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Early Film Critics and Fanatical Fans:
The Reception of the Italian Diva Film and the Making of Modern Spectators in Postrevolutionary Mexico

ABSTRACT: The reception of Italian diva films starring Pina Menichelli, Francesca Bertini, and Lyda Borelli in Mexico City was pivotal in shaping conceptions of the film spectator and the new professional role of the film critic in Mexico City in the late 1910s and early 1920s. In early writings on the divas, journalists (usually erudite and male) established their critical authority through contrasts with the behavior of fanatical fans (usually middle class and female), evaluating the effects of moviegoing, interconnected forms of consumer culture, and the local production of feature films in relation to the nationalistic goals of the postrevolutionary state.

KEYWORDS: Mexico, Italian cinema, film criticism, fan studies, gender

In 1917, pioneering Mexican film critic Rafael Pérez Taylor observed profound disruptions of daily life in the nation’s capital. Writing in the year that the signing of a new constitution marked a turning point in the Mexican Revolution (1910–20), the journalist describes an urban experience marked by violence and economic crisis, the accelerating pace of modern life, and a fanaticism for the movies exemplified by female spectators’ enthusiastic reactions to Italian actress Pina Menichelli: “Under the new regime, with auto races, suicides, robberies, the lack of basic necessities, a state of desperation with the streetcars, and other trifles of the sort at their height, there flourishes, among the middle classes, a consuming passion for the cinema that seems more like an illness that has left a profound mark on our mawkish girls [niñas cursis], and which we might call, without hyperbole, a clinical case named menichelismo.” Pérez Taylor claims that Menichelli’s films were prompting young women to imitate her provocative and flirtatious gestures, leaving them vulnerable to being seduced and abandoned by suitors. Pérez Taylor also feared that fans would try to follow in her footsteps by becoming film actresses themselves—a difficult task,
as Mexico City production companies were just beginning to release their first fiction features. If frustrated in their ambitions, these young women were liable to, “after smooching some nobody in the shadows of a movie theater, continue with their exhibitionism until they fall squarely into the quivering tentacles of vice.”³ For Pérez Taylor, Menichelli’s films fostered an overinvolvement with the filmic image that encouraged young women to engage in theatricalized performances of sexual desire, whether onscreen or off. Menichelismo thereby menaced heterosexual courtship and marriage, threatening to turn respectable middle-class girls into fallen women.⁴

Pérez Taylor’s condemnation of menichelismo resembles heated debates about the behavior of female moviegoers that unfolded internationally in the 1910s, often in connection with the popularity of female screen personalities. In Italy, mass fascination with Lyda Borelli (“borellismo”) prompted young women to emulate her hairstyles, dress, and gestures. In the United States, anxious discussions of the “movie-struck girl” linked women’s moviegoing habits with the specter of illicit sexuality.⁵ Indicating a similar impulse to police female spectators, Pérez Taylor’s text fulfills another, less obvious function within the discourse of film criticism emerging in Mexico City in the late teens. His comments bolster the authority attached to the new professional role of the film critic through an implicit contrast with the female fan who fails to maintain the appropriate detachment from cinematic spectacle, threatening public morality in the process.

Without sharing Pérez Taylor’s alarmist attitudes, fellow film critics Francisco Zamora, Rafael Bermúdez Zatarain, and Carlos Noriega Hope all developed their journalistic personae in part through writings on Italian diva films: erotically charged melodramas starring celebrated actresses like Menichelli, Borelli, and Francesca Bertini. Popularized internationally in the midteens, these femme fatales portrayed romantic passion and intense emotional suffering onscreen using lyrical, highly stylized gestures.⁶ Associated with unsettling sensuality and questionable artistic refinement, the diva film occupied an uneasy position within emerging hierarchies of cinematic taste in postrevolutionary Mexico, particularly as US films began to displace Italian productions on local screens.⁷ In early writings on the Italian divas, critics articulated key questions regarding cinema’s social effects, censorship, film aesthetics, distinctions between national cinemas, and desirable models for Mexican film production. Across this range of topics, critics debated whether the consumption of imported films bolstered or subverted efforts to forge an economically prosperous and culturally modern nation in the wake of the revolution.

The reception of Italian diva films provided an arena for early Mexican film critics (usually erudite and male) to establish their critical authority
through contrasts with the real or imagined behavior of fanatical fans (usually middle class and female), as they evaluated the effects of moviegoing, interconnected forms of consumer culture, and the local production of feature films relative to the nationalistic goals of the postrevolutionary state. The Mexican reception of the Italian diva film thus exemplifies processes of “triangulation” in Latin American silent-film culture: that is, an active negotiation between evolving notions of national culture and imported cinema from both the United States and Europe. Focusing on the case of Mexico City, where film exhibition, criticism, and production were most robust, I build on recent scholarship examining what Russell Meeuf and Raphael Raphael call “sites of transnational media circulation in which the constructs of nation or the inequalities of global capitalism, even when glaringly present, can be obscured or put aside in favor of the seemingly intimate and personal connections created by consuming transnational stars.” However, I contend that the reception of the Italian divas in postrevolutionary Mexico did not obscure, but instead foregrounded, questions of nationhood and the politics of cultural goods’ uneven global circulation.

I argue that the reception of the Italian diva films charts alternative genealogies for the star system and fan culture in Mexico that predate and exceed the history of US influences, including American cinema’s generative but often contentious presence on Mexican screens. This essay thereby expands on scholarship on the intersections of gender, visual culture, and consumerism in postrevolutionary Mexico, which has focused almost exclusively on North American influences. Preceding the furor surrounding the pelona (a figure analogous to the flapper), impassioned responses to the Italian diva film highlighted new forms of female consumption and sexuality, which some period commentators celebrated as quintessentially modern. Others viewed these social practices as conflicting with ideals of female domesticity in the service of the nation. Coverage of local film production also highlighted tensions between patriotic ambitions and potentially undesirable foreign influences. Journalists and producers framed filmmaking as a patriotic effort to improve the national image, frequently tarnished by “denigrating” US films that stereotyped Mexicans as lazy, sadistic “greasers” and alluring señoritas. Yet the clear influence of Italian films on early Mexican features complicated these nationalistic claims.

Italian cinema was pivotal in popularizing the feature format worldwide; fittingly, the first feature produced in Mexico City, La luz, tríptico de la vida moderna (The Light, Triptych of Modern Life, 1917) mimicked the Italian film Il fuoco (The Fire, 1915), starring Menichelli. In 1917, stage actress Mimi Derba and veteran cameraman Enrique Rosas founded the Azteca Films Company, which released five features with melodramatic plots and upper-class settings reminiscent of diva films. Critics evaluated these early features—all
believed to be lost—through reference to valued aspects of Italian cinema, such as expressive performances and picturesque landscape views. Yet reviewers also criticized these films’ failure to incorporate elements of national culture and their focus on the upper classes, deemed inappropriate for a postrevolutionary social order. As women participated actively in moviegoing and film production, critics viewed these activities as both promising and problematic for a modernizing Mexico.

In the aftermath of the conflict that toppled dictator Porfirio Díaz, Mexico’s government and elites renewed modernizing initiatives pursued during his thirty-five year regime, including investments in education, public-health campaigns, and the expansion of transportation infrastructure. At the same time, intellectuals and the state sought to forge a modern, secular national identity that would unite the country’s population across regional, ethnic, and class divides. Occupying a privileged place in the rhetoric of postrevolutionary nationalism, women were charged with raising educated, physically healthy, and economically productive citizens in the domestic sphere. At the same time, new forms of entertainment and consumer culture gave women an opportunity to engage in social practices viewed as modern, including the purchase of imported commodities and fashions. Women’s self-determination and presence in public life generated intense public debate in the period, not least after a 1914 decree made by General Venustiano Carranza and provisions in Mexico’s new constitution made binding divorce—as opposed to separation—possible for the first time. As conceptions of women’s patriotic duty at home came into conflict with their public consumption of material and cultural goods, women’s leisure activities were framed as matters of national import. Indeed, Joanne Hershfield observes that postrevolutionary visual culture attests to “a wide-ranging attempt among various social constituencies to fashion a female subjectivity and a female body that could respond to the demands of a new sociopolitical environment that required women to be Mexican and modern.”

In their country of origin and transnational reception, the personae of the Italian divas were often seen as incompatible with ideals of marriage and motherhood harnessed to the forging of a modern nation. Angela Dalle Vacche argues that the theatricalized suffering of the diva gave expression to a female subjectivity torn between the conflicting demands of patriarchal tradition and technological modernity, while Marcia Landy notes that Italian commentators viewed the divas as “opposed to traditional femininity as well as to those dimensions of fascism that elevate maternity, reproduction, and service to the family and nation.” The divas’ perceived challenge to models of womanhood linked to hegemonic nationalism took on additional complexities in their cross-cultural reception. In the Ottoman Empire, male writers framed women’s supposed
fascination with the divas as a threat both to heterosexual relationships and the
forging of a strong Turkish nation-state independent from foreign influences. In Mexico, the reception of the diva film highlighted competing definitions of
gender roles at a moment of national reconstruction and modernization. As
seen above, Pérez Taylor, who played an influential role in shaping postrevo-
lutionary cultural policy, viewed menichelismo as a social disease that threat-
ened the institution of marriage and, by extension, the health of the nation.
Yet other critics celebrated the diva film’s capacity to generate novel forms of
female self-expression, challenging bourgeois morality and religious tradition
and contributing to a modern, secular postrevolutionary order.

Debates surrounding the diva film coincided closely with the emergence
of film criticism as a specialized discourse in the Mexico City press. The mod-
ern-format newspapers El Universal and Excélsior, founded in 1916 and 1917,
respectively, showed unprecedented interest in cinema. While other newspapers
had included some coverage of the medium beginning in 1914, these periodicals
featured the first regular columns focused on film: Excélsior’s “Escenarios y
Pantallas” (Stages and Screens) appeared in the inaugural March 1917 issue,
while Pérez Taylor’s column “Por la pantalla” (Onscreen) debuted in El Universal
the same month. During the same period, the illustrated magazines Revista de
Revistas and El Universal Ilustrado began to devote more sustained attention to
cinema, particularly after film enthusiast Noriega Hope became the latter pub-
lication’s editor in chief in 1920. In line with international trends in film-related
publications, by the early 1920s illustrated magazines sought to actively involve
their readers in a participatory fan culture. Notable among these efforts was
a 1920 contest sponsored by El Universal Ilustrado that invited readers to cast
votes for “La Reina del Cine” (“The Queen of Cinema”) (fig. 1). Fans wrote to the
magazine in large numbers not only to express their preferences but also to
defend them. By taking on the role of critics, these fans gave public visibility to
a new conception of the film spectator, imagined as an impassioned observer
who was also educated and discerning.

As US film producers expanded aggressively into Mexican exhibition
markets in the late teens, the increasing presence of American commodities
and cultural products raised the specter of US hegemony. Laura Isabel Serna
has demonstrated that Mexican fan culture in the period was nurtured by the
circulation of film periodicals across the US-Mexico border; my research reveals
that Mexico City critics were also consulting newspapers and magazines pub-
lished in Italy, Spain, and Argentina, indicating a multinational rather than a
bilateral frame of reference (fig. 2). In this context, critical debates about the
merits of Italian stars and their American rivals framed film taste—and by
extension, Mexican cultural refinement and progress—in terms of nationality.
Fig. 1: The "Reina del Cine" contest pitted Italian divas against American stars. *El Universal Ilustrado*, March 25, 1920. (Courtesy of the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, University of Texas at Austin)
A report on the state of Italian cinema during WWI signals the Mexican press’s awareness of international developments. Revista de Revistas, April 28, 1918. (Courtesy of the Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Secretaría de la Hacienda y Crédito Público)

Fig. 2: A report on the state of Italian cinema during WWI signals the Mexican press’s awareness of international developments. Revista de Revistas, April 28, 1918. (Courtesy of the Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Secretaría de la Hacienda y Crédito Público)
Journalists linked film style and narrative with stereotyped national characteristics, contrasting the sensuous and sentimental Latin character supposedly shared by Mexico and Italy with the energy and dynamism associated with the United States. This rhetoric aligned Mexico with European influences, even as ascendant forms of cultural nationalism glorified Mexico’s indigenous heritage. Other commentators praised American cinema, appealing to ostensibly universal standards of technical perfection and naturalism.

These binary oppositions between supposed Latin and Anglo film aesthetics demonstrate how foreign films were interpreted locally through broader geopolitical frameworks, signaling the range of positions that critics and fans might take in relation to the imported cultural products available to them. Aesthetic preferences were inflected by notions of racial and linguistic belonging that could be invoked to contest the United States’ ascendant cultural dominance. Examining the reception of the Italian diva film in Mexico thus illuminates how early film criticism forged conceptions of the modern spectator shaped by hierarchies of gender, class, and nation, navigating competing visions of national modernity through critical debates surrounding imported film.

DISTRIBUTING AND MARKETING THE DIVAS IN MEXICO CITY

Italian films dominated Mexico’s screens during much of the revolution, exhibited alongside French, German, Danish, and a few US productions. Between 1914 and 1917, Italian cinema held the largest share of the exhibition market in Mexico City, peaking at 54 percent of all features shown in 1916. Multireel historical epics like Quo Vadis? (1912) and Gli ultimi giorni de Pompeii (The Last Days of Pompeii, 1913) enjoyed great box-office success in Mexico City, where they screened for several weeks. Cabiria (1914) was reportedly shown for sixty-five consecutive days in the elegant Salón Rojo in 1916.

The initial reception of the diva film in Mexico is closely linked to the local emergence of a cinematic star system, which built on Italian productions’ success in framing film as art. While films d’art starring Bertini and other celebrated Italian actors were shown in the capital as early as 1912, performers were not prominently featured in publicity campaigns until early 1914. The Mexico City exhibition of Ma l’amor mio non muore (Love Everlasting, 1913), often considered the first example of the diva film, helped foster local appreciation of screen personalities by tapping into the capital’s preexisting entertainment culture. Borelli’s performance in Caserini’s film alluded to her career as a stage actress, particularly her role in Oscar Wilde’s Salomé, which she performed during a 1909–10 Latin American tour that included a stop at Mexico City’s Teatro Arbeu. Although Borelli’s stint at the Arbeu was a commercial
disappointment, audience memories of her visit likely enhanced the box-office appeal of *Ma l’amor mio non muore* when it was exhibited in April 1914.\(^36\)

In contrast with later associations between the diva film and middle-class audiences, *Ma l’amor mio non muore* was imbued with considerable cachet. During its engagement in the Teatro Hidalgo, the film was reportedly viewed by “a highly distinguished audience . . . the most select of our high society.”\(^37\) Ordinary spectators were also invited to enjoy an elegant, modern convenience in connection with the screening: ticketholders were offered a complimentary automobile ride from the box office to the theater.\(^38\) One newspaper described the film as a harbinger of a “brilliant season of cinematic art,” noting that it had been acquired by impresario Humberto Langella on a trip abroad made with the purpose of cementing distribution agreements with Italian companies.\(^39\)

Throughout 1914, Italian films continued to be shown in prestigious venues, particularly Jacobo Granat’s Salón Rojo; by 1916, they were advertised as special attractions in the catalog of films distributed by Ignacio Navascués and Germán Camus.\(^40\) Several diva films premiered in the Palacio and Parisiana movie theaters owned by the two impresarios.\(^41\) A string of new and older diva films was released in quick succession in the latter half of 1916, including *Il fuoco* and *Tigre reale* (Royal Tigress, 1916), featuring Menichelli, and *Assunta Spina* (1914) and *Odette* (1916), starring Bertini.

Exhibitors highlighted the cultural capital linked to the diva film’s European origins, seeking to attract audiences by affirming the cosmopolitan character of local entertainments. Advertisements and newspaper articles (often promotional texts inserted by request) cited the critical and commercial success of diva films abroad, inviting local audiences to demonstrate that they possessed similarly refined tastes. For example, an article on *I sette peccati capitali* (The Seven Deadly Sins), a series of 1918–19 films starring Bertini, declared “the culture of our audience will cause ‘The Seven Deadly Sins’ to have the same reception it achieved in civilized Europe.”\(^42\) Advertisements for diva films also highlighted their (supposedly) simultaneous premieres in Europe and Mexico.\(^43\) These publicity discourses affirmed that local exhibition culture was up-to-date. Tellingly, in October 1917 *Revista de Revistas* proclaimed, “the great artist Francesca Bertini constitutes the cinema of the moment [actualidad cinematográfica] in Mexico” (fig. 3).

In addition to highlighting the diva films’ European provenance, publicity emphasized their extended length and their stars’ impressive acting credentials. A representative 1914 newspaper advertisement touted “novelties of extraordinary length (between 6 and 8 parts), the most interesting topics released lately in Europe, among them the colossal series of theatrical works performed by the eminent artist, queen of Italian Dramatic Art, Lidia [sic] Borelli.”\(^44\) By 1916,
Fig. 3: Bertini is described as embodying “the cinema of the moment in Mexico.” *Revista de Revistas*, October 21, 1917. (Courtesy of Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Secretaría de la Hacienda y Crédito Público)
Bertini’s skill as a thespian was evoked so frequently that journalists viewed it as commonplace.\textsuperscript{45} By contrast, Menichelli’s more playful, mercurial acting style was more often associated with affectation than artistry, and Mexico City critics regularly deemed her overt performances of sexual desire in films like Il fuoco, Tigre reale, and La moglie di Claudio (Claudio’s Wife, 1918) unsettling. One exclaimed in 1918, “Oh Menichelli! How you perturb homes and thwart marriages!”\textsuperscript{46}

In attempting to describe the divas’ unique performance style, marked by physical pliability and emotional changeability, film critics engaged in verbal gymnastics. In an early review for Excélsior, Francisco Zamora described “Miss Menichelli, twisting eternally on the screen like a glow worm, contorting her mouth or half-opening it as if to suck or bite.”\textsuperscript{47} A journalist reviewing Bertini’s performance in La contessa Sara (Countess Sarah, 1919) observed how the actress “undulates and bends and twists and straightens up, according to the frivolous or dramatic instant marked by the situation of the plot.”\textsuperscript{48} The critic judged that among Italian performers, Bertini was most skilled in adapting her body and costuming to the dramatic demands of the narrative, signaling the importance of daring sartorial choices to the divas’ on- and offscreen personae.

Female moviegoers in Mexico City were invited to imitate the divas’ elegant appearance by purchasing imported fashions, linking cinema to a consumer culture that had greatly expanded during the Díaz regime under the influence of Western European (more than North American) retail models.\textsuperscript{49} Drawing on press accounts, film historian Aurelio de los Reyes describes women’s mass adoption of low-cut gowns, diaphanous skirts, and tunics following the exhibition of Il processo Clemenceau (The Clemenceau Affair, 1917), starring Bertini. He also notes that the affluent local women photographed for the society pages mimicked the poses, makeup, and fashions of the Italian divas.\textsuperscript{50} In 1917, the department store La Ciudad de Londres advertised dress styles with the names Bertini, Hesperia, and Susana (likely a reference to French actress Suzanne Grandais).\textsuperscript{51} Bertini’s name was used into the early twenties to sell facial soap and high-heeled shoes.\textsuperscript{52} While these marketing strategies never rivaled the systematic cross-promotion of Hollywood stars and consumer goods in Spanish-language fan magazines of the 1920s, they signal emerging links between cinema, the press, and consumer culture.\textsuperscript{53} Yet while the interests of film exhibitors and department-store owners converged in publicity surrounding the diva film, early film critics hotly debated its effects on women and the middle classes as Italian cinema’s popularity grew.
THE IMPRESSIONABLE SPECTATOR: GENDER AND CLASS IN EARLY FILM CRITICISM

As Mary Ann Doane observes, female spectatorship has consistently been associated with an “over-identification with the image” that collapses the distance between spectator and screen, generating emotional and bodily excess. In their writings on the divas, early Mexican film critics described female spectatorship both as mimesis—a form of imitation involving a visceral bodily reaction to the moving image—and theatricalization, the deliberate staging of the self for public consumption. Most immediately, critics suggested that the tragic themes and expressive acting of the diva film frustrated emotional detachment. One observed in a review of L’orgoglio (Pride, 1918), “Bertini weeps with pain and the audience, which thinks what it’s seeing is real, weeps with her.” Furthermore, the diva film was attributed with the ability to provoke forms of viewer identification that might subvert traditional values of marriage and motherhood. Bermúdez Zatarain described Bertini’s performance in La contessa Sara as appealing to women in marriages of convenience, to whom “destiny brings . . . a terrible, indomitable passion, that even if only in spirit, makes them abdicate their duties as wives or mothers . . . [I]n every audience there are ‘Countess Sarahs’ who believe themselves brutally reflected on the screen, in reliable photography.” These comments suggest how the narrative themes of the diva film, which pitted romantic passion against social convention, might have resonated with local audiences at a moment when nationalist discourses stressed women’s obligation to raise ideal citizens within a traditional family structure.

Associating the diva film primarily—though not exclusively—with female audiences, journalists linked its popularity to middle-class pretensions and vanity. The reformist impulses evident in early film criticism were most often directed at petit bourgeois women, viewed as particularly vulnerable to the allure of Menichelli, Bertini, and Borelli. While the sexual behavior of the poor and working classes had long been targeted for reform by elites, they were viewed as having little respectability to lose. By contrast, affluent and middle-class women were expected to maintain their moral rectitude, and the latter were seen as particularly vulnerable to the erotic and consumer desires fostered by novel forms of mass culture. In a satirical 1920 article on film audiences, a journalist describes the typical fare of middle-class movie theaters as “the lustful creations of Menichelli and the acrobatic episodes of Antonio Moreno” (the popular Spanish star of US serials). The critic also mocks “the attitudes of people who have never known publicity, when they see themselves, by chance, in front of a cinematic apparatus in the street. There, I have seen Frenchified women of fifty adopt postures in imitation of Bertini.” This description links
moviegoing with a keen awareness of one’s public image that could provoke laughable acts of self-fashioning for the camera.

Critics additionally described the middle classes as susceptible to the perceived refinement of the diva film, which they were unable to distinguish from more elevated artistic works. In the wake of the revolution’s disruption of social hierarchies, intellectuals nevertheless remained dubious about popular tastes. Even as postrevolutionary cultural nationalism celebrated regional customs and popular art as wellsprings of *mexicanidad* in the 1920s, many—including Zamora and José Vasconcelos, minister of education and influential architect of postrevolutionary cultural policy—viewed these traditions as raw material that should be sanitized and refashioned to conform to implicitly Western aesthetic norms. Italian diva films’ links to international forms of popular melodrama—including serial literature—made them difficult to harness to patriotic projects of cultural uplift. In a review of *Tigre reale*, Zamora writes, “our ordinary film audience whose literary knowledge begins with the novels of [Spanish serial novelist Manuel] Ibo Alfaro and finds its maximum point in ‘The Lady of the Camellias’ by Dumas the younger . . . has discovered that Pina Menichelli is a notable artist. For this working public, the affected is the artistic.” Since their daily duties left them little time to contemplate aesthetic nuances, Zamora claims, they easily mistook the pretense of art for the genuine article. By invoking a supposed middle-class penchant for melodrama, Zamora reinforces perceptions of his own more elevated tastes. For Zamora, the “intense sadism” of *Tigre reale* also evoked the popular entertainment of bullfighting, whose cross-class appeal prompted comparisons to cinema. He comments that the climactic scene in which Countess Natka (Menichelli) prompts her lover (Febo Mari) to kill himself after he is unfaithful embodies an “aesthetic of the bullring that is far from convincing.” Linking *Tigre reale* to an entertainment with an ambiguous class affiliation, Zamora also frames the film’s visceral appeal in gendered terms, claiming its “unhealthy eroticism” would have deleterious effects on the “impassioned nerves of our girls.” Yet the critic praised the visually pleasing costumes, sets, and locations of *Tigre reale*, aspects of Italian productions that Mexico City filmmakers would soon strive to emulate.

In 1919, Zamora discussed the social effects of the diva film in a more sanguine tone as he criticized a move to impose film censorship. Addressing fears that cinema fostered crime and sexual immorality, a censorship decree was scheduled to take effect in January 1920. However, the measure faced protests from exhibitors and was eventually abolished in July 1920. Presenting himself as a “simple cinema spectator” unlikely to be moved by the sensual or criminal temptations of diva films or French serials, Zamora writes, “My concept of morality is disturbed neither by the laudable effectiveness with
which Fantômas commits crimes, nor by the passionate and carnal complications with which Lady Menichelli kisses.” Yet, observing Borelli’s influence on the amorous behavior of young women, he notes, “alas, not all have my indifference to cinematographic sins.” While his tone is ironic, Zamora emphasizes the detachment of the professional critic through contrast with the susceptible fan.

Zamora remained skeptical about the moral panics sparked by the cinema, while giving some credence to its effects on the corporeal expression of young Mexicans, both male and female. Citing an American artist’s claim that the viewing of onscreen performances was reshaping the facial expressions of the young, Zamora links the pliability of celluloid [gelatina] with the increased flexibility of moviegoers’ bodies, noting that film “turn[s] its devotees gelatinous.” Seemingly with more irony than real alarm, he writes, “We should tremble, my friends, because the ‘shimmy’—which also has something to do with gelatin—and the cinematograph will end up softening the bosoms of our women and the hearts of our young dancing-cinematophiles.” Discussing Italian divas and North American dance crazes side by side, Zamora puts a humorous spin on fears of moral and even physical decay linked to imported mass culture.

Whereas Zamora observed the corporeal effects of popular entertainment with bemusement, poet Rafael López openly celebrated the diva film’s disruptive power, even as he judged it of limited usefulness as a template for local production. In a 1917 review of La tigresa (The Tigress), the fourth production of Azteca Films, López is unenthusiastic about the “minimal aesthetic value of the Italian model, whose dramatic gestures I judge to be closer to the madhouse than to beauty.” Yet he hails the diva film’s unsettling effects on audiences, writing, “I thank Menichelli for having made a few kilos of bourgeois flesh tremble with disquiet at an innocent gesticulation.” For López, the divas’ performances had the power to unsettle the social order by stimulating the spectator’s senses, whether through visceral moral reaction or entirely novel forms of erotic sensation. He hails “this invasion of tigresses in a land of patriarchal customs . . . where it is still yet premature for the institution of divorce to function, here where the majority of our women pray the rosary next to the family spinning wheel and live walled up in their rooms.” Yet while López links the diva film with a salutatory disruption of patriarchal and religious values, he observes a disconnect between the “aristocratic social milieu” of the diva films and Mexico’s “democratic” character, particularly in the wake of a revolution that addressed profound social inequalities. López’s comments signal the tensions involved in adopting the Italian diva film as a model for the nationalistic endeavor of film production.
ADAPTING THE DIVA IN EARLY MEXICAN FEATURES

In interviews with local journalists, the stars of early Mexican features invoked the Italian divas as a source of artistic inspiration harnessed to the patriotic goal of filmmaking. Emma Padilla, star of La luz, declared Il fuoco her favorite film and Pina Menichelli her favorite actress, while Mimi Derba claimed that her desire to emulate Borelli drove her to found Azteca Films (whose name signals its nationalistic bent). In a 1918 interview with Cine-Mundial, the Spanish-language counterpart of Moving Picture World, Derba claimed the export of her films to the United States would “spread the truth of a Mexico that is cultured, socialized and progressive; . . . erase the prejudice, so deeply rooted here, of a Mexico that is uncivil, always rebellious, and ever more backwards.” Rejecting the prevailing image of the Mexican Revolution in the United States as an anarchic conflict that reflected an inherently violent and primitive national character, Derba emphasizes the opportunities for national modernization offered by the postrevolutionary period. She notes that favorable conditions “oblige us to erect a civilization, over the ruins of the old, rapidly and widely, as peace, which is taking root in our spirits, provides a basis for all kinds of initiatives,” aligning filmmaking with processes of national reconstruction.

Signaling how political circumstances shaped the development of Mexican cinema, the production of La luz, tríptico de la vida moderna marked a departure from the filmmaking practices dominant during the revolution, while also manifesting continuities. Between 1911 and 1916, most Mexican productions were nonfiction compilation films documenting the conflict, often filmed in close collaboration with military leaders. Indicating their ongoing involvement in production, a preview screening of La luz was held at the home of General Pablo González, also believed to have been a silent partner in Azteca Films.

Reviews of La luz praised it as a victory for Mexican cinema, while evaluating it through reference to the expressive acting and landscape views of Italian films. The film’s three-part structure (with segments entitled Dawn, Noon, and Dusk) was modeled on Il fuoco, divided into the sections Spark, Flame, and Ash, which corresponded to the stages of an ill-fated love affair between Menichelli’s character and a young painter (Febo Mari). As in Il fuoco, a femme fatale identified only as “She” seduces and abandons a young man with tragic consequences. In a review of the film, Pérez Taylor was sympathetic to the efforts of Emma Padilla, whom he mentioned frequently in his column. Yet he also noted the “lack of heat in passionate scenes” and the subordination of narrative development to a succession of scenic views. Commenting that La luz “might well have been titled ‘The lovers’ excursion through the Federal District,’”
critic mentions scenes set in the canals of Xochimilco to the south of the city, the gardens of Coyoacán, San Ángel Inn, and Chapultepec Park. The display of the latter two sites—linked respectively to the upper classes and Parisian-style urban reforms—would have acted as a testament to the elegant “modern life” referenced in the film’s title.

Yet adapting the conventions of the diva film also led to incongruities like the presence of “a gondolier in the placid waters of Xochimilco dressed as a charro” (a traditionally costumed cattle wrangler, increasingly viewed as a national icon in the postrevolutionary period). This juxtaposition of Italian and Mexican iconographies was compounded by a disconnect between the film’s aristocratic setting and the social class of its producers. Describing a mismatch between the characters’ high-society origins and their costumes, a journalist in El Pueblo noted that the “white summer dress, semi-transparent” worn by Padilla “would look quite well on the shoulders of a government typist, on a half-salary, who affects fashionable dress.” Despite mixed reactions from critics, La luz enjoyed a brief commercial run in Mexico City movie theaters, at one point screening alongside Il fior di male (Flowers of Evil, 1915), starring Borelli.

While the making of La luz was an isolated effort, the melodramas produced by Azteca Films constituted a more sustained production strategy. Vowing not to release their first feature until they had guaranteed continuity by completing five or six films, Derba and Rosas established a studio in the center of Mexico City, next to the Alameda. Curious journalists toured their facilities, reporting on preparations for film production as newsworthy in their own right. By July 1917, Azteca Films had concluded their first film En defensa propia (In Self-Defense), which, according to publicity stills and press accounts, resembled a diva film in its upper-class setting and elaborate mise-en-scène. The film starred Derba as Enriqueta, a governess married to her widowed employer, whose domestic harmony is threatened by the flirtatious newcomer Eva (played by fellow operetta star María Caballé).

Reviews judged the film to be a partial success, emphasizing the potential of film production to affirm the economic growth and modernization of Mexico’s capital. Theater critic Roberto Núñez y Domínguez commented that the film’s “ensemble scenes and some of its isolated tableaux have the ‘cachet’ characteristic of European films.” Yet he notes that the landscape scenes, particularly the views of Xochimilco, would have been improved by filming at night in the manner of Italian productions. Like La luz, En defensa propia was perceived as deficient in its portrayal of Mexico City’s elites. Zamora described the film’s “reproduction of metropolitan high-society life” as “extremely flawed.” However, he was quick to add that it displayed “all that the most advanced
civilization could demand” in terms of material comfort, emphasizing how national productions could showcase Mexico’s prosperity.

As Azteca Films released its features in quick succession, journalists’ interest began to wane, with many complaining of the films’ melodramatic excesses. Only a week after the premiere of *En defensa propia*, Azteca Films premiered *Alma de sacrificio* (Soul of Sacrifice), a tale of the selfless Rosa (Derba), who passes off the illegitimate child born to her sister Catalina (Emilia del Castillo) as her own so Catalina can marry. The film’s affinities with literary and stage melodrama (key aspects of the diva film’s local horizon of reception) also displeased some critics. For Zamora, *Alma de sacrificio* exemplified a broader problem: “the narrative for films, as is well known, is in a period of transition,” causing specifically cinematic qualities to be subordinated to theatrical and literary ones.81

Azteca Films continued to mine diva films and associated forms of melodrama in its next production, *La tigresa*, which was released in September 1917. Although the film’s title clearly recalls *Tigre reale*, the plot was closer to *Il fuoco*, with a grimmer conclusion. The aristocratic protagonist Eva (Sara Uthoff) charms the young painter Bruno (Fernando Navarro), then abandons him to marry a wealthy man. Driven mad by rejection, Bruno is consigned to a mental institution. He reencounters Eva during a charity visit to the hospital and strangles her. Azteca Films’ next production *La soñadora* (The Dreamer, 1917) also focused on the violent ends of star-crossed lovers: a painter (played by stage actor Eduardo Arozamena) recalls his youthful affair with Emma (Derba), who has fallen into prostitution. A reunion between the lovers is cut short when he is killed in a fight with a soldier.

Critics increasingly complained that Azteca Films’ productions failed to incorporate elements of national culture, which was actively being reimagined in the postrevolutionary period. One reviewer criticized a scene in *La soñadora* where the characters dance a minuet (characteristic of eighteenth-century France) in “these violent times of the danzón and foxtrot,” adding that Derba’s “national beauty” would have been more effectively displayed in “a typical Mexican costume performing a lively and daring *jarabe*,” a dance that was becoming enshrined as a form of national folklore.82 Azteca Films’ final film *En la sombra* (In the Shadows, 1917) was hardly more nationalistic, as its principal attraction was the appearance of a visiting Italian opera company.83 With the disappointing reception of Azteca Films’ later productions, optimism surrounding production in Mexico City temporarily declined. While the figure of the Italian diva loomed large in early film criticism and efforts at feature filmmaking in Mexico City, by the early twenties, the growing dominance of US cinema was generating fresh attention to national differences in film style and new conceptions of film spectatorship.
CRITICS AND FANS DEBATE NATIONAL CINEMAS

In the late teens, critics noted US films’ expanding presence on Mexican screens, a shift that was perhaps most visible in the growing popularity of serials. By 1919, these productions were “sufficient, by themselves, to fill a movie theater,” according to a journalist writing in the entertainment magazine *Don Quijote*. The critic nevertheless maintained, “the supremacy is indisputably with Italy, which with Francesca Bertini, Pina Menichelli, Lidya [sic] Borelli and other stars, presents us with true gems at every moment.” Other journalists increasingly associated Italian films not with artistic refinement but with lurid sensationalism. Bermúdez Zatarain wrote in 1920, “if the Latino audience—which is the one that sees the most Italian films—always prefers truculent plots, full of pain, barbarity, indolence, it is only just that the Italian producers, businessmen more than propagators of art, manufacture films of intense pain and barbarous sentiments.” In 1919, Noriega Hope blamed a national taste for adaptations of “melodramas or fin-de-siècle novels” for the success of films starring Bertini and Menichelli. He laments: “Cinema can never keep up with the times among us, who, as Latinos par excellence, have the itch to postpone action in favor of feeling. . . . The Yankees have found in the photoplay the most synthetic and profound expression of ‘their’ art because, in short, they as professors of energy, carry with them another concept of Life, based exclusively on the predominance of action.” Noriega Hope credits the supposed dynamism of the North American character for Hollywood’s technical mastery of the cinematic medium. Yet he also suggests an inevitable disconnect between the sentimentalism of the Latino character and the aesthetic of US cinema.

These comments exemplify early Mexican film critics’ tendency to link imagined racial and linguistic characteristics to film aesthetics. Fans were also encouraged to evaluate film stars in these terms. In its announcement of the Reina del Cine contest of 1920, *El Universal Ilustrado* states: “advances in American cinematography have placed Francesca Bertini and Pina Menichelli against various other stars of indisputable merits, such as Mary Pickford, Mabel Normand and Constance Talmadge. We do not know if the public will keep honoring its old idols, or if it now prefers these new artists.” Taking their cue from the contest’s framing, the majority of fans claimed to favor Italian actresses over their American rivals, evoking a shared if vaguely defined cultural identity. In a suggestive letter to the magazine, a pair of female readers attributed their passion for Bertini to a deep emotional engagement linked to their gender and ethnicity, stating “We do not understand how a woman who feels, a woman with a soul, a Latina woman, in short, can vote for an artist who is not Francesca Bertini.” While most letters echoed this praise of Bertini, one
of the magazine’s collaborators cast his vote for Mimí Derba as a patriotic act, arguing that the Italian divas’ popularity in Mexico was a sign of a national inferiority complex (fig. 4).90 A rare letter in support of an American actress praised Mary Pickford’s “naturalness” and “simplicity,” in contrast with the “lustful gestures” and “multitude of contortions” the writer deemed “the only weapons of the Italian artists.”91

The Reina del Cine contest mapped models of modern womanhood onto nationality at a moment when fan and consumer cultures were being transformed by the growing presence of American cultural products. Serna argues that the “contest—essentially a debate about the merits of the sort of femininity represented by the divas and by American actresses—signaled that a new sort of woman, the chica moderna [modern girl], was becoming the exemplar of modern womanhood.”92 Indeed, Francesca Bertini’s triumph in the contest with over 3,600 votes—more than twice the number received by runner-up Mabel Normand—failed to translate into enduring popularity for the divas.93 Yet the contest also signals persistent audience interest in Italian cinema and the role of imagined national affiliations in the emergence of a new kind of spectator: the discerning film fan. El Universal Ilustrado observed that its contest “has demonstrated that many serious, cultured and erudite people think all too frequently about the photodrama. . . . Furthermore, the importance of the new art can be noted in the passionate outbursts of certain persons, who take to heart the triumph of artist So-and-So or the star What’s-her-name.”94 While still invoking the figure of the overinvolved fan, the magazine also grants public recognition to educated amateur critics.

An exchange between Noriega Hope and a reader with the pseudonym Marisa Shaydon published during the contest epitomizes the new public visibility of the discerning fan. In a letter that left Noriega Hope “happily convinced of the remarkable preponderance of the cinematograph among the cultured classes,” Shaydon deflects mounting criticisms of Italian cinema’s affectation.95 She contends that Italian producers and Mexican spectators share a similar “race, instinct, and sympathy,” leading to a common conviction that artificiality is essential to the medium.96 According to Shaydon, cinema should not “servilely cop[y] real life,” but rather “highlight its characteristics, sublimate it, poeticize it, enrich it.” Significantly describing Italian cinema as the choice of a “select public,” Shaydon associates American film with a staid, middle-class respectability. She claims US producers “are interested in morality, not in art, and without the inevitable accompaniment of philosophical reflections of the most authentic bourgeois flavor, no work of art seems complete to them.” By contrast, in his response Noriega Hope (in a shift from his earlier position) rejects judgments about film aesthetics drawn along national lines. Instead,
Fig. 4: A caricature of Menichelli accompanies a journalist’s explanation of his vote for Mimi Derba as “Reina del Cine.” El Universal Ilustrado, May 6, 1920. (Courtesy of the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, University of Texas at Austin)
the journalist invokes cinematic progress and “aesthetic universality,” echoing characterizations of cinema as a universal language by poet Vachel Lindsay and others, rhetoric that was adopted by American film producers to reinforce their domestic and international market dominance. Noriega Hope claims that “as the art elevates itself,” the best Italian and North American films will increasingly be viewed as “examples, not of the ‘Latin temperament’ or ‘Saxon temperament,’ but rather of this magnificent, synthetic and human art called the cinematograph.”

While Noriega Hope’s comments indicate an investment in medium-specific qualities that trump imagined cultural affinities, this stance served a pragmatic purpose for staunch defenders of Hollywood cinema like his colleague Marco-Aurelio Galindo. By appealing to “aesthetic universality,” critics could skirt concerns about growing US influence. As Hollywood studios exported a growing number of films to Mexican markets, the tide turned against the diva film. By September 1920, Bermúdez Zatarain observed that productions starring Borelli could no longer command the audiences they had in the past. He found “praiseworthy the attitude of a great part of the audience that now views with indifference, although with certain remnants of tenderness, the supranatural attitudes of Bertini or Menichelli, [in order] to revel in those breaths of life and well-being” offered by American films.

In reinforcing the growing dominance of US cinema in local markets, Mexico City critics again invoked naive spectators’ fondness for the Italian divas to bolster their critical authority. In 1921, Galindo described an encounter with a diva-obsessed lawyer during a visit to a sleepy lakeside town near Guadalajara. While the lawyer insists on Bertini’s unparalleled elegance, the critic urges his readers to reject the criterion of beauty in favor of more medium-specific standards, writing, “You will agree with me . . . that being elegant is not sufficient to be an artist.” Using the provincial fan as a foil, Galindo encourages his urban readers to align their cinematic tastes with his own preference for the more naturalistic style of Hollywood film. Galindo condemns the divas as retrograde, declaring that Menichelli could only regain her popularity through a “return to those times in which her hystericism dominated.” By 1925, cinematic tastes and fashions had undergone a decisive shift. The “Mexican Menichelli” herself, Emma Padilla, had adopted the short bob of the pelona and was headed to Los Angeles for the next phase in her artistic career.

In a 1926 article entitled “Modern Life,” academic Jorge Fernando Iturribarría framed the vanished popularity of the Italian diva as a measure of profound cultural transformation. He writes, “Those times of ‘bertinomania’ and ‘meniquelimania’ have passed . . . Bohemia has been definitively supplanted by ‘flapperism.’” Fernando Iturribarría links the decline of the diva to broader
geopolitical shifts and the powerful forces of industrial modernity. He suggests that the increasing influence of the United States after World War I, combined with “the standardization of everything and the industrialization of all that exists—including feminine beauty—has given modern life a hard physiognomy, in which, to be sure, Latino sentimentalism has come out badly.” Retrospectively framing the Italian diva as a model of modern femininity more consonant with the Mexican character, Iturribarría’s text signals how North American consumer culture, fashion, and music increasingly embodied pleasurable experiences of modernity that were nevertheless implicated in fears of US imperialism.

The reception of the Italian diva film in postrevolutionary Mexico City generated shifting conceptions of modern film spectators: the overinvolved female fan afflicted by erotic desire, emotional excess, and nervous overstimulation; the middle-class viewer seduced by melodramatic themes and aesthetic pretensions; the aspiring actress who reworked the conventions of the diva film for patriotic ends; and the professional film critic and erudite audience member who debated the merits of Italian and American film. The diva films crystallized anxieties surrounding film spectatorship at a moment when consumer and entertainment cultures fueled by imported goods were understood as both an opportunity and a dilemma for national modernization. The critical reception of the Italian divas thus worked to mediate hierarchies of gender, class, and nation and conflicting models of cultural modernity in postrevolutionary Mexico.

Notes

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1. Without bringing an end to the hostilities, the constitution signaled a provisional compromise between radical and more reformist political positions, particularly on questions of labor relations and secularization, offering a template for government reforms and initiatives.


14. The first fiction feature produced in Mexico (as opposed to Mexico City) is not *La luz*, but *¡1810! o los libertadores de México* (1810 or the Liberators of Mexico), shot in Yucatán in 1916. See Laura Isabel Serna’s contribution to this issue.


16. Diaz seized power in the 1876 Yuxtepex rebellion. He served a single term as president, and his close ally Manuel González assumed the office between 1880 and 1884. Diaz then returned to the presidency, which he held through elections widely believed fraudulent, and resigned in 1911 after losing a decisive battle in Ciudad Juárez to forces aligned with Francisco I. Madero.


18. See Katherine A. Bliss, “For the Health of the Nation: Gender and the Cultural Politics of Social Hygiene in Revolutionary Mexico,” in Vaughn and Lewis, *The Eagle and the Virgin*, 196–218; and


24. Pérez Taylor organized the well-known India Bonita contest to select an indigenous beauty queen in 1921 and became the director of the Museo Nacional (National Museum) in the 1930s. López, *Crafting Mexico*, 33–34, 139.


32. Ibid., 19, 21.


41. Amador and Ayala Blanco, Cartelera cinematográfica, 55–59; and Miquel, En tiempos de revolución, 235.
42. Advertisement, El Nacional, April 8, 1914, 8; and “En elogio de la eximia Francesca Bertini,” El Universal, February 26, 1919, 7. See also “Éxito colosal de Francesca Bertini en ‘Fedora,’” Excélsior, April 8, 1917, 5.
43. Advertisement, Excélsior, September 10, 1916, 7; advertisement, Excélsior, October 10, 1921, 6.
44. Advertisement, El Imparcial, March 17, 1914, 3.
46. Quoted in Miquel, Mimi Derba, 77.
47. Zeta [Francisco Zamora], “Pina Menichelli en ‘La Tigre Real,’” Excélsior, April 7, 1917, 5.
52. Advertisement, Excélsior, September 11, 1921, sec. 2, 5; and advertisement, El Dictamen (Veracruz-Llave), August 6, 1922, 4.
57. Miquel, Por las pantallas, 126–28; and Rafael Bermúdez Z[ataráin], “Los estrenos de la semana: La Condesa Sarah,” El Universal, April 25, 1920, 18.
58. Pérez Taylor describes three impassioned male spectators debating the merits of Menichelli, Bertini, and Hesperia outside a movie theater in “Los exaltados,” El Universal, April 25, 1917, reprinted in González Casanova, Por la pantalla, 196–97.
60. Don Juan el Bobo [pseud.], “El reino del ridículo: Los que van al cine,” El Universal, June 6, 1920, 16.
61. López, Crafting Mexico, 72–76.
62. Zeta [Francisco Zamora], “Pina Menichelli en ‘La Tigre Real,’” Excélsior, April 7, 1917, 5.


72. Hipolito Seijas [Rafael Pérez Taylor], “Luz—pelicula mexicana de arte,” 222, 220.


78. Ibid., 57.


83. Miquel, *Mimi Derba*, 70. In the film, a mysterious masked woman seduces a singer. She reveals herself as a friend’s wife and is then killed in the ensuing confusion. The singer then awakens suddenly, realizing the events were a dream.


87. See also Miquel, “A Difficult Assimilation.”

88. “Nuestro primer concurso cinematográfico.”


93. “Resultado de nuestro concurso cinematográfico.”


98. Silvestre Bonnard [Carlos Noriega Hope], “Variaciones,” 18.

99. For example, Marco-Aurelio Galindo, “¿Cinematografía europea o americana?,” *El Universal*, June 6, 1920, 18.


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