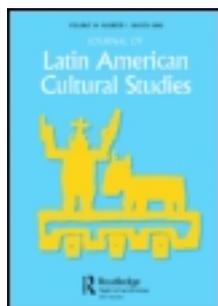


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### Spectacles of Violence and Politics: El automóvil gris (1919) and Revolutionary Mexico's Sensational Visual Culture

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## Rielle Navitski

# SPECTACLES OF VIOLENCE AND POLITICS: *EL AUTOMÓVIL GRIS* (1919) AND REVOLUTIONARY MEXICO'S SENSATIONAL VISUAL CULTURE

*One of the first box-office successes of Mexican cinema, the 1919 'El automóvil gris' (dir. Enrique Rosas) fictionalized a case that exemplified a national crisis of political legitimacy – a series of robberies committed by the 'Grey Automobile Gang' with the complicity of military officials – using the narrative and visual conventions of French and North American crime film. Evoking cosmopolitan iconographies of crime cultivated in the police blotter, serial literature, and cinema, the film casts criminality as a thrilling and threatening sign of local urban modernity, glossing over the problem of corruption by distorting real-life events. Capitalizing on cinema's claims to topicality and authenticity, even as it extends the use of visual reproduction technologies as a means of social control, 'El automóvil gris' exemplifies a sensationalistic visual culture fueled by the dissemination of photochemical images and the expansion of the popular press. By incorporating ostensibly unstaged footage of the real criminals' execution into its fictionalization of the case, 'El automóvil gris' throws into relief the political uses of the cinematic image's reality effects. The film foregrounds visual reproduction technologies' role in registering the violent costs of industrialization, urbanization, and civil war, processes that defined the contested trajectory of modernization in early twentieth-century Mexico.*

The trajectory of early film in Mexico is defined by the encounter of cinema, understood as the quintessential medium of (imported) modernity, with the Revolutionary conflict, a violent demand for a more equitable mode of national modernization. Between 1911 and 1916, film production in Mexico was almost exclusively dedicated to actualities – short films depicting current events – and increasingly complex compilation films reviewing recent national history. Through their documentation of the conflict, emergent technologies of visual reproduction were pivotal in inaugurating a new regime of 'the management and representation of death . . . keys to the implantation of the modern state' (Lomnitz 2005: 58). Charged with rendering visible the achievements of Porfirian modernization, including new methods of policing and punishment (Santoni 1983; Padilla Arroyo 2001), during the Revolution film and photography bolstered the legitimacy of the military leaders who served as patrons to cameramen like Salvador Toscano, Jesús Abitia, and Guillermo, Salvador and Eduardo Alva. During a conflict marked by fleeting alliances, betrayals,

and conflicting claims to political authority, a wholesale militarization of public life destabilized the government's historically precarious 'monopoly of legitimate physical violence' (Weber 2004 [1919]: 33).

The mutually constitutive relationship of cinema and politics was decisive in the production of one of Mexico's first commercially successful fiction films, the 1919 *El automóvil gris/The Grey Automobile*. A suspenseful true-crime<sup>1</sup> narrative that takes Mexico's crisis of political legitimacy as its implicit subject, *El automóvil gris* was directed by cameraman Enrique Rosas with the support of Pablo González, a general in Venustiano Carranza's forces who cherished presidential ambitions.<sup>2</sup> The film adapted a real-life case that had been sensationally publicized in the illustrated press: a string of robberies committed in 1914 and 1915 by the so-called 'Grey Automobile Gang,' who used military uniforms and search warrants to enter the homes of their victims, sparking rumors of involvement by high-ranking officials.

The general likely provided Rosas with the access needed to shoot one of *El automóvil gris*'s most disquieting scenes: a series of ostensibly unstaged images of the execution of six accused members of the gang. González had swiftly condemned them to death in December 1915 – in order to conceal his own guilt, it was rumored. The sequence was originally included in Rosas's compilation film *Documentación nacional histórica 1915–1916/National Historic Documentation 1915–1916*. This was likely his third non-fiction feature after *La revolución en Veracruz/Revolution in Veracruz* (1912), documenting Félix Díaz's uprising in the port, and *Decena trágica/Tragic Ten* (1913), which depicted Díaz's counterrevolution in Mexico City (Leal 2012: 125, 178).<sup>3</sup>

Initially an exhibitor, Rosas had begun showing his own actualities in 1904 (de los Reyes 1986: 28). As the profitability of non-fiction film waned in the late teens, due to politically motivated film censorship, growing public sentiment against the prolonged hostilities, and ambitions for a domestic film industry (de los Reyes 1995b: 71; López 2000: 69), Rosas ventured into fiction filmmaking. In 1917, he produced five melodramas in collaboration with actress Mimi Derba, with González acting as 'silent partner' (Ramírez Berg 2000: 8). In early 1919, a series of suspicious deaths, spectacular escapes, and promised declarations by the Grey Automobile bandits provoked a campaign of investigative reporting that catalyzed the production of *El automóvil gris*. Mimicking the episodic structure of the American, French, and Italian crime serials popular with local audiences – it was originally released in twelve installments over three days, though it survives only in an altered form<sup>4</sup> – the film drew on the narrative and visual conventions of foreign cinema in a bid for commercial success, even as it favored González's reputation by strategically altering the facts of the case as reported in local newspapers.

*El automóvil gris* exemplifies the visual culture of violence that flourished in early twentieth-century Mexico, at once intensely national in its preoccupations and influenced by foreign journalism and cinema, which marshaled the reality effects of mechanically reproduced images in the service of both popular entertainment and social control. Seeking to defuse the very scandal on which it capitalizes, the film forms part of a panorama of mass-mediated images that publicly displayed the unrest and violence accompanying modernization.<sup>5</sup> As Jean Franco argues, the drive to modernize provoked decades of state-sponsored violence in twentieth-century Latin America (2013: 2). While the 'massification of death' in Porfirian and Revolutionary Mexico (Lomnitz 2005: 378) can be understood within these violent trajectories of

modernization, critics have long argued that death has a privileged relationship to constructions of Mexican nationhood (Paz 1993 [1950]; Brodman 1976). Scenes of political assassination formed an integral part of the cult of Revolutionary heroes, and violent death was heavily cultivated as a theme by the popular printmaking workshops and muralist movements that flourished after the Revolution (Sánchez 2010a). The dominance of these selfconsciously artisanal media within hegemonic currents of post-revolutionary cultural nationalism has often overshadowed the role of mechanically reproduced images in displaying contested visions of Mexican modernity.<sup>6</sup>

As one of a tiny number of silent productions to survive to the present day,<sup>7</sup> *El automóvil gris* enjoys a special status in histories of Mexican cinema (de los Reyes 1981) and considerations of how Latin American silent film negotiated imported cinematic codes and local concerns (Ramírez Berg 2000; Schroeder Rodríguez 2008). However, previous discussions of the film have not explored its positioning within a broader contemporary culture of sensationalized violence and politics forged by new modes of visual representation. In this essay, I build on recent scholarship on image-making during the Revolution (Berumen and Canales 2009; Mraz 2012) and criminal photography in Mexico City (Lerner 2007), examining how the visceral impact of physical violence, mediated by the camera lens, foregrounded the social costs of national modernization. I argue that *El automóvil gris* exemplifies the ambiguous reality effects of popular sensationalism, which spectacularly documented topical events as it narrated them through the melodramatic tropes of serial literature (the *folletín*) and imported crime film.

Like a number of early ventures into fiction filmmaking in Mexico, *El automóvil gris* drew on imported crime genres to recast Revolutionary violence and urban crime as ambivalent signs of local modernity. Historian Pablo Piccato observes that the gang was closely associated both with a cosmopolitan imaginary of criminality drawn from popular American and European literature and film, and with the complicity between politicians and bandits that emerged in the Revolution's wake (2001: 176).<sup>8</sup> Capitalizing on these cosmopolitan associations, *El automóvil gris* constructs criminality as a thrilling and threatening sign of urban growth, even as it seeks to gloss over the difficulty of distinguishing between authorities and bandits that has plagued law enforcement in Mexico since Independence (Vanderwood 1981).

A similar strategy is manifest in a number of true-crime films from the period, which have not survived to the present day. Most notable among these were *La banda del automóvil/The Automobile Gang* (Ernesto Vollrath, 1919), adapted from the same case, and *Fanny o el robo de los veinte millones/Fanny or the Theft of the Twenty Millions* (Eduardo Urriola, 1922), which like *El automóvil gris* was produced with the help of a military patron and put a flattering spin on recent scandals involving the armed forces.<sup>9</sup> The plot turned on a missing map that evoked documents compromised in a security breach, while the twenty millions of the title likely referred to the amount stolen by Carranza from the treasury during his fatal flight to Veracruz in 1920 (De los Reyes 1993: 91–92). Reviews and advertisements from the period suggest that they adapted imported genre codes – such as the figure of the physically dynamic American ‘serial queen,’ on which the eponymous villain of *Fanny* was modeled – in order to pleasurable and profitably address local anxieties regarding criminality.

This aim was shared by true-crime productions from the period that had little commercial impact, such as the 1926 *La banda de los cinco deoros/The Gang of the Five of*

*Pentacles*, which dramatized newspaper coverage of organized crime (de los Reyes 1993: 75), as well as *El proceso de Magdalena Jurado/The Trial of Magdalena Jurado* (1920); and *Redención/Redemption* (1924), which portrayed women implicated in real-life ‘crimes of passion.’ Such narratives capitalized on fears of female criminality linked to women’s expanded (and contentious) presence in the public sphere (Piccato 2009: 134). Like the illustrated police reportage on which they were based, true-crime films solicited local audiences by promising both melodramatic thrills and topical authenticity. This representational tension pervades the sensational visual culture of late Porfirian and revolutionary Mexico, marked by the expansion of the illustrated press and the growing use of criminal photography in both journalism and policing.

The sensational mode, characterized by a strong appeal to affective reactions like excitement, anger, pity, and disgust, has recently been invoked as a key category for understanding the intersection between mass culture and sensuous experience under industrial capitalism. Writing in the context of journalism, stage melodrama and early cinema, Ben Singer has argued that popular sensationalism capitalizes on the overwhelming sensory impressions that characterized life in the metropolis after the Second Industrial Revolution (2001: 66). Closely linked to commercial imperatives, the tendency to ‘sensationaliz[e] and literally spectaculariz[e]’ became the means through which reality was commodified,’ as Vanessa Schwartz argues in the case of fin-de-siècle France (1998: 11). Yet in Mexico’s emerging mass culture, sensationalism was as intimately tied to politics as to commerce.

Mexican visual culture drew on the French sensationalist press and American yellow journalism to address the ills and abuses accompanying modernization, from the harsh penal institutions and forced labor camps of the Porfiriato to a perceived explosion of crime in a rapidly expanding Mexico City. Shelley Streeby has examined how representations of ‘endangered, suffering, and dead bodies’ were marshaled in service of ‘political arguments about races, classes, nations, and international relations,’ fueling both imperialist and radical agitation in the context of U.S.-Mexico relations (2013: 5; 2002). Conversely, sensationalism may act as a conservative and stabilizing force, working to codify social norms by shaping collective reactions to their violation (Wiltenburg 2004: 1378). Signaling the mode’s ambivalent relationship to transgression, Carlos Monsiváis suggests that the police blotter [*nota roja*] works to simultaneously ‘exalt and condemn “the forbidden,”’ functioning as a ‘negotiable manual of social mores’ (1994: 12–13).<sup>10</sup> In making a spectacle of representational authenticity, late Porfirian and Revolutionary sensationalism displayed violence as an ambivalent sign of local modernity that could be mobilized to reinforce or critique state authority.

Juxtaposing a suspenseful crime narrative with an ostensibly direct document of capital punishment, *El automóvil gris* constitutes a particularly striking and ideologically charged instance of this phenomenon. While it is impossible to determine if the execution sequence is a depiction of actual physical death, it adopts the visual codes used by actualities to signify the fortuitous capture of a contingent event: rapid pans; shifts in focus in the course of a take; and human figures passing directly in front of the camera (Levy 1982: 248). The sequence opens with a quick pan left and then right, which shows the soldiers assigned to the firing squad; the criminals awaiting execution are displayed by means of a slower pan along an exterior wall, framed to recede on the diagonal. A long shot of an expectant crowd is followed by a very brief shot showing

puffs of gunsmoke and falling bodies; soldiers then approach the prone figures to give each the *coup de grace* (figure 1). The panning motions and wide shot scale, which avoid a focus on individual criminals, suggest a desire to capture the totality of a public spectacle which is alien to the goals of the fictional narrative, but very much consistent with surviving actuality images from the period.<sup>11</sup>

The remainder of *El automóvil gris* observes the continuity editing codes consolidated in America and Europe around 1915: analytical editing that orients the viewer with establishing shots and provides details with close-ups; suspenseful cross-cutting between different spaces where the narrative action unfolds; and dynamic tracking shots.<sup>12</sup> *El automóvil gris*'s fictional sequences present robbery and violence as suspenseful entertainment, using internationally dominant cinematic conventions. By contrast, the execution sequence offers an ostensibly 'real' demonstration of the lethal (if not necessarily legitimate) force of military authorities, exercised on actual rather than fictionalized bodies. While the bulk of the film elaborates a convenient political fiction that exonerates the military of complicity, the demonstration of their repressive power is constructed as authentic and thus irrefutable.

In its strategic re-use of non-fictional images for political ends, *El automóvil gris* also inscribes a historical shift in modes of cinematic production into its textual structure. By the time of the film's release in December 1919, non-fiction filmmaking had almost entirely disappeared. Yet a persistent interest in topical events is signaled by *El automóvil gris*'s publicity campaign, which emphasized supplementary markers of the film's authenticity. Journalist Miguel Nechoechea was credited with collaborating on the script (*Don Quijote* 1919); the lead detective in the case, Juan Manuel Cabrera, appeared as himself; and several sequences were advertised as shot in the actual 'scenes of the crime' (*Excelsior* 1919a). This mingling of fictional codes with sensational fact gives *El automóvil gris* strong affinities to the contemporary police practice of staging and photographing reconstructions of violent deaths. These reconstructions were intended to clarify the sequence of the events and attribute guilt for official purposes; however, the images produced were frequently published in newspapers and illustrated



**FIGURE 1** Still from the execution sequence of *El automóvil gris*. (DVD, FilMOTECA de la UNAM, 2010).

magazines (Lerner 2007: 48–51). For example, photographs from the reconstruction of Grey Automobile gang member Francisco Oviedo's murder appeared in a number of Mexico City newspapers (figure 2). These images provided visual drama to police reportage, even as they promised access to the 'truth' of violent, contingent events by means of forensic protocols. In a similar fashion, in *El automóvil gris* images of recorded and reconstructed violence function as a source of narrative thrills, even as they are linked to technologies of repression. In the following section, I examine how the narrative framing of images of violence in late Porfirian and revolutionary Mexico produced diverse regimes of journalistic and juridical truth, whose analysis in turn sheds light on the representational strategies of Rosas's film.



**FIGURE 2** Reconstruction of the murder of Francisco Oviedo in prison. *El Universal*, January 22, 1919. Courtesy of the Biblioteca Lerdo de Tejada.

## Visual cultures of violence in late Porfirian and revolutionary Mexico

In their documentation and dissemination of images of violence, sensational illustrated journalism of the Porfiriato and images of the Revolutionary conflict followed distinct but converging trajectories. A genealogy might be traced from images of criminals facing firing squads in the state-subsidized newspaper *El Imparcial* (Mraz 2012: 21), to depictions of Revolutionary-era executions, such as a photograph of a man about to be executed ‘for the crime of rebellion’ (*Revista de Revistas* 1916: 2), to the execution sequence of *El automóvil gris*.<sup>13</sup> The rise of the illustrated press was accompanied by proliferating images of killers and corpses: physiognomic portraits of criminals, autopsy photographs of victims, and images of executed lawbreakers and enemy troops. Increasing in sophistication from lithographs to half-tone photographic reproductions, these images were the visual counterpart of a new mode of ‘mechanized killing’ that emerged in the labor camps and prisons of the Porfiriato, and expanded during the Revolution, with the adoption of technologies that facilitated violence on a mass scale: railroads used for troop movements, machine-guns, and modern artillery (Lomnitz 2005: 383). Mechanically reproduced images lent themselves to diverse political uses, from reinforcing the Porfirian vision of order and progress to serving as inflammatory calls for revolt (Streeby 2013).<sup>14</sup> Police reportage of the period under study also reveals the influence of positivist criminology, a discourse that defined the racial and class parameters of Mexican citizenship in the late nineteenth century and beyond (Buffington 2000). Yet the drive to eliminate crime in the name of national progress is increasingly overshadowed by gruesome displays of violence’s effects on bodies, framed as ambivalent spectacles of the modern.

In the late nineteenth century, the positivist principles hailed by the *científicos* of Porfirio Díaz’s regime were crystallized in new regimes of photographic representation. Newspapers like *El Universal* and the state-subsidized *El Imparcial* were the first to extensively use graphic reportage, which first appeared in the former paper in May 1892. A month later, *El Universal* published its first example of illustrated police reportage, which featured minute descriptions of two criminals’ clothing, bearing, and behavior alongside two lithograph portraits (Castillo Troncoso 1998: 167). This doubling of visual and verbal content signals an investment in exhaustively detailed empirical observation, which could be used to reinforce hierarchies of morality that hewed closely to class and racial lines (Buffington 2000: 47–51; Garza 2007). The taxonomic impulse of positivist criminology is evident in *El Universal*’s *Galería de Rateros* (‘Thieves’ Gallery’) or the *Página Negra* (‘Black Page’) published in the official organ *Gaceta de Policía*. These regularly appearing features publicized the faces of ‘known criminals,’ encouraging readers to engage in practices of surveillance and physiognomic classification. The grid layout of the images recalls the series of photographs that illustrated criminological texts, signaling a broad popularization of racialized science.

The *Gaceta de Policía* exemplified the conjunction of scientific, progress-oriented discourses with images of violent injury and death. Publishing articles on forensic procedure and profiles of exemplary officers that attested to the ongoing professionalization of police, the magazine also featured graphic accounts of murders and gruesome accidents, which combined portrait photographs of victims with

speculative engravings showing the events. In the inaugural issue, its editors declared, ‘in addition to its obvious utility, we can assure you that our publication will also be of thrilling interest, given that, to the extent possible without compromising our service, one will be able to read in our newspaper the story of each crime that makes Mexican society tremble’ (*Gaceta de Policía* 1905: 2). The tension between sensationalizing and containing crime is evident in the juxtaposition of forensic science with reconstructions of violent events intended to viscerally thrill the public.

The drive to reconstruct and narrativize, thereby containing the sense of uncontrollable contingency that governed modern experience, was extended by ‘graphic reportage with a certain independence from the text, which presented complete stories with narrative unity expressed in different blocks or vignettes,’ which made its first appearance in 1903 (Castillo Troncoso 1998: 177–78). These proto-cinematic illustrations had close affinities to the exaggeratedly staged images produced by police reconstructions (Lerner 2007: 50). The mass dissemination of these images signals their dual functioning as a tool of social control and a means of commodifying violence for mass consumption, with the latter tendency becoming increasingly dominant in the post-revolutionary period (Lerner 2007: 44).

Journalistic discourses on criminality manifested a parallel set of developments: crime would increasingly be hailed, however ironically, as a sign that Mexico had joined the ranks of modern nations, rather than as a failure of national progress. In 1893, *El Universal* had declared: ‘in Mexico, criminality has not advanced sufficiently to penetrate into certain superior classes: crime has all the brutal simplicity of a group of humans in the first stages of civilization’ (quoted in Castillo Troncoso 1998: 169). This positivistic association between criminality and fears of social and racial degeneracy would shift as processes of urbanization and modernization accelerated. In the wake of the Revolution, ‘crime acquired a new signification – no longer as a symptom of the inferiority and backwardness of the population as a whole, but on the contrary, as proof of a new emergent modernity’ (Lerner 2007: 44). Yet during the active phase of the Revolution, criminal activity was not uniformly hailed as a sign of civilization: robbery and murder in Mexico City were constructed as both urban malady and national crisis, problems compounded by a blurring of the distinction between military and criminal violence. A 1919 editorial lamented:

For nine years, we have fought on this soil for all the ideals of free and civilized nations; blood has amply reddened the earth; but, sad to say, the greater part of those who have lost their lives, did not fall in combat; they fell in an immense series of murders that have unfolded like a great chain. [...] Enough! we say. Save something that is above the Revolution; save the fatherland, which is drowning in a sea of blood. It is necessary, because, looking from above, as far as the eye can see, in long stretches, one can distinguish only victims and executioners, murderers and murdered. (*El Universal* 1919b)

Characterizing the nation’s basic social relation as one of murderous violence, the editorial emphasizes the need to ‘save the fatherland’ through the re-instatement of a vanished distinction between military and criminal aggression, even as it indulges in gruesome, hyperbolic imagery. In a series of articles with a similarly alarmist tone, published throughout the late teens and early twenties, *El Universal* protested the

outbreaks of violence accompanying elections and waged campaigns against *rateros* (thieves) (Piccato 2001: 163–88), continually drawing attention to the unregulated use of violence as a marker of social disintegration.

While political and criminal violence could be difficult to untangle during the active phase of the Revolution, the dissemination of violent images was heavily conditioned by political concerns. Despite pretensions to impartiality,<sup>15</sup> illustrated magazines depicted conflict in a manner consistent with their bourgeois audience, displaying the corpses of soldiers identified as Zapatistas, but not those of Federal soldiers (Gautreau 2009: 121). Mass-circulation newspapers, which were priced more cheaply and enjoyed a broader readership, tended to be less restrained. Sensationalistic strategies responded in part to the economic and political challenges faced by journalism in the revolutionary years, most notably a worldwide paper shortage and the constant threat of reprisals in a rapidly shifting political climate (Gautreau 2009: 119–28). Without government subsidies, newspapers and magazines that thrived during the Porfiriato began to disappear around 1914 (Ortiz Gaitán 2003: 40–50). They were replaced by modern-format mass-circulation publications like the new incarnation of *El Universal*, founded in 1916, and *Excelsior*, whose layout was closely modeled on the *New York Times* (Timoteo Álvarez and Martínez Riaza 1992: 217–18).

The visual documents of the Revolution that circulated in the pages of the popular press, as picture postcards, and through photographic exchanges like the one established by the Casasola family, manifest both aestheticizing and documentary impulses. John Mraz notes a striking diversity in codes of photographic realism in the period; pictorialist conventions inherited from painting and *costumbrista*<sup>16</sup> photography coexisted with an emergent photojournalistic style that aimed to capture events *in media res* (2012: 12). This candid quality could be achieved only intermittently; the fortuitous capture of violent events often eluded revolutionary photographers, complicating images' truth-claims. In addition to the physical danger involved in documenting the conflict, photographers were hampered by heavy glass-plate cameras with long exposure times, which often limited photographers to showing the aftermath of battles, or passing off military exercises as combat (Mraz 2012: 10–12). The technological constraints on image-making encouraged the staging of events: Pancho Villa's contract with the U.S. film producer Mutual supposedly stipulated that battles and executions take place during the day to allow for clearer exposures. While in fact the agreement contains no such provisions,<sup>17</sup> they were widely reported in both the Mexican and the American press (de los Reyes 1995a), constituting a powerful myth of the Revolution's visual mediation.

The staging of Revolution for the cameras complicates Aurelio de los Reyes's assertion that early Mexican cinema manifests a unique investment in historically accurate representation that constitutes its national specificity (1995b). While he notes that early films documenting the conflict strictly observed the sequence of events reported in newspapers, compilation films increasingly used climactic narrative structures and culminating apotheosis sequences glorifying military leaders (López 2000: 67–68). The convention of the apotheosis – a tableau that conveyed an allegorical meaning, often through static arrangements of costumed actors – would have been familiar from both local revue theater and French trick and *féerie*<sup>18</sup> films (Sánchez 2010b: 126). Drawing both on the conventions of foreign cinema and on the political musical revues popular in the period, the apotheosis inscribed images of

conflict within a legible historical narrative linked to the ascendancy of a particular *caudillo*. This politically charged mode of image-making would be refigured after 1916 in semi-fictional films that capitalized on crime and violence.

### Spectacularizing criminality and urban space in *El automóvil gris*

In the late teens and early twenties, a cross-pollination between literary and cinematic crime narratives and sensational police reportage in Mexico City forged an intermedial imaginary of cosmopolitan criminality. Journalists often evoked the tropes of imported serial literature and film. For example, a 1921 newspaper headline promised sensational details of the ‘Rocambolesque escape’ of Grey Automobile Gang member ‘El Chato Bernabé’ (*El Universal* 1921), referring to the protagonist of serial novels by Ponson du Terrail and film adaptations by the French studio Pathé, which were first released in Mexico City in July 1914 (Amador and Ayala Blanco 2009: 33). The close association of criminality with the modernity of the industrialized cities like Paris, London and New York is further suggested by discussions of the growing ‘refinement’ of criminality, which often invoke Thomas de Quincey’s essay ‘On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts.’<sup>19</sup>



**FIGURE 3** Sensational police reportage of the ‘Grey Automobile Gang’ constructs crime as an ambivalent symptom of local modernity. *Excelsior*, October 26, 1919. Courtesy of the Biblioteca Lerdo de Tejada.

One frequently cited cause of this ‘refinement’ was the popularity of imported crime serials, described by detractors as a veritable school of crime. One newspaper claimed, ‘there is no doubt that refined criminal education, of a distinctly European stamp, which has been imported in recent years by means of the cinema, increases each day’ (*El Pueblo* 1916: 1). Citing both lawbreakers and authorities, press reports attributed the spread of advanced criminal techniques to films like the Nick Carter series produced by the French studio Éclair and the Pathé New York serial *The Exploits of Elaine*, released in modified form in Mexico as *Los misterios de Nueva York* (Matute 1991: 34). Speaking out in favor of film censorship, imposed shortly after the premiere of *El automóvil gris*, an official commented:

Everyone will recall that in the past our thieves did not sedate their victims, nor were there masked robbers [*encapuchados*], nor did theft occur on a grand scale. For this to occur, it was necessary that models come from abroad. In this fashion, stemming from the exhibition of ‘The Mysteries of New York’ with copious attendance by thieves [*rateros*], they modernized their strategies and were more easily able to elude the police. (*El Universal* 1920)

The perceived two-way traffic between criminal acts and criminal fictions also signals the extent to which contemporary urban experience in Mexico City was understood through the lens of imported narratives of criminality. By suggesting that the abundant disguises and ingenious criminal schemes portrayed in imported crime serials had influenced local practices, such comments construct crime as a highly ambivalent marker of Mexico City’s ‘civilization’ (figure 3).

This rhetoric recurred frequently in the coverage of the ‘Grey Automobile Gang’ case; for example, member Francisco Oviedo’s escape from prison was described by *El Universal* as having been achieved ‘with an audacity only imaginable in films.’ After Oviedo was re-captured and murdered by a fellow prisoner, the same newspaper stated, ‘It is indispensable that a film be released. Inevitably, we all must remember, as a comparison, the exciting and at times unbelievable episodes of *The House of Hate*,’ an American serial starring local favorite Antonio Moreno (quoted in de los Reyes 1981: 240). Accordingly, Rosas was far from the only entrepreneur to capitalize on developments in the case: distributor Ausencio Martínez exhibited the Vitagraph serial *The Scarlet Runner* under the title *El automóvil gris*, a misleading marketing strategy that sparked legal action by Rosas, who had copyrighted the title.

Rosas also launched a publicity campaign asserting the ‘thrilling actuality’ [*palpitante actualidad*] of his version (*El Universal* 1919a). Distributor Germán Camus’s aforementioned *La banda del automóvil* was released in September 1919, again amid protests by Rosas (de los Reyes 1981: 246). Copyright disputes, the threat of censorship by local authorities, and libel suits lodged by the alleged criminals contributed to ongoing newspaper publicity that likely supplemented the film’s box office receipts. As critic Carlos Noriega Hope ironically commented, ‘The red flags of scandal gave [the film] luster and splendor and all of the questions of judicial boards and watermarked paper served to stimulate the curiosity of our public on a daily basis’ (1919: 5). In the case of *El automóvil gris*, a public debate about the legality of representing true crime, staged in the pages of the popular press, became spectacular entertainment.

In January 1919, the magazine *El Universal Ilustrado* directly compared the events of the case to a suspenseful film that unfolded over a series of distinct ‘episodes,’ in turn linking it to a culture of sensationalism with an international scope:

Public anticipation, now very difficult to excite, given the sensationalism to which it has become accustomed by the rapid succession of surprising spectacles the world over, has followed with renewed avidity the most minor episodes of this tragic film in which those involved lose their lives in circumstances that are unclear to the authorities and the threads of the plot slip from one’s hands, and the physiognomies of the true criminals are hidden behind a veil of mystery. (El Universal Ilustrado 1919: 6)

Developments in the case, successively reported in the police blotter, came to resemble the suspenseful installments of serialized literature and film, as rumors of military abuses sustained public interest. Yet political and practical obstacles to assigning guilt and innocence meant that the coverage of the case lacked the moral legibility of sensational crime melodrama, precisely the quality that Rosas’s film sought to restore to it. In this concluding section, I examine two key aspects of *El automóvil gris* – its ambiguous construction of criminality and authority, and its treatment of urban space – to illuminate its mediation of a crisis of national politics by means of a cosmopolitan iconography of crime.

While the political situation had stabilized to some degree in 1917 with the adoption of a new constitution and Carranza’s ascension to the presidency, the need to fortify the legitimacy of the military and police was still keenly felt at the time of *El automóvil gris*’s production. In the anarchic atmosphere of the occupation of Mexico City, marked by violence, food shortages, and proliferation of counterfeit currency, police authority was undermined by soldiers’ indiscriminate looting (Piccato 2001: 185). Yet in *El automóvil gris* the police work efficiently and effectively to capture the gang; González himself appears in a scene where he urges the detectives to redouble their efforts.

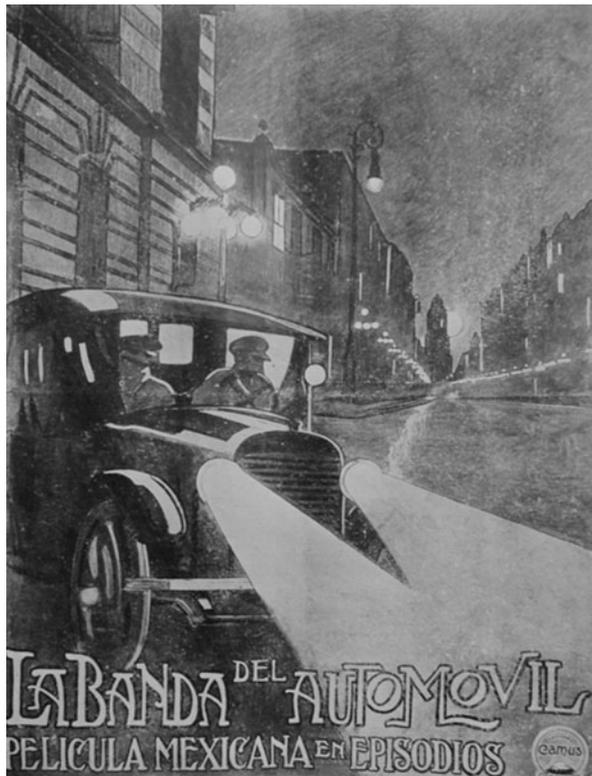
Other historical events are clearly distorted: while the search warrants used in the historical robberies bore the authentic signatures of military officers, in contrast to those used in similar crimes (De los Reyes 1981: 183), in the film they are depicted as having been stolen by the gang’s leader, Higinio Granda, with the complicity of a low-ranking colleague on the police force. Official involvement in the robberies is further disavowed by means of a curious narrative device. Roughly mid-way through the film, Granda pretends to respond to the summons of a higher-up in a private room for the benefit of an accomplice; during a police raid later in the film, the supposed crime boss is revealed to be a mannequin dressed in a Carrancista uniform. De los Reyes notes that this strange scene deviates from both plausible historical fact and pre-existing legends about the band, playing on and then refuting popular suspicion about military complicity in the crimes (1981: 248).

Yet at the same time, the plot of *El automóvil gris* emphasizes the slippage between criminal, police, and military activity manifest in the period. The historical Granda worked as a Zapatista captain concurrently with his participation in the robberies, and as a court clerk after his imprisonment (Piccato 2001: 178). Similarly, his character in *El automóvil gris* infiltrates the ranks of both the police (to steal the search warrants used in the robberies) and the military (to escape prison through conscription into the

army). In a parallel development, an elderly victim of one of the robberies receives police permission to dispense vigilante justice. The authorities themselves adopt disguises in the film, dressing as electricians in order to gain entry to a rooming house where one of the bandits and his lover are in hiding. Rosas's original script even includes a scene, not present in the surviving version of the film, in which the police fight their own agents in disguise, having mistaken them for the bandits (Serrano and Moral 1981: 28–29).

While addressing distinctly national concerns, this fluidity of authority and identity was a narrative trope that would have been familiar from crime serials like Louis Feuillade's *Fantômas* (1915) and *Les vampires* (1916), produced for the French studio Gaumont, in which disguise, impersonation, and the infiltration of criminals in high society and the police force are constant. Yet *El automóvil gris*'s inclusion of the non-fictional execution sequence signals that matters of guilt, innocence, and the legitimacy of violence had literally life-and-death stakes during the Revolution and its aftermath.

*El automóvil gris* tempered the socially disruptive potential of its subject matter by circumscribing the 'truths' produced by means of visual reproduction within



**FIGURE 4** Drawing on the tropes of imported crime serials, an advertisement for *La banda del automóvil* emphasizes Mexico City's broad, electrified avenues, products of urban reform. *Don Quijote*, September 10, 1919. Courtesy of the Biblioteca Lerdo de Tejada.

melodramatic moral polarities. An advertisement for the film is particularly suggestive in this regard:

This film is not a fiction. Traced [*calcada*] from real events, it is an exact transcription of the truth, selected from the incongruent details of a mystery. Plotted around the crimes of the Grey Automobile Gang, it has exciting and dramatic details, terrible scenes and poetic renderings [*pincladas*] which are rays, pious lightning bolts of virtue that from time to time break the shadow of the fearful den where evil and crime seek refuge. (*Excelsior* 1919b)

The trope of light penetrating darkness constitutes what Shelley Streeby, writing in the context of exposés about Porfirian Mexico, calls a ‘rhetoric of exposure, of bringing hidden horrors into the light of day,’ a recurring strategy of sensational journalism (2013: 172). This rhetoric exemplifies the press’s drive to investigate and verify real events, which are then attributed with melodramatic characteristics (here, a Manichean opposition of piety and virtue to ‘evil and crime’). The advertisement emphasizes *El automóvil gris*’s narrativization of violent events, the manner in which it assembles a plot from a profusion of ‘incongruent details.’ At the same time, it evokes the role of light in creating a photochemical impression of the real, highlighting the indexical character of photography and its function as a ‘trace’ of contingent events.

Both Rosas’s and Camus’s adaptations of the Grey Automobile gang case traded on these apparently opposed, but paradoxically linked, processes of narrativization and photographic inscription. Their advertising campaigns and reviews emphasized a mastery of the suspenseful narrative structures and high-quality cinematography associated with foreign cinema. This is evident in a shared emphasis on urban space, despite divergent portrayals of the capital. *El automóvil gris* shows a Mexico City visibly ravaged by conflict, while *La banda del automóvil* emphasized the capital’s electrification and wide avenues, products of urban reform (figure 4).<sup>20</sup> A review of *La banda del automóvil* notes that an ‘admiring exclamation escaped the spectators when there appeared on the screen the surprising effect of the Avenida del 5 de Mayo [which runs along the Zócalo] at midnight’ (*El Herald de México* 1919b). Writing in the context of still photography, Mraz notes, ‘Photographing the luminous city must have offered a double certification of the up-to-date: the images not only testified to Mexico’s electrical capacity, but also demonstrated the technological capabilities of the photographers’ (2012: 35). Like its convoluted plot and succession of characters in disguise, the film’s skillful cinematography established affinities to foreign film: reviews of Camus’s version highlighted the use of optical effects like irises and dissolves, described as a key part of the audience appeal of American, French, and Italian films (*El Herald de México* 1919a: 8).<sup>21</sup>

By contrast, a review of Rosas’s film notes, ‘Strangely, the streets have not been scoured [for locations] to make Mexico City seem prodigiously beautiful, a mania of producers around here; almost everything was filmed in ugly, deserted passageways, which give realism to the chases in other incredible locations, and the formidable combats, proper to the anarchic age in which they took place’ (Soto 1920: 121). *El automóvil gris* traded heavily on the sense of authenticity offered by filming on location, although it refuted more cosmetic visions of local urban modernity. In sequences depicting the robberies, establishing long shots are carefully framed to include precise

house numbers. The film's outdoor shooting and staging in depth, which frequently prompt comparisons to Feuillade's serials (Ramírez Berg 2000: 20), work to document the half-ruined spaces of Mexico City, even as they demonstrate Rosas's skillful cinematography. Deep-focus shots, many of which showcase the eponymous automobile moving towards the foreground, simultaneously capture the urban backdrop and display a mastery of photographic technique.

The importance of urban space in *El automóvil gris* is also signaled by the appearance of large-scale maps of the city during scenes in which the criminals plot future robberies. In the first sequence of the film, the bandits swear allegiance to each other by placing their hands atop a map of the capital. In a close-up shot, Granda indicates to his conspirators the route they will take to reach their target. In a later scene, Granda discusses a new heist with an accomplice at the police station, using a wall-mounted map to explain the plan of attack. This second map clearly shows the city's broad, modern avenues and the concentration of robbery sites in the new *colonias* constructed for wealthy residents in the western sector of the city. It thus subtly signals both the exclusionary program of urban reform in Mexico City, and the capacity for illicit traffic along its modern thoroughfares, not to mention in the ranks of the police force charged with repressing these criminal activities (Whissel 2008: 161–84, 206–14).

The criminal potential of modern technology is also emphasized by the film's virtuosic tracking shots, which Ramírez Berg compares to Italian film epics of the same period (2000: 4). Harnessing the camera lens to the automobile, these shots foreground their joint role in traversing and mapping the city. During the first robbery, shown in flashback, the automobile pauses to pick up the individual robbers, now dressed in military uniforms, on various street corners. Emphasizing physical and mechanical dynamism – the robbers leap onto the automobile while it is in motion – this scene also highlights the bandits' control of urban space, indicated by their translation of the route indicated on the map into coordinated action across several locations.

Beyond a treatment of the city that drew on the conventions of French and Italian cinema, *El automóvil gris* evokes a cosmopolitan imaginary of crime in its villains' off-duty costumes. When not dressed as soldiers, the criminals wear caps, ascots, and suits resembling the attire of the French *apache*.<sup>22</sup> Some contemporary spectators found their appearance problematically foreign, in part because it was incongruous with the racialized vision of criminality developed by positivist thought. Evoking criminological discourses that equated certain physical characteristics with an innate propensity towards violence, Noriega Hope pictures the 'real' Granda as savage and primitive:

I always thought that the fearful gang's leader was sturdy in appearance; I imagined that this offspring of evil would be a blood-soaked bandit, whose pupils would flash while his thick, hairy eyebrows underlined all of the horror of his look . . . [But] in the film the leader of the Grey Automobile Gang shocks us with his broad gestures that have the air of the boulevard, with his graceful component of *sportman* [sic] dressed, for dilettantism, as a Parisian *apache*. (1919: 5)

While Granda was in fact a Spanish immigrant with pale skin and delicate features, as readers of the illustrated press would have been aware, Noriega Hope's review

suggests a dissonance between a local and a French iconography of crime, a precarious balance between national content and cosmopolitan imagery and narrative structures.

In *El automóvil gris*, physical resemblance functions a point at which the tension between the cosmopolitan and the national, and between documentation and dramatization, becomes strikingly evident. Reading the execution sequence as an attempt to quell Europe-oriented, bourgeois Mexicans' anxieties about shifting class and race hierarchies in the wake of the Revolution, Schroeder Rodríguez focuses on the film's incoherent portrayal of the Grey Automobile Gang's members, noting the incongruence between the indigenous-mestizo features of the real-life bandits and the appearance of the stage actors who play them in the film (2008: 50). He critiques the sequence's wide framing, suggesting that 'what we see are not individuals, but a faceless, indistinct pattern of falling bodies. The effect of this closing montage is that the viewer's previous identification with the bandits is severed, criollo fears of losing their privileges and properties are effectively allayed, and revolutionary activity is equated with banditry' (2008: 50). Schroeder-Rodríguez helpfully calls attention to the imbrication of local politics with the adaptation of imported film genres and conventions. However, what he interprets as a dehumanization of the bandits can be more adequately explained as a strategic use of the reality effects of cinematic convention, a shift from fictional codes that entertain, to actuality conventions that document (or construct) a display of capital punishment exercised on actual bodies. Rosas's film does not, as Schroeder-Rodríguez suggests, propose a conservative equation of revolution with banditry; rather, it makes a reactionary attempt to re-impose the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence and appropriations of private property that had effectively disappeared during the occupation of Mexico City.

In its strategic use of fictional and non-fictional codes, *El automóvil gris* exemplifies a mode of sensational authenticity at once distinct from, and intertwined with, an international repertoire of conventions for depicting criminality and violence. Drawing on visual documents of the Revolution, the film appropriates imported cinematic codes to render the breakdown of the state's monopoly on legitimate violence as suspenseful entertainment, and cast criminality as a sign of urban growth. *El automóvil gris* thus constitutes a powerful instance of the political uses of verisimilitude, and an extension of public spectacles of violence that sensationalized the contested course of modernization in Mexico.

## Notes

- 1 For clarity, I use this anachronistic term to refer to crime narratives based on actual events.
- 2 González is perhaps best known for orchestrating the assassination of Emiliano Zapata in April 1919.
- 3 De los Reyes tentatively attributes *La revolución en Veracruz* to Rosas, and bases his identification of Rosas as the cameraman of *Decena trágica* on testimony by Francisco Rosete Aranda (1986: 83, 93).
- 4 *El automóvil gris* was re-exhibited in 1933 and 1937 in a 111-minute version with added dialogue and sound effects.

- 5 On the issue of statistical versus perceived increases in crime during the late Porfiriato, see Piccato 2001: 52–53, 136, and Castillo Troncoso 1998: 163; both suggest that public perceptions of increased crime exceeded statistical measures of its growth.
- 6 See Ades and McClean 2009 and Albiñana 2010. It is worth noting that the work of José Guadalupe Posada, celebrated by the muralists as the epitome of Mexican popular art, included many sensationalist prints depicting modern traffic accidents and incidents from the police blotter. Yet Posadas's satirical slant on current events was quite distinct from the sensational authenticity offered by photographic and filmic depictions of violent death.
- 7 Before the restoration of *El tren fantasma* and *El puño de hierro*, two adventure films directed by Gabriel García Moreno in Orizaba, Veracruz, *El automóvil gris* was the only work of fiction film from the silent period available for viewing by scholars. *El puño de hierro* was the first to be restored in the 1970s; both films were restored in 1983 and again under the direction of Esperanza Vázquez Bernal in the early 21st century (Wood 2011).
- 8 It has been speculated that the gang's epithet was influenced by the public's memory of *L'auto gris*, a French film depicting the exploits of a Parisian gang of automobile bandits that was exhibited in Mexico City in 1912 (De los Reyes 1981: 188).
- 9 The film's principal actor Ángel Álvarez described the role of General Cal y Mayor in funding and distributing the film in an interview given in the 1950s (Sánchez García 1954: 29–30).
- 10 All translations from Spanish are mine.
- 11 Actuality images from the period can be viewed in *Memorias de un Mexicano/Memories of a Mexican* (Carmen Toscano, 1950) and *Epopeyas de la Revolución/Epic of the Revolution* (Gustavo Carrero, 1961), as well as in more recent works such as *La historia en la mirada/History in the Gaze* (José Ramón Mikelajáuregui, 2010).
- 12 See Ramírez Berg 2000 for a detailed discussion of the adaptation of continuity editing codes in the film.
- 13 Executions were also subject to a sensationalistic treatment by journalists, characterized by a melodramatic rhetoric that aligned it with popular entertainment. In 1915, humanist Julio Torri decried 'the lack of specialists in the press. He who writes about theater and sports will also cover executions [by firing squad] and fires. Pernicious confusion of concepts! An execution is not a sport or a theatrical spectacle. This is the source of the florid style that afflicts the connoisseur, those expressions so tiresome to read like "visibly moved," "his expression denoted contrition," "the terrible punishment"' (Monsiváis 1987: 14).
- 14 The Flores Magón brothers' *Regeneración*, published on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border and illustrated with polemical prints, is perhaps the most pertinent example (Streeby 2013: 111–132).
- 15 For example, *Revista de Revistas* promised in its inaugural issue that it would not 'wage political or religious campaigns' (1910: 1).
- 16 This term refers to visual and literary representations of local customs and 'types.'
- 17 The contract is reproduced in Orellana 2003: 291–96.
- 18 This term refers to a fantastical genre of early film, produced primarily by Georges Méliès and the Pathé studio.
- 19 Examples include Hernández 1922: 9 and *El Universal Ilustrado* 1923: 11.
- 20 For discussion of urban reforms in Mexico City, see Piccato 2001: 17–33.

- 21 The distinction between reviews and paid publicity was often unclear in the period; I suspect that this item was the latter.
- 22 The figure of the Parisian *apache*, associated with motorized banditry, was heavily evoked in the press discourse around a murder linked to the *La banda de los cinco de oros*.

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