

# Greater Mexico's Ramón Novarro: Between Latin Lover and Aztec Prince

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**Abstract:** This article explores the construction of Ramón Novarro—the first Mexican actor to reach Hollywood stardom—as a “matinee idol” for women within multiple and competing, cultural discourses in Mexico City and Los Angeles. Looking at trade journals, periodicals catering to American, Mexican-American, and Mexican readerships, as well as Novarro’s starring role in *Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (Fred Niblo, 1925), I trace the contradictory underpinnings shaping his star persona along class, ethnic, gendered, and sexed lines. Unlike that of Rudolph Valentino, Novarro’s star persona struck the right balance as an oddly de-eroticized Latin lover. This balance would allow for Novarro’s meteoric rise, within the growing nativist culture of mid-1920s Hollywood, against the backdrop of the Italian beau’s sudden fall.

**Keywords:** Latino Hollywood, Ramon Novarro, latin lover, illustrated periodicals, star studies.

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## El Ramón Novarro de Greater México: *Entre latin lover y príncipe azteca*

**Resumen:** Este artículo explora la construcción de Ramón Novarro —el primer actor mexicano en alcanzar el estrellato en Hollywood— como *matinee idol* femenino en el marco discursos culturales antagónicos en las ciudades de México y Los Ángeles. A partir de periódicos dirigidos a públicos norteamericanos, mexicano-norteamericanos y mexicanos —y del estudio del rol del actor en *Ben Hur* (Fred Niblo, 1925)—, se identifican funciones contradictorias en la formación de la estrella en términos étnicos, de clase, de género y sexuales. A diferencia de Rudolph Valentino, Novarro encontró un punto medio como *latin lover* deserotizado que permitiría su ascenso dentro de la emergente cultura nativista del Hollywood de mediados de los años veinte, en contraste a la repentina caída del galán italiano.

**Palabras clave:** Hollywood Latino, Ramón Novarro, *latin lover*, periódicos ilustrados, estrellas de cine.

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## Ramón Novarro, do Greater México: entre *latin lover* e príncipe asteca

**Resumo:** Este artigo explora a construção de Ramón Novarro —primeiro ator mexicano a chegar ao estrellato em Hollywood— como *matinee idol* para mulheres no contexto de discursos culturais antagônicos nas cidades do México e Los Angeles. Baseado em jornais voltados para o público americano, mexicano-americano e mexicano —além do papel do ator em *Ben Hur* (Fred Niblo, 1925)—, desenho as funções contraditórias da estrela em termos étnicos, de classe, de gênero e sexuais. Ao contrário de Rudolph Valentino, Novarro encontrou um ponto médio como um amante latino deserotizado que permitiria sua ascensão na emergente cultura nativista de Hollywood dos anos vinte, ao contrário da súbita queda do ator italiano.

**Palavras-chave:** Hollywood Latino, Ramón Novarro, *latin lover*, jornais ilustrados, estrelas de cinema.

In the 1920s, Mexico City film critics sought to build a star system that would strengthen local film production. They found those rising stars in Mexican actors involved, to varying degrees, with the Hollywood film industry. Initially, local critics looked at Fernando Elizondo and Miguel Contreras Torres, two actors on the fringes of Hollywood filmmaking who returned to Mexico City to produce action melodramas. Contreras Torres staged an interpretation of the Hollywood western, through which a postrevolutionary conception of Mexican masculinity took center stage.<sup>1</sup> By appropriating the conventions of the western—on-location shooting, open spaces, and life-threatening physical feats—Contreras Torres responded to disparaging representations of Mexicans in Hollywood films, reviews suggest. Carlos Noriega Hope praised Contreras Torres as “the apostle of our cinematic revenge,” and celebrated how, if Hollywood films tapped into Mexican greasers, Contreras Torres retorted with his own “odious” type—“the repugnant Yankee foreman.”<sup>2</sup> As Noriega Hope’s review exemplifies, Mexico City film critics first forged a local star system in opposition to Hollywood conventions; more specifically, they countered the “denigrating films” circulating in the United States—rife with backward, uncivilized *bandoleros*—that misrepresented Mexicans at home and abroad.

It must be noted, however, that denigrating depictions of Mexicans were not only a national concern for Mexican audiences in Mexico City and across the US/Mexico border. Hollywood’s representational practice and its correlative response had continental effects, reverberating as far south as Buenos Aires. Even if *porteño* sensationalist weeklies reproduced Hollywood’s bandits—in narratives such as “The Messengers of Hate,” an “absolutely truthful” account (the weekly claims) of an American “citizen” who tries to invest in Mexican agriculture but instead finds himself defending helpless peasants against vicious “bandoleros” (Figure 1)<sup>3</sup>—*porteño* film

<sup>1</sup> NAVITSKI, Rielle *Spectacles of Violence. Sensational Cinema and Journalism in Early Twentieth-Century Mexico and Brazil*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017, p. 98. Unless noted otherwise, all translation from Spanish to English are my own.

<sup>2</sup> BONNARD, Silvestre (pseud. of Carlos Noriega Hope). “El nacionalismo agresivo,” *El Universal*, n. 15 October 1922, Qtd. in Navitski, *ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>3</sup> MCDERMAND, Charles. “Los mensajeros del odio,” *Aventuras*, n. 17 September 1929, pp. 3–8. Such stories were advertised as “typical” and “flawless” reports on the current state of Mexican society, “a

trade journals, particularly at the beginning of the decade, followed closely Mexico's response to denigrating films, which local journals labeled "insidious films." Porteño critics condemned Hollywood films for "ridiculing the inhabitants of the land of Montezuma" and celebrated growing local production as "an emphatic repudiation of the Yankee neighbors' malicious propaganda."<sup>4</sup> The "national" concern had, therefore, transnational repercussions during the period, and points to the complex relations Latin American films and film cultures established vis-à-vis Hollywood.



Figure 1.- Cover of *Aventuras* (1929). Courtesy of Biblioteca Nacional Argentina.

Contreras Torres' response, in conjunction with the bans and embargoes the Mexican government imposed to disparaging imports, effectively "unit[ed] Mexican viewers on either side of the border in their defense of the nation."<sup>5</sup> In this context, the role of Contreras Torres, in films and in the press, evinces the way stars serve as vehicles of representation. As Christine Gledhill suggests, by facilitating a "personalization of the social," the star combines recognition

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nation swept by fratricidal bullets, a land covered with blood spilled by the resentment of its people." Ad for "Los mensajeros del odio," *Aventuras*, 10 September 1929.

<sup>4</sup> "Contra las películas insidiosas," *La Película*, 19 February 1920, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> SERNA, Laura Isabel. *Making Cinelandia: American Films and Mexican Film Culture before the Golden Age*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2014., p. 171. In "greaser" films—such as *Tony the Greaser* (William F. Haddock, 1911), *Bronco Billy and the Greaser* (Gilbert M. Anderson, 1914), and *The Greaser's Revenge* (1914)—Mexican or Mexican-looking characters rob, rap, and plunder. It should be noted, however, that some Mexico City exhibitors, fearing considerable losses, did not support government-sponsored boycotts, as a 1922 letter from the Union of Federal District Cinema Employees to President Álvaro Obregón suggests. Reproduced in SERNA, Laura Isabel and Rielle Navitski. "Ephemerata," *Film History*, vol. 29, n. 1, 2017, p. 152.

of individuality and “a socioethical emblematic function characteristic of melodrama.”<sup>6</sup> Such function can traverse national borders. Focusing on transnational star Ramón Novarro in the context of Hollywood’s “Latin craze,” this article traces the ways that stars and star-vehicles provided platforms for both overlapping and contested readings of social formations in Mexico City and Angeleno film cultures. As “insidious” films at the beginning of the decade show, the fraught relations with Hollywood reverberated across the Americas. This article traces “filmic borderlands” in stars’ bodies and in star vehicles in the late 1920s. For film historian Dominique Brégent-Heald, filmic borderlands create “complex and paradoxical spaces to explore the social construction of nation, race, and gender.”<sup>7</sup> Looking at the discursive construction transnational stars made possible in Greater Mexico publications, what follows explores the national, racial, and sexed boundaries stars such as Ramón Novarro embodied near the close of the silent period.<sup>8</sup>

### **Pushing Cinematic Dreams (and Nightmares)**

Mexico City film critics not only forged a local star system but also played an important role in creating Hollywood stars, in both Mexico City and Los Angeles. Their accounts, of “the most cinematographic city in the world,”<sup>9</sup> encouraged Mexican actors and filmmakers to embark on northbound travels. Filming in California, Contreras Torres reminisced reading Carlos Noriega Hope’s Hollywood chronicles, “[in Hollywood,] I imagined myself rereading the unforgettable chapters of Silvestre Bonnard [Noriega Hope] in whose pages I wished, more than ever before, to carry out my Los Angeles

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<sup>6</sup> GLEDHILL, Christine. “Prologue: The Reach of Melodrama.” In: Williams, Linda and Christine Gledhill (eds.). *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018, p. xiii.

<sup>7</sup> BRÉGENT-HEALD, Dominique. *Borderland Films: American Cinema, Mexico, and Canada during the Progressive Era*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015, p. 3

<sup>8</sup> The writer, ethnographer, and *corrido* singer Américo Paredes first coined the term Greater Mexico to denote the historical movement of Mexicans, Mexican Americans and Chicanos/as back and forth across the US-Mexico Border.

<sup>9</sup> CONTRERAS TORRES, Miguel. “Cómo filmé una película en Los Ángeles,” *El Universal Ilustrado*, n. 17 August 1922. My gratitude to Rielle Navitski for sharing this article.

journey.”<sup>10</sup> Inspired by accounts of critics unbound to national borders, many ventured north in the pursuit of star-struck dreams. Others, instead, may have been deterred by discriminatory stories against Mexican performers. A particularly polemical account was that of María Rivera, a revue *cancionista*. Chasing her cinematic reveries, she went to Los Angeles only to find herself “cutting [her] dreams by the root and dancing and singing in cafeterias.”<sup>11</sup> Even though Rivera managed to rekindle her stage career in Los Angeles before returning to Mexico City, she warned other dreamers, “To conquer Hollywood one must be born Yankee. There, we are considered an inferior race and the few Mexicans that have been able to reach to the top hid their nationality from the beginning.” Rivera’s claims indicate a peculiar phenomenon of the United States racial formation—the racialization of the Mexican nationality. As such, they ignited polemic controversy in local and Angeleno newspapers, reanimating discussion of links between Mexicans and denigrating films.

In the face of Rivera’s account—and other articles of similar tenor published in Mexico City<sup>12</sup>—*Página de cine* of *El Heraldo de México* (published out of Los Angeles) vowed to “disprove the endless caravan of fabrications” about Mexican actors in *Cinelandia*.<sup>13</sup> A full-page article on three Hollywood “success” stories—Lygia di Golconda, Nelly Fernández, and Ramón Novarro—exemplifies such an attempt.<sup>14</sup> The

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* The book in question is Noriega Hope’s *El mundo de las sombras*, a compilation of his chronicles published in Mexico City by the press of *El Universal Ilustrado* in 1919.

<sup>11</sup> ALDEBARÁN. “Auténticas murmuraciones de Hollywood,” *El Universal Ilustrado*, 11 September 1924, p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> For example, “Los mexicanos en Hollywood,” *El Demócrata*, 4 April 1924.

<sup>13</sup> Retorts against Mexican publications were directed at Mexiqueño publications in general, but highlighted the newspaper *El Universal*, its supplement *El Universal Ilustrado*, and the latter’s director. Carlos Noriega Hope, who purportedly rejected articles sent by *El Heraldo*’s Hollywood insiders. OJEDA, Manuel. “Manuel Ojeda tiene la palabra,” *El Heraldo de México*, 2 September 1924, p. 5. Film articles written by *Heraldo* regulars circulated through an expanded network of film cultures in urban centers such as Houston, Tucson, Santiago de Cuba, Managua, Mexico City, and Sinaloa. “¡Gracias estimados colegas!”, *Heraldo de México*, 17 December 1924. *Heraldo* also claims to be read in South America, “Página cinematográfica de El Heraldo de México es muy leída en la América del Sur,” 10 January 1925.

<sup>14</sup> “La tierra de Anahuac y el arte de la cinematografía,” *El Heraldo de México*, 15 September 1924, 6. The article also mentions a column titled, “El fracaso de nuestros artistas de cine en el extranjero,” as an example of Mexico City fabrications.

article celebrates the three actors as self-made celebrities, but eschews the racialization of Mexican nationals. On the contrary, it praises the actors' "fair, white star skin" [*carnes blancas de estrella*], while managing to celebrate their alterity. Purportedly, the three exemplified "the Latin type [tipo latino] par excellence." Without eschewing their roots, the article stresses the stars' racial whiteness and simultaneous ethnic "latinidad," that is an ethnic definition which refers to descent from southern Europe. Consequently, it strikes a careful balance of ethnic otherness—vis-à-vis the Anglo-Saxon Hollywood norm—and sensual appeal in order to elevate the three stars to Hollywood stardom: "They have made not only Mexicans, but all the peoples of the world love them." The article shows the three actors pointing to a productive ambivalence that negotiated the national and racial frameworks shaping the film cultures of Mexico City and Los Angeles.<sup>15</sup>

The back and forth of the Mexico City and Angeleno press, exemplified here in two articles, zoomed in on specific actors and ultimately produced a constellation of stars that obscured the boundaries between Hollywood, global, and local star-systems. In the long run, di Golconda and Fernández did not enjoy outstanding careers in the United States.<sup>16</sup> But Ramón Novarro, along with Lupe Vélez and Dolores del Río, managed to resonate across borders. Rendered in press and film, these stars embodied the ambition of *hacer la América*, to borrow an Argentine expression—the

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<sup>15</sup> The idea of "nation" should be understood here closer to its German equivalent, *volk*, rather than as a geographically bound nation-state.

<sup>16</sup> Di Golconda acted, in Mexico, "Malditas sean las mujeres" (n.d.), "Amnesia" (Ernesto Volrath, 1921), and "Fulguración de raza" (Eduardo Martorell, 1922). Spanish-language press materials claim that Golconda performed with Carmelita Geraghty in a film titled, "Las joyas de Alvarado" (John Mac Carthy, Universal City, 1924). Ligia di Golconda, "Mis impresiones," *El Heraldo de México*, 8 July 1924, p. 5. Aldalberto González, "La 'china poblana' que triunfa en Hollywood," *El Heraldo de México*, 3 July 1924, p. 5. Furthermore, *El Heraldo* recognizes her as an active contributor to its *Página de cine*, along with other local film critics. "Nuestro prestigio," *El Heraldo de México*, 27 July 1924, p. 5. Nelly Fernández, on the contrary, has a less prominent presence in the press. She appears as an actress of great promise, cast but not hired for certain Hollywood roles. She seems to only have had some success on the stage, performing at the Hidalgo Theater, on Main St. Luis G. Pinal, "Nelly Fernández," *El Heraldo de México*, 3 July 1924, p. 5.

prospect for personal and economic success through migration.<sup>17</sup> The expression is germane. Press accounts suggest that, for these actors, cinematic success did not necessarily imply a revised sense of belonging or full assimilation. On the contrary, it effaced without entirely eliminating a degree of otherness—deracializing Mexicannes to fit within a Latin whiteness—that would prove strategic in reshaping the film cultures of Mexico City and Los Angeles, while allowing Mexican actors to partake in the by-then global star system of Hollywood cinema.<sup>18</sup>

Such articles point to what Laura Isabel Serna aptly describes as “ambivalent fascination” in fan magazines—the enthrallment of Mexican fans with Hollywood accompanied by the correlative awareness of how film studios exoticized or sidelined Mexicans in films and film culture.<sup>19</sup> Serna contends, “Though it seems paradoxical,” these complex forms of consumption “nurtur[ed] Mexican national identity” in Greater Mexico.<sup>20</sup> Colin Gunckel, for his part, analyzes instances of ambivalent fascination among the Mexican American press. He notes that both critics and fans “selectively Mexicanized Hollywood” via certain Mexican actors. Considering them positive representatives of Mexico, journalists “somewhat paradoxically framed stardom as either undesirable or inaccessible,” discouraging readers from migrating

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<sup>17</sup> European immigrants to Argentina, particularly Spanish and Italian, popularized the expression “hacer la América” as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A United States equivalent would be “the American Dream.” In this section, however, I use the expression to highlight how “América” in this context transcends national frameworks and, understood as the search of personal success, allows for complex networks and exchanges between film cultures across borders. For the experience of Italian immigrants and their senses of belonging, see BAILY, Samuel. “Hacer la América: los italianos ganan dinero en New York y Buenos Aires, 1880-1914,” *Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos*, vol. 14, n. 38 1998, pp. 57–68.

<sup>18</sup> This niche was a discursive space that many Latin American Hispanist intellectuals elaborated in the face of American imperialism, José Enrique Rodó and José Vasconcelos being cases in point and to which I return to below.

<sup>19</sup> SERNA, Laura Isabel. *Making Cinelandia: American Films and Mexican Film Culture before the Golden Age*, Durham/Londres: Duke University Press, 2014, p. 110.

<sup>20</sup> SERNA, Laura Isabel. “Cinema on the US-Mexico Border: American Motion Pictures and Mexican Audiences, 1896-1930.” In: McCrossen, Alexis (ed.). *Land of Necessity: Consumer Culture in the United States-Mexico Boderlands*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009, p. 144.

to Hollywood.<sup>21</sup> Gunckel's equally paradoxical formulation—Mexican American journalists contradictorily catering to both local and Mexican readers—betrays the expanded networks and overlapping territories Mexico City and Angeleno film cultures shared. Departing from a national framework, and supported by the archive, I propose that these forms of consumption fostered discursive constructions between urban film cultures that both effaced and reproduced ethnic, raced, and gendered threats and enticements associated with stardom.

Certain Mexico City publications partook in these expanded visual regimes independent of a nationalist outlook. Periodicals such as *Magazine Fílmico* (1926–1929) had permanent correspondents in Los Angeles stoking conflicting readings of *Cinelandia*, thereby complicating the “two-way” (as opposed to one-way) flow of Mexican Hollywood stars. These publications “promoted Mexicans in Hollywood”<sup>22</sup>—from established actors (Novarro, del Río, Vélez) to potentially rising stars (di Golconda, Lupita Tovar, and others)—while acknowledging racialized discrimination in *Cinelandia*. Some of their film critics focused their attention on specific stars—not because of nationalist attachment, but because of an urban sense of belonging. Ángel Míquel contends that the director of *Magazine Fílmico*, the Durango-born Rafael Bermúdez Zataráin, “contributed to [film criticism by] closely following the career of his fellow *duranguense* Ramon Novarro.”<sup>23</sup> On both sides of the border, then, ambivalent representations of stars afforded a two-way formulation of “sustained structures of identification.”<sup>24</sup> These structures, both and at the same time, Mexicanized and “Latinized”—that is, whitewashed—Hollywood Mexican actors.

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<sup>21</sup> GUNCKEL, Colin. “Ambivalent Si(Gh)Tings: Stardom and Silent Film in Mexican America.” In: *Film History*, vol. 29, n. 1, 2017, p. 112.

<sup>22</sup> MIQUEL, Ángel. Rafael Bermúdez Zataráin y *el Magazine Fílmico*, *Vivomatografías. Revista de estudios sobre precine y cine silente en Latinoamérica*, n. 3, diciembre de 2017, p. 56. Disponible en: <http://www.vivomatografias.com/index.php/vmfs/article/view/119> [Access 10 October 2019]; my emphasis.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>24</sup> HANSEN, Miriam. *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 246.

## What Every Woman Wants

In both film cultures, the representational practices Mexicanizing and Latinizing stars struck a careful balance between familiarity and alterity. Ramón Novarro, the first Mexican to reach Hollywood stardom, embodies this delicate equilibrium.<sup>25</sup> The construction and reception of star personas, such as his in Mexico City and Los Angeles as well as in other cities on both sides of the border, reflect Hollywood's transnational presence and its local readings. As Giorgio Bertellini notes, Hollywood's widespread appeal by the late 1920s, broadcast through its star system, did not confer universal validity on its productions. Rather, at home and abroad, stars' "ability to embody modern imageries and new ideas of social difference and interaction (...) exert[ed] different outcomes in different contexts, whether ethnic, regional, or international."<sup>26</sup> If, as Robert C. Allen argues, stars "embody in their images certain paradoxes or contradictions inherent in the larger social formation,"<sup>27</sup> stars such as Ramón Novarro reveal that these formations can encompass—and, in fact, interconnect—discrete, urban film cultures when we confront different reception contexts.

Before centering on the actor, however, it is worth lingering on the discursive barriers and invitations Hollywood offered in the press. Publications on both sides of the border asserted the challenge of entering Hollywood. Stoking readers' ambivalent fascination, film columns portrayed star-requirements in soft focus, for lack of a better word. "Los Angeles, Hollywood (...) is undisputedly the Cinelandia of the Earth.

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<sup>25</sup> If Ramón Novarro and Dolores del Río epitomize the success of Mexicans in Hollywood, Lupe Vélez embodies what Richard Dyer terms the "undertow" of Hollywood success: excess, decadence, and eventual tragedy. DYER, Richard. *Stars*. London: BFI, 1998, p. 35. On Vélez, see STURTEVANT, Victoria. "Spitfire: Lupe Velez and the Ambivalent Pleasures of Ethnic Masquerade." In: *The Velvet Light Trap*, n. 55, 2005, pp. 19–32.

<sup>26</sup> BERTELLINI, Giorgio. "Manipulation and Authenticity: The Unassailable Valentino in 1920s Argentina." In: Navitski, Rielle and Nicholas Poppe (eds.). *Cosmopolitan Film Cultures in Latin America, 1896-1960*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017, p. 73. In this section, as the entire chapter proposes, the terms "home" and "abroad" refer to places and spaces not constrained by national borders—even if, at times, they are posited in nationalistic terms, as I discuss in the following section.

<sup>27</sup> ALLEN, Robert C. "The Role of the Star in Film History (Joan Crawford)." In: Braudy, Leo and Marshall Cohen (eds.). *Film Theory and Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 560.

But Cinelandia is not an enchanted palace open to all personalities,” warned *El Heraldo*, “So far, no one has purchased the privilege to be one of the chosen ones.”<sup>28</sup> Press accounts placed an emphasis on the elusive notion of “personality”—an unstable term denoting an outstanding individual and/or a set of qualities determining character—obfuscating traits proper to film stars from clear-cut racial, ethnic, or national determinisms.<sup>29</sup> Premised on an intangible vagueness, personality effaced the divide between physical and ethereal qualities. Adalberto Elías González, director of *Página de cine*, best portrays the elusive attributes proper to the film star: “There is something that is neither talent, nor beauty, nor opportunity. SOMETHING enigmatic, mysterious, INCOMPREHENSIBLE traces the road (...) of those who were born predestined to savor the sensation of being at the TOP. What is that SOMETHING?”—González asks—“Nobody knows.”<sup>30</sup> For the film critic, very few Hollywood stars enjoyed that intangible “something”—Ramón Novarro and the “great-lover” (in English) Rudolph Valentino among them. Other articles echo González’ claims, with descriptions of Novarro as a “mystic of the screen,” or of “elegant and attractive physiognomy [and] innate discriminating manners.”<sup>31</sup> English-language fan magazines were no different, rhetorically seeking answers to the “mystery” of what makes Ramón Novarro a star.<sup>32</sup> These essentialist descriptions, rather than indicating the subtle qualities reserved for stars, betrayed Hollywood’s attempt to don its immigrant actors with sensual exoticism in the guise of the “Latin type.”

The Italian-born Rudolph Valentino first introduced the Latin lover figure, starring in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (Rex Ingram, 1921),<sup>33</sup> a film about a porteño

<sup>28</sup> “El triunfo del celuloide,” *El Heraldo de México*, 31 July 1924, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> BERTELLINI, Giorgio. “The Atlantic Valentino: The ‘Inimitable Lover’ As Racialized and Gendered Italian.” In: Baldassar, Loretta and Donna Gabaccia (eds.). *Intimacy and Italian Migration: Gender and Domestic Lives in a Mobile World*. New York: Fordham University, 2011, p. 43.

<sup>30</sup> GONZÁLEZ, Adalberto Elías. “Luces de Hollywood,” *El Heraldo de México*, 18 May 1924 (title case in original)

<sup>31</sup> GONZALO BECERRA, Salvador. “El místico de la Pantalla,” *El Heraldo de México*, 23 September 1924, p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> HOWE, Herbert. “What is the Mystery of Ramon Novarro?,” Qtd. in CHÁVEZ, Ernesto. “‘Ramon Is Not One of These’: Race and Sexuality in the Construction of Silent Film Actor Ramón Novarro’s Star Image.” In: *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 20, n. 3, 2011, p. 535.

<sup>33</sup> RAMÍREZ BERG, Charles. “Stereotyping in Films in General and of the Hispanic in Particular.” *Howard Journal of Communications*, vol. 2, n. 3, 1990, pp. 286–300, p. 296.

transnational family that finds its members on opposite fronts of the Great War.<sup>34</sup> In the film, the famous tango scene imbues Valentino with this novel personality. Taking place in the Buenos Aires underworld of *La Boca*, the scene features Valentino as a gaucho-looking “youthful libertine,” intertitles read. At a tavern filled with morally questionable urban types, he overpowers a man and lays claim to his female partner on the dance floor. Valentino’s tangoed body, sexualized in both close ups and long shots, presents a provocative, dangerous, and sensual character (Figure 2).<sup>35</sup> In such moments of display—punctuated by alluring stares between Valentino and the woman—the star system taps into “a persistent undercurrent” of the cinema of attractions in service of exhibitionism.<sup>36</sup> Thus, through the Valentino phenomenon, Hollywood film culture—for the first time—recognized female spectatorship as a socially and economically significant group.<sup>37</sup> An article in *Photoplay* devoted to Valentino and other “matinee idols” recognized that “woman may not count for much at the polls, but at the box office her two-bit ballot controls the situation, making and unmaking stars.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> The family consists of *volkisch* members of Spanish, French, and German origin.

<sup>35</sup> For Argentine film historian Jorge Finkielman, Valentino’s “gaucho costume was rather absurd, and his dance steps cannot be considered to be authentic tango.” Just as other scholars, I have not come across comments on the reception of this scene at the time in Buenos Aires. Four years later, however, the writer Manuel Gálvez published a bilingual poem, “The Gaucho” (titled in English), ridiculing the film and the way “Valentino” danced tango in it, “With chiripá and spurs, / and a winged caster felt hat / and a manila shawl / the tango was danced (...) and delirious, Yankeeeland said: / ‘is the best in the world.’ [quote in English] / Tremendous local color, / in Broadway, to that tango was found.” FINKIELMAN, Jorge. *The Film Industry in Argentina*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004, p. 39; GÁLVEZ, Manuel. “The Gaucho,” *Martín Fierro*, n. 17, October 1925. On the dearth of contemporary commentary on this (in)famous scene, see BERTELLINI, “Manipulation,” pp. 88–89.

<sup>36</sup> HANSEN, *Babel*, p. 247.

<sup>37</sup> HANSEN, Miriam. “Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship.” In: *Cinema Journal*, vol. 25, n. 4, 1986, p. 6. Hansen relates Valentino’s mass appeal to social changes in the wake of the Great War, particularly regarding the integration of women into the work force and correlative shifts in consumer society, gender relations, gender roles, and notions of femininity. For the effects of the Great War in the emergence of Latin American melodramatic film cultures, see chapter one.

<sup>38</sup> HOWE, Herbert. “What are Matinee Idols Made of?,” *Photoplay*, April 1923, p. 41.



Figure 2.- Valentino tangoes with Beatrice Dominguez. Postcard (1921). Author's collection.

Although Novarro never played a Latin type in film,<sup>39</sup> press materials suggest that Valentino and Novarro competed for the title of the silver screen's ethnic male lover.<sup>40</sup> Rex Ingram—director of *The Four Horsemen* and “discoverer” of Novarro—played no small part in building the Latin lover on-screen and off. In an article advertising Novarro's first starring role under contract with Ingram,<sup>41</sup> the director capitalizes on Valentino to propel Novarro's exoticized appeal. After highlighting how the director “rescued Valentino from heavy

villain parts” in *The Four Horsemen*, Ingram claims to deliver in his films “what every woman wants.”<sup>42</sup> That is, men other than the “American husband;” men that “arouse

<sup>39</sup> During the silent period, Novarro played an “Austrian” henchman in *The Prisoner of Zenda* (Rex Ingram, 1922), a “pagan Polynesian of the South Seas” in *Where the Pavement Ends* (Rex Ingram, 1923), a “French hero” in *Scaramouche* (Rex Ingram, 1923), a “Spaniard” in *Thy Name is Woman* (Fred Niblo, 1924) an “Arab Dragoman” in *The Arab* (Rex Ingram, 1924), and, lastly, “the prince of Jerusalem” in *Ben Hur* (Fred Niblo, 1925). REYES, Manuel. “Ramon's Ancestors Greeted the Mayflower,” *Photoplay*, October 1925, p. 46.

<sup>40</sup> No Latin American played such roles. Besides the Italian-born Valentino, the Spaniard Antonio Moreno and the Hungarian Ricardo Cortez (born Jacob Krantz) did portray the Latin lover.

<sup>41</sup> Cast as Rupert of Hetzau for *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1922).

<sup>42</sup> WHITE, Peter. “What Every Woman Wants,” *Picture-Play Magazine*, June 1922, p. 23. Rex Ingram catapulted the careers of Valentino, Antonio Moreno, and Novarro. He also partook in building their star personas. See O'LEARY, Liam. *Rex Ingram: Master of the Silent Cinema*. New York: Harper and Row, 1980, p. 96.

her interest” with “an exotic, instant appeal (...) giving her some quality of the unknown to ponder on.” Harnessing the mystery of personality, Ingram proceeds to exclaim, “The Latin type of man offers that as no other type can.” After explicitly referring to Valentino, the article concludes by confirming Ingram’s intent, “[Ingram] feels sure Ramon will be the next big star.” That the article appeared after Ingram and Valentino parted ways,<sup>43</sup> suggests that Ingram himself aimed at counterpoising Novarro and Valentino from the earliest stages in Novarro’s career.

Born Ramón Gil Samaniego, Ramón Novarro aspired from a young age to become a Hollywood actor. He traveled north in the wake of the Mexican Revolution and in the context of the Great War. In 1916, at seventeen years old, he left Durango for Los Angeles. Performing as Ramón Samaniegos (note the added s), he found some temporary jobs as an extra and made ends meet working as an usher at the Philharmonic Theatre in downtown Los Angeles. In 1918, he secured a position with the Marion Morgan dance troupe, travelling to the East Coast and Canada, only to quit and return to California six months later. Performing in the dance pantomimes of the Hollywood Community Theatre, one night Rex Ingram spotted him, screen tested him, and offered him the role of Rupert of Hentzau in *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1922). Soon, Ingram signed Samaniegos for a two-year contract while encouraging him to change his name to something more “pronounceable.”<sup>44</sup> A star was born. Ramón Novarro appeared in Ingram’s *Trifling Women* (1922), *Where the Pavement Ends* (1923), *Scaramouche* (1923), and *The Arab* (1924). His increased visibility led him to sign a contract with Metro Pictures, the forerunner of MGM, which at its merger offered Novarro the lead in *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (Fred Niblo, 1925), the most ambitious production to date. Casting Novarro over Anglo actors sparked a “two-way” crisis that I discuss below.

Arguably, Novarro did not equally enjoy—or suffer—the “socioreligious phenomenon” of which Valentino was “the golden calf,” as André Bazin eloquently

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<sup>43</sup> Valentino left Metro after shooting *The Conquering Power* (Rex Ingram, 1921).

<sup>44</sup> ETTINGER, Margaret “To the Ladies—Ramon the Romantic,” *Picture-Play Magazine*, June 1922, p. 99.

puts it.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, Novarro was also venerated as an object of near-religious devotion, as he partook in the “cultural discourse on ethnicity, masculinity, and sexual difference” that Hollywood film culture deployed through “female oriented media, fan magazines, plays, and popular culture.”<sup>46</sup> An article on Novarro’s meteoric rise recognized women’s buying power and its effects in the industry, “It’s the woman who pays and pays and pays for the upkeep of the Hollywood beau,” exclaimed Herbert Howe, the Anglo insider who followed Novarro’s career the closest.<sup>47</sup> Spanish-language publications followed suit in recognizing Novarro’s appeal among American women, claiming the actor “owed his success to [American] flappers.”<sup>48</sup>

Regarding Novarro’s star persona, both the Mexico City and the Angeleno press harnessed the ambivalent fascination the figure of the Latin lover elicited to cater to local readers. The press in each city balanced sex appeal and alterity to foster interest in Novarro among readers and spectators—without stimulating sources of anxiety specific to each film culture. Addressing just such motifs, Ana López depicts Hollywood as a “cultural ethnographer” creating race and ethnicity through its cinematic and paracinematic renderings of various groups.<sup>49</sup> When pitted against each other, however, these press accounts reveal “two-way” uses of ethnicity, masculinity, and sexual difference. As indicated previously, Howe praises Novarro’s acceptable racialized otherness in contrast to other Latin types based on their ability

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<sup>45</sup> BAZIN, André. “In Defense of Mixed Cinema.” In: *What Is Cinema?* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, p. 74.

<sup>46</sup> STUCLAR, Gaylyn. “Discourses of Gender and Ethnicity: The Construction and De(Con)Struction of Rudolph Valentino as Other.” In: *Film Criticism*, vol. 13, n. 2, 1989, p. 19.

<sup>47</sup> HOWE, “What are Matinee Idols Made of?”, p. 41. Howe reported on Novarro for *Photoplay* and the *Los Angeles Times*. Howe also wrote serialized biographies of both Valentino, for *Photoplay* in 1923, and Novarro. Novarro’s biography, “On the Road with Ramon Novarro: The Romantic Life Story of Novarro” appeared in five installments in *Motion Picture Magazine* (February-June 1927). Chávez follows closely Howe’s prose to suggest a subtext of queer infatuation with Novarro. For Chávez, by stressing Novarro’s beauty, Howe depicted a star that could “transcend his racial self, and, with it, overcome the deeply racist impulses not only of his American fans in the early twentieth century but also of those who wrote about him.” CHÁVEZ, “Race and Sexuality”, p. 537.

<sup>48</sup> GONZÁLEZ, Adalberto “Ramón Novarro Debe su Triunfo a las Pelonas,” *Heraldo*, 14 September 1924, p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> LÓPEZ, Ana. “Are All Latins from Manhattan?” In: Friedman, Lester (ed.). *Unspeakeable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*. Urbana: University of Illinois, 1991, p. 404.

to please women. Hinting at denigrating depictions, Howe distinguishes Novarro from other Mexicans, “Ramon is not one of these [greasers], even though he is a Hollywood resident and a Mexican. Not that I mean any disparagement of Mexicans. I may want to take a flight over the border myself one day.”<sup>50</sup> Distinguishing Novarro from greasers—a proxy term to racialize brown lower-class Mexican and Mexican-American men—Howe attempts to deracialize Novarro’s Mexicanness (which in the United States racial formation constitutes a “race”) and realigns his body with southern Europe types, therefore discursively whitening him: “Ramon has the finest, clearest black eyes I ever saw outside the countenance of a Neapolitan bambino (...) Yet between him and such hot knavish Latin lovers as Valentino and [Antonio] Moreno there is no more resemblance than between Little Eva and Topsy.” Howe’s allusion to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—the United States’ foundational racialized melodrama<sup>51</sup>—complicates the Latin type’s raced otherness, for it points to dissimilar racial partitions at play in American and non-American film cultures.

Indeed, the visual regimes Novarro’s alterity fostered vary significantly, depending on the *loci* of enunciation—and consumption—in the particular film culture that maintained his star persona. In Hollywood, his racialized self functioned as a figure distinctly different and yet familiar, as Howe’s depiction suggests; whereas in Mexico City film culture, his alterity—or, more specifically, his outstanding personality—did not contend with issues of race but rather with the complex bond between race and class otherwise known as caste. The distinction is not surprising, as it responds to Mexican forms of sociability borne out of colonial caste systems.<sup>52</sup> Highlighting the distinction is important, for, as Mary Beltrán notes, in the United States—unlike in Latin America—race has been historically constructed in terms of a black-white binary (e.g., Topsy and Little Eva). That is why the United States, for Beltrán, has

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<sup>50</sup> HOWE, “Matinee Idols,” p. 41

<sup>51</sup> WILLIAMS, Linda. *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (revised edition). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002. pp. 45–95. For an explication of the Latin American “foundational fictions,” see Doris Sommer’s eponymous study.

<sup>52</sup> See KATZEW Ilona, *Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

historically “repudiated the idea of racial hybridity for most of its history,” and as a result has had “no cultural or legal context for understanding the racial place of mestizo peoples.”<sup>53</sup> The discrepancy is of prime concern for Novarro’s case and those of other Hollywood Latin lovers such as Valentino. It points to different reading proficiencies in differentiated film cultures—the American fear of miscegenation and the elaborate class-race Mexican divides. Not contradictorily, these incongruities also reveal the negotiable qualities of visual regimes extending beyond both film cultures: physical appearance and personality.

### **A Decided Newness of Type**

If in the 1910s, greasers dominated the (degraded) minority image in Hollywood films; in the 1920s, immigrant film stars epitomized cinema’s gender and racial difference, under the guise of an exoticism geared toward conjoining film cultures in a cinematic *lingua franca*.<sup>54</sup> By 1925, the ethnic romantic protagonist peaked,<sup>55</sup> as female and male stars shifted from action-bound heroes—standard-bearers of American values and modes of identification—to “heroes of passion and eroticism.”<sup>56</sup> Press materials describe the ways in which the Hollywood film industry “collapsed specific national or ethnic identities in its quest to reach international markets.”<sup>57</sup> In the process, the Latin type exuded “southern European sensuality and a sense of the forbidden,”<sup>58</sup> without appearing utterly foreign with respect to the Anglo-Saxon-derived United States self-image. These uses elicited differentiated forms of reception *and* rejection of immigrant stars in specific film cultures. At a time when

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<sup>53</sup> BELTRAN, Mary C. *Latina/o Stars in U.S. Eyes: The Making and Meanings of Film and TV Stardom*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009, p. 7.

<sup>54</sup> For a study of how Hollywood shaped “not yet white,” “in-between people” across the industry, see ROGIN, Michael. *Black Face, White Noise*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. Miriam Hansen locates in the 1920s the culmination of a nativist movement in the wake of Roosevelt imperialism, an important factor I return to in the third section. Hansen, *Babel*, p. 255.

<sup>55</sup> STUDLAR, “Gender and Ethnicity,” p. 30.

<sup>56</sup> BOSCHI, Alberto. “Significado Del Nuevo ‘Star System.’” In: Talens, Jenaro and Santos Zunzunegui (eds.). *Historia General Del Cine: América (1915-1928)*. Madrid: Cátedra, p. 364.

<sup>57</sup> SERNA, *Making Cinelandia*, p. 105.

<sup>58</sup> BERTELLINI, “Atlantic Valentino,” p. 37.

denigrating films were on the wane, and previously sidelined ethnic actors began being cast in leading roles, Novarro and other matinee idols conformed to a standard “that identifie[d] beauty with mainstream culture”<sup>59</sup>—emptying Hollywood of ethnicity, except for stereotyped antagonists and supporting roles—while privileging, yet surreptitiously disavowing, ethnic protagonists.

Mexican actors partook in this representational regime in film and in the press, distancing themselves from the racialization of Mexicanness because of proximity to a southern European construct of whiteness. The Spanish-language press promoted Mexican actresses as Spanish-looking, and therefore “unproblematically” able to partake in Hollywood stardom.<sup>60</sup> Hair-product ads yield a similar take on Novarro. One shows the “Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer star” provocatively asking the reader, “What ‘role’ do you want to represent in life?”<sup>61</sup> Targeted at Mexico City men, the ad invites male consumers to emulate Novarro in the stateless and whitewashed role of the “refined and cultured (...) modern gentleman.” These portrayals strategically engaged with Hollywood’s aims at expanding its global markets through a carefully managed veneer of ethnic alterity, appropriating Hollywood beauty standards while elevating Novarro’s whiteness as both modern and desirable for Mexican readers.<sup>62</sup> The English-language press was no different, displaying Novarro as an outstanding Mexican because of his physical beauty and upbringing. Further, it sexualized Novarro’s body and raised his class, depicting him as exquisitely sophisticated, without devolving such praise into the “stigma of effeminacy” to which Valentino’s off-screen persona was subjected.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> WINOKUR, Mark. “Improbable Ethnic Hero: William Powell and the Transformation of Ethnic Hollywood.” In: *Cinema Journal*, vol. 27, n. 1, 1987, p. 7.

<sup>60</sup> SERNA, *Making Cinelandia*, p. 106.

<sup>61</sup> Stacomb advertisement, *El Universal Ilustrado*, 5 January 1928. Certain publications zealously commit to discerning, and even correcting, misperceptions of stars’ race, ethnicity, and nationality—confirming or denying Mexican or Latin American origin—such as *La Prensa* of San Antonio, Texas. Gunckel, “Ambivalent Si(gh)tings,” p. 116.

<sup>62</sup> STURTEVANT, “Spitfire,” p. 21; STUDLAR, “Gender and Ethnicity,” p. 21.

<sup>63</sup> HANSEN, *Babel*, p. 262.

Novarro's star image, therefore, revolved around two axes: his patrician origin and his "sensual yet pure body."<sup>64</sup> Regarding the former, articles promoted him as old-fashioned, unpretentious, and urbane. Regarding the latter, Mexico City press struck a careful balance in recognizing his sex appeal among modern women—both local and American *pelonas*—while highlighting the star's heightened moral comportment and disinterest in his entrancing effect on women. Contrasting Novarro with Valentino, an article evaluates the former's *donjuanismo* as a "myth," despite the "sighs" of his female spectators and his "enormous popularity." The article even contends that Novarro is "of sober manners [, a]ll the strength of his love concentrated on (...) his adored mother."<sup>65</sup> To cater to a Mexican readership, the Mexican star required a degree of self-restraint vis-à-vis the excesses of Hollywood. More interesting than highlighting Novarro's Catholic-cum-motherly devotion over the facile pleasures available to him, the article upends the tenets of the Latin type without disparaging Novarro's distinctive personality, "The aureole of [Novarro's romantic] conquests is but a legend forged by the heat of American fantasies in (...) its craving for Latinism [*latinismo*]." Turning eroticized exoticism on its head, Mexico City press imbued Hollywood film culture with an inflamed and immoderate demeanor that only actors of *la raza* (the "race") could counter.<sup>66</sup> Akin to Valentino—acclaimed as a "polished foreigner" and a "modern Don Juan," after his role in *The Four Horsemen*<sup>67</sup>—Novarro's ethnic otherness vacillated between (sensual) visibility and (classed) obscurity. But unlike Valentino, he was ultimately promoted "in oddly de-eroticized terms."<sup>68</sup> Thus, in building Novarro's star-persona, Mexico City press adopted an *arielista* outlook—the anti-American discourse favoring Latin American

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<sup>64</sup> CHÁVEZ, "Race and Sexuality," p. 521.

<sup>65</sup> "El Donjuanismo de Ramón Novarro," *Revista de Revistas*, 2 May 1926.

<sup>66</sup> GONZÁLEZ, Adalberto. "Bello gesto de Ramon Navarro," *Heraldo*, 25 February, 1923, p. 4. Multiple allusions to "la raza," a Spanish expression denoting Hispanophone populations deriving from colonial encounters in the Americas, further weakens the category of the national in the study of the film cultures under scrutiny.

<sup>67</sup> "A Latin Lover," *Photoplay*, September 1921.

<sup>68</sup> STUDLAR, "Gender and Ethnicity," 30.

spirituality and idealism in opposition to the “material slavery” associated with the United States.<sup>69</sup>

A vehicle of representation, the star serves as a form and source of knowledge. Through the star, the “personalization of the social,” the “embod[iment] of social experience in physical type and personality,” thus carries representational consequence.<sup>70</sup> In this case study, a careful arrangement of erotics, alterity, and relatable urbanity determined Novarro’s meteoric rise, in opposition to Valentino’s sudden fall. The latter’s star power mainly capitalized on exotic eroticism,<sup>71</sup> therefore questioning his socioethical function. Whereas from the earliest stages of Novarro’s career, paracinematic texts built his star persona, highlighting his (white) physical attributes—“deep brown eyes, well-chiseled features, and (...) nicely shaped head”—in combination with an outstanding urbanity—an “innate gentlemanliness” that amounted to a “decided newness of type.”<sup>72</sup> These accounts juxtaposed his “amazing charm and good looks” with a melodramatic tale “of his struggles for recognition,”<sup>73</sup> from meager roles in a local pantomime theatre to Hollywood stardom and worldliness. Valentino “was never considered to be anything more than a sexual object,” and was eventually feminized for having “lived off women” in his past career.<sup>74</sup> Novarro was praised for a more encompassing personality and did not represent a threat to male spectators or homocentric values. Consequently, his eroticism, on screen and off, was not chastised by the media. In Hollywood, many still viewed Valentino as an “agent of miscegenation” because he married white women.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> RODÓ, José Enrique. *Ariel, Obras Completas*. Madrid: Aguilar, 1967, p. 215. José Enrique Rodó’s turn-of-the-century idealism circulated in Mexico first through the writings of José Vasconcelos and, beyond the period of this study, through the work of Octavio Paz. My gratitude to Mónica García-Blizzard for pointing out this connection.

<sup>70</sup> GLEDHILL, “Prologue,” xiii.

<sup>71</sup> STUDLAR, “Gender and Ethnicity,” 28.

<sup>72</sup> ETTINGER, Margaret. “To the Ladies—Ramon the Romantic,” *Picture-Play Magazine*, June 1922, p. 99. One of the anonymous reviewers noticed here a eugenics or Lombrosian investment in anthropometric tendencies; a noteworthy observation that highlights the dialectics of whitening Mexican stars along southern-European lines of Latinidad and criminalizing racialized Mexican greasers that this article explores. My gratitude for her observation.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> STUDLAR, “Gender and Ethnicity,” p. 21.

<sup>75</sup> CHÁVEZ, “Race and Sexuality,” p. 540.

Press materials stressed Novarro's lack of interest in marriage, and even circulated his interest in priesthood or the monastery.<sup>76</sup> A confirmed bachelor and churchman, he posed "no threat to the racial order."<sup>77</sup>

Novarro's otherness hovered at a sexual threshold; but, in comparison to Valentino's, it never reached the level of eroticized threat in Mexico City or Angeleno film cultures. When Novarro was cast in *Where the Pavement Ends*, the script demanded that his character, a Pacific Islander by the name of Motauro, leap to his death in a waterfall after realizing he cannot consummate his love for Matilda (Alice Terry). To provide a "happy" ending without stirring fears of miscegenation, Metro Pictures had Ingram insert a prologue explaining that Motauro was, in fact, a white boy who grew up on the island ignoring his true racial identity.<sup>78</sup> This effaced exoticism and reduced erotic threat allowed the Mexican actor to be paired—unproblematically—with Anglo female stars in compelling narratives of seduction and romance, without contention or resistance. Novarro therefore operated as a "vessel of sexual appeal and desire," just as Valentino.<sup>79</sup> But, unlike Valentino, Novarro's meteoric rise—supported by his reined-in otherness—did not set in motion an equally sensational fall (during the silent period).<sup>80</sup> Assessing the Valentino phenomenon, Giorgio Bertellini argues that the Latin type was shaped by "the modern commercialization of gender and racial

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<sup>76</sup> Novarro's interest in priesthood appears in English-language magazines starting in 1928. BIERY, Ruth. "Why Ramon Novarro Decided to Remain in the Movies?" *Photoplay*, October 1928, p. 58.

<sup>77</sup> CHÁVEZ, "Race and Sexuality," p. 540. Valentino's relation to women, particularly to his second wife Natacha Rambova, further eroded his image in favor of Novarro and other Hispanic stars. Portrayed as a henpecked husband who, under her influence, quarreled with the studios in the name of the seventh art, Valentino saw defeat in his struggle for recognition. A two-page cartoon in *Photoplay* best portrays his demise. On the left page, a crowd of female and male spectators flock to a film theatre, the entrance framed with posters of Novarro and Antonio Moreno. On the right, Valentino and Rambova shout slogans on a makeshift stage—"I'm for Art," says he; "Down with the Producers!" echoes his wife—the diatribe acknowledged only by a scraggly vagrant who shouts, "Atta boy, Rudy!". GOLDGBERG, R. L. "Presto Chango Valentino!," *Photoplay*, May 1925, pp. 36–37.

<sup>78</sup> SOARES, André. *Beyond Paradise: The Life of Ramon Novarro*. New York: St. Martin's, 2002, p. 42.

<sup>79</sup> BERTELLINI, "Atlantic Valentino," p. 38.

<sup>80</sup> As Hansen and other scholars note, vitriol against Valentino exacerbated even after his death. Novarro may not have suffered from such critique during his tenure as a silent film star, but his unexpected death, at the hands of a male prostitute in 1968, echoed heteronormative anxieties surrounding Valentino's star persona. See SOARES, *Beyond Paradise*, p. 202.

typecasting (...) as national fantasy,” apropos of a rising nativist culture particular to the United States.<sup>81</sup> But the vicissitudes in the careers of both stars, and star personas, deploy vectors in multiple directions. The competition between both actors, in both Spanish and English-language publications in Mexico City and Los Angeles, evinces instead a dialogic relation between discrete (non-national) film cultures. In this sense, both actors partook in the ways that Hollywood film culture linked the exotic to the erotic “in forging a contradictory sexual spectacle of male ethnic otherness within a xenophobic and nativist culture.”<sup>82</sup> But the arena in which this culture was deployed surpassed national and cultural borders, not necessarily related to national sovereignties or markets; therefore facilitating different readings premised on otherness that catered to the (titillating) demands of discrete film cultures.

### **From Latin Lover to Aztec Prince**

The resolution of this apparently contradictory form of spectacle—celebrating otherness while reproducing raced and social differences across film cultures—lies in the greatest production to date; the process of choosing its male lead; and its reception, MGM’s *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (Fred Niblo, 1925). “The supreme motion picture masterpiece of all time”—reads the 1925 trailer—may have consolidated MGM’s position in Hollywood, but *Ben-Hur*’s production was not without complications. Even if immensely popular, the film would take almost six years to turn a small profit for the newly merged studio.<sup>83</sup> Shot “in authentic settings in Italy, the Mediterranean, and Palestine,”<sup>84</sup> the final cost of the film amounted to four million dollars, a sum previously unheard of in the film industry.<sup>85</sup> Initially, the Goldwyn Company acquired the rights to Lew Wallace’s 1880 novel and began shooting in Italy in late 1923, with George Walsh in the starring role. A few months

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<sup>81</sup> BERTELLINI, “Atlantic Valentino,” p. 38.

<sup>82</sup> STUDLAR, “Gender and Ethnicity,” 23.

<sup>83</sup> Bolstered by a 1931 reissue that included synchronized music and sound effects.

<sup>84</sup> “George Walsh Chosen to Play Lead in Ben Hur,” *Moving Picture World*, 5 January 1924, p. 34.

<sup>85</sup> An expensive production at the time would be one million dollars. BENSON, Scott. “Ben-Hur: The Making of an Epic.” Turner Home Entertainment, 1993.

after production began, the costs of producing abroad started to generate criticism.<sup>86</sup> When Goldwyn merged with Metro Pictures and Louis B. Mayer Productions, the troubled production saw radical changes in cast and crew. Fred Niblo—who had worked for Mayer—substituted director Charles Brabin, while a debate ensued regarding the leading role. Walsh was initially chosen for his “ability as an actor” and “physical development” but, as a Hollywood insider noted, “no role in motion pictures (...) caused so much discussion as that of Ben Hur.”<sup>87</sup> After disapproval arose about Walsh’s fitness for the role, Rudolph Valentino, cowboy star Buck Jones, and John Gilbert—among other matinee idols—were considered for the part of Judah Ben-Hur. Ultimately, Ramón Novarro was chosen for the lead.<sup>88</sup> Almost the entire cast was selected anew, with the exception of Francis X. Bushman, who played the role of Messala, and Carmel Myers, who played Ira, Messala’s mistress.

Walsh’s substitution triggered a series of “rumors,” in which the physical qualities of the actors took center stage. Defenders of Walsh decried how this example of “well-proportioned (...) muscular development” was “dropped for the shorter and slighter Ramon Novarro.” They even ridiculed production efforts to measure up the latter to Bushman’s Messala, “Heels have been put on [Novarro’s] sandals, or rather on and in, because the footwear was padded inside and out (...) How he will compare in bulk to Bushman is something the critics are wondering about.”<sup>89</sup> MGM quickly produced a statement in order to “vindicate” Walsh “from unjust rumors”—his “release” was due “to no failing or fault of Walsh’s” but rather “was unavoidable due to circumstances of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer merger.”<sup>90</sup> Novarro may not have been as robust as Walsh—in the film his antagonist does surpass him in size—but *Ben-Hur* responded to a novel film culture premised not on thrills and strongmen but on carefully calibrated, eroticized male exoticism. To somewhat “de-eroticize” Novarro’s image,

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<sup>86</sup> BUSH, W. Stephen. “Loew Asserts much of ‘Ben Hur’ Could Have Been Made in U.S.,” *Moving Picture World*, 2 August 1924, p. 348.

<sup>87</sup> “George Walsh Chosen,” p. 34.

<sup>88</sup> BENSON, “Ben-Hur.”

<sup>89</sup> KEEL, A. Chester. “The Fiasco of ‘Ben Hur,’” *Photoplay*, November 1924, p. 33.

<sup>90</sup> “Marcus Loew Tells About Goerge Walsh and ‘Ben Hur,’” *Moving Pictures World*, 22 November 1924, p. 308.

his defenders appealed to his struggle for recognition and religious devotion. A brief column on the actor's departure to Italy relates how, "When he was a half-starved little extra boy, trying to break into the Hollywood studios, Ramon had a vision of himself as Ben Hur." The column asserts Novarro's "appeal" to the "religious significance of the story," describing the "devout churchman" who, while shooting abroad, "whenever he is in Los Angeles, acts as choir-master for the Little Catholic Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe."<sup>91</sup> In all, the article strives to redeem Novarro through Catholicism, while also protecting against his feminization through religiosity.

The shift from the strongman to the composed, exotic-erotic yet bashful star brokered in what Miriam Hansen describes as an "economy of looks"—as, she believes, Valentino does in all of his films. For Hansen, in staging the exchange of looks between Valentino and the female characters, Valentino's films offer "point-of-view constructions that affirm the cultural hierarchy of gender in the visual field."<sup>92</sup> In a similar way, *Ben-Hur* and its paratexts manufacture an economy of looks that exploits Novarro's gendered appeal, while still appeasing its male audience. The 1925 trailer emphasizes the renowned episodes of the chariot race, "The thrill of thrills!" and the sea battle. And yet, the "lavish grandeur" describing action sequences as well as the unheard of magnitude of the production covertly shifts to a different commitment. Opulent sets and elevated figures disappear from the trailer after an intertitle anticipates "Daring Gorgeousness!" A low-angle medium shot of Novarro immediately follows. The star becomes the center of attention. Larger than life and dressed in Roman victory regalia, he oversees the audience from screen left to right. Thus, the trailer's economy of looks initially capitalizes on action-based thrills to daringly give prominence to a distinct visual regime—one gendered female.

This modification occurs throughout the film as the spectator's gaze is trained on Novarro's gorgeousness. A late sequence doubles down on this visual alignment, when Ben-Hur—by then a renowned Roman athlete—meets Messala's mistress. "Ira,

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<sup>91</sup> "Do You Believe in Hunches?", *Motion Picture Magazine*, September 1924, p. 53.

<sup>92</sup> HANSEN, "Pleasure, Ambivalence," p. 11.

the Egyptian whom all men worship,” receives Ben-Hur in her quarters. She first appears in reaction shot. Dressed in sequined nets—provocatively covering her chest and hips—the courtesan gasps for air in the presence of the beau. Her sumptuous chest swelling, she slowly ogles from screen bottom to screen top. A vertical panning shot follows—in close-up, running her (our) eyes over Novarro’s unclothed legs, his exquisitely dressed body, culminating in an elegantly framed bust of his backlit head and gleaming shoulders. The sequence finally turns to the mistress, beaming with satisfaction. Confirming a distinct, gendered hierarchy of the visible, Ira serves as “the bearer of the look;”<sup>93</sup> the sequence thus grants female spectators—and, to a lesser extent, male patrons—a tantalizing dose of visual pleasure (Figure 3).



Figure 3.- Ira ogles Ben-Hur, from toes to head. Video stills from *Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ*.

<sup>93</sup> MULVEY, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In: Brady, Leo and Marshall Cohen (eds.). *Film Theory and Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 835. Using a psychoanalytic lens, Mulvey’s seminal essay on gendered visual pleasure proposes narrative cinema’s sexualized ways of looking as empowering men while objectifying women.

“The most coveted [role] of all,”<sup>94</sup> *Ben-Hur* propelled Novarro to instant fame.<sup>95</sup> As suggested in the Mexico City and Angeleno press, Novarro’s role in *Ben-Hur* negotiated at least three different levels of ethnicity: Novarro’s, Novarro’s star persona, and his role in the film—the “real,” “perceived,” and “on screen” ethnicities that Ian Jarvie discerns in star vehicles.<sup>96</sup> An article in the Mexican-American press conflated these ethnic identities in celebration of Novarro’s winning out over Walsh for the leading role, “It fits a Mexican the high honor of having been chosen over hundreds of actors of all the nations to interpret the immortal ‘Ben-Hur’ (...) his vehement Latin heart, through its bluish channels [canales azulados,] carries matter, blood that is very Mexican.”<sup>97</sup> Amalgamating Latin and ethnic type, the article hints at a third element to elevate Novarro’s star persona: his alleged noble origins. With *Ben-Hur*, Novarro’s star image further pushed the boundaries between national borders, as the film’s plot allowed critics to incorporate ancient and mythic times into their star narratives. “Novarro may claim descent from the oldest American aristocracy (...) the imperial blood of the Aztecs flows through the heart of Novarro,”<sup>98</sup> a *Photoplay* article stated in anticipation of the premiere. The commentary traces the actor’s bloodline four hundred years into the past, to find his mother’s origins in an “Aztec noble,” while “his father’s records trace back to the conquistadores of Cortez.” Unlike other Mexicans—children of the great *chingada*, the (fatherless) progeny of the seduced or violated princess *Malinche*<sup>99</sup>—after *Ben-Hur*, Novarro’s star persona stood for a modern cosmogonic myth.

Significantly, Novarro’s ancestry does not support an outstanding *mexicanidad* in press materials. On the contrary, it blurs boundaries between identities and film cultures. The *Photoplay* article stresses how “against the romantic background of Aztec splendor, Novarro has suffered the appellation of ‘Latin’ in silence.” Celebrating

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<sup>94</sup> ETTINGER. “To the Ladies—Ramon the Romantic,” *Picture-Play Magazine*, June 1922, p. 99.

<sup>95</sup> In Mexico City, *Ben-Hur* grossed the unprecedented amount of fifty thousand pesos during its two-week run at the exclusive *Cine Palacio*. “Películas favoritas de 1926,” *Magazine Fílmico*, January 1927. Qtd in SERNA, *Making Cinelandia*, p. 45.

<sup>96</sup> JARVIE, Ian C. “Stars and Ethnicity: Hollywood and the United States, 1932-1951.” In: Friedman, Lester (ed.). *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*. Urbana: University of Illinois, 1991, p. 84.

<sup>97</sup> LUPIN. “Ramón Novarro y Fred Niblo en Italia,” *Heraldo de México*, 22 July 1924, p. 5.

<sup>98</sup> REYES, Manuel. “Ramon’s Ancestors Greeted the Mayflower,” *Photoplay*, October 1925, p. 46.

<sup>99</sup> PAZ, Octavio. *El Laberinto de La Soledad*. Mexico City: FCE, 1992, pp. 31–33.

Novarro's purported "Aztec stoicism," it proceeds to inventory the international roles he has played as proof of the actor's "All-American"—not Latin—nature.<sup>100</sup> "American" here does not denote sets of characteristics or values proper to the United States, reproducing a national framework; as the article elaborates, the roles he has played "have given him the background and manner of a cosmopolitan." The ancient imperial history *Ben-Hur* evokes allows English- and Spanish-speaking critics to elevate Novarro's figure, collapsing his purported pre-Columbian noble heritage with Greco-Roman imperial histories, his ancestors coming from "a luxuriant and finished civilization, comparable to the remote and vanished civilization of the Mediterranean when that sea was literally the center of the world."<sup>101</sup> These ancient connections, bridging gaps between (film) cultures, nevertheless reproduced the prejudiced alterity discourses Hollywood seemed unable to transcend. Howe, quoting the *Los Angeles Times* columnist Harry Carr, also fed the fantasy of Novarro's noble Aztec ancestry, while adding an Orientalist angle. In an article on Novarro's "mystery," he points to the interest on "Aztec history" the actor has kindled in him and fantasizes about what would have happened if Novarro had indeed been born in the Aztec Empire. Howe imagines that Novarro's beauty would most likely have sent him to the sacrificial altar; the "prince (...) physically perfect" before his death would have "wined [,] dined and had four of the most beautiful girls in the land as his mistresses."<sup>102</sup>

Orientalism delivers the culmination of this "two-way" account of eroticized exoticism between film cultures. Howe's Aztec nobleman evokes the roles of Novarro and other matinee idols as Middle Eastern princes. Provocatively threatening and sensual for critics and viewers alike, Valentino's *The Sheik* (George Melford, 1921) blends exotic masculinity with romantic passion; Novarro's *The Arab* (Rex Ingram, 1924) followed suit, proving more inclined to romanticize than to mobilize its protagonist. All along, Anglo film critics closely charted the rise of these and other

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<sup>100</sup> See note 39.

<sup>101</sup> REYES, "Ramon's Ancestors," p. 47.

<sup>102</sup> HOWE. "What is the Mystery of Ramon Novarro?," *Photoplay* 1925. Qtd in CHÁVEZ, "Race and Sexuality," p. 536.

exotic male lovers in Middle Eastern garb—all those “Sheiks of Araby.”<sup>103</sup> Hispanic critics also sought to shadow Novarro in the process, articulating their localized readings of *Ben-Hur* in explicit terms: the rise of “the illustrious compatriot” to “Jewish prince [upon whose] Mexican face a new sun shines,” writes one Angeleno critic in a bilingual column.<sup>104</sup> This ebb and flow in press materials point to the ways in which matinee idols and their film vehicles—Hollywood mass culture exports—were consumed in locally specific contexts and under orchestrated conditions of reception. As such, to borrow from Hansen, they not only had a “leveling impact on indigenous cultures” but also “challenged prevailing social and sexual arrangements [while advancing] new possibilities of social identity and cultural styles.”<sup>105</sup>

Localized perspectives conduct multi-vectored exchanges between local film cultures; in this case, between Mexico City and Angeleno cultures. The heyday of foreign actors was short-lived in Cinelandia, however. Hollywood ultimately found the most acceptable iteration of the Latin type in Anglo-Saxon actors who could play dark-skinned lovers and “temporarily satisfy female desire for exotic eroticism without threatening either American men or the notion of Nordic/Anglo-Saxon purity.”<sup>106</sup> A case in point being Douglas Fairbanks, the thief of Baghdad (1924), who in *The Gaucho* (F. Richard Jones, 1927) tangoes with Lupe Vélez; stripping the foreign male from the privilege of male lead, and in so doing, ushering in a new age for the Latin type—the tantalizing *Latina*. The latter—Lupe Vélez, the “Mexican spitfire,” among them—was promised an incandescent yet fleeting career. The double standard purged mainstream Hollywood of the exotic male, but reproduced the Latina body—always-already sexually available to the newly arrived, less threatening male star.

## Conclusion

Navigating the threats and enticements associated with stardom, the Angeleno and Mexico City press produced transnational star-personas such as Ramón Novarro. In

<sup>103</sup> “All the Sheiks of Araby,” *Motion Picture Classic*, May 1924, p. 19.

<sup>104</sup> BECERRA Salvador Gonzalo. “El ‘Ben Hur’ que yo vi,” *Heraldo de México*, 29 August 1926, p.11.

<sup>105</sup> HANSEN, Miriam. “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism.” In: *Modernism/Modernity*, vol. 6, n. 2, 1999, p. 68. Emphasis in original

<sup>106</sup> STUDLAR, “Gender and Ethnicity,” p. 30.

the respective film cultures of Los Angeles and Mexico City, as well as in other cities along the Mexican-American border, the transnational star embodied social experience in physical type and personality. As such, he served as a heuristic vehicle that deployed different “socioethical emblematic functions.”<sup>107</sup> Carefully balancing erotics, urbanity, and alterity, he embodied varying forms of ambivalent fascination as suited each particular film culture. In Mexico City and Mexican-American periodicals, Novarro epitomized the cosmopolitan Mexican attuned to a modern—because transnational—consumer culture who, nevertheless, as a representative of the “raza” (and not the country) was insulated from “the heat of American fantasies,” the amoral excesses of Hollywood.<sup>108</sup> In Anglo-American periodicals, a similar balance yields instead an urbanite Latin lover who, oddly de-eroticized as a confirmed bachelor and devout Catholic, negotiated the emerging nativist culture that was once again pushing foreign male actors to the fringes of the industry in favor of Anglo actors able to play dark-skinned lovers. If stars embody contradictions inherent in the larger social formations they partake in, Ramón Novarro’s star persona inscribed both the bridges and boundaries reciprocally shaping the film cultures of Greater Mexico.

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<sup>107</sup> GLEDHILL, “Prologue,” xiii.

<sup>108</sup> GONZÁLEZ. “Bello gesto,” *Heraldo*, 25 February, 1923, p. 4. As a cosmopolitan, Novarro contrasts later transnational-Mexican masculinities that match *machismo* with *nacionalismo*—Mexican Golden Age stars Pedro Infante, Jorge Negrete, and Pero Armendáriz. See GONZÁLEZ MARÍN, Jesús Daniel. “¿Es que no sabes que eres un hombre? Star System y masculinidades en cinco actores del cine mexicano.” In: De los Reyes, Aurelio (ed.). *Miradas al cine mexicano*. México: IMCINE, 2016, p. 375.

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