

FILM AND GENDER IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY SPAIN: A NEW IMPULSE TOWARDS MODERNITY

Resumen

Varios son los críticos que han mencionado el cine como una fuente tanto de cambio social como de preocupación a principios del siglo veinte en España. Hasta el momento, sin embargo, no existe un estudio que examine en detalle el papel de este nuevo medio de comunicación en los cambios y las transformaciones que estaba experimentando la sociedad española anterior a la Guerra Civil. Me propongo explorar aquí, precisamente, la conexión entre la industria cinematográfica y la modernización de los modelos de comportamiento de la mujer española en los años veinte y treinta. Me enfocaré especialmente en el impacto de las películas y las estrellas que protagonizaban las mismas en el abandono de papeles de género tradicionales que se observa entre las mujeres españolas de principios del siglo XX. Estudiaré varios textos y películas que nos abren una ventana hacia cómo, dentro de una sociedad eminentemente tradicional y patriarcal, el cine se convirtió en un espacio en el que las mujeres podían tomar conciencia de nuevos valores, nuevas libertades y nuevas posibilidades.

Palabras clave: *cine, género, papeles femeninos, modernidad, España*

Abstract

Several critics have mentioned cinema as a source of social change and of concern among moralists in early twentieth century Spain. No in depth study exists, however, on the role of cinema in the changing social landscape that preceded the Spanish Civil War. It is my intention here to explore, precisely, the connection between motion pictures and the modernization of female gender models in the 1920s and 1930s in Spain, specifically the role of movies and movie stars in the progressive abandonment of traditional gender roles by Spanish women in the early 20th century. I will examine several texts and films that provide insight into how motion pictures constituted a locus where women became aware of new values, freedoms and possibilities within a very traditional and patriarchal society.

Keywords: *film, gender, female roles, modernity, Spain*

In the December 1912 issue of *Arte y Cinematografía*, a writer signing with the initials K.U. welcomes the news of the first film production company in Spain. After describing the upcoming projects of these pioneers, he concludes the article commending the new producers to embark on their enterprises with:

fe y entusiasmo en su noble empeño, seguros de que alcanzarán honra y provecho si no se apartan del verdadero objeto del cinematógrafo, *que es y debe ser*, el de Moralizar, Educar y Deleitar. (n. p.)

faith and enthusiasm in their noble effort, being sure that they will achieve honor and benefit if they do not stray from the true object of the cinematographer, *which is and must be*, that of providing morals, education and delight.¹ (n. p.)

K.U. finishes his article reminding the first and brand new producers of Spanish national cinema of their duty to provide their audience and their country with a product that is pleasing, and, above all, morally upstanding. As early as 1912, this writer establishes what will be the hopes and fears of both moralists and intellectuals concerning the cinema. It could be an ideal means for either educating or corrupting the unaware viewers that happily absorbed what was presented on screen. The power of the new medium to change social mores was perceived in the early stages of its development as one of its greatest advantages but also one of its most dangerous potentials. Up until now, criticism on the subject of early Spanish cinema has focused mainly on tracing its history and evolution. Joan M. Minguet Batllori establishes that cinema came to Spain around 1896, at the same time that the Lumière machine was exhibited in most European countries. The first Spanish film is dated 1897.² By the early 1920s, Batllori states, cinema had established itself as the dominant entertainment form of the masses in the main cities of the Iberian Peninsula. At this time, most of the screenings were of foreign films, especially American movies, with some French or German features sharing the spotlight. The birth of a true national film industry, say Román Gubern ("El cine") and J.M. Caparrós Lera, would have to wait until the 1930s. It was then that, finally, Spaniards could see on screen national movies that responded to the standards and the expectations set by the super-productions coming out of American studios, already operating from their particular dream factory, Hollywood. The years of 1935-36, states Gubern, are known as the golden age of Spanish cinema ("El cine"). In 1936, however, the conflict between traditionalism and modernity that had been intensifying since the late 19th century finally came to a terrible conclusion. Francisco Franco was an army general serving in Morocco at the time. He started an insurrection that would eventually do away with the changes that the early decades of the 20th century had brought about in the social and ideological landscape of the country. The war also put an end to hopes of an established film industry in Spain.

Several critics have mentioned cinema as a source of social change (Gubern, *Proyector* 59; Pérez Bowie 61) and of concern among moralists (Rey Reguillos 10). No in depth study exists, however, on the role of cinema in the changing

¹ All translations are my own.

² There has been a controversy around this issue. For a long time, "La salida de misa de doce del Pilar de Zaragoza" was considered the first Spanish movie. Recently, however, Jon Letamendi Gárate and Jean-Claude Seguin Vergara have contested this idea. They assure that up until the post-Civil War era, "Riña en un café" (1897), by Fructuoso Gelabert, was commonly considered as the first Spanish film.

social landscape that preceded the Civil War. It is my intention here to explore, precisely, the connection between motion pictures and the modernization of female gender models in the 1920s and 1930s in Spain, specifically the role of movies and movie stars in the progressive abandonment of traditional gender roles by Spanish women in the early 20th century. I will examine several texts and films that provide insight into how motion pictures constituted a locus where women became aware of new values, freedoms and possibilities within a very traditional and patriarchal society.

Film did not change Spanish society single handedly. The three decades preceding the Civil War had been characterized by an intense process of change in a Spanish society that was finally catching up with other modern and industrialized societies. Since the early years of the 20th century, sparked by the loss of the last colonies and the defeat in the war against the United States, Spaniards embarked on a search for values. Intellectuals tried to determine the personality traits that had once given them the status of the greatest nation on Earth. Tradition was being questioned and moral codes revisited. Conservatives saw a return to even more traditional ideals as the answer to the present decline. In their view, modern ways were making Spaniards desert the true Catholic values that had made their country a great empire in the 16th century. These values were being replaced by corrupt principles engendered by industrialization and urbanization. The threat was perceived to come, especially, from the alteration of the traditional family system due to growing numbers of women in the labor market. The spread of the standards of the lower classes to the rest of society was also considered dangerous. Some liberals, however, looked precisely to modern values in more industrialized societies as the solution to create a more democratic and vital country.³ Traditionalists saw cinema as the evil of all evils, a creation that was spreading deviance and revolt among the popular classes and corrupting the virtue and honesty of Spanish women. Liberal thinkers, on the other hand, saw movies as a source of inspiration and normalization of social change.

Traditionalists were especially concerned about how women were negatively influenced by images and ideas reproduced on screen. Starting in the 1910s—coinciding with the popularization of film as the preferred media of entertainment—the streets of the main cities in Spain were witnessing the birth of a new social being: the New Woman. Since the 16th century, Spanish femininity had been modeled after the image of the ideal “ángel del hogar,” or Angel in the House. It had been first defined in 1583 by Father Luis de León in

³ In the early twentieth century, a newspaper such as *Madrid Cómico*, for example, released a great number of articles and caricatures whose matter of concern was the “invasion” of the labor market by women. Many caricatures portrayed male-fashioned women that took the righteous place of, often, their husbands in the social arena. Intellectuals such as Miguel de Unamuno wrote articles and essays criticizing the spreading of “flamenguismo” an attitude related to the lower classes in the South that was becoming popular in other parts of Spain among the middle classes.

his book *La perfecta casada* (*The Perfect Married Woman*). According to this conduct manual, women were domestic creatures who only existed in relation to their husbands and children. The New Woman, in contrast, freely walked the streets of the cities and often had a job that provided them with economic independence. Many saw in her a threat to the family, the ultimate bastion of society. A woman who worked did not need a man to support her, which meant she might not want to get married. This endangered the future survival of the nation, embodied in children. The New Woman was also a sinful being that did not exhibit basic traits of decency, virtuosity, and honesty, since she refused to be invisible and flaunted herself in the public arena. Finally, she contravened the Virgin Mary's signature traits—resignation and subservience—and therefore rejected the ultimate conduct model proposed by the Church. Even though an important contingent of women writers defended the right of women to work and have a life outside the home, movies, above all, made the New Woman attractive and desirable to a female population that was largely illiterate. Thus, conservative voices, especially the Church, blamed the growing presence of the New Woman in the cities on the female models presented in the movies.⁴ Women in Spain were looking at Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich, and not the Virgin Mary, as examples to follow.

Indeed, the power of popular culture to impact social behavior has been firmly established. C.W.E. Bigsby in his article "The Politics of Popular Culture" talks about the emergence of popular culture in the 19th century in these terms:

[i]n the 19th century, the novel, itself both a symbol of the emergence of a new middle class and a mirror of its activities, was despised as a frivolous and immoral distraction. . . . Pop culture is seen by turns as epiphanic and apocalyptic, as evidence of social dislocation, as proof of subversive energy and evidence of decadence. (4-5)

The novel was, in the 19th century, a vehicle for social change and was the source of worry among the dominant classes. The impact fictional women were having on real women was also of special concern. Nancy Armstrong has established how domestic fiction and the type of femininity it portrayed were key elements in the rise of the middle class. Novels were a source of alarm due to the transformations they helped to develop. To a great extent, these alterations came about, Armstrong assures, thanks to the space novels provided for a new type of female citizen.⁵

In the case of movies, the popular classes were the targeted audience and the source of change. The "masses" that, according to José Ortega y Gasset,

⁴ Antonia del Rey Reguillos notes how, during the 1920s, moralists blamed movies for the popularity of new, more carefree fashions coming from abroad.

⁵ In *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong establishes domestic fiction and conduct manuals as the cornerstone for the rise of the middle class and its values in 19th century England.

were "the greatest crisis that can afflict peoples, nations and civilization" (qtd. in C.W.E. Bigsby 11), were invading the urban landscape of Spain. They religiously flocked to the movie theatres to be bewitched by images of poor men and orphans that become rich. Women, full members of the masses in their own right, thrived on stories of young working girls that live a life of freedom, independence and, often, sexual experimentation. Movies, more so than novels in the previous century, marked the birth of mass and global culture. Appealing mostly to the lower classes, pictures brought hope of a different world of increased possibilities. Ramiro de Ledesma, an intellectual writing in the 1920s in Spain, stated that film's virtue was its popularity: "Le ha enseñado a las masas a ocupar su realidad" ("It has taught the masses to occupy their reality"; qtd. in Pérez Bowie 39).

Film, says Román Gubern, became a means to liberate customs and an incitement to eroticism in the strongly Catholic country that Spain was at the time (*Proyector* 80). This was of special concern in the case of women. As soon as 1914, two years after K.U.'s hopeful article, Father Francisco de Barbéns writes a book called *La moral en la calle, en el cinematógrafo y en el teatro* (*Morality on the Street, in the Cinema, and in the Theatre*). He states how sensuality has invaded the heart of modern society and goes on to describe how the lower classes and, especially, women have lost all sense of decency. He condemns the female exhibitions that plague streets, movies and theatres. Low cut dresses, short skirts and a provocative demeanor entice men's imagination and make the city a demoralized space. He goes on to criticize films for awakening the passion of movie-goers in an atmosphere where men and women sit freely together in a dark room. The movies, Father Barbéns concludes, provide "doctrinas subversivas de religión . . . sentimientos de perversidad, de rebeldía a la legítima autoridad. . . ." ("subversive doctrines against religion . . . feelings of perversity and rebellion towards legitimate authority. . . ."; 204). For this priest, movies constitute the essence of all the evils that are a threat to social order.

This testimony may seem a bit extreme and not representative of mainstream reactions towards movies and social mores in the early 20th century. This sort of commentary, however, was common in essays, newspaper articles and magazines directed toward the middle class woman. The main concern seemed always to be the immorality surrounding the movie-going experience. The extent to which this was a normal response to the dangers seen in this new kind of entertainment is best seen in the law. Soon after the popularization of film the government tried to regulate the messages provided by the screen as well as the way these messages were received. In 1913, under the pressure of the Church, film censorship was first established in Spain. It would be reinforced even during the democratic years of the Republic, between 1931 and 1936. One of its main goals was to ensure the decency of the cinematic images being projected on Spanish screens. In 1921, a contributor to the magazine *El mundo*

cinematográfico criticizes a government project to toughen censorship laws. He clearly links censorship with an attempt to control social attitudes surrounding sexuality. For the government, he says, what is most essential is that “ninguna señorita ni ningún pollo se den cuenta de que en el mundo existen la deshonra y el adulterio, aunque estén hartos de conocerlos por libros y periódicos” (“no young lady or young lad realize that dishonor or adultery exist, even if they are tired of knowing about them through books and newspapers”; “¿Vamos a tener nueva censura?”). Censorship tried to control access to information, especially information related to sexual conduct. Another source of concern was the space of the movie theatre itself as a ground for sexual experimentation. In 1920, Director of Security Mr. Millán de Priego ordered that men and women should sit separately in movie theatres, with a special area at the back of the theatre, lit by a red light, destined for married couples (Gubern, *El proyector* 81; Stone 20). Audiences never obeyed the law, but that did not prevent the authorities from trying to reinforce it (Gubern, *El proyector* 81). Maybe they were worried about such displays of public affection as couples communally kissing at the end of romantic comedies. This sort of behavior reportedly coincided with the protagonists’ last kiss at the end of Hollywood movies (Pérez Bowie 99). Finally, in the 1930s, film arrived at the peak of its creative life in Spain and more movies were made that dealt with specifically Spanish issues. The public’s positive response was seen in their success in the box office. At this time, a group called the Feminine Catholic Youth started the “Week against Immoral Cinema,” trying to fight the popularity of obscenity in film. An article about this effort in the conservative paper *El Debate* assures that the Week’s program

merece la atención de todas las familias honradas de España, y muy en particular de la mujer, cuyos sólidos sentimientos de piedad y virtud son la base más halagüeña de la reconstrucción del espíritu cristiano de nuestra patria. (citado en *La Campaña* n. p)

deserves the full attention of all honest Spanish families. It particularly deserves the attention of women, whose strong feelings of piety and virtue are the most hopeful basis for the reconstruction of the Christian spirit of our motherland. (qtd. in *La Campaña* n. p)

In this case, the future of the country is directly linked to the virtue of women. Film, with a corrupting influence in female decency, is jeopardizing the rebuilding of the true spirit of the land. In other words, the “impure” world of cinema is compromising the nation through an evil manipulation of its daughters.

Up to what point, we may wonder, were these fears justified? Was society, specifically women, really influenced by movies? Were women really looking at film and actresses as role models? Women’s voices from the time provide the answer. In *El mundo cinematográfico*, a magazine about movies and, especially, movie stars, we find an article titled “El arte de vestirse” (The Art

of Dressing”), dated in 1917. In it, an anonymous female writer assures her “lectoras,” her female readers, that they will not find better models in fashion and make-up than those seen in the cinema. The only problem, the writer warns, is the lack of modesty common in these models. She also congratulates herself on her love of cinema, which she equates to art: “admirar y comprender el arte, así sea en la manifestación más insignificante, se traduce en cultura; y esa hace muchísima falta a las hermanas españolas” (“admiring and understanding art, even if it is in the most trivial of manifestations, translates into culture, and culture is something that my Spanish sisters need desperately”; “El arte”). Thus, this writer, a woman herself, establishes cinema as both a school of taste and culture.

Along this same line we find another article in *Arte y Cinematografía* in 1935. The article is titled “El séptimo arte y la mujer” (“The Seventh Art and Women”) and is set among drawings of a woman dressed in fashionable clothing—some of it quite revealing. She appears smoking in a tight, low cut, long party dress, playing with a beach ball in a bikini and reading a book in the park in a light summery dress. Perhaps the most interesting picture is the one in which the young woman appears to embrace a city. Tall buildings and factory chimneys are the background for this woman who dreamily wraps her arms around it. Few images exemplify the possibilities that modern life, and the movies as a mirror and extension of it, offer to women of the 20th century: pleasure, culture, (maybe work?), and a sense of control over surroundings that go well beyond the limited space of the home. Above all, the drawings show a woman that has abandoned domesticity, and therefore tradition, as her space of choice. The article itself, written by Carmen Leira, also praises the cinema for its power to educate. She writes:

Que el cine ha influido enormemente en nuestra vida es indudable. Recuerdo que en mis años de colegiala nada estimulaba tanto mi afán de obtener buenas notas semanales como la promesa que me hacían mis padres de llevarme, en premio a mi aplicación, el jueves y domingo por la tarde al cine. (n. p.)

There is no doubt that the cinema has greatly influenced our lives. I remember how, in my years as a school girl, nothing stimulated my desire to get good weekly grades like my parents’ promise of taking me to the movies on Thursday and Sunday afternoons in reward for my hard work. (n. p.)

For this woman writing in the 1930s, movies have been an inherent part of her life and have left a lasting impression on her development as a human being. Responding to the fears of all of those traditionalist voices quoted earlier, she acknowledges film as a school of gender acculturation. Pictures teach the modern woman how to behave as such. She writes: “Para la mujer moderna el cine ha sido el libro en donde ha aprendido a maquillarse, sonreír maliciosamente, sentarse provocativa cruzando una pierna sobre la otra, mirar pica-

rescamente, fumar lanzando el humo voluptuosamente e insinuar un *firt* con desparpajo. . . ." ("For the modern woman, the cinema has been the book where she has learned to wear make up, to smile mischievously, to sit provocatively, to smoke voluptuously and to flirt with confidence"; n. p.). The cinema, she states, is a school of femme-fatales, but not just that. Together with coquetry, film has imparted culture and knowledge about the world. Motion pictures, she says, are "una cátedra de sabiduría inagotable" ("a school of infinite wisdom"; n. p.). Indeed, in a country that started the century with a female illiteracy rate of almost 80%, movies became a unique source of information.

Both articles, separated by almost 20 years, emphasize the same two aspects. For Spanish women of the early 20th century, cinema was both a school of style and manners and a source of culture and knowledge about unknown places. These are just two examples of a plethora of texts that testify to the influence of motion pictures in women's lives. The advertising in all of the film magazines also speaks of the great power of movie stars to impact women's lives. They determined what to wear, how to wear it and what to wear it with, how to comb one's hair and what face powder or perfume to use.

So far, I have presented testimonies of how cinema positively or negatively—depending on the ideological stance of the source—influenced women's lives. I now turn to the movies themselves and the messages that they were spreading. Even though, as I have mentioned, most of the films shown on Spanish screens were foreign, there is a collection of fairly popular Spanish movies that came out of national production houses in the 1930s. In contrast to Hollywood productions, these films responded in both esthetics and theme to issues that were of concern or interest in the Spanish context. Interestingly, many, if not most, of these films deal with the place in society of the "fallen" woman, the woman that is no longer pure and virginal. The female protagonists are sheltered innocent girls that have been educated following the ideal of the "ángel del hogar." Untrained in the ways of the world, they fall in love with a man, often the wrong one, and lose their virtue. Soon they are abandoned by the man they thought was devoted to them and repudiated by a family that has been disgraced by such dishonorable behavior. A move to the city often follows, where they need to find a way to survive. Since they have not been educated for any kind of productive enterprise, they work as seamstresses, if they are lucky, or any kind of less reputable position, selling their affection to male companions. In the end, the fairy tale ending prevails and the woman is either taken back by her original love or finds one that is willing to forget her past. She is also, without exception, forgiven by her parents and welcomed back in the family house.

So the story goes in movies such as *Currito de la Cruz*, *La aldea maldita* or *Pilar Guerra*. In spite of their crowd-pleasing romantic plot, they present a world where traditional social rules are upstaged. Beyond the escapist nature that most critics see in this kind of film, these movies present conflicts that

actually respond to gender tensions and alterations very much alive in the 1920s and 1930s in Spain. They talk of the need to raise women that are aware of the world and its mechanisms. They state the value of women beyond their condition as pure or not pure. Above all, they assert the existence of a type of woman whose life and value was rejected by family, Church, and State. The happy endings talk about nothing more or nothing less than the acceptance of change and reconciliation.

In early 20th century Spain, change, through film and otherwise, was creeping into the very fabric of everyday life, yet it encountered firm opposition from all dominant sectors of society, with the Church at the head. For the dominant elites and, especially, for a Church that counted on female devotees to keep its firm grip on family life and, by extension, on the life of the community, movies represented the end of life as they knew it. Ironically, in contrast to the reconciliation preached by happy endings, it was the adamant rejection of such change that brought about the military insurrection in 1936 and the consequent dictatorship. For the next thirty years and as per the disposition of Francisco Franco, the dictator, women would again see their lives limited to being the "ángel del hogar." They could either be virgins in the home—creatures at the service of their husband and children—or not exist at all in the public consciousness.

In their attempt to bring Spain back to its Catholic roots, the nationalists soon established measures to control cinematic messages. A "Department of Cinematography" was created as early as 1938.⁶ In 1939, they established censure of all scripts intended for projection and, in 1941, film falls under the jurisdiction of the Department of Education. Again, censors were especially hard on movies with scenes of inappropriate sexual content. Finally, in 1944, in an attempt to make sure that the not-so-young-any-more medium would work to their advantage, the Franco regime established special sponsorship for "movies of national interest." These were pictures that contributed in any way to the exaltation of the racial values or the teachings of those moral and political principles that were considered exemplary by the Franco regime. As for women, they, indeed, returned to a position worthy of the Middle Ages. Their dreams of work, freedom, culture, independence and sexual conquest were condemned as anti-Catholic and, therefore, anti-Spanish. By law, a woman could not own or inherit property. If married, she could not work, open a bank account, or leave the house without previous permission of her husband. Also, any unmarried woman over the age of eighteen had to attend the "Cursos de la Sección Femenina," where she learned, and I quote from the statement of purpose of the organization, that "there is nothing more beautiful than subser-vience" (qtd. in Otero 31).

⁶ The following data regarding censure during the dictatorship comes from Enrique Braso's study on the state of Spanish cinema in 1975.

Film was a dream factory that opened Spanish women's eyes to new possibilities. It facilitated social change and normalized a new kind of woman— independent, self-confident and self-assured—a woman who dared not to be pure and who was not punished for it. Luckily, in spite of all of Franco's efforts to control his subjects, one cannot put a hold on dreams. Dreams kept coming in. Movies, songs, poetry and fiction, became, during the dictatorship, a space for truth, resistance and hope. And, just like in a movie with a happy ending, in 1975, the villain died and the way to recovered freedom was peacefully regained.

Francisca Paredes
Western Washington University
Bellingham, Washington State

WORKS CITED

- Armstrong, Nancy. *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Barbéns, P. Francisco de. *La moral en la calle, en el cinematógrafo y en el teatro. Estudio pedagógico-social*. Barcelona: Luis Culi, 1914.
- Bigsby, C.W.E. "The Politics of Popular Culture." *Approaches to Popular Culture*. Ed. C.W.E. Bigsby. London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1976. 3-25.
- Braso, Enrique, et al. *Siete trabajos de base sobre el cine español*. Valencia: Fernando Torres Ed., 1975.
- Caparrós Lera, J.M. *Arte y política en el cine de la República (1931-1939)*. Barcelona: Publicaciones y Ediciones de la U de Barcelona, 1981.
- "El arte de vestirse." *El mundo cinematográfico*. Jul. 1917: n. p.
- Gubern, Román. *Proyector de luna. La generación del 27 y el cine*. Barcelona: Ed. Anagrama, 1999.
- . "El cine sonoro." *Historia del cine español*. Eds. Román Gubern, José Enrique Monterde, Julio Pérez Perucha, Esteve Riambau y Casimiro Torreiro. Madrid: Cátedra, 1995. 123-179.
- K.U. "La industria cinematográfica nacional." *Arte y cinematografía* Dec. 1912: n. p.
- La campaña contra el cine inmoral*. Madrid: Imprenta Sáez Hermanos, 1935.
- Leira, Carmen S. "El séptimo arte y la mujer." *Arte y cinematografía* Dec. 1935: n. p.
- León, Luis de. *La perfecta casada*. Madrid: Ruiz hermanos, 1917.
- Letamendi Gárate, Jon y Jean-Claude Seguin Vergara. *La cuna fantasma del cine español*. Barcelona: CIMS, 1998.

Minguet Batllori, Joan M. "Early Spanish Cinema and the Problem of Modernity." *Film History: An International Journal* 1.16 (2004): 92-107.

Otero, Luis. *La Sección Femenina*. Madrid: EDAF, 1999.

Pérez Bowie, José Antonio. *Materiales para un sueño. En torno a la recepción del cine en España (1896-1936)*. Salamanca: Librería Cervantes, 1996.

Rey Reguillos, Antonia del. *El cine español de los años veinte. Una identidad negada*. Valencia: Ediciones Epistema, 1985.

Stone, Rob. *Spanish Cinema*. Edinburgh: Pearson Education Limited, 2002.

"¿Vamos a tener nueva censura?" *El mundo cinematográfico*. Apr. 1921: n. p.