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Preface

It was an all but impossible task to select which of the abundant excellent essays written on feminism and film since 1970 to put in this volume. Originally, I had chosen twice as many as appear here, only to be forced to cut drastically. Faced with that prospect, I decided to focus on one major strand of thought in the field produced by Laura Mulvey's polemical and influential 1975 essay on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.' Mulvey's work struck a cord so pertinent and provocative that it has remained to this day a site of both appreciation for the insights and contestation and debate about their validity or utility. Many of the major essays in the field responded in one way or another—including outright rejection—to Mulvey's theoretical positions, so I could produce a book of coherent essays by printing work that debated, argued against, or built out from 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.'

But re-reading the entire book as I proofed it, I realized something else. A central set of concepts worked and reworked by scholars is that of *difference*: in the early days, it is male/female sexual difference; later on gay/straight difference—that is, the differences *within* female sexuality; still later the difference of 'gender' (as distinct from 'sexuality'); and finally, differences between women produced by race and ethnicity. In reading our varying and complex theorizing about all these differences, I realized how feminist film research was very much at the forefront of questioning and analyzing differences across all these territories, across all these borders. Off hand, I cannot think of any discipline that focussed so closely on difference. Anthropology, on which feminist film theory drew, is perhaps the exception, but in using psychoanalysis, feminist research went in other directions than did most Anthropology.

The question of difference is an important point as we think about the future. I would argue that the tools feminist film theorists have produced will prove extremely important as we move into the 21st century—perhaps the first truly global one because of digital communications technologies. Sexual and ethnic differences in many parts of the world remain entrenched—often in ways with long traditions and histories. It will be interesting to see how and if the tools for

Feminine Narrative Form', *Film Quarterly*, 33: 1 (Fall 1979), 14. A longer version of this article can be found in Modleski's book *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1982), 85–109.

47. Kaplan, 'Theories of Melodrama', 46.
48. Doane, 'Film and the Masquerade', 87.
49. Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Inspired by *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946)', 13.
50. Doane, 87.
51. Ruby Rich, in Michelle Citron et al., 'Women and Film: A Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics', *New German Critique*, 13 (1978), 87. Although Rich goes on to suggest that this dialectic is an either/or choice—'to identify either with Marilyn Monroe or with the man behind me hitting the back of my seat with his knees'—I think the more proper sense of the word would be to construe it as a continuous conflict and tension that informs female viewing and which in many cases does not allow the choice of one or the other.
52. Ben Brewster has cited the many cinematic references of the original novel as an indication of just how effective as an appeal to reality the cinematic illusion has become. 'A Scene at the Movies', *Screen*, 23: 2 (July–August 1983), 4–5.
53. Freud's theory that the little boy believes in the maternal phallus even after he knows better because he has seen evidence that it does not exist has been characterised by Octave Mannoni as a contradictory statement that both asserts and denies the mother's castration. In this 'Je sais bien mais quand mème' (I know very well but just the same), the 'just the same' is the fetish disavowal. Mannoni, *Clefs pour l'imaginaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), 9–30. Christian Metz later applied this fetishistic structure to the institution of the cinema as the creator of believable fictions of perceptually real human beings who are nevertheless absent from the scene. Thus the cinema aims all of its technical prowess at the disavowal of the lack on which its 'imaginary signifier' is based. *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1982), 69–76.
54. Doane, 'Film and the Masquerade', 80–1
55. Mulvey, 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama' (Reprinted in this anthology, 75–79).
56. Vicinus, 132.

26 Tears and Desire: Women and Melodrama in the 'Old' Mexican Cinema

Ana M. López*

The melodrama has been a crucial site for the interrogation of many of the categories utilized for the contemporary study of the cinema and for debates over questions of genre, narration, ideology, subjectivity, and representation.[1] Above all, however, film melodrama has been one of the most important areas for the development of feminist film criticism. Long considered a 'feminine' mode because of its insistent attention to the domestic sphere and related emotional issues, the melodrama—especially that subset of the genre known as the 'woman's film' and ostensibly addressed to female audiences—has proven to be a productive area for the investigation of the representation of women, female subjectivity, and desire, gendered critical categories, and the role of women as cultural producers and consumers.[2] Emerging in the context of the 1960s–1970s rediscovery and reassessment of the classical Hollywood cinema and the 1970s–1980s boom in feminist scholarship, this investigation of the melodramatic mode was limited, until very recently, to the study of the Hollywood melodrama and its relationship to US society, ideology, and patriarchy. However, recent studies exploring the historical and international inscription of women and melodramatic representation (in cinemas as diverse as German Weimar films, French films of the 1920s and 1930s, the *bourekas* films of 1970s Israeli cinema, and the commercial 1950s Hindi cinema)[3] have begun to delineate the complex lines of historical and cultural affiliations that link and differentiate the social functions of the melodramatic in specific moments of Western and non-Western societies. Above all, the investigation of the gendering of subjects in melodramatic representation in non-US societies has forced scholars to confront

* Ana M. Lopez, 'Tears and Desire: Women and Melodrama in the "Old" Mexican Cinema' from *Multiple Voices in Feminist Criticism* edited by D. Carson, L. Dittmar and J. Welsch (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), reprinted by permission of the author.

conflicting, historically specific claims of national, ethnic, and gender identity.

Within this context, I want to explore the placement of women in Mexican film melodramas of the 1940s and 1950s and its relationship to Mexican society. Rather than present a content-based description of the 'types' of women represented (virgins/mothers versus whores, for example) or summarize clichéd plot resolutions,[4] I am concerned with the interrelations among patriarchal Mexican society, women's place in Mexican culture and national identity, and film production and consumption. Emphasizing the different articulations of gender and subjectivity in a society formed by colonization and marked by a history of violence and discontinuity, I attempt to link the history of the classical Mexican cinema melodrama with Mexican society, to trace the inscription of the melodramatic alongside the social positioning of women, and to highlight moments when conflicting voices and needs visibly erupt into the cinematic and social spheres.

THE MELODRAMA AND THE LATIN AMERICAN CINEMA

As has been extensively detailed elsewhere, the melodrama, along with music and comedy, became synonymous with the cinema in Latin America after the introduction of sound.[5] Taking advantage of Hollywood's temporary inability to satisfy the linguistic needs of the Latin-American market, local producers used the new technology to exploit national characteristics. Argentina took on the tango and its melodramatic lyrics and developed the tango melodrama genre in the early 1930s. Similarly, Mexico made the melodrama a central genre of the sound cinema after the success of *Santa* (1931, Antonio Moreno), an adaptation of a well-known melodramatic novel by Federico Gamboa about an innocent provincial girl forced into urban prostitution and redeemed only in death.[6]

Furthermore, the rapid establishment of a specific Latin-American star system heavily dependent on radio and popular musical entertainers gave rise to melodramas with at least one or two musical performances to heighten a film's 'entertainment value'. Starring singers-turned-actors, narratives about entertainers sprinkled with performances became *de rigueur*. Thus Libertad Lamarque's suffering mothers always also sang, Pedro Infante could weep over his little black child with the popular song 'Angelitos Negros' ('Little Black

Angels') in the film of the same title, and Ninón Sevilla could vent her sexual anger and frustration dancing wild rumbas in the *cabaretera* (brothel) films of the 1950s. In these and other films, the narrative stoppage usually generated by performances was reinvested with emotion, so that melodramatic pathos emerged in the moment of performance itself (through gesture, sentiment, interactions with the audience within the film, or simply music choice). And in a film such as *Amor en las Sombras* (*Love in the Shadows*, 1959, Tito Davison), which featured ten complete performances in less than two hours' screen time, music and song rather than dramatic action propel the narrative.

Despite this diversity, however, two basic melodramatic tendencies developed between 1930 and 1960: family melodramas that focused on the problems of love, sexuality, and parenting, and epic melodramas that reworked national history, especially the events of the Mexican Revolution. Although the two categories are somewhat fluid, with some family melodramas taking place in the context of the Revolution and its aftermath, I shall be concerned primarily with the operations of the former. The revolutionary melodramas are perhaps as significant for the development of a gendered 'Mexican' consciousness as the family ones, but I am interested in analyzing the cinematic positioning of women within the Mexican domestic sphere, and the ideological operations of the family melodramas provide us with privileged access to that realm. Set in quintessential domestic spaces (homes or similar places) that, as Laura Mulvey says, 'can hold a drama in claustrophobic intensity and represent . . . the passions and antagonisms that lie behind it,'[7] the family melodramas map the repressions and contradictions of interiority and interior spaces—the home and unconscious—with more urgency than is possible within the cathartic large-scale action of revolutionary dramas.

THE MELODRAMA, WOMEN, AND MEXICO

The melodramatic is deeply embedded in Mexican and Hispanic culture and intersects with the three master narratives of Mexican society: religion, nationalism, and modernization. First of all, Hispanic culture carries the burden of its Christianity, which, as Susan Sontag argues in *Against Interpretation*, is already melodramatic—rather than tragic—in structure and intention. In Christianity, as Sontag says, 'every

crucifixion must be topped by a resurrection,' an optimism inimical to the pessimism of tragedy.[8] Furthermore, the staples of the family melodrama—sin and suffering abnegation—are essential components of the Christian tradition: sin allows for passion and, although it must always be punished, passion, after all, justifies life.

Perhaps most significantly, the melodrama always addresses questions of individual (gendered) identity within patriarchal culture and the heart of Mexico's definition as a nation. In Mexico, questions of individual identity are complicated by a colonial heritage that defines woman—and her alleged instability and unreliability—as the origin of *national* identity. The Mexican nation is defined, on the one hand, by Catholicism and the Virgin Guadalupe, the Virgin Mother and patron saint, and, on the other, by the *Chingada*, the national betrayal of Doña Marina– also known as La Malinche or Malintzin Tenepal—the Aztec princess who submitted to Cortez and handed her people over to the conquistadores.[9] As Cherríe Moraga succinctly puts it,

> Malinche fucked the white man who conquered the Indian peoples of Mexico and destroyed their culture. Ever since, brown men have been accusing her of betraying her race, and over the centuries continue to blame her entire sex for this 'transgression'.[10]

Raped, defiled, and abused, Malintzin/Malinche is the violated mother of modern Mexico, *la chingada*—the fucked one—or *la vendida*—the sellout. As Octavio Paz explains in *The Labyrinths of Solitude*, Malinche's 'sons' (*sic*), the Mexican people, are 'the sons of La Chingada, the fruits of a rape, a farce.[11] Thus the origins of the nation are located at a site—the violated mother—that is simultaneously an altar of veneration and the place of an original shame. The victim of a rape, Malinche/La Chingada, mother of the nation, carries the guilt of her victimization. Deeply marked by this 'otherness', Mexican national identity rejects and celebrates its feminine origins while gender identity, in general, is problematized even further. To be Malinche—a woman—is to be a traitor, the great whore-mother of a bastard race. The melodramatic became the privileged place for the symbolic re-enactment of this drama of identification and the only place where female desire—and the utopian dream of its realization—could be glimpsed.

Mexico's colonial heritage—first Spanish and most recently North American—also affects the social functions of the melodrama. Colonialism always implies a crisis of identity for the colonial subject, caught between the impulse to imitate the colonizer and the desire for

an always displaced autonomy. Like Caliban in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, the colonized must use the colonizer's 'words'—the imported cinematic apparatus—and learn the colonizer's language before he or she can even think of articulating his or her own speech: 'You taught me language and my profit on't is I know how to curse.' Just as in Brazil the parodic *chanchada* genre can be seen as a response to the impossibility of thinking of a national cinema without considering the Hollywood cinema as well as Brazil's own underdevelopment, in Mexico, melodrama's excess explicitly defies the Hollywood dominant:

> Since there can be no nostalgic return to pre-colonial purity, no unproblematic recovery of national origins undefiled by alien influences, the artist in the dominated culture cannot ignore the foreign presence but must rather swallow it and recycle it to national ends.[12]

As Carlos Monsiváis has said, 'If competition with North America is impossible artistically or technically, the only defense is excess, the absence of limits of the melodrama.'[13] Thus the melodrama's exaggerated signification and hyperbole—its emphasis on anaphoric events pointing to other implied, absent meanings or origins—become, in the Mexican case, a way of cinematically working through the problematic of an underdeveloped national cinema.

The melodrama is also formally and practically linked with the specific trajectory of Mexican national identity and the significance of the Revolution for the nation-building project. If we agree with Peter Brooks that the melodrama is 'a fictional system for making sense of experience as a semantic field of force' that 'comes into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question,'[14] then we should not be surprised by the cultural currency of the melodrama in post-Revolutionary Mexico. In the midst of the great social upheavals of this period, the country seemed ungovernable and the city an unruly mecca: the Revolution changed the nature of public life, mobilized the masses, shook up the structures of the family without changing its roots and, as Monsiváis says, 'served as the inevitable mirror where the country recognized its physiognomy'. The Revolution may not have 'invented' the Mexican nation, but 'its vigor, for the first time, lent legendary characteristics to the masses that sustained it.'[15] In other words, the Revolution created a new class—the new urban poor soon to be a working class—whose willpower, roughness, and illiteracy became insistently visible in the formerly feudal national landscape.

The Revolution also further problematized the position of women

in Mexico. Women had fought alongside the men and had followed the troops cooking, healing, and providing emotional and physical solace, either as legitimate wives, lovers, or paid companions. Known generally as *soldaderas*, these women formed the backbone of an incipient feminist movement that emerged after the Revolution. Yet as Jean Franco argues in *Plotting Women*,

> The Revolution with its promise of social transformation encouraged a Messianic spirit that transformed mere human beings into supermen and constituted a discourse that associated virility with social transformation in a way that marginalized women at the very moment when they were, supposedly, liberated.[16]

Precisely when the nation created itself anew under the aegis of Revolutionary mythology and its male superhero redeemers, women were, once again, relegated to the background, and in cultural production—especially in national epic allegories—represented as a terrain to be traversed in the quest for male identity. Simultaneously, while the new secular state ostensibly promoted women's emancipation to combat Catholicism and its alleged counterrevolutionary ideology,[17] Mexico found itself caught in the wheels of capitalist modernization.

The new class created by the Revolution—an increasingly mobile, urban, migratory class of male and female workers—was entertained by the popular theater (*teatro frívolo* or *género chico*) before it found the cinema, but after the coming of sound, Spanish-language movies became the principal discursive tool for social mapping. While the *género chico* and its carnivalesque ribaldry[18] attracted a socially but not sexually mixed audience, the cinema was family entertainment and, by design and by commercial imperatives, broader based. By the late 1930s and through the 1940s and 1950s, the national cinema granted access not only to entertainment, but also to vital behaviors and attitudes: 'One didn't go to the cinema to dream, but to learn.'[19] There was not much room here for the carnivalesque celebration that continued to take place in the *teatro frívolo*: the cinema helped transmit new habits and reiterated codes of behaviour, providing the new nation with the common bases and collective ties necessary for national unity. In fact, the cinema helped make a new post-Revolutionary middle class viable.

If it is indeed true, as Monsiváis says, that film melodramas served this kind of socializing function, what exactly were the lessons they taught women? How did the melodrama mediate the post-Revolutionary crisis of national and gendered identity and its subsequent institutionalization? Rather than blindly enforce or teach unambiguous high moral values, stable codes of behaviour, or obedience to the patriarchal order, the family melodramas staged specific dramas of identity that often complicated straightforward ideological identification for men *and* women without precluding accommodation. However, the melodrama's contradictory play of identifications constituted neither false communication nor a simple lesson imposed upon the people from above. Rather, these films addressed pressing contradictions and desires within Mexican society. And even when their narrative work suggests utter complicity with the work of the Law, the emotional excesses set loose and the multiple desires detonated are not easily recuperated.

The narratives of the Mexican family melodrama deal with three principal conflicts: the clash between old (feudal, *porfirian*) values and modern (industrialized, urban) life, the crisis of male identity that emerges as a result of this clash, and the instability of female identity that at once guarantees and threatens the passage from the old to the new. These conflicts are played out in two distinct physical and psychic spaces—the home, a private sphere valorized and sanctified by the Law, and the nightclub, a barely tolerated social space as liminal as the home is central. Only marginally acceptable, the nightclub is nevertheless the part of the patriarchal public sphere where the personal—and issues of female subjectivity, emotion, identity, and desire—finds its most complex articulation in the Mexican melodrama.

THE HOME: MOTHERS, FAMILIES, AND THEIR OTHERS

Although Mexican patriarchal values insist on the sanctity of the traditional home (as an extension of the 'fatherland' blessed by God), the extended families in them are rarely well adjusted precisely because of the rigidity of the fathers' law and in spite of the saintliness of the mothers. In Mexico, the family as an institution has a contradictory symbolic status as a site for the crystallization of tensions between traditional patriarchal values (especially the cult of machismo) and modernizing tendencies and, as a source of maternal support and nurturing the secular state could not replace.[20] This ambivalence is clearly evidenced in the deployment of the Mexican cinema's so-called mother obsession. Although it is undoubtedly true that the Mexican melodrama's fascination with saintly mother figures can be traced to

the deeply conservative social impulses of the post-Revolutionary middle classes, who countered their insecurity over the legitimacy of their status with aggressive nationalism and an obsessive attachment to traditional values, how this mother obsession is worked out in the melodrama complicates any assessment of the politics and social mapping of such representations.

Director Juan Orol and the actress Sara García created the archetypal mother of the Mexican melodrama in *Madre Querida* (*Dear Mother*, 1935), the heart-wrenching story of a young boy who goes to a reformatory for arson and whose mother dies of grief precisely on the tenth of May (Mother's Day in Mexico). Over the next decades, García played suffering, self-sacrificing mothers in countless films such as *No Basta ser Madre* (*It's Not Enough to Be a Mother*, 1937), *Mi Madrecita* (*My Little Mother*, 1940), and *Madre Adorada* (*Beloved Mother*, 1948). However, despite their self-acknowledged narrative focus on mothers and their positioning of the mother as the central ideological tool for social and moral cohesion, these and other films ostensibly glorifying mothers as repositories of conservative family values were clearly maternal melodramas rather than women's films. This distinction, invoked by E. Ann Kaplan in her discussion of Hollywood 1920s and 1930s melodramas,[21] is significant for Mexican cinema, because it helps to distinguish between films that focus on male oedipal dramas and films that more self-consciously address female spectators. Indeed, one could argue that despite their focus on mothers, these family melodramas are patriarchal rather than maternal because they attempt to preserve patriarchal values over the sanctity of the mother. In attempting to reinforce the patriarchy their narrative logic breaks down: the moral crisis created in these films revolves around the fathers' identity and not the mothers', whose position is never put into question.

In *Cuando los hijos se van* (*When the Children Go Away*, 1941, Juan Bustillo Orol), for example, a rigid provincial family is torn asunder by the father's (Fernando Soler) inability to see the true characters of his sons or to recognize their mother's (Sara García) more sensitive assessment of their characters. Influenced by the 'bad' son, the father banishes the 'good' son to the city, while the mother, with her unerring maternal instinct, never doubts his integrity and is ultimately proven right by the narrative: the banished son returns a popular radio star and saves the family from a bankruptcy engineered by his sibling. Despite the narrative's obvious privileging of the mother's sight, the film attempts to shore up a patriarchal family structure threatened not

only by the patriarch's inability to see, but by the other world lying outside the patriarch's control: Mexico City, emblem of modernization and progress, and the modern and highly pleasurable world outside the family. The film attempts to idealize the family as a unit whose preservation is worth all sacrifices, even death, but its suggestion that the familial crisis is caused by the father's blindness and irrational rigidity, especially when compared to the mother's unerring instinct, puts in question the very patriarchal principle it seeks to assert.

Mothers may have a guaranteed place in the home as pillars of strength, tolerance, and self abnegation—in other words, as Oedipal illusions—but outside the home they are prey to the male desires that the Mexican home and family disavow. As a foil to the mother's righteous suffering and masochistic respect for the Law, men, especially father figures, are self-indulgent and unable to obey the moral order. It is their desire—unleashed because of maternal asexuality— that most threatens and disturbs the stability of the family and its women. While denying desire within the family, outside it is a compelling and at times controlling force. Thus a variant of the family melodrama focuses on the impossible attraction of 'other' women: the 'bad' mothers (*las malas*), the vamps, the mistresses.

While Sara García portrayed the archetypal good mother, María Félix depicted her opposite, the *mala mujer* (bad woman): the haughty, independent woman, as passionate and devilish as the mothers are asexual and saintly. The titles of Félix's films clearly reveal her star persona: *Doña Bárbara* (Fernando de Fuentes, 1943), *La Mujer de Todos* (*Everyone's Woman*, Julio Bracho, 1946), *La Devoradora* (*The Devourer*, Fernando de Fuentes, 1946), *Doña Diabla* (Tito Davison, 1949). *Doña Bárbara*, her third film, most clearly defined this persona.[22] After being brutally raped as a young girl, Bárbara becomes a rich independent landowner—la Doña—who enjoys despoiling and humiliating others, especially men. She exults in her power and discards lovers and even her own daughter easily, exhibiting neither pity nor shame and relishing her hatred. Despite her power, Bárbara, like most of Félix's characters, is simply the vampiresque flip side of the saintly mothers of the family melodramas. Easily classified as antifamily melodramas insofar as they reject the surface accoutrements of the patriarchal family, ultimately her films forcefully reinscribe the need for the standard family. Despite titles focusing on the female character, Félix's films are male-centered narratives, where the specular pleasure lies with the woman (and her masquerades of masculinity), but the narrative

remains with a male protagonist. Even in *Doña Bárbara*, the principal narrative agent is Santos Luzardo, a young man (Julián Soler) who challenges la Doña's power when he refuses her seduction. The film is more concerned with how he defeats Bárbara than with Bárbara's point of view or her downfall. Bárbara remains unknowable, an enigma given a sociological raison d'être—the rape—and the face of a goddess, but whose subjectivity and desires remain unknown. As a star, Félix could not embody female desire, for she was an ambivalent icon, as unknowable, cold, and pitiless as the mother figure was full of abnegation and tears.[23] Her presence is simply an echo of the dangers of desire for men rather than its realization for women.

WOMAN'S DESIRE ON THE MARGINS OF THE HOME

In general, only two kinds of Mexican melodramas were structured around woman's identity and presented from a female point of view: the fallen-but-redeemed-by-motherhood women's films and the *cabaretera* subgenre. Each type also had its prototypical female star: whereas the former films most often starred Dolores del Rio or, somewhat later, Libertad Lamarque, two stars whose characters suffered copiously for their meager sins and relished child obsessions without equal, the latter were epitomized by the sexy *rumberas* portrayed by Cuban actress Ninón Sevilla. Since neither Lamarque nor Sevilla are Mexican, the relative independence achieved by Lamarque's characters and the sexual wantonness of Sevilla's could be distanced as foreign otherness even when the actresses portrayed Mexican women. However, Mexican-born del Rio began her career in Hollywood, and, unlike the other two, was always considered a great actress, the *grande dame* of the Mexican cinema, whose face would acquire mythical status as *the* archetype of the moral and physical perfection of the indigenous woman.

Lamarque, singer and Argentine stage and movie star, acquired a tango-inspired star persona after successfully competing for screen time with singing idol Jorge Negrete in Luis Buñuel's *Gran Casion* (1946). Neither matriarchal mother, vampish other, nor a symbol of indigenous purity, Lamarque was most often a prototypically innocent fallen woman who also sang professionally. In *Soledad* (*Solitude*, Tito Davison, 1948), for example, Lamarque plays a young orphaned

servant (Argentine!) tricked into a false marriage by the family heir, made pregnant, and abandoned but finally successful as an entertainer.

Despite their innocence, however, Lamarque's characters fall uneasily into the prevailing stereotypes of the Mexican cinema. In her best films, where she portrays entertainers with tragic pasts or fates, the need to position her simultaneously in relation to family life and to public life as a performer complicates the affirmation of standard social structures and woman's position vis-à-vis the private and public spheres. Her status as a respectable performer—and the incumbent independence of a salary, relationships outside the domestic sphere, and the adoring gaze of diegetic audiences—destabilizes her identity as a hopeless mother. Thus *Soledad* is unable to sustain the figurative melodramatic signification of its initial scenes (for example, prefiguring the falsity of the wedding ceremony via ominous mise-en-scènes and the *coup de theatre* of a candle blown out by violent wind when the couple first embrace) and depends increasingly on Soledad's voice rather than her silence to unravel its melodrama. Told from her point of view and, by film's end, literally dependent on her voice, the melodrama of *Soledad* ends appropriately with her long lost daughter's anguished cry of recognition: 'Mother!' But by now Soledad is far more than 'just a mother' and remains an outstanding model of self-sufficiency.

THE CABARET: *RUMBERAS* AND FEMALE DESIRE

Whereas Lamarque's characters are usually tricked or forced by circumstances into successful careers as singers while all they really want to be is wives and mothers, Ninón Sevilla and other *cabareteras* (María Antonieta Pons, Leticia Palma, and Meche Barba) present a different problematic. Much more sordid, their fates and entertainment activities project a virulent form of desire onto the screen. Nowhere else have screen women been so sexual, so wilful, so excessive, so able to express their anger at their fate through vengeance. As François Truffaut (under the pseudonym Robert Lacheney) wrote in *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1954,

> From now on we must take note of Ninón Sevilla, no matter how little we may be concerned with feminine gestures on the screen or elsewhere. From her inflamed look to her fiery mouth, everything is heightened in Ninón (her forehead, her lashes, her nose, her upper lip, her throat, her voice) . . . Like so

many missed arrows, [she is an] oblique challenge to bourgeois, Catholic, and all other moralities.[24]

Albeit uneasily, Lamarque's sophisticated performers could be narratively recuperated within an expanded domestic sphere, but Sevilla's excessively gendered gestures engaged melodramatic tropes beyond the point of hyperbole. Thus with Sevilla, the performative excess of the 'musical/performance melodrama' readies its zenith and the boundary between performance and melodrama disappears entirely.

. . .

In Mexico, the prostitute as emblem of desire, necessary evil, and mother of the nation (Malinche/Malintzin) has a prominent place in national cutural history. Prostitution might indeed be the oldest profession everywhere, but rarely have prostitutes been the preferred subject of so many popular culture texts as in Mexico. What we see in the *cabaretera* films of the late 1940s and 1950s is the culmination of a complex process in which the figure of the prostitute—albeit cloaked with the shameful aura of Malinche—became the site of a serious challenge to the *porfirian* moral order and an emblem of modernity.

Officially regulated and socially shunned, the post-Revolutionary prostitute and her spaces—the brothel, assignation house, and cabaret—had a distinct social function: they offered men a place to escape from the burdens of home and saintly wives and to engage in uninhibited conversations and the ambivalent pleasures of the flesh. Mexican culture always celebrated the myth of the prostitute, but in the 1920s the prostitute also assumed a different iconic status in the wildly popular romantic visions of singer-composer Agustín Lara. Idealized and simultaneously romantic and perverse, the prostitute of Lara's songs was not pitied for falling from grace. Lara's popular songs embodied a fatalistic worship of the 'fallen woman' as the only possible source of pleasure for modern man.[25] Though at first considered scandalous (and prohibited in schools by the Mexican Ministry of Public Education), Lara's audacious songs were quickly absorbed as a new popular culture idiom, the exaltation of the Lost Woman.[26]

By the late 1940s,[27] the cinema had completely assumed Lara's vision of the prostitute as an object of self-serving worship and his songs were the central dramatic impulse propelling the action of many *cabaretera* films. Thus, for example, *Aventurera* is clearly inspired by a song of the same title (sung by Pedro Vargas in the film):[28]

Sell your love expensively, adventuress
Put the price of grief on your past
And he who wants the honey from your mouth
Must pay with diamonds for your sin
Since the infamy of your destiny
Withered your admirable spring
Make your road less difficult,
Sell your love dearly, adventuress

Lara's songs idealized woman as a purchasable receptacle for man's physical needs—the ultimate commodity for modern Mexican society—but also invested her with the power of her sexuality: to sell at will, to name her price, to choose her victim. Nevertheless, as Monsiváis says, his songs also made the object of pleasure, once used, abstract:

> The deified prostitute protects the familiar one, exalts the patriarchy, and even moves the real prostitute herself to tears, granting a homey warmth to its evocation of exploited lives.[29]

In literature, in the songs of Agustín Lara and others, and finally in the cinema, the prostitute and the nightlife of which she is an emblem became an anti-utopian paradigm for modern life. The exaltation of female desire and sin and of the nightlife of clubs and cabarets clearly symbolized Mexico's new (post-World War II) cosmopolitanism and the first waves of developmentalism. The *cabaretera* films were the first decisive cinematic break with *porfirian* morality. Idealized, independent, and extravagantly sexual, the exotic *rumbera* was a social fantasy, but one through which *other* subjectivities could be envisioned, other psychosexual/social identities forged.

But the *rumbera* is not a simple model of resistance. When analyzed as part of a specific process of neurotic determinations[30] and in the context of the suffering mother, the emerging image of female subjectivity is deeply contradictory and without an easy resolution. In fact, it is a fantasy. As Ninón Sevilla with much self-awareness explains to her lover in the *cabaretera* film *Mulata* (Gilberto Martínez Solares, 1953), the impossible challenge of female identity is the insecurity of 'never knowing whether a man has loved me or desired me'. Not that one is necessarily preferable to the other—she can be either the wife *or* the sexual object—but that Mexican society insists that they are mutually exclusive.

Notes

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1. See, for example, Christine Gledhill, 'The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation' in *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 5–39; Robert Lang, *American Film Melodrama: Griffith, Vidor, Minnelli* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); and Rick Altman, 'Dickens, Griffith, and Film Theory Today', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 88 (Spring 1989): 321–59.
2. See, for example, the essays collected in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home is Where the Heart Is*, and Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
3. Patrice Petro, *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Maureen Turim, 'French Melodrama: Theory of a Specific History', *Theater Journal*, 39 (October 1987); Ginnette Vincendeau, 'Melodramatic Realism: On Some French Women's Films in the 1930s', *Screen*, 30 (Summer 1989); Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989); Ravi Vasudevan, 'The Melodramatic Mode and the commercial Hindi Cinema', *Screen*, 30 (Summer 1989).
4. For this kind of analysis, see Carl J. Mora, 'Feminine Images in Mexican Cinema: The Family Melodrama; Sara García, "The Mother of Mexico" and the Prostitute', *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, 4 (1985), 228–35.
5. This period of the Latin-American cinema has generated much solid historical/archival research. For Mexico, see especially Emilio García Riera, *Historia Documental del Cine Mexicano*, 10 vols. to date (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1969), and Moises Viñas (ed.), *Historia del Cine Mexicano* (Mexico City: UNAM/UNESCO, 1987). In English, see Carl J. Mora, *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1896–1980* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). For a succinct and well-informed comparative historical analysis of this period in English, see John King, *Magical Reels: A History of Cinema in Latin America* (London: Verso, 1990).
6. Although the Mexican cinema would not take off on an industrial scale until the 1936 international success of the *comedia ranchera* (ranch comedy) *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (*Out on the Big Ranch*, Fernando de Fuentes), melodramatic films were a staple from the 1930s through the 1960s. Aided by US wartime policies, (and US resentment of Argentina's neutrality), the Mexican cinema thrived during the war and immediate postwar periods, producing 124 films in 1950, the majority of which were melodramas. I am using the term *melodrama* here loosely, for the Mexican cinema (and other Latin American cinemas, especially Brazil's and its *chanchadas*) proved extraordinarily adept at generic mixing. I use the word *melodramatic* in its broadest sense, as a structuring principle of expectations and conventions against which individual films establish their uniqueness as singular products, while recognizing that the term has a different currency in Latin America than in the United States or Europe.
7. Laura Mulvey, 'Melodrama in and out of the Home', in *High Theory/Low Culture*, ed. Colin MacCabe (New York: St Martin's Press, 1986), 95
8. Susan Sontag, 'Death of Tragedy', *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell, 1966), 132–39.
9. An Aztec legend claimed that Quetzalcoatl, a feathered serpent god, would come from the East to redeem his people on a given day of the Aztec calendar, which, coincidentally, was the same day (21 April 1519) that Cortez and his men (fitting the description of Quetzalcoatl) landed in Vera Cruz. Thus Malintzin Tenepal became Cortez's translator, strategic advisor, and eventually mistress, believing that she was saving her people. This is how recent scholarship has reinterpreted the 400-year-old legacy of female betrayal, the founding moment of the Mexican nation. See Nancy Alarcón, 'Chicana's Feminist Literature: A Re-Vision Through Malintzin/or Malintzin: Putting Flesh Back on the Object', in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrié Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983).
10. Cherrié Moraga, 'From a Long Line of Vendidas: Chicanas and Feminism', in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 174–75.
11. Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinths of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 85.
12. João Luiz Vieira and Robert Stam, 'Parody and Marginality: The Case of Brazilian Cinema', *Framework*, 28, (1985), reprinted in *The Media Reader*, ed Manuel Alvarado and John O. Thompson (London: British Film Institute, 1990), 96.
13. Carlos Monsiváis, 'Reir Llorando (Notas Sobre la Cultura Popular Urbana)', in *Politica Cultural del Estado Mexicano*, ed. Moises Ladrón de Guevara (Mexico City: Ed. GEFE/SEP, 1982), 70.
14. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), xiii, 14–15.
15. Monsiváis 'Reir Llorando', 27.
16. Jean Franco, *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 102.
17. However, women did not win the right to vote in national elections until 1953.
18. The *género chico*, or *teatro frívolo*, was a vaudevillelike theatrical genre that developed in neighbourhood playhouses and tents. While the bourgeois theater staged classical melodramas from Spain and France that outlined the parameters of decent behavior and exalted heightened sensibilities in perfect Academic Spanish, the *género chico* thrived with popular characters and satire. Carnivalesque in the Bakhtinian sense, it included in its repertory taboo words and gestures and popular speech while exalting the grotesque and demanding a constant interaction between players and audience. See Ruth S. Lamb, *Mexican Theater of the Twentieth Century* (Claremont, Calif.: Ocelot Press, 1975), and Manuel Manón, *Historia del Teatro Popular de Mexico* (Mexico City: Editorial Cultura, 1932).

19. Carlos Monsiváis, 'El Cine Nacional', in *Historia General de Mexico*, vol. 4 (Mexico City: El Colegio de Mexico, 1976), 446.
20. See Jean Franco, 'The Incorporation of Women: A Comparison of North American and Mexican Popular Narrative', *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).
21. E. Ann Kaplan. 'Mothering, Feminism, and Representation: The Maternal in Melodrama and the Woman's Film 1910–40', in *Home is Where the Heart Is*, 123–29.
22. For an extensive analysis of Mariá Félix's career and star persona, see Paco Ignacio Taíbo, *María Félix: 47 Pasos por el Cine* (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortiz/ Planeta, 1985).
23. See Carlos Monsiváis, 'Crónica de Sociales: María Félix en dos tiempos', in *Escenas de Pudor y Liviandad* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1981), 161–68.
24. Robert Lacheney, *Cahiers du cinéma*, 30 (1954); cited by Emilio Garcia Riera, *Historia Documental del Cine Mexicano*, vol. 4, 132–34, and Jorge Ayala Blanco, *La Aventura del Cine Mexicano* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1968), 144–45.
25. 'The Perverted One'

> To you, life of my soul, perverted woman whom I love
> To you, ungrateful woman
> To you, who makes me suffer and makes me cry
> I consecrate my life to you, product of evil and innocence
> All of my life is yours, woman
> I want you, even if they call you perverted.

26. As Eduardo Galeano summarizes it in *Century of the Wind*, 'Lara exalts the Lost woman, in whose eyes are seen sun-drunk palm trees; he beseeches Love from the Decadent One, in whose pupils boredom spreads like a peacock's tail; he dreams of the sumptuous bed of the silky-skinned Courtesan; with sublime ecstasy he deposits roses at the feet of the Sinful One and covers the Shameful Whore with incense and jewels in exchange for the honey of her mouth' (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 110.
27. As Jorge Ayala Blanco indicates, in a few months between 1947 and 1948 alone, precisely coinciding with the Mario Rodríguez Alemán *sexenio*, over twelve *cabaretera* films were produced. See *La Aventura del Cine Mexicano*, 137.
28. The Lara song 'Aventurera' had already been featured in the 1946 María Félix film *La Devoradora* (Fernando de Fuentes). At the time, Lara and Félix were enjoying a much-publicized, albeit short-lived, marriage, and he ostensibly wrote the song explicitly for her.
29. Carlos Monsiváis, *Amor Perdido* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1977), 60.
30. John Hill. *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956–1963* (London: British Film Institute, 1986).

27 Three Men and Baby M

Tania Modleski*

While some of the films in the current boom of baby boom movies suggest that woman's primary role is to be a mother, others show men taking over this role. The enormously popular French film, *Three Men and a Cradle*, and the American remake, *Three Men and a Baby*, which are about an infant named Mary who is left on the doorstep of the infant's father and his two male housemates, are interesting manifestations of the concern about father's rights that has intensified with the controversy over surrogate motherhood. Indeed, what we might call the American 'Baby M' film could be seen as the 'theory' of contemporary fathering, while surrogate motherhood is, or at least seemed for a time to be, the practice. This is a practice that involves, as Katha Pollitt has argued, women signing away one of the rights that, until the twentieth century, they rarely possessed: 'the right to legal custody of their children'.[1] It is in *this* historical context, in which women's rights as mothers have been virtually nonexistent, that a film like *Three Men and a Baby* must be seen, rather than being considered the product of a historically unprecedented, feminist-inspired, and altogether contemporary reconceptualization of the paternal role. To be sure, although *Three Men and a Baby* does its utmost to invest desire in the humorous and sentimental vision of a collective male fatherhood, it is a relatively benign version of a father's rights scenario, since it does in fact 'make room for Mommy' at the very end of the film. Nevertheless, by keeping the mother from the audience's sight until this point, the film effectively de-realizes her—just as, in Pollitt's argument, the term 'surrogate mother' renders the woman's role 'as notional as possible', thereby suggesting that since the (biological) mother is the surrogate, the father must be 'the real thing' (683). Moreover, even though the men in the film do ultimately incorporate

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