathers, although the exception, Ximena (Ana Layevska), the wealthy contestant from Guadalajara, manages to get her banker father on the phone and thus make herself even less sympathetic in her whiny privilege. The democratic urge in *Casi divas* that would level Ximena's material privilege and ease other characters' economic disadvantages as they compete for the chance to become a star, relates to the connotations of piracy in the popular imaginary. Ultimately, the inescapably superficial meditation in *Te presento a Laura* on the star persona leads me back to the slickness of Johnny Depp as Captain Jack Sparrow.

Conclusion on Credit

Depp seems a likely figure to interrogate for the conclusion of the present analysis on the dynamics of stardom, credit, and piracy. In the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films, the unchanging goals of Depp's pirate mean that Captain Jack is always at work, but since his work is playfully extralegal, he is also permanently on a Caribbean vacation, much the way stars can be seen (or at least imagined) to live professionally and make money simply by allowing themselves to be photographed while living—again, professionally—on vacation. Credit matters to this illusion. The twentieth-century invention of credit cards has unleashed an imaginative force and changed the way consumers aspire to spend (Applbaum 66). As a result, a habit of, or at least a desire for, grand travelling vacations has developed in conjunction with the credit card (Applbaum 67). Travel becomes easier with credit because, for reasons that probably pertain to the realm of the abstract, the money that consumers do not have is accepted as the coin of every land. Under the pirate metaphor then, vacations, credit, and the lure of stars are related. Oh to be a star, or "alguien" with credit. The "vacation appeal" or consumer "interest rate" of a Mexican film, to judge from the domestic box office results, increases if it features a boy actor who promotes the "son of a pirate" or "imitation adult" adventure, and the same kind of "vacationability" or return on consumer investment rises if the Mexican film features a young woman as a pirate "señorita," or nonvirgin ingénue who chases the tease of stardom and exercises hypnotizing pansexuality. If the film audience dreams about access to credit, an appealing glamour fantasy or reputation lottery awaits in these movies.

It would seem that fans, critics, and corporations all aspire to credit, and among us there lurks a shared admiration of the pirate solution.

Perhaps because piracy offers one way for the little guy to "make it," Johns's massive history of intellectual property proposes that the contemporary specter haunting Europe—along with the rest of the planet—is not communist, "but a pirate" (4). Certainly, the figure of the pirate is spectral, and all three metaphors studied here straddle binaries. These easily apprehended surface tensions further reveal how pirates, celebrity, and credit prove so entrancing on the big screen. Credit is also debt. Stars "are just like us." Piracy depends on brands. Credit, piracy, and stars crisscross elegantly among categories of fake and authentic, insider and outsider, and someone and no one, without settling into any one classification. In other words, piracy explains the contemporary fascination with celebrity in the sense that because no human is literally a "star," actors are seen to manufacture their own reputation and thus enter the paradoxically terrestrial "heavens" of celebrity wealth in the context of an otherwise frustratingly immobile global society. Thus, while stars are just like us, they may be much better at playing pirate. A relevant quotation rounds out the thought here. Apropos of piracy, David Bordwell has asked, "If Disney can't collect from people who have downloaded *Pirates of the Caribbean 3* for free, why should you or I expect to be paid for talking about it?" (Bordwell and Thompson 61). It would seem that fans, critics, and corporations all aspire to credit, and among us there lurks a shared admiration of the pirate

solution. In recognition of our common aspirations, greater tolerance for the pirate theme in commercial Mexican film might help academics avoid the limiting job of taste police. Because it is up to the real police to arrest a pirate, we critics can assign ourselves more flexible duties, such as pointing out why piracy is so arresting.

NOTES

[1]For the titles of 2000–2009, see "10 años." For the top 10 list of 2010, see Franco Reyes.

[2]Perhaps as a result of these pervasive extralegal tactics that ensure access to the otherwise off-limits, one official Mexican study found, "Only 1% [of Mexicans] expressed concern that piracy led to greater corruption" (Cross 319). The cited governmental consumer protection agency, or PROFECO, study also revealed, "Only small minorities [of Mexicans] expressed agreement that piracy imposed social costs: […] 31% agreed that it hurt producers, 26% that it caused unemployment, and 21% that it hurt the economy" (Cross 319).

[3]One U.S. poll discovered that 80% of surveyed undergraduates agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "Top stars are usually in good movies" (Levin, Levin, and Heath 179). For that 80%, celebrity presence supplies "heuristic devices for making the decision to see a new movie," and this trust in celebrity overrides the need to consult criticism (179).

[4]In some ways, this conversation is already out of date. As Siva Vaidhyanathan notes, copyright is being replaced—or at least supplemented—by contract, and on the Internet, "Clickwrap" or "Shrinkwrap" license agreements often ask users to waive rights, such as fair use and first sale, in order for access to content (178). Access is not ownership, as Vaidhyanathan points out. In the case of researchers who use the Billboard.com site, for example, investigators must acquire separate and specific license from Billboard's parent company in order to use the information gleaned from the portion of site that requires a membership to view (178).

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