"Ese pequeño arte que tanto amamos": Remediating Cinema in El Universal Ilustrado

The Mexico City magazine El Universal Ilustrado (1917-34) is best known today for its promotion of the avant-garde estridentista movement and the rival Contemporáneos group; however, the publication’s engagement with cinema, unparalleled in the Mexican press, has gone largely unexamined. This essay contends that El Universal Ilustrado’s remediation of cinema through literary, journalistic, and visual discourses negotiated between postrevolutionary cultural nationalism and US mass culture, and thus between the intellectual ambitions of lettered elites and emerging popular audiences. Cinema’s social effects in the period highlighted a perceived divide between cultural producers and consumers, given Mexico’s status as an importer rather than a producer of moving-image entertainment. At the same time, the publication staged procedures for assimilating the medium of film (as a technology, an industry, and a set of subjective experiences) by linking cinema to new forms of urban circulation and erotically charged social encounters, highlighting Mexicans’ role as cultural producers in the imagined space of Los Angeles, and articulating and enforcing ideals for domestic film production and consumption. El Universal Ilustrado’s visual and verbal heterogeneity allowed it to negotiate the conflicting cultural meanings attached to cinema, even as discourses on the medium reinscribed hierarchies of nation, race, gender, and class.

On the occasion of its sixth anniversary, the Mexico City magazine El Universal Ilustrado celebrated what it considered to be its greatest virtues: “nuestro eclecticismo” and “la constante rectificación de nuestros errores” (El Universal Ilustrado 13). In the same issue, editor-in-chief Carlos Noriega Hope described a weekly recalibration of the periodical’s structure and content in order to appeal to a reading public that was heterogeneous and growing, though still limited in size:
Lo más difícil, realmente, en un periódico ilustrado es guardar una proporción juiciosa, una ponderada arquitectura, en cada número. Es decir, debe haber ‘de todo y para todos,’ distribuido de tal manera que el lector ingenuo recorra cada página lentamente, sin hojear seis o siete de un tirón para detenerse en una sola . . . .

En muchas ocasiones la arquitectura, la ponderación a que me he referido, falla lamentablemente. Parece entonces EL UNIVERSAL ILUSTRADO demasiado frívolo, o demasiado serio, o excesivamente cinematográfico, o tremendamente internacional. Hay que cruzarse, entonces, de brazos con paciencia, porque el error no tiene una rectificación posible sino hasta los ocho días (“Del moderno periodismo” 50).1

Noriega Hope’s comments signal both the specificity of the illustrated magazine’s form—which amalgamates text, photography, and illustration in an ephemeral architecture of sections and columns that is reinvented on a weekly basis—and the cultural registers and reference points through which the magazine navigated as it sought to attract an emerging mass audience at a moment of national reconstruction and modernization.

Part of a wave of new publications that emerged after many Porfirian-era newspapers and magazines shuttered during the Revolution (Timoteo Álvarez and Martínez Riaza 217–18), El Universal Ilustrado (1917–34) is perhaps best known today for its dissemination of writings by the estridentistas, who advocated the development of a uniquely national mode of artistic expression even as they took inspiration from European avant-gardes, and the rival Contemporáneos group, which cultivated an overtly cosmopolitan and universalist mode of literary production.2 Yet intellectual debates like the 1925 polemic involving the two groups were only one element of the kaleidoscopic variety of topics covered by the magazine, which described itself as a “semanario artístico-popular.”3 The publication featured articles on the latest technologies, intellectual trends, and political developments in the United States and Europe alongside coverage of emerging forms of postrevolutionary cultural nationalism that would become hegemonic by the end of the 1920s.4 Initiatives spearheaded by El Universal Ilustrado paralleled official efforts to forge a unified national identity that bridged ethnic, class, and regional divides in the wake of the Revolution, which were linked to desires for an economically prosperous and culturally modern nation (Knight, Vaughn and Lewis). The 1921 “India Bonita” beauty contest organized by the magazine exemplified the exaltation of Mexico’s indigenous heritage, even as indios were actively
encouraged to assimilate into the Spanish-speaking, mestizo population (López 29–64). Special issues showcased the picturesque landscapes, notable landmarks, and modernizing infrastructure of Mexico's states, an initiative viewed to contribute "al desarrollo de las relaciones entre los habitantes del país y va creando vínculos que afianzan la nacionalidad" ("Nuestro Distrito Federal" 7). *El Universal Ilustrado* also covered the work of Diego Rivera, who was quickly becoming the most visible representative of Mexico's burgeoning muralist movement, and helped consecrate Mariano Azuela's *Los de abajo* as the quintessential "novela de la Revolución Mexicana" by re-publishing it in serial form in 1925 (Mahieux 393).

In describing *El Universal Ilustrado*’s balancing of the serious with the frivolous, the national and the international, Noriega Hope significantly notes that the magazine was often viewed as "excesivamente cinematográfico" ("Del moderno periodismo" 50." The publication's attention to cinema—affectionately called "ese pequeño arte que tanto amamos" by contributors—was unequaled in the Mexico City press (Miquel, "Por las pantallas" 89), ranging from cinema-themed literary works to film criticism, film-related contests, reports from Hollywood correspondents, and articles on local production. These varied engagements with the medium exemplify the heterogeneity of *El Universal Ilustrado*’s cultural reference points: film was associated with triviality and ephemerality, but was also a focus of reflections on aesthetics. As a topic, it crystallized tensions between the emerging currents of postrevolutionary nationalism (including ambitions for a national film industry) and popular fascination with novel forms of entertainment and consumer culture associated with US influence.

Emerging from Mexico City's robust and expanding exhibition culture, *El Universal Ilustrado* capitalized on the sense of novelty linked with cinema to frame itself as emphatically contemporary, even after the medium's consolidation as a distinct, primarily narrative-driven form, rather than a non-narrative "cinema of attractions" inseparable from its intermedial relations with other forms of "screen practice" like the magic lantern (Gunning, Musser). Whereas emerging media forms often "remediate" the content and formal strategies of preexisting media in order to tap into established audiences and accrue cultural legitimacy (Bolter and Grusin 68–70), *El Universal Ilustrado* remediated cinema—simultaneously understood as a technological apparatus, a repertoire of aesthetic strategies, and a set of subjective experiences linked to new
entertainment venues and social practices. Engagements with cinema within *El Universal Ilustrado*’s constantly shifting architecture of literary works, crónicas, journalistic coverage, and film criticism, accompanied by half-tone photographs and illustrations (made possible by the roto-gravure printing process), worked to “bridge or join old and new technologies, formats, and audiences” (Thornburn and Jenkins 3). Adopting a comparative media studies approach sheds light on how the magazine functioned as a space of encounter between avant-gardes fascinated with cinema’s aesthetic potential and a growing popular audience captivated by Hollywood and its star system.

This essay thus shifts direction from recent explorations of cinema’s place in the literary imagination of early twentieth-century Mexico (Rashkin, “Una opalescente claridad”) and Latin America more broadly (Borge). In many cases, these scholars extract literary works from their original context: the visually rich and discursively heterogeneous space of the illustrated magazine. I argue for the value of de-centering literary production as the focus of analysis, building on approaches from periodical studies that “insist[s] on the autonomy and distinctiveness of periodicals as cultural objects,” rather than simply “aggregations of otherwise autonomous works” (Latham and Scholes 519, 521). By contrast with previous scholarship on relationships between cinema and print media in early twentieth-century Mexico, which traces the development of film criticism as discourse (González Casanova; Miquel, *Por las pantallas*) or examens literary engagements with cinema (Miquel, *Disoluciones*), I ground my analysis in the material and textual properties of the original publications, charting the interrelations of cinema and print staged in the magazine’s pages.

Curiously, *El Universal Ilustrado*’s fascination with film has gone largely unexamined in recent re-evaluations of the magazine, even as literary critics delve into its complex negotiation of commodified mass culture and avant-garde movements (Gallo; Gabara). Scholars have emphasized the publication’s role as a key site for the dissemination of literary avant-gardes (Mahieux; Flores 132, 147), focusing on how modernist writers’ interest in new media technologies was materialized in the illustrated press. Noting the estridentistas’ fascination with radio broadcasting—in particular, the radically new spatial configurations it instituted and its potential to dissolve language into abstract sound—Rubén Gallo emphasizes their work’s convergence with popular discourses on radio in *El Universal Ilustrado*, which sponsored Mexico’s first commercial radio broadcast in April 1923 (123–29).
Noriega Hope commissioned a poem for the occasion by leading *estri­dentista* Manuel Maples Arce. Entitled “T.S.H.” (“telefonía sin hilos”), it was read over the airwaves and published in the magazine accompanied by an illustration by Fernando Bolaños Cacho that dramatizes the sense of displacement generated by fragments of radio broadcasts received from distant locales (Flores 145–46). While implicitly addressing the remediation of radio in poetry and print, Gallo grounds his analysis in notions of medium specificity, privileging works that he views as fully exploiting radio’s unique characteristics rather than examining how radio and the illustrated press might have functioned as mutually constitutive media forms. Esther Gabara takes a more intermedial approach in her discussion of the *estridentistas* and *Contemporáneos’* complex relationship with the medium of photography, which they viewed as aligned with the feminized sphere of mass culture and thus with promiscuous forms of cultural mixture that exceeded hegemonic forms of postrevolutionary nationalism (143–44).

By contrast with photography and radio, film’s place in *El Universal Ilustrado* has received very little attention, perhaps because remedi­ations of cinema in the magazine’s pages are impossible to untangle from the specter of Hollywood’s cultural hegemony. In *El Universal Ilustrado*, engagements with cinema highlighted a perceived divide between cultural producers and consumers, rendered particularly stark by the expense and technical complexity of film production and by Mexico’s status as an importer rather than a producer of moving-image entertainment. At the same time, this divide was tentatively bridged through a series of procedures for assimilating the medium of film—as a technology, an industry, and a set of subjective experiences—that were staged within the visual and discursive space of the magazine’s pages. I focus on three principal textual procedures that blurred the boundaries between spectacle and spectator, and, by extension, between passive spectator and active participant in film culture. *Crónicas* and literary works equated elements of film language (such as close-ups and dis­solves) with distinctly modern forms of visual perception linked to male heterosexual desire, elaborating structures of looking that placed the texts’ narrators within a network of erotic connections unfolding in urban space. Second, fictional and journalistic narratives of Los Angeles visually and verbally positioned Mexicans as cultural producers within the imagined space of Hollywood, highlighting forms of Mexican creative labor that were often elided in popular discourses on the US
film industry. Finally, film reviews and coverage of local film production harnessed both activities to patriotic ends. Pedagogical works of film criticism instructed readers about elements of style and narrative, encouraging them to adopt a sympathetic attitude towards Mexican productions and to actively evaluate and interpret films, instead of being transfixed by the allure of foreign—especially Hollywood—stars.

The growing presence of US cinema in Mexico was a particularly vexed issue due to Hollywood’s frequent stereotyping of Mexican characters as savage bandits and alluring señoritas, a practice that led to a national boycott of some US films in 1922 (Serna 163–71, Vasey 93–94, 170–76). Yet despite—and, indeed, because of—the openly conflictual relationship between the Mexican government and US film producers in the 1920s, Laura Isabel Serna argues that “exhibition and moviegoing, discussions about what cinema should be and should do in Mexican society, and the fan culture that emerged around the cross-border circulation of American cinema were as important for the production of a distinctly national film culture—perhaps more so—than any film produced in Mexico during this period” (6). El Universal Ilustrado played a pivotal role in this process, articulating broader public discourses on cinema with literary and artistic experimentation.

Placing avant-gardes in dialogue with emerging globalized forms of popular culture, El Universal Ilustrado’s engagement with the medium participates in a phenomenon that Miriam Hansen has influentially called “vernacular modernism,” which encompasses “a whole range of cultural practices that register, respond to, and reflect upon processes of modernization and the experience of modernity” (60). Classical Hollywood cinema, in Hansen’s view, mirrored perceptual and subjective experiences generated by industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of mass consumer culture, giving it a “transnational and translatable resonance” that enabled it to function as “something like the first global vernacular” (68, 70). While this formulation usefully highlights local responses to the dominant US industry, it overlooks the diversity of imported goods circulating in cultural markets and the contested process through which they are attributed with social meanings. Aaron Gerow emphasizes that in Hansen’s model, “the ability to appropriate is taken as a given, is seen as inherent in the semiotic process; a notion such as this elides the often-contentious history of conflict over the extent and possession of this ability” (23). Gerow stresses that public discourse about media technologies, particularly new
media, is a site of struggle where the boundaries of medium and nation are continually re-defined through the assertion and re-negotiation of discursive authority (22–24). In *El Universal Ilustrado*, efforts to rhetorically frame Mexicans as cultural producers, rather than consumers of imported cultural goods, often reinscribed hierarchies of gender and race. Overwhelmingly male *letrado* journalists and white/mestizo film producers presented themselves as the arbiters of cinema's resignification, whether as a vehicle for literary experimentation or as a means of instituting a national film culture (Rama). The publication reserved a limited place for the indigenous within national culture and expressed anxieties about cinema's impact on popular audiences and women. As the magazine remediated cinema through literary experimentation, fictional and non-fictional chronicles of Hollywood, and commentary on local film production and consumption, it attached social meanings to the medium that oscillated between the erudite and the popular, and between Hollywood and postrevolutionary Mexican nationalism.

**Urban Encounters and the Desiring Gaze: Remediating Film in Literature and the Crónica**

Throughout the late teens and twenties, *El Universal Ilustrado*’s contributors invoked cinema as a marker of all that was superficial, ephemeral and thus quintessentially modern, bolstering the magazine's claims to novelty and variety. In the 1925 survey “¿Cómo Pierde Ud. el Tiempo?,” poet Rafael López, a founding member of the Ateneo de la Juventud, admitted to a passion for “leyendo las historias de las artistas de cine” published in “las páginas frívolamente transcendentes del ‘Fotoplay [sic]’” (Aldebarán 20) (Figure 1). As this description of Hollywood’s preeminent fan magazine suggests, cinema’s significance was paradoxically perceived to reside in its triviality. This position was echoed by Salvador Novo, a leading member of the *Contemporáneos* group and frequent contributor to *El Universal Ilustrado*, in his article “Bataclanízemos la vida,” whose title refers to a daring French musical revue that sparked a craze in Mexico City. Invoking a spirit of frivolity in arts and letters, Novo writes “el cine es nuestro arte, el de América. Cine trágico es cosa griega y la Venus de Milo se ha engordado. Cine frívolo, que acaba bien precisamente por contraposición a la vida, es el Ba-ta-clán, es Gloria Swanson, y debemos empezar a ser ya en México”
Claiming film as an art of the Americas (not solely the United States), Novo rejected Old World aesthetic canons and hailed film's potential to reenergize Mexican intellectual life. By contrast, Nicaraguan journalist and intellectual Francisco Zamora expressed skepticism about cinema's modernizing potential, even as he highlighted its links to avant-garde movements:

A pesar de lo que opinen los jóvenes cinematófilos y ‘dadaistas’ de los cuatro puntos cardinales de la República, no me es posible tomar en serio ese pequeño arte que tanto amamos. Hasta sospecho ¡así el Señor me perdone! que está produciendo un añoñamiento en eso que llaman los editorialistas la ‘conciencia colectiva’, añoñamiento semejante al que produjeron en el mundo la literatura de Jorge Ohnet y las novelas del señor Pérez Escrich. (“Del arte mudo” 21)

Evoking the work of well-known serial novelists, Zamora attributes film with similarly stupefying effects.

Expressing both suspicion and optimism about cinema’s social effects and aesthetic possibilities, estridentista writers hailed the medium’s capacity to level social and artistic hierarchies in a more radical fashion. Suggesting a fascination with Charlie Chaplin shared by avant-gardes across Latin America (Borge 73–105), Maples Arce declared in a 1923 interview published in El Universal Ilustrado, “Aún hay muchas gentes que se alumbran con lámpara de petróleo: se espantan de la luz eléctrica. Mary Pickford y Lenin les meten miedo [...] no quieren entender que Charlot es representativo y democrático” (qtd. in Raskin, “Una opalescente claridad” 56). The final phrase appears almost verbatim in the second estridentista manifesto posted as a broadsheet in the city of Puebla in January 1923. Expressing “Horror a los ídolos populares,” the signatories declared, “CAGUÉMONOS: Primero:—En la estatura del Gral. Zaragoza, bravucón insolente de zarzuela, William Duncan del ‘film’ intervencionista del imperio, encaramado sobre el pedestal de la ignorancia colectiva” (qtd. in Schneider 277). This latter reference to a popular star of US westerns implied the masses’ susceptibility to US cultural imperialism (imagined as a film and exercised through the export of cinema). Even as Hollywood cinema raised the specter of “ignorancia colectiva,” Chaplin (celebrated by international avant-gardes) could be recuperated as the sign of an eminently modern and non-hierarchical aesthetic: “Charles Chaplin es angular, representativo y democrático” (qtd. in Schneider 277).
Nuestas Encuestas Trascendentes
¿Cómo Pierde Ud. el Tiempo?
Por Aldberán

SABER cómo corre el tiempo, y escribir que se va como agua fría y monótona, que pasa por el cuenco de las manos, requiere una filosofía para quedarse en la gracia del otrc inteligentes, y pensando que las antiguas topologías como normas espaciales de vida. No la pereza inútil, sino las horas que son vitales y que no deben ser llenadas únicamente con una tal especie de juego, que lo hace penetrar en todas las intervenciones. Las poetas y los filósofos son los que mejor saben perder el tiempo. Son los que lo pisan, misterioso y musical, con voces únicas y múltiples, son ellos, también, los que mejor lo interpretan.

El mencionar vale fríos, que pierde el tiempo, el aprender de la conducción. ALDBERÁN
RAFAEL LOPEZ DICE...

Había aquí un silencio hondo. Un silencio casi pardo, de que resulta por la concentración mágica del arte de los volúmenes, y la quiesencia dorada de sol. Hubo un salto misterioso en el que el tiempo desapareció en un paso, las de caras históricas: Rafael López, don José Guadalupe Chávez, don Nicolás Rangel...
El maestro de “Con los ojos abiertos”, dice:
— Pienso el tiempo— y una sonrisa vaga por sus labios delgados y voluptuosos—, leen estas páginas, que ha publicado en los últimos números de las revistas especializadas. Quiero mostrarme de las letras de su incomparable

Figure 1. Poet Rafael López poses reading the “páginas frivola-mente transcendentales” of Photoplay magazine, suggesting the associations between cinema, the superficial, and the up-to-date cultivated by El Universal Ilustrado. Estridentistas Manuel Maples Arce and Fermín Revueltas also appear in the layout.

El Universal Ilustrado, April 2, 1925. Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.
As Elissa J. Rashkin has stressed, the *estridentistas* imagined aesthetic interventions as public performances encompassing semi-staged events like the posting of the manifestos, pranks and provocations, expositions, theater, and interventions in the popular press (“The Stridentist Movement” 11–12). Stressing *estridentista* Arqueles Vela’s conviction that journalism itself functioned as a meaningful mode of artistic production (148), Tatiana Flores describes his series of recurring columns in *El Universal Ilustrado*, which juxtaposed idiosyncratic reflections on stories from the telegraph news service with unrelated photographs that offered the reader unexpected and novel sights (149–50). Vela wrote in one of these columns in 1922,

> La influencia del cinematógrafo ha llegado hasta lo increíble. Todo tiende a cinematografiarse. Las reinas, las cupletistas, las actrices se cinematografizan. / La vida está tomando la incoloridad del cinematógrafo. Se camina con pasos de sombras cinematográficas. Se dan saltos inverosímiles. Las palabras no pronunciadas se subrayan con guiños cinematográficos (“Mientras el mundo gira” 41)

Echoing broader anxieties regarding cinema’s sweeping impact on moviegoers’ behavior, physical gestures, and self-presentation (de los Reyes, *Sucedió en Jalisco* 145), Vela’s *crónica* articulates an implicitly gendered concern: that women’s mimicry of onscreen performers threatened to strip them of sincerity and spontaneity. Ironically, across Vela’s writings in the magazine, the incorporation of cinematic tropes into first-person narration becomes a catalyst for literary experimentation, exemplifying the *estridentistas*’ interest in how “subjectivity was itself shaped by external forces” in the sensory environment of urban modernity (Rashkin, “The Stridentist Movement” 43).

In a series of writings published in the magazine in the early 1920s, Vela contends that the mechanisms of memory, desire, and the gaze had themselves become filmic in modernity, describing this shift in terms of a heterosexual male subjectivity. In the 1925 *crónica* “Las luces de los automóviles,” Vela invokes cinema as a mode of perception that has been assimilated into everyday acts of looking. Describing how the beams of light emitted by incandescent bulbs guide the attention and provoke the desire of the onlooker, he writes, “Las luces de los estribos de los coches nos presentan las pantarillas [sic] como en un ‘close-up.’ Parece que se han puesto de moda estas luces, precisamente, ahora que las faldas cortas triunfan de los comentarios y de la figura alargada” (70).
Remediating Cinema in *El Universal Ilustrado*

Linking an explicitly filmic mode of looking to technologies of electric light, new modes of urban circulation, and contemporary fashions, the text appears alongside a drawing by cartoonist Andrés Audiffred that renders the crónica's subject in graphic form: an abstracted silhouette of a woman stepping into an automobile as the headlight of a second car, which strongly resembles a projector beam, illuminates her feet and calves (Figure 2). The page's layout constitutes a calculated mirroring of text and image, subject of Vela's article “El pictografismo ideológico,” published the previous month. Vela describes his efforts to achieve in written form the graphic impact of illustration, stressing the need to explore the plastic possibilities of text in a modern moment marked by the decline of reading and the ascendance of the visual (35). Capitalizing on specifically visual and verbal resources, Audiffred's illustration and Vela's text jointly evoke the fetishistic logic of the cinematic close-up, which offers up a fragmented body for (implicitly erotic) contemplation.

Vela's exploration of the convergence between subjective processes and elements of film language arguably reached its height in *La Señorita Etcétera*, presented as evidence of *El Universal Ilustrado's* eclecticism and openness to literary experimentation upon its publication (Monterde 11). Serialized between September and December 1922 in *La novela semanal*—a booklet of reduced size inserted in the magazine's binding—Vela's text was the first installment of the supplement to include illustrations (Monterde 11). It recounts the unnamed narrator's pursuit of an elusive woman identified only as “ella” as he moves aimlessly through city streets, offices, hotel rooms, streetcars, and trains. Describing his first chance encounter with “ella” when he impulsively leaves the train in an unknown city, the narrator describes their dreamlike movements through urban space: “La calle fue pasando bajo nuestros pies, como en una proyección cinemática” (272). As the narrator repeatedly loses sight of, abandons, and re-encounters his fantasized love object, it becomes increasingly ambiguous whether she is one woman or several. This erosion of individuality is heightened by descriptions of “ella” as mechanized and infinitely reproducible: “Era, en realidad, ella, pero era una mujer automática. . . . Sus movimientos eran a líneas rectas, sus palabras las resucitaba una delicada aguja de fonógrafo” (278). In the text’s final passages, “ella” is described as increasingly phantasmatic as allusions to the filmic medium multiply. The final encounter between the narrator and the elusive woman takes place in a
movie theater: "en la puerta de un cine, un timbre saqueaba a los tran­suntes. Me detuve un instante para explicarme su realidad. / Sus pasos apenas si rozaban el silencio aglomerado numéricamente en las butacas" (280). The narrator portrays the movie theater as an anonymous space ripe for the projection and repetition of erotic reverie— "Todas las noches, como en un sueño, yo desenrollaba mi ilusión cinemática"—as the text's focus shifts from the female figure's threatening incorporation of media technologies to the male narrator's internalization of cinematic forms of memory and fantasy.
Figure 2. Arqueles Vela’s text “Las luces de los automóviles” and Audiffred’s accompanying drawing equate the exercise of an implicitly male erotic gaze in urban space with the mechanisms of cinematic framing and projection. *El Universal Ilustrado*, August 27, 1925. Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

Written in a much more conventional prose style, a series of short stories by Juan Bustillo Oro (who would later become an important director of Mexican sound cinema) entitled *La penumbra inquieta* also presents the movie theater as a privileged space of heterosexual desire, linking the Hollywood star system to new forms of public sexuality exercised in the movie theater (Serna 79–80). These texts describe a dialectic of distance and proximity, in which unattainable stars became the object of intimate fantasies that could foster erotic connections between moviegoers. In “El ladrón de Bagdad,” the first-person narrator, a bohemian student, observes an unaccompanied woman raptly admiring the hyperkinetic performances of Douglas Fairbanks in the 1924 film referenced in the story’s title: “Tuve celos de Douglas Fairbanks, una mujer sola en el cine parece absurdamente nuestra” (50). Equating the woman’s solitary presence in public space with sexual availability, the narrator embarks on a wordless flirtation, taking advantage of her absorption in the film to initiate physical contact, culminating in a series of kisses (51). Taking advantage of her state of distraction to fulfill an erotic conquest, the narrator capitalizes on desires mobilized by Hollywood’s star system and temporarily contests its seductive power. Whereas Vela and Bustillo Oro focus on the transformative dimensions of film spectatorship, describing its impact on bodily gestures, sexual desire, perception, and memory in gendered terms, journalistic and fictional chronicles of Hollywood emphasized participation in film production as the most powerful means of appropriating cinema’s cultural force.

“El Espejismo de Los Angeles”: Imaginaries of Film Production

As the Mexico City press developed a network of Los Angeles correspondents in the early 1920s (Miquel, *Por las pantallas* 101–06), illustrated magazines increasingly explored the imagined space of Los
Angeles. In the pages of *El Universal Ilustrado*, the city is framed as simultaneously cosmopolitan and hostile, attracting a flood of newcomers with dreams of fame and economic prosperity that ultimately prove to be mirages. In an article entitled “La Ciudad Cosmopolita,” the magazine’s Los Angeles correspondent Armando Vargas de la Maza writes, “A Los Angeles viene arribando de todos los puntos del mundo, gentes de todas las razas y todos los tipos. . . . Con todo, estos horizontes son apenas espejismos. La fuente de riqueza del cine está completamente cerrada, agotada, a los nuevos buscadores de oro” (43). Despite this cautionary tone regarding Hollywood’s allure, especially for young women (Serna 123–27, 145–51), *El Universal Ilustrado* facilitated fantasies of mobility linked to the city and portrayed it as more familiar than foreign. In a 1925 article entitled “El espejismo de Los Angeles,” which announced a contest for a trip to the city co-sponsored by the magazine and the *Los Angeles Times*, novelist Alfonso Teja Zabre writes, “Los Angeles también tiene algo de Cosmópolis como París y como Nueva York. . . . En Los Angeles la perspectiva de la tierra, del aire, del ambiente y de la población tiene algo de meridional, de criollo, de asiático y de trópico (17). Emphasizing that “En California, un mexicano es algo más que un exérgico. Porque fue algo más en otro tiempo” (17), Teja Zabre references Los Angeles’s cultural heterogeneity and historical past to affirm Mexicans’ belonging in the city, and by extension, within Hollywood’s industrial structure.

While *El Universal Ilustrado* was quick to publicize Mexican actors’ successes in Hollywood, however minor, occasionally the magazine highlighted the real-life obstacles facing Mexican performers in a racially stratified industry (Serna 209–12). An article signed by José Corral Rigan (a pseudonym shared by Noriega Hope, Vela, and writer Febronio Ortega) chronicles the indignities suffered by an anonymous Mexican extra in Hollywood. In contrast with the self-aggrandizing claims of “todos los artistas y pseudo-artistas mexicanos que trabajan en Los Angeles [que] son, indefectiblemente, dos cosas: Estrellas y Patriotas” (6), the extra admits to being forced by financial need to play two diametrically opposed but equally dehumanizing roles: a stereotyped Mexican bandit or “greaser,” and his heroic Anglo opponent. During the performance of this latter role, the extra’s consciousness of a double masquerade leads to an explosion of violence: “Como buen mexicano sufría entonces una oculta indignación contra esos fantoches que nos parodiaban y ¡claro!, repartía golpes con todas fuerzas, no obstante las vociferaciones del director” (6). In this account, the extra’s national
identity is either caricatured or rendered invisible by Hollywood's racialized system of representation, prefiguring the themes of masquerade and misrecognition manifest in Noriega Hope's "'Che' Ferrati, inventor."

Drawing on the writer's his real-life trip to Los Angeles between December 1919 and March 1920 and published in the magazine in 1923, the story mingles technological fantasy with a deep suspicion of Hollywood's artifice. Its protagonist, Mexican extra Federico Granados, rises to stardom thanks to a highly malleable modeling compound created by the eponymous Argentine inventor. Applied to Federico's face, the material allows him to exactly mimic the appearance of a recently deceased French matinée idol, Henri Le Goffic. The masquerade wins him fame, even as it erodes his relationship with his lover, a star-struck American flapper who is increasingly smitten by the dead actor. In its emphasis on ingenuity, "'Che' Ferrati" participates in what Beatriz Sarlo has called an "imaginación técnica," constituted by popular discourses on technology that offered readers forms of practical "know-how" that became meaningful sources of cultural capital and class mobility at a moment of ongoing urbanization and modernization (16). The story would have resonated with technical articles published El Universal Ilustrado that offered details about special effects and advances in color, sound, and 3-D projection (Honore; Brigard; "Las verdades y mentiras de la pantalla," "Los trucos de la pantalla"). Yet the narrative of "'Che' Ferrati" offers only a partial reversal of the mastery of technology and technique monopolized by US studios. Ferrati's invention allows Federico to insert himself in—but not overturn—the racial and national hierarchies embedded in Hollywood's mode of production. Studio power brokers are forced to acknowledge Federico's superior acting ability and masculinity; director Roy Margram declares, "hemos acabado por hallar un Henri Le Goffic superior, más artista, más hombre" (957). Yet despite this declaration, the inflexibility of the star system condemns Federico to either continue his masquerade or return to his anonymity as an extra.

These racial and national hierarchies are both highlighted and provisionally undone by the reassertion of male dominance within the heterosexual romance central to the plot, portrayed as permeated from its inception by cinematic forms of looking and desire. In a passage that recalls the visual fragmentation of the woman's body and the proliferation of interchangeable women in Vela's writings, Noriega Hope describes Federico's initial meeting with the flapper Hazel van Buren.
at the Mount Wilson observatory: "su vista clavóse irresistiblemente en dos pantorillas que, un poco más allá, pendían sobre el abismo... Luego vio el rostro imperturbable de una girl de las calles, de los almacenes, de los cines" (932). Federico's gaze first focuses fetishistically on Hazel's calves before moving to her face, described in terms of anonymous young women circulating in public space. Hazel's glances at Federico also signal a de-individualizing and explicitly filmic form of desire: she mistakes him for a movie star, foreshadowing her growing fascination with Le Goffic. After Hazel sends a flirtatious note to Federico in his disguise as the star, the ironies of his situation push him to the verge of suicide. In the story's climax, after a physical confrontation with Hazel, Federico and departs for Mexico to make a new start in life with his earnings. Jason Borge argues that in "'Che' Ferrari" and other Latin American fictions with Hollywood settings, "The exaltation and belittlement of North American women serve as tropes of enchantment and disenchantment through which Hollywood and the mass culture it epitomizes are brought down to size," a strategy that offers "symbolic mastery over the United States and its popular film industry" (55). Yet Borge does not address the intertextual relationships between the story and journalistic discourses that aligned Hollywood with technological mastery while framing the Mexican nation as the only viable space for self-realization.

Accounts of Mexican actors' real-life sojourns in Los Angeles proliferated in El Universal Ilustrado's pages, mimicking the profiles of US stars that appeared in the magazine's weekly section "Crónicas de Los Ángeles." Elvira Ortiz, who had previously appeared in a handful of Mexican films, offered a conventionalized narrative of her entrance in the film business entitled "Mis primeras experiencias en el 'set'" (28–29). The text is interspersed with photos that provide a behind-the-scenes glimpse at film production, offer proof of Ortiz's intimacy with Hollywood luminaries like Spanish actor Antonio Moreno, and show her as a bathing beauty, a stock trope of studio publicity photos. Similarly, an account by actor/producer Miguel Contreras Torres of a trip to Los Angeles to film scenes for his cross-border drama El hombre sin patria stressed longstanding fantasies of visiting Hollywood and encounters with well-known actors like Rudolph Valentino (35). Mexicans' participation in US productions was presented as a point of pride, even as it highlighted the failure to establish a national industry. Commenting on the Hollywood roles of Mexican actress Ligia de Golconda, journalist Rafael Fuentes Jr. observes, "Miles y miles de intentos
Remediating Cinema in *El Universal Ilustrado*

cinematográficos ha habido entre nosotros [...] el resultado final fue un fracaso. Y es que la técnica, esa técnica de la pantalla que los americanos tienen aprisionada entre sus manos y no dejan huir fácilmente, faltaba de manera lastimosa en nuestras producciones” (59). Mentioning Golconda’s appearance in the film *El secreto* (*Her Sacrifice*, 1926), Fuentes urges readers to attend its Mexico City premiere, declaring “Hay que ayudar hasta donde sea posible a estos y a todos los compatriotas que se han lanzado tras la conquista de gloria” (59). In the absence of a viable film industry, success in Hollywood could be framed as holding patriotic significance.

In *El Universal Ilustrado*, literary works like “Che’ Ferratí” offered the possibility of symbolically re-writing the relationship between Mexico and Hollywood, while journalistic accounts made visible the labor of Mexican film industry workers, visually and verbally positioning them alongside the US industry’s power brokers. Yet even as chronicles of Los Angeles fueled readers’ fascination with Hollywood, *El Universal Ilustrado’s* coverage of local productions signaled persistent desires to lay claim—however precariously—to a film industry Mexico City could call its own. The magazine’s film critics emphasized that in order for a national film industry to take root, it was necessary to cultivate not only technological proficiency, but also a patriotic and discriminating viewer.

**National Production, Cosmopolitan Spectatorship**

Whereas literary texts and Hollywood chronicles developed imaginaries of spectatorship and production that privileged individual fantasies and desires, emerging forms of journalistic coverage and film criticism sought to enlist the cinema in service of explicitly nationalistic goals. The first half of the 1920s was marked by initial optimism, then disappointment regarding ambitions for a Mexican film industry as Hollywood solidified its dominance of Mexican screens. During World War I, French, Italian, and German industries faced profound challenges to producing and distributing films, and US production companies took advantage of the circumstances to expand aggressively into global film markets (Thompson). Beginning in the late teens, they devoted special attention to Mexico, hoping to discourage film piracy (prevalent along the US-Mexico border) and establish a “gateway to even larger and more lucrative audiences in other parts of Latin America” (Serna 31–33). The percentage of US films shown in Mexico increased sharply
from just over 29 percent in 1917 (Amador and Ayala Blanco 161) to nearly 56 percent in 1920 and over 87 percent by 1925 (de los Reyes, *Sucedió en Jalisco* 145).

After a period dominated by non-fiction compilation films (1911-16) documenting the events of the Revolution, film producers turned to fiction, yielding a handful of box-office successes like *Santa* (1918), adapted from Federico Gamboa’s naturalist novel, and the serial film *El automóvil gris* (1919), based on a real-life case involving a gang of motorized bandits. Impresario Germán Camus constructed studio facilities in the capital in 1920, generating new optimism about the prospects for domestic production (de los Reyes 50-51). Yet by mid-1922, Camus’s studio had suspended its activities due to the “fracaso económico originado por el alto costo de las cintas, que el público quiere ver al mismo precio que las extranjeras” (Soto, “Crónica de México” 258). The presence of Hollywood films, in particular, undercut the financial prospects of Mexican productions; they generally covered the cost of their production in the domestic market and could be sold cheaply overseas (Thompson 1). Mexican features thus struggled to recoup their budgets in a market glutted by inexpensive films. Contreras Torres also complained of unfavorable agreements with distributors and exhibitors who kept the bulk of the box-office profits (Soto, “Yo prefiero las morenas” 604). After a brief wave of films made between 1920 and 1922, the number of features produced in Mexico declined from fourteen in 1922 to ten in 1923 and five in 1924 (de los Reyes, *Bajo el cielo de México* 244).

Throughout this initial boom in production, *El Universal Ilustrado* publicized domestic film production through interviews with Mexican actors and photo essays that showcased features in progress, offering visible evidence of Mexico’s incipient industry. These efforts were almost inevitably framed in patriotic terms; for example, upon the release of Alfredo B. Cuellar’s film *El escándalo* in 1921, the magazine claimed, “La cinematografía nacional ha entrado en un período de verdadero auge que hace creer que llegará a alcanzar un lugar decoroso entre la producción mundial” (“Una gran película nacional” 35). Films and journalistic texts alike invoked the emerging iconography of post-revolutionary nationalism, which packaged regional customs, crafts, and folklore into an imagined national identity suitable for both domestic and foreign consumption (Saragoza 92–93, 98–101).
In particular, the charro or traditionally costumed cattle wrangler, increasingly framed as a national icon in the 1920s (Nájera Ramírez), enjoyed a prominent place in adventure films starring Contreras Torres, which eschewed the aristocratic settings of previous Mexican feature films in favor of on-location shooting. In an interview published in *El Universal Ilustrado*, the actor declares, “Para qué interpretar ‘snobs’ y señoritas de alta sociedad si nosotros somos, ante todo, hombres nuevos, de una raza que no puede distinguirse por su ‘snobismo’?” (Ega 17). Promising that his upcoming film *El caporal* (*The Foreman*, 1921) would depict “nuestros hombres de lucha y acción,” Contreras Torres invokes a rhetoric of racial superiority and—surprisingly—the stars of Hollywood westerns, infamous for their denigrating representations of Mexicans:

No crea usted . . . que en la película aparecen indios miserables y casucas más miserables aún. No . . . México tiene bellezas imponderables y los verdaderos hombres de hacienda no son los exponentes de una raza degenerada e inútil . . . Creo que si los americanos hacen maravillas con un William Hart o un Douglas Fairbanks, nosotros necesitamos actores que, como ellos, sinteticen el alma de México. (17)

These comments privilege whiteness by linking it to the physical force and dynamism associated with male Hollywood stars, signalling an overlap between the racial hierarchies enforced by Hollywood’s mode of representation and production and the rhetoric of postrevolutionary nationalism.

Even as Contreras Torres framed indigenous communities as a source of racial degeneration, other rural melodramas echoed tendencies towards indigenismo in postrevolutionary cultural policy. Intellectual elites embarked on the systematic study and documentation of native populations while encouraging their assimilation into the Spanish-speaking, mestizo “mainstream” (López). These contradictions are evident in a 1921 article publicizing the film *En la hacienda*, directed by Ernesto Vollrath and produced by Germán Camus (Figure 3). Featuring two photographs of actress Elena Sánchez Valenzuela costumed as an indigenous woman and posing with a clay water jar, the article notes that she “interpreta el espíritu dulce y sufrido de nuestras indígenas. Su papel en la obra . . . viene a sintetizar . . . a las hijas de esa raza de bronce que dentro de su imposibilidad interior, guardan un exceso de altos sentimientos altruistas” (“Las próximas películas nacionales” 27).
This description feminizes the indigenous, describing them as passive and long-suffering. At the same time, the images of the actress—who is light-skinned with dark hair and European-looking features—highlight the gap between the indigenous ideal and its onscreen embodiment, whitening and thereby effacing the figure of the indigenous woman. The discursive and visual framing of national film production in the magazine reinscribed hierarchies of gender and race, even as it sought to appropriate cinema for patriotic ends.
Although publicity discourses surrounding domestic film production drew on the ambivalent rhetoric of postrevolutionary nationalism, unlike the muralist movement and efforts to popularize indigenous arts and crafts, the impact of Mexican feature films in the 1920s was sharply limited. Beyond their disappointing box-office returns, these productions failed to meet the technical standards established by imported films. Tellingly, a 1921 article in *El Universal Ilustrado* posed the question “¿Qué Falta en México Para que las Películas Resulten Perfectas Fotográficamente?” to Mexico City cameramen (Bermúdez Zatarain 35). Contributors like Noriega Hope and columnist Cube Bonifant, respectively director and star of the 1923 film *La gran noticia* (known as “la película de los periodistas mexicanos”), published humorous first-person accounts of their own rather hapless filmmaking activities (“La gran noticia”; Bonifant, “Algo que ustedes no saben;” Noriega Hope, “Indiscreciones”). Even as they demystified film production for *El Universal Ilustrado*’s readers, these narratives emphasized the technical and practical obstacles to local film production. On occasion, contributors even broke with nationalistic rhetoric and panned Mexican films (Bonifant, “Permitan que les cuente algo”). Yet the magazine continued to invoke an appreciation for Mexican films as a sign of elevated taste, defining norms of spectatorship that yoked film consumption to ambitions for national production.

Conceptions of cinematic technique—understood in terms of both technical mastery and aesthetics—were at the heart of *El Universal Ilustrado*’s attempts to foster the proper critical orientation towards cinema in its readers. In the March 1921 debut of the section “La crítica y las películas,” the magazine invited readers to send letters expressing their opinions about recent releases for possible publication, providing guidelines that enumerate elements of cinematic technique: “Tanto nuestro juicio como el de nuestros lectores, deseamos que abarque,
no solo la película juzgada como entretenimiento, sino en su parte de interpretación, dirección, técnica, argumento, fotografía y presentación” (“Un servicio a nuestros lectores” 48). Film critics’ judgments were informed by references both to Hollywood productions and their European rivals, which were often presented as excessively risqué and technically deficient by comparison. Film critic Marco-Aurelio Galindo declared German film producers—who were seeking to recapture their lost share of foreign markets in the early twenties—“desconocedores de la técnica fotográfica, desconocedores de la técnica de la dirección, desconocedores de los efectos dramáticos, desconocedores del arte de la expresión” (“Los estrenos cinematográficos” 51). Galindo turns this condemnation into an opportunity to instruct readers, writing, “Pero, ¿cual es la técnica fotográfica? preguntarán sin un real interés los que frecuentan nuestros salones cinematográficos en busca de una película cuya procedencia los tiene sin cuidado. Estos señores, claro está, no saben otra cosa que de las actitudes de Francesca Bertini o del gesto sabio de Norma Talmadge” (51). Focusing spectators’ attention on camera movement, lighting, and optical effects like fade-outs and irises, Galindo suggested that a proper appreciation of photographic technique could contribute to an awareness of national cinemas’ distinct characteristics and mitigate the seductive appeal of attractive film stars.

Beyond this pedagogy of film viewing, El Universal Ilustrado explicitly sought to link moviegoing to nationalistic ambitions. A 1921 contest that invited readers to vote for the best Mexican film exhibited during the previous year was described as an effort to “cooperar en todos nuestro esfuerzo para crear verdadero cine en México . . . para impulsar hasta donde esté a nuestro alcance, la marcha lenta y difícil de la cinematografía nacional” (“Varías escenas” 12). Yet the contest failed to generate the desired effect: in February 1922, the magazine expressed frustration about readers’ comments on national productions, pronouncing many sectors of the audience unfit to pass judgment on Mexico’s incipient industry. The harshest criticism was reserved for a “público mediocre, formado en su totalidad por elementos mal prevenidos en contra de las Películas Nacionales . . . personas todas sin ninguna cultura previa que juzgan a priori y siempre mal” (“Una opinión” 10). Conversely, the magazine’s definition of a “público intelectual, en muy escasa minoría desgraciadamente” was described as
formado por elemento culto, instruido, previamente preparado y que asiste como crítico inteligente a los progresos del arte mudo nacional, que sigue sus pasos lentos pero seguros, que aplaude los éxitos porque los considera fundados y merecidos; que advierte los defectos y los disculpa en atención que es algo nuevo en nuestro medio que piensa a hacer los primeros tanteos en Cinematografía. (10)

Constituting a transparent attempt to stem attacks on national productions, these comments also reinforce the conventional hierarchies of letrado culture—an impulse in conflict with the El Universal Ilustrado’s self-proclaimed appeal to new readers and popular audiences—by suggesting that an educated, intellectualized mode of film viewing is required for the success of national productions. The magazine’s enforcement of cultural hierarchies suggests Mexican films’ lack of mass appeal; yet it also affirms film spectatorship as an active labor of interpretation and stresses the value of public discourse on cinema when practical measures to foster film production faltered.

The distinct forms of discursive authority exercised in the magazine shaped the range of social meanings attached to cinema as it was remediated through text, photography, and illustration. Remediations of cinema in El Universal Ilustrado blurred the distinction between passive consumers and active participants in film culture as the magazine navigated between emerging discourses of postrevolutionary nationalism and incipient forms of globalized popular culture. Literary texts and crónicas framed cinema’s perceived transformations of subjectivity through texts that framed cinema’s transformation of social practices and perceptual experiences through the lens of heterosexual male desire. Journalistic and fictional chronicles of Hollywood framed Mexicans as cultural producers by rendering their labor in the US film industry visible, but in the process highlighted the subordinate status of Mexican production. Finally, national productions and pedagogical forms of film criticism sought to harness the medium in the service of national progress, but reinscribed hierarchies of race and class embedded in the rhetoric of postrevolutionary nationalism, even as they contested the dominance of Mexican screens by Hollywood films. Navigating between cosmopolitan conceptions of cinematic technique and patriotic rhetoric, El Universal Ilustrado resignified cinema as an aesthetic form, industry, and set of social practices, exemplifying the magazine’s role as a cultural mediator in the construction of a contested postrevolutionary modernity.

University of Georgia
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Michael O. Hironymous of the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin; Emily Sahakian; and the editor of this special issue, Jerónimo Arellano.

NOTES

1 Bartra estimates the number of newspaper readers in Mexico in the period at five percent of the population (302), although overall literacy approached 33 percent by 1930, rendering the visual content of periodicals essential to attracting a larger audience (Serna 90).

2 The magazine’s name became Ilustrado in 1928.

3 See “¿Existe una literatura mexicana moderna?” in the January 22 and January 29 issues of the magazine.


5 Between 1923 and 1925 the magazine published special issues on Colima, Nayarit and Sinaloa, Sonora, Támpico, Chihuahua, Puebla, Yucatán, Veracruz, the Estado de México, and Querétaro. On Rivera, see “La obra genial del pintor Diego M. Rivera,” February 19, 1925 and “Homenaje a Diego Rivera,” March 12, 1925.

6 The difficulty of accessing original periodicals complicates matters, particularly with regard to literary supplements like La novela semanal, which are rarely preserved alongside the standard edition of the magazine.

7 Founded in 1909, the Ateneo de la Juventud was comprised of young intellectuals who advocated educational reform and freedom of thought, including influential figures of the postrevolutionary period like José Vasconcelos, Alfonso Reyes, and Martín Luis Guzmán.

8 This was certainly not the only form of eroticism fostered by film spectatorship; in his memoir La estatua de sal, Novo describes the queer desires activated during his viewing of romantic scenes (Miquel, Disoluciones, 135–36).

9 Margram is a thinly disguised version of Rex Ingram, who directed the quintessential “Latin lover” Rudolph Valentino in The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (1921).
WORKS CITED


Brigard, Rene. “¡Por fin el cinematógrafo no será mudo!” El Universal Ilustrado 22 Nov. 1923, 73, 97. Microform.


———. Por las pantallas de la Ciudad de México: periodistas del cine mudo (Guadalajara: U de Guadalajara, 1995). Print.


———. Prólogo. Monterde, 18 novelas 7–16.


**Keywords:** film, illustrated magazines, visual culture, remediation, postrevolutionary Mexico.

**Palabras clave:** cine, revistas ilustradas, cultura visual, remediación, México posre­volucionario.

Date of Receipt: June 15, 2015
Date of Acceptance: November 15, 2015