

ARTICLE

## The Fall of Virtuous Men: Mexican Film Noir, and the Crisis of Values in the Postrevolutionary State, 1950–1959

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### Abstract

International reconsideration of Mexican film noir is a recent phenomenon. For decades, Mexican film criticism tended to dismiss the importance of this tradition and even to deny its existence, often citing the presence of melodramatic elements in would-be noir films and the lack of a crime novel tradition for screen adaptations. By comparing two Mexican films to similar American productions and examining the local political and economic conditions of the former, this article argues that Mexican film noir had its own pessimistic viewpoints, which were borrowed from journalism and the illustrated press. These viewpoints were based on existing social ailments and delivered relevant criticism of the institutions, classism, and sexual norms of the postrevolutionary Mexican state of the 1940s and 1950s.

**Keywords:** Mexican cinema; film noir; governmental corruption; justice system; sexual violence

### Resumo

A revalorização do filme mexicano noir é um fenômeno recente. Durante décadas, no entanto, os críticos tendiam a descartar a importância desta tradição ou mesmo a negar sua existência. Muitas vezes, as razões citadas para esta exclusão foram a presença de elementos do melodrama nos filmes que poderiam ser reconhecidos como parte do gênero noir do filme e a falta de uma tradição mexicana de romance policial para sua adaptação. Comparando dois filmes mexicanos com filmes americanos similares e examinando as condições políticas e econômicas em que os primeiros foram produzidos, argumenta-se que o filme mexicano noir tinha suas próprias fontes para apresentar perspectivas pessimistas que eram livremente extraídas do jornalismo e da imprensa ilustrada. Essas perspectivas refletiam problemas sociais prevalentes e incluíam críticas relevantes às instituições, ao classismo e às normas de gênero do Estado mexicano pós-revolução nos anos 1940 e 1950.

**Palavras-chave:** filme mexicano; filme noir; corrupção; sistema judiciário; violência sexual

In the final phase of what is known as the Golden Age of Mexican cinema (1933–1955), dramas with graver and grimmer subjects began to be shown more frequently in Mexican movie theatres. These films explored the darkest impulses of urban characters,

in plots depicting crime, graphic violence, and the tragic loss of moral fiber. Their stories featured individuals from privileged backgrounds, the justice system, the world of education, or the rising working class. Integrating several of these elements, the two examples of Mexican film that I analyze here reflect some of the discourses of disenchantment and social criticism that were appearing frequently in newspaper articles and certain forms of entertainment and literature of the era. The loss of civic values and the active pursuit of self-centered passions, revenge, chauvinistic male hubris, and monetary interest serve as core motivations for the characters featured in *La noche avanza* (Gavaldón 1952) and *Sensualidad* (Gout 1951). Both films are examples of narratives of the era focused on the fall of “virtuous” male figures: successful men who are dragged into criminal behavior by circumstances or their own actions. I have specifically chosen these two films to illustrate the final phase in the dissemination of what Picatto (2017) calls “criminal literacy,” as their images exemplify a certain transition in the delivery of crime narratives from textual to visual form. Furthermore, these films depict the tolerance for masculine aggression and the structural violence against women that rose as consequence of new economic and social conditions imposed by the Mexican political and justice system during the 1940s (Bailón Vásquez 2016, 164). Finally, these films demonstrate how Mexican directors integrate visual and character allusions that converse with international and American film, and at the same time, they express local anxieties and misgivings regarding the social and political process of the postrevolutionary state in Mexico.

The rise to prominence of darker filmic spectacles in Mexico can be indirectly explained as the result of an increase in the production of films with urban settings, which by 1942 surpassed by two to one the output of those featuring rural images (García Riera 1998, 124). Furthermore, the Mexican academy’s gradual recognition of a few feature films with noir characteristics serves as additional evidence of the brewing changes in the field of cinematic production during the era. For instance, in 1949, the winner of the Ariel Award was a drama steeped in nationalist imagery and suffused with *indigenista* rhetoric.<sup>1</sup> *Río Escondido* (1948), directed by Emilio Fernández and starring María Félix, received ten nominations and won eight awards, including for best film and best director (García Riera 1998, 179–181). The story of a *mestiza* rural teacher who heroically defends her indigenous students against an arbitrary white cacique was also screened with great success at the Cannes Film Festival (Doetsch 2016; Tierney 2012).

Three years later, by contrast, the Mexican academy granted its maximum recognition to one of the most prominent examples of Mexican film noir, *En la palma de tu mano* (1951), directed by Roberto Gavaldón, a film focused on urban misadventures and deception featuring an extraordinary con man, Professor Karín (played by Arturo de Córdova), who uses his powers of “divination” to manipulate and extort high society female victims (Mino García 2007, 108–112; Obscura Gutiérrez 2015, 205). In 1952, *En la palma de tu mano* received eleven nominations and walked away with eight Ariel trophies, including those for best picture and best director (García Riera 1998, 180). Such accolades make this film the most decorated in the noir cycle of Mexican cinema.

A key clarification must be made here. Until the turn of the millennium, an important sector of Mexican film criticism concluded that the category of *cine negro mexicano*, or “Mexican film noir,” was in fact nonexistent or impossible given the conditions of production and exhibition during the classic era of Mexican cinematography (1933–1955), as well as a recurrent use of melodrama in that era, a supposed lack of a locally produced detective novel tradition, and the prevalence of censorship (Ayala Blanco 1993, 117; Bonfil 2016, 53; Fernández 2007, 28; Monsiváis 2000, 74; Ortega and Faz 1992). Taking issue with this exclusion, and after reviewing a broad range of American film noir from the era of 1940–1959 for comparison purposes, my research

<sup>1</sup> The Ariel is the Mexican film award equivalent to Hollywood’s Oscar.

confirms and extends the partial conclusions reached by other authors (Aviña 2017, 12–15; Mino García 2007, 26, 95, 118; Tuñón 2003). The most important of these studies is Rafael Aviña's *Mex Noir, cine mexicano policiaco* (2017), which presents a definitive panorama of the core films in the *cine negro* category. However, Aviña's (2017, 14–15, 225) book does not offer a specific definition of noir and insists on locating most of the production of Mexican noir films during the Alemanista period (1946–1952), acknowledging only a sporadic yield during the rest of the 1950s and early 1960s. As a result, the study's diffuse categorization and time frame yields a very limited list of titles, as well as mixes horror and wrestling films that clearly belong to different genres (Aviña 2017, 22, 226). My research stems from the need to specify the characteristics of Mexican noir and locate the dozens of films that are left out of Aviña's study and previous studies. In this sense, my analysis confirms that there was indeed a solid production of dark films in Mexico from 1941 to 1959, as well as a significant audience for them. Moreover, the number, scope, relevance, and influence of these films were broader than previously established, which indicates that they should be studied by paying closer attention to their contemporary social and media contexts. Furthermore, I propose that the categories of *melodrama negro*, *melonoir*, and *cine negro* are equivalent and should be unified and studied together as "Mexican film noir."

Following classifications proposed by previous authors (Mayer and McDonnell 2007, 20–21; Miklitsch 2014, 4–10; Spicer 2010, xxxix–xl), I used a set of chronological, visual, narrative, and psychological characteristics in selecting 120 films to include in the category of Mexican film noir. The inclusion criteria were the following: (1) films produced or released between 1941 and 1959 featuring black and white cinematography, a variable number of night scenes, and a strategic use of high contrast light and pronounced shadows; (2) a central narrative tension that revolves around the facts, preparation, or accidental circumstances of a violent or criminal act committed by ordinary individuals who out of desperation or anxiety make bad decisions and are overwhelmed by the life-changing consequences of their actions; (3) a filmic atmosphere that tends to be (or becomes) dark and alienating, with characters immersed in psychological, emotional, or social circumstances leading to oppressive or violent situations; (4) realist plots featuring urban settings and following one or more of the eight narrative tropes present in American or international noir: the fall of the virtuous man or woman, the rise and fall of an exceptional con man or tragic woman, the unsolved crime awaiting investigation, the psychologically disturbed criminal, the heist gone wrong, the rogue cop or corrupt officer of the law, the jailbreak or prison riot, the failed expectations of youth or popular hero. Finally, the selection of the films includes a subgenre—notable in Mexican cinema—featuring the fictional lives of cabaret stars: the *rumbera* or *cabaretera* noir. Horror, sci-fi, wrestling, and Western films that borrow some elements of noir were excluded, insofar as they belong to specific and predefined genres. These four criteria, together with the two aforementioned selection factors, allowed for the inclusion of previously recognized features of the Mexican noir tradition as well as dozens of films ignored by previous studies.

It is certainly true that the Mexican filmography of this era has a characteristic melodramatic tone, stemming from plots focused on the sentimental and emotional reactions of characters and the presence of strained familial or amorous relations (Aviña 2004; Hernández Rodríguez 1999; López 1993, 149). However, a revision of American and international sources with regard to the definition and inclusion of specific works in the genre, style, or movement known as film noir yielded no reference to the rejection of films due to their use or integration of melodramatic elements. In fact, James Naremore (2008, 41, 45, 48) refers to seminal noir works as "melodramas" and comments on the "melodramatic" relations among the main characters. As he and other authors clearly state, classic examples such as *Double Indemnity* (Wilder 1944), *Out of the Past* (Tourneur 1947), *Secret beyond the*

*Door* (Lang 1947), *The Third Man* (Welles 1950), and most of the films centered on female figures, such as *Phantom Lady* (Siodmak 1944), *Laura* (Preminger 1944), *Mildred Pierce* (Curtiz 1945), and *Gilda* (Vidor 1946), include elements of melodrama or are considered both melodramas and fully fledged examples of film noir (Chinen Biesen 2005, 135, 137; Grossman 2014, 39; Heredero and Santamarina 1996, 133; Miklitsch 2017, 28; Naremore 2008, 71, 89, 115, 122; Osteen 2013, 187).

Mexican filmography of the 1940s and 1950s is not different in this regard, featuring films that mix the style and elements of noir in certain crime melodramas that thereby constitute prime examples that must be included in the category of Mexican film noir. Furthermore, the reconsideration of these features echoed in the circuit of national and international film festivals and retrospectives in Mexico and the United States (Michel 2014, 141; Hoberman 2015; Smith 2018). In fact, readers and researchers familiar with the Anglophone literature on film noir may find the clarifications in question redundant. The fact is, because of the dismissive attitude of Mexican film criticism starting in the 1960s and after, the legacy of Mexican film noir was for the most part disqualified or ignored by local and international researchers until very recently.

### Darkness under bright city lights

The two decades preceding the rise of film noir in Mexico—the period from 1920 to 1939—were marked by efforts toward revolutionary reconstruction of the country and the building of institutions that were supposed to withstand the test of time (Caballero 2010). Indeed, despite the tragic confrontations of the religious-based Cristero War of 1926–1929 and the tumultuous agitation of the “red decade” (as the popular, peasant, and labor mobilizations of the late 1920s to the 1930s came to be known), the social energies of this reconstructive phase steered the nation toward a general sense of optimism. Land reforms and the approval of a progressive labor law during the 1934–1940 government of President Lázaro Cárdenas (considered the last regime of the Mexican Revolution) were the first installments of the social justice reforms promised by revolutionary leaders during the original uprising of 1910. Moreover, the early 1940s mark the start of what historians and economists have referred to as the “Mexican miracle,” a period of steady growth and increasing levels of development that transformed the provincial character of Mexico City and the largest state capitals in the country, Guadalajara, Monterrey, and Puebla (Carmona and Montaña 1970; Meyer 2013, 93). The construction of new avenues, modern housing projects, hospitals, universities, high-rise buildings, public transportation and highway systems, lighting and electrification infrastructure, and the increase of vehicular traffic made these cities appear, at least in part, to be dynamic and growing urban centers, and in 1960 their growth pushed the national urban population above the 50 percent threshold (Gillingham 2021, 192, 197; Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática (INEGI) 1996, 40).

However, the dizzying rhythm of urbanization and sharp increase in foreign and local investment during the 1940s and 1950s was also marked by frequent news reports of major cases of graft, electoral fraud, corruption, and blatant manipulation of laws, labor regulations, and state institutions in favor of commercial and industrial capital and its associated political power (Loeza 2013; Niblo 2000, 280–290). Contemporary historians recognize the final years of the administration of General Ávila Camacho (1940–1946), and especially the presidency of Miguel Alemán (1946–1952), as the moment when the ruling regime’s authoritarian character was fully revealed and the official political party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) became firmly implanted as the principal hegemonic force in the country (Alexander 2016, 179; Meyer 2013, 85; Paxman 2014). On the one hand, presidential power locked in the support of labor unions by reversing

the internal democratic process and corrupting many labor leaders or forcing their submission to the policies of the ruling party (Alexander 2016, 158; Gillingham 2021, 105–107; Hodges and Gandy 2002, 33–36; Peña and Aguirre 2006, 439). On the other hand, the government sealed a firm alliance with the country's financial and industrial elites as well as the major players of transnational capital (Alexander 2016, 81; Gillingham 2021, 191; Niblo 2000, 189). Party leaders instrumentalized the political system in order to tighten their grip on the most relevant social sectors. It is therefore not surprising that one of the earliest Mexican noirs *Distinto amanecer* (Bracho 1943), focuses on the persecution of a young labor leader striving to uncover the corruption of a governor who is acting in cahoots with foreign investors (Castro Ricalde 2017; García Riera 1998, 136). Clearly, in the eyes of many observers, an undercurrent of corruption, violence, and moral degradation was indelibly mixed with the auspicious possibilities of material progress touted by the new government, positive projections that in many cases came to fruition despite the violence and corruption because the regime was able to sustain annual growth levels of 6 percent or higher for several decades (Kehoe and Meza 2013).

Although the infrastructure improvements allowed Mexico City to almost triple its population in twenty years (1930–1950) (INEGI 1996, 26, 35), the new levels of urban concentration and the arrival of masses of uprooted individuals from all states of the nation spurred new anxieties fueled by a sense of a crisis of nationalist values in a new social context (Cosío Villegas 1947; Pulido Llano 2018, 18; Santillán Esqueda 2016, 282). Despite tepid efforts to regulate urban sprawl, slums and cardboard cities sprang up from the center of Mexico City to its periphery. Many of these spontaneous communities took decades to receive services or be connected to basic urban infrastructure. In contrast, newspapers and magazines displayed columns and photographs featuring the upper echelons of public life, documenting the transfiguration of the political class into a group of celebrities and the nouveau riche. The illustrated press devoted copious pages to the tastes and habits of the youngest president in history (Miguel Alemán), to his entourage, and to the officials in his cabinet, which was comprised of rising jet-setters and members of some of the richest families in the country (González Cruz 2014, 246; Mraz 1999, 45–47).

This restructuring of social and political life accelerated the shattering of accepted truths and long-established class patterns, fostered the destruction of residual hierarchies stemming from the social remnants of the Porfirian era (1884–1911), and broke apart the tenuous alliances of the early years of the revolutionary state (1920–1940). The vision of a modern society growing at a dizzying pace ushered in an era of incertitude and fluidity in the appreciation and solidification of changing values that redefined the role of the individual and her or his insertion in the formal aggregates of family, community, party, and nation (Reyes 2014, 338; López 1993, 152; Pulido Llano 2018, 18, 47).

In light of these notable and astonishing changes, it would be disingenuous to think that ambitious and artistically daring film directors such as Alejandro Galindo, Juan Bustillo Oro, Julio Bracho, Roberto Gavaldón, Alberto Gout, Matilde Landeta, Emilio Fernández, Luis Buñuel, and Juan Orol would ignore the opportunity to portray, confront, or express the burgeoning feelings that were generated by the modernization of Mexican society and instead simply copy what they saw in American noir.<sup>2</sup> If Mexican cinema of the 1940s and 1950s both filtered and emotionally reconfigured contemporary social issues, it was because filmmakers understood the importance of the social forces of their time and had something to say about the everyday (and “every night”) reality surrounding them.

<sup>2</sup> Together, these nine directors produced fifty titles, or nearly 42 percent (out of 120) of the entire noir cycle.

### The other side of success

Released along with many other films portraying urban slums or seedy cabarets, Alberto Gout's *Sensualidad* (1951) and Roberto Gavaldón's *La noche avanza* (1952) present the descent to hell of a male figure who occupies the upper echelons of social and professional prestige. Both films present similar plotlines centered on proud and resourceful men who have adapted to postrevolutionary society, are established in their professions, possess great confidence in their ability to improve their condition and achieve success before social and economic pressures, or ill-managed passions, send them down the road to perdition.

Gavaldón's *La noche avanza* is a particularly good example of the use of the “fall of virtuous man” trope. The main character, played by a physically imposing Pedro Armendáriz, is a famous *pelotari* named “Marcos Arizmendi.” This is, Arizmendi is a professional player of the sport known as *pelota vasca* or *jai alai*, a spectacular form of frontenis. By the mid-1940s, *pelota vasca* tournaments were a popular sporting event—indeed, a thrilling spectacle—in Mexico and other major capitals in Latin America, in Spain, and in a number of cities in the United States including Miami, Los Angeles, and Chicago. As was the case for many professional sports at the time, legal and illegal betting was always involved whenever high stakes matches were played.

In Gavaldón's film, spectators soon learn that Marcos Arizmendi has played in the Philippines and Argentina, has met and handily bested some of the strongest challengers in Barcelona, was in the current season at Frontón México, and will soon be headed for Havana to further pursue his sporting exploits and fuel his high-roller lifestyle. Thus, from the outset, the hypermasculinity represented by Armendáriz is marked by its modernity and cosmopolitanism. The mercantilist and exploitative logic of the *pelota vasca* sporting scene is readily established in the first two sequences of the film, which portray the active betting involved and the physical injuries provoked by the game.

Armendáriz's role as Marcos the *pelotari* was miles away from the charros in black flannel and silver-threaded suit, or the innocent peasants dressed in immaculate white cotton garb that he had portrayed during the previous decade (Fernández 2016; Tierney 2012). Moreover, the chivalric values, the indigenous innocence, and the revolutionary solidarity championed in earlier rural films of Mexican cinema are nowhere to be found in this fast-paced urban drama. Marcos Arizmendi is not only a ruthless rival on the *jai alai* court but also a cynical womanizer who romances and takes advantage of three women: Sara, a mature but ostensibly rich and attractive widow; Lucrecia, an elegant cabaret singer; and Rebeca, an underage beauty from an erstwhile aristocratic family. Not surprisingly, Arizmendi epitomizes the self-made man who is emotionally and physically chiseled by merciless competition, is accustomed to imposing his will on his companions, and practices a winner-take-all philosophy on everyone else (see Bonfil 2016, 96).

At the end of the opening sequence set at Frontón México (the city's main *jai alai* sporting center), Arizmendi proudly walks off the court, showered with thunderous applause and shouts of admiration from an adoring public. The camera tracks him in full shot until he strikes a pose before the photographers (Figure 1), where, in a medium shot at eye level, Arizmendi raises an index finger to signal his place as the sole winner and the number-one player at the Frontón. Throughout the sequence, spectators hear Armendáriz elocute, in voice off, the aggressive and callous creed of an egocentric individual who has little regard for friendship, sportsmanship, or social norms: “Yes, I am Marcos, I am used to winning and everyone else has gotten used to seeing me win. It's only logical: no one pays attention to those who fail, not even to the degree of getting used to seeing them fail. That's why we will never cease to be the winners. I am among the victorious, among





**Figure 1.** *Pelotari* Marcos Arizmendi (Pedro Armendáriz) flouts his number-one status in front of sports photographers at Frontón México in *La noche avanza* (Roberto Gavaldón 1952).

the strongest. The weak deserve their lamentable destiny, without greatness the weak do not count at all” (Gavaldón, *La noche avanza* 1952).<sup>3</sup> The monologue, which is featured in the sports column of the week, is the rant of a self-centered macho summarizing his wining philosophy during an exclusive press interview as a champion.

The references to radio and print journalism, here and throughout the film, also evince the actuality of crime narratives during the early 1950s and signal the broad audience that such narratives enjoyed in a variety of different media formats. As Piccato has asserted, the transmission of “criminal literacy”—that is, the public’s familiarization with the ways of criminals, the violent actions of the police, the failures of the justice system, and the danger of certain urban spaces—evolved from early reporting of crime and judicial cases in newspapers, to pulp novels, to illustrated magazines, and finally to film (Piccato 2017, 23, 95). In visual terms, a key moment of this intermedial evolution can be seen in the transition from the isolated diagrams and single cartoons that re-created crimes in newspapers in the 1930s, to the deployment of visual summaries in one-page stories, using the comic book or the photo novel style, that appeared in specialized supplements or newspapers such as *La Prensa* and *Excelsior’s Magazine de Policía* in the 1940s (Figure 2).<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the Mexican public did have access to a long tradition of journalistic crime reporting and translated crime stories since the 1920s, as well as fictionalized local crime narratives since the 1930s written by dozens of unknown writers and some recognizable ones like Antonio Helú, José Martínez de la Vega, Leo D’Olmo (collective author), María Elvira Bermúdez, and Rafael Bernal (Piccato 2017, 63, 206). Thus, despite the lack of prestigious crime novels, thanks to the circulation of these printed sources and their transition to the illustrated press in the 1940s Mexican filmmakers and audiences could draw on a variety of

<sup>3</sup> All translations in this article are my own unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>4</sup> The early publication of one-page comic books or photo novel crime summaries on the back covers of *Magazine de Policía* (1939–1969) is discussed by Pulido Llano (2015; 2018, 119–138). The massive circulation of crime comics and crime photo novels was notable by the early 1940s (Aurrecochea and Bartra 1994, 273, 277, 481).

ANO 4 NUMERO 207

# POLICIA

COMPLETAMENTE AJENO A LOS CUERPOS DE SEGURIDAD PUBLICA  
SEÑALAR LAS LACRAS DE LA SOCIEDAD ES SERVIRLA

## UN ATRACO *en* PERALVILLO

TEXTOS  
TRISTÁN DE ACUÑA  
FOTOS  
ADRIAN DEVARS



A las nueve de la mañana hay intensísimo movimiento en la Glorieta de Peralvillo, que está frente a la llamada Adasana Pulquera. Se ven cubos rebosantes de ricos llamapas venidos de Hidalgo, México y otras comarcas, que allí son realizados. Todo un mundo se mueve en ese lugar y los vendedores de frías hacen su agosto.

Adrián Castéllum Martínez, a esas horas, transaba por la glorieta cobrando cuentas de la Compañía de Inmuebles "Riviera Torres Hermanos". Un pulquero, contándole los billetes sobre el mostrador de granito, le pagó una crecida cantidad, que el cobrador con toda parsimonia recataba y guardaba en las entrañas de un portafolio que tenía.

Presenciaron la escena dos tipos del hampa, que en el acto se cuchichearon algo al oído y colocándose en una de las puertas vieron el rumbo que siguió el cobrador al salir de la pulquería, que en ese momento se detuvo a corta distancia del expendio en espera de que pasara el camión que lo conduciría al centro de la metrópoli.

Para calmar su impaciencia, Adrián Castéllum Martínez caminó a pie por la llamada Calzada de la Ronda, hacia donde se dirigió. Pero no se dio cuenta de que los mismos tipos que estaban dentro de la pulquería cautelosamente le seguían los pasos, procurando no ser vistos por el cobrador que iba provisto de una suma de dinero.

En lugar propicio, se le colocaron a los lados. Uno de ellos, tocándole por el hombro, le dijo en tono cortés: "No quiere platicar con nosotros, chaparrío?" Mientras el otro, de debajo de su blusa de mezclilla, sacaba un puñal de que iba armado. En esos instantes iban a realizar el atraco que planearon rápidamente.

Uno de los truhanes, poniéndole el cuchillo en la costilla, le dijo en tono amenazador y adormecedor todo con tonos muy mexicanos, de esos que tanto agradan a los extranjeros por su sonoridad: "Bú, si no quiere morir, párese y suelte el portafolio. Si usted grita, aquí se queda ensartado para que se lleve la pelona".

El otro hampón le arrebató el portafolio en que guardó el dinero, y registrándole rápidamente en un santiamén los billetes cambiaron de dueño y de bolsillo. En tanto que la operación era realizada satisfactoriamente, el cuchillo que empuñaba el otro maleante no fue separado de las costillas del cobrador ni un solo momento.

En ese pasó un camión de pasajeros, al cual ágilmente saltaron los dos ladrones y asaltantes, que en pocas horas lograban huir después de consumar tan espectacular atraco en un lugar tan concurrido a esa hora. El cobrador Adrián Castéllum Martínez se quedó parado y como quien veía visiones, por efecto de la sorpresa sufrida.

Caminando con algo de nerviosidad y sintiendo en sus piernas y manos le temblaban algo, el atraco y robado continuó su marcha hasta que encontró su paso a un molestratillero, al cual le narró puntualmente tal como había sido atraco por esos dos ladrones que matosamente se le acercaron para despertar sospecha alguna.

Figure 2. Back cover of *Magazine de Policía* December 14, 1942. The one-page photo novel recounts a robbery in the Peralvillo neighborhood. Script: Tristán de Acuña. Photos: Adrian Devars. Hemeroteca Nacional.



visual references, narrative conventions, and a sentimental economy to craft and understand the local version of film noir.

*La noche avanza* follows the logic of these popular crime stories, integrating them in a classic film noir structure: after the first sequences of the film have situated Arizmendi at the highest point of his ambition and success, the remaining story line depicts his precipitous fall from grace. The master of the court falls victim to the machinations of a resentful teller from the Frontón whose underage sister Rebeca was impregnated by the *pelotari* star and will soon be abandoned by him when he leaves for Havana. Plotting his revenge, the brother-in-law enlists the help of a conniving gangster-lawyer, who, threatening to denounce Arizmendi for the seduction of a minor, forces him to throw his next match so that the gangster can make a fortune. At the last minute, however, the spiteful teller informs Arizmendi that plans have changed: the latter no longer needs feign a defeat and can play at his best. Arizmendi wins big, and those who bet against him suffer the consequences except for the teller, who has secretly changed the odds and has bet all of his own money, plus a generous loan from a Chinese bookie, on the right outcome. The teller's last-minute lies and manipulations throw the gangster-lawyer into ruin and provoke his murderous ire.

What comes next is a capture and torture sequence in which the gangster-lawyer seeks to exact revenge on the prideful *pelotari*. Anticipating Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959) by seven years, Gavaldón's film presents a sequence featuring an assassination covered up as a DUI accident. Armendariz is captured by the gangster's thugs and forced to drink an entire bottle of tequila in a matter of minutes. According to the plan, once Arizmendi becomes drunk, his captors will roll him down one of the city's new stormwater canals and present his drowning as the unfortunate consequence of a night of celebration and excess. But before casting him unconscious into the canal, the thugs empty the pockets of the victim's suit, discover his checkbook and its hefty balance. Arizmendi is then asked to pay a ransom in lieu of being assassinated. To the surprise of the spectators and the potential victim, the disloyal goons have decided to betray their boss to get the balance of twenty-five thousand pesos in the sportsman's bank account.

Unable to get the cash—it is early on the Sunday morning of his flight to Havana and the banks are closed—Arizmendi decides to appeal to one of his female marks. Sara, an old flame he met while playing in Manila, has supposedly inherited her rich husband's estate and has recently arrived in Mexico to get her young lover back. Desperate to secure money to pay the ransom, Arizmendi urges Sara (played by the exiled Spanish actor Anita Blanch) to lend him the large sum, but she proceeds to tell him the truth: she is in fact penniless and has been using the wardrobe, jewelry, and house of a couple of diplomat friends who left the city on vacation, all to impress Marcos and try to lure him back.

Frustrated by the deception, which he considers an affront to his masculinity, Arizmendi berates Sara and starts slapping her around, at which point she pulls a gun. In the action we hear a shot; Sara dies, although it is not clear who fired. Adding a wrinkle to the plot, Arizmendi's captors have witnessed the scene. They grow more determined to get their money and threaten to tell the police that Arizmendi is the murderer. The victim of extortion and kidnapping has suddenly become a fugitive, and captors and captee are now implicated in a web of crime.

In this story written by journalist Luis Spota and adapted for the screen by Gavaldón along with Mexican writer and activist José Revueltas, the unavoidable hand of a dark destiny catches up with the original "victim." In the closing scenes of the film, the ironies continue to accumulate. After being liberated from the gangsters by the police, the champion is escorted to the airport by the starstruck officers, who ignore the fact that they are aiding and abetting a presumed murderer. The next scene shows the plane taking off. Inside the cabin, in the apparent calm of a pleasant flight, the unsuspecting Marcos is shot twice in the chest by his youngest lover, the sister of the Frontón teller. The invincible



**Figure 3.** Arizmendi lies wounded in the airplane aisle, his head on the newspaper that salutes his undefeated season at Frontón México (Roberto Gavaldón 1952).

champion's towering figure falls prostrate into the aisle, next to a newspaper article showing headlines bidding him farewell and predicting his continued success in Cuba (Figure 3). The final images of the film show a busy street across from the Monument to the Revolution, where a stray dog urinates on a torn piece of a poster announcing Marcos's final game at the Frontón. The spectators have seen this urban landmark earlier in the film, as it dominated the spectacular view at the luxurious apartment where the proud champion used to maintain his love nest.

The closing images could be read as a desecration of the monument, but they also seem to serve as an eloquent warning that the assurances and promises of the revolutionary period have been discarded, and that Mexican society has entered a different era: the fast pace of the recently modernized city chews up both the weak and the strong with equal force and cruelty. Thus, spectators must grapple with the mildly consoling notion that even the most ambitious, successful, and well-connected figures of the new Mexican capitalism, if they repeatedly ignore the law, are as exposed to the twists and turns of destiny as anyone else. However, beyond the possible reading of Arizmendi's doom as a metaphor for the dangers of savage capitalism, spectators are also left to brood over other unsolved crimes and illegalities committed by the rest of the characters. We are left pondering the fate of the underage pregnant murderess, the gangster-lawyer's criminal manipulation of the law, the teller's fraudulent handling of bets at the Frontón, the seeming naiveté or complicity of the police, and whether Sara's murder will ever be solved. Furthermore, the film makes it a point to sully the positive connotations of the signs of modernity by symbolically defacing a national monument, by transforming a national export—tequila—into a murder weapon, and by proposing the use of a symbol of urban progress (the recently built stormwater canal) as a cover-up for a potential crime.

Outside the movie theaters, however, the disturbing reality was that the discourse of the "self-made man" who often commits bribery, acts of corruption, or extortion on his road to wealth and success was being verified as a viable path, or as an affirmative sign for

the new era. Individuals with such views were becoming prominent in the political and economic scene of the 1940s and 1950s. Together with cinematographer Jack Draper, director Roberto Gavaldón delivers an effective and thrilling tale of corruption at all levels of society and explores the dark side of sports betting which was also portrayed in American noir films such as Robert Rossen's *Body and Soul* (1947), Mark Robson's *Champion* (1949), and Robert Wise's classic *The Set-Up* (1949). These three films are focused on boxing, but in *Body and Soul* hubris and dark impulses led to the demise of the character played by John Garfield, and the machinations of corrupt managers during a single long night spell doom for Robert Ryan's character in *The Set-Up*. In *Champion*, a combination of these circumstances brings down Kirk Douglas's proud pugilist and also gave the actor his first nomination for an Academy Award. These films also deploy melodramatic mechanisms in the form of sentimental relations with mothers, brothers, wives, and girlfriends who are unable to save the main characters from the exacting forces surrounding them or from their own tragic impulses. All of these characters, like Marcos Arizmendi, are at the peak of their success and end up biting the dust.

### Justice not served

If Marcos Arizmendi's tragic end in *La noche avanza* provides a residue of poetic justice against an egotistical and callous individual, there is very little consolation or reassurance of restored equilibrium at the end of Alberto Gout's 1951 *Sensualidad*. In this film, an exemplary judge, hailed in the newspapers as a champion in the fight against a recent "crime wave," falls prey to a vengeful and sensuous *rumbera*, played by the Cuban Mexican actor Ninón Sevilla, who will stop at nothing to see her target dishonor the judicial bench, ruin his reputation, and lose his family.

*Sensualidad* is part of what I call the *rumbera noir*, a subset of what is generally referred to in Mexican criticism as the *cabaretera* or *rumbera* film genre (see Castro Ricalde 2018; Tuñón 1998). In fact, this is the only form of Mexican film noir that has received continuous critical attention. Ever since Gout's *Aventurera* (1950) was discovered and enthusiastically hailed by the members of *Cahiers du Cinéma* in France in the mid-1950s, the film has continued to generate analyses and commemorations (Aviña 2017, 69; Ayala Blanco 1993, 118; Castro Ricalde 2018, 116). For the most part, critical approaches and readaptations tend to focus on the trials and tribulations of the *rumbera*: a woman, generally of middle- or lower-class origins, who, after being orphaned or losing her family and reputation, is subjected to abuse and exploitation by unscrupulous pimps and madams who peddle her for sex. The panderers eventually launch her career as an entertainer, as a more lucrative alternative to prostitution. In her ascent from the humiliation of sex for hire to the acclamation of adoring cabaret audiences, the *rumbera* will exact her revenge, whether justly or unjustly, by hitting the culprits where it hurts: their money, their love, or their family (Cabañas Osorio 2014, 213; Tuñón 1998, 243).

With its screenplay by Alvaro Custodio, and loosely based on Josef Von Sternberg's classic 1930 film *The Blue Angel*, *Sensualidad* introduces a series of innovations in the basic *cabaretera* plot, casting new light into the obscure corners of the lives of Mexican civil servants and members of the judicial system who are involved with the criminal element they are ostensibly tasked with controlling.<sup>5</sup> From the start, two technical elements announce that this film will not constitute merely one more twist in the *cabaretera* tale of the daring, albeit amoral, woman who defies her tormentors and the society that has crushed her at an early age. First, in the title sequence that opens with a bird's-eye

<sup>5</sup> As I will discuss later, Gout's film echoes some plot and visual elements of both *The Blue Angel* (1930) and *Nora Prentiss* (1947). *Sensualidad* also makes passing reference to *Gilda* (1946) when a Mexican orchestra at Aurora's cabaret plays the song "Put the Blame on Mame," interpreted by Rita Hayworth in Vidor's film.



**Figure 4.** The title of Alberto Gout's film from 1951 marks the contour line of the dead body of cabaret dancer Aurora Ruiz (Ninón Sevilla).

view of the *rumbera*'s dead body, the letters of the title conform the silhouette of the lifeless figure, as if drawn with the chalk used during a forensic investigation to outline the site where a corpse has been discovered (Figure 4).

With this simple frame, the narrative functions of the film have been turned around. Instead of announcing the protagonist's chronological and progressive rise to emancipation or her steady yet inevitable demise, the opening images show the final product of her machinations, as she lies dead in the yard of her pretentious mansion at the conclusion of, what will be a chronicle of a death foretold. Nonetheless, this shot does not impede the mounting of suspense: the following sequence presents a flashback, showing the protagonist desperately running inside a deserted cabaret, seeking shelter from an unseen assailant. The tension increases as we hear the victim's inner thoughts in voice off. The scene of pursuit, during which the assailant's face is never revealed, will linger in spectators' minds in preparation for the closing of the circular narrative ninety minutes later. The film's second noir style element, the frequent recourse to Dutch tilt shots, is applied not so much to the actions of the woman but to those of her mark, Alejandro Luque, a respectable old judge who once had the misfortune of sentencing the young prostitute for a street hold-up perpetrated in combination with her pimp.

During the trial scene, the judge offers a brooding assessment of a supposed rise in crime rates and delivers an impassionate verbal argument that heralds his personal crusade to restore social morality and uphold the rule of law. At the conclusion of his speech the judge sentences the young woman to a term of two years in prison. As represented in the film, the sentence seems unusually harsh. Even the judge's wife commiserates with the young offender, alleging that the petty thief was likely the victim of circumstances and exploitation. The judge seems unmoved by that argument and is praised for his iron fist by the chief of police, his personal friend Commander Santos.

When Aurora is finally released from prison, she returns to where she started: the old dancing hall. Sitting at the bar, she berates "El Rizos," her pimp (played by Rodolfo Acosta),

for failing to visit her when she was behind bars. After the exchange of unpleasantries and recriminations, Aurora accepts a new scheme proposed to her by the pimp: to become a performance artist, first at rundown bars and later at elegant venues. As her success as an entertainer grows, the young dancer tries to claim her independence, rebuffing the advances of the pimp who seeks to restore their previous arrangement in which Aurora would first inebriate her unsuspecting johns before they were subsequently fleeced by El Rizos in the dark alleys of Mexico City's red-light district. One night, when Aurora once again refuses to participate in one of El Rizos's schemes, the pimp begins to slap her around in the middle of the street. Who should come to the rescue but the sternest of judges, Alejandro Luque, who in a chivalric gesture saves the woman from a certain beating. As was the case in *La noche avanza*, this and other scenes in *Sensualidad* closely follow the headlines of Mexican newspapers and crime supplements of the period.

In February 1940 the Mexican government, under pressure from reformers and various national and international political actors, changed its approach to the legal problem of prostitution, departing from a long tradition of regulatory measures and sanitary inspections of "red zones" to instead initiate what was intended to become an abolitionist regime (Bailón Vásquez 2016, 167; Santillán Esqueda 2016, 283). Specifically banned were formal or informal brothels, cabarets, dance halls, cinemas, massage parlors, and restaurants serving a multiclass clientele in the populous quarters of the central district. Despite an intense legal and media battle, the madams of middlebrow and lower-class brothels and cabarets saw their employees and clients thrown to the streets. However, what was intended to be a "moralizing campaign," instead resulted in a period of relocation and restructuring of illicit trades, as the most elegant and politically connected madams and their brothels relocated to middle class neighborhoods. Thanks to the active participation of the police and certain judges, male owners of the previously forbidden establishments were allowed to reopen them in different locales while pimps and other subordinates reorganized the sex trade. During this period, cases of violence against women were frequent. Nonetheless, corrupt authorities abandoned or dismissed most cases, thanks to an established amorous or domestic relations between involved parties (deemed a private matter between individuals), the difficulty of finding proof of coerced prostitution, or the nonratification of accusations (Bailón Vásquez 2016, 177). A one-page photo novel on the back cover of *Magazine de Policía*, published on December 14, 1944, titled "La hirió su Tarzán" (Wounded by Her Tarzan) (Figure 5), described the beating and stabbing of a woman by her exploiter. This photo novel was one more addition to a growing repertoire of images of violently enforced male dominance shaping the criminal literacy that prepared spectators for the violent scenes in *rumbera* noirs of the 1950s including *Aventurera* and *Sensualidad*, among other films.

In *Sensualidad*, after the scene in which Aurora is attacked and then rescued by Judge Luque, the film returns to its cinematic influences from international cinema and American noir. After the judge intervenes in their quarrel, Aurora and El Rizos immediately recognize their former judicial nemesis. The latter quickly leaves the scene but the young *rumbera* stays, seizing the opportunity to launch her seduction of the old man and get revenge for the time she spent in prison. At first, not recognizing the woman he put behind bars years ago, the sexagenarian seems to resist Aurora's advances, although she manages to convince him not only to help her walk but also to tend her wounds. In a scene reminiscent of both *The Blue Angel* (1930) and a noir titled *Nora Prentiss* (1947), Aurora follows the seductive examples of Marlene Dietrich and Ann Sheridan by persuading her would-be sugar daddy to rub and soothe her ankle. The seductress takes the lead in the scene, forcing corporal contact under the pretense of a needed healing hand (Figure 6). In this case, the judge seems to pass the test, he helps try to heal her but does not take the bait. In the next scenes, he is shown going back to his domestic routine, taking care of his ailing wife and maintaining a decent middle-class home for his only



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# POLICIA

COMPLETAMENTE AJENO A LOS CUERPOS DE SEGURIDAD PUBLICA  
SEÑALAR LAS LACRAS DE LA SOCIEDAD ES SERVIRLA

## LA HIRIO SU TARZAN

TEXTO: R. LARA  
FOTOS: DEVAR



1—"Oye Cusa, ya no puedo con Hermelinda. Me trata como a una cualquiera y se quiere castigar. Por cualquier motivo me golpea, y de plano, ya no puedo resistir esta vida", se quejaba Estela, una maestra que lleva la desgracia de tener relaciones amorosas con un bruto. Cusa le aconsejó que rompiera sus relaciones un poco infelices.

2—Con lágrimas en los ojos, se porque le doliera dejar lo que había sido su casa de tortura, sino por recordar las horas oscuras que pasaba, envuelta en ropas. Cusa la cargó y Estela dejó escrita en un papel que clavó en una esquina: "No me busques más, estoy resuelta a terminar. Te dejo las cosas y me llevo las mías. Keng".

3—Hermelinda Hernández, que buscaba por afición y estaba acostumbrado a largos golpes cuando no le gustaba algo, llegó a su vivienda en el callejón de la 7ta. "¡Maldita esta, ya se fue con otro —pensó en alta voz al leer el recado—. Ora verá, que a un hombre como yo no se le deja así como así, algo caro le va a costar su cambio..."

4—Cusa y Estela encontraron pronto el medio de que la segunda se consiguiera de la mala vida que había llevado. Fueron a dar a una cantina y con sus amigos Pedro Ferra y Enrique Torres se dedicaron a la maldanza. Beberon y gaseaban muy callados de la pena; parecían ser los más felices del mundo que nada malo podía pasarles.

5—Fero el gase se fue al pona. Hermelinda, dando muestras de pensar un afán más fino que el de un sabroso, entró de repente en la cantina y desde la puerta le cobó una mirada fulminante. "¡Dígame, hija desobediente; venga pa' acá, que no soy la bruta de nadie. Déjame como de rayo, afuera la espero para premiarla..."

6—"Virgen de Guadalupe, amparame de ese salvaje, de ese bruto...", oraba Estela al salir de la cantina. Caminaron hasta la calle más silenciosa. "¡Dígame, a veinte cuantos o verá lo que le pasa", rugió Hermelinda. Estela se sintió valiente y le gritó, pero en el acto lo agarró por su soltera y arremetióse, costándole golpeteada...

7—"Te prohibo el rigor de mis puños, ya veo que sí dar en la tierra a cualquiera que se olvide adivina comedia", gritaba Hermelinda mientras Estela, indavna greggy media se incorporaba y le contestaba: "¡Ta bien, Tarzán, ya no soy una de las que te imaginas. No soy voy, no, no y no; yo sí fajezco la fama mejor que tú los pantalones..."

8—"Te lo quitaré la maestra, pronto esta indecente, al que valieras todo", gritó Hermelinda, y cuando un descomodar se le hundió en el pecho. Ya que con sus puños no pudo conseguirlo de que volviera a vivir a su lado, le pareció más sencilla castigarlo de esa manera. "¡Ay, ya me olvida, pero te maldigo para todos los días de tu vida..."

9—Se quejaba Estela, al tiempo que caía. Hermelinda Pérez, mirándola cuando se alejaba para que no le aporreada, se daba cuenta de que la había herido de gravedad. "¡Caramba, era el más canchó... Pero tiene la culpa por ser más torpe que una mala parda. Así son las viejas, necias, y luego me se comprancho macho..."

Figure 5. Back cover of *Magazine de Policía*, December 14, 1944. The one-page photo novel recounts the beating and stabbing of a woman by her pimp. Script: R. Lara. Photos: Adrian Devars. Hemeroteca Nacional.



**Figure 6.** Judge Alejandro Luque (Fernando Soler) assists dancer Aurora Ruiz (Ninón Sevilla) after defending her from the brutal attack of her pimp in *Sensualidad* (Alberto Gout 1951).

son, Raúl (played by Rubén Rojo), who is set to become a lawyer and has recently become engaged to the heiress of a well-to-do family. The film has thus carefully established a stark contrast between decent family life and the dark side of nocturnal entertainment, yet the two worlds will soon collide. After a seemingly unrelated incident at his office, the stalwart justice finally succumbs to the enchantments of the sensual dancer.

Apparently, what ends up breaking the judge's moral backbone is not the indecent proposals of the young woman nor her salacious and exaggerated enticements, but instead the sudden corruption and fall into disgrace of Mr. Martínez, Luque's secretary of thirty years. In a humorous sequence, spectators learn that Mr. Martínez has missed work for a week, after three decades of perfect attendance. At the judge's order, the court employee is located by the police and forced to appear before his boss. Visibly disheveled and inebriated, the faithful civil servant shouts that he is tired of leading a decent life and complains that he has almost nothing to show for a lifetime of hard work and constant privations. He regrets having renounced most of life's pleasures in exchange for a meager salary. Mildly scolded by the judge to change his ways, Martínez declares his refusal to do so and states that he will henceforth shun his wife and spend the rest of his days drinking and having fun.

After this moment of humorous relief with tragic undertones, we see the judge back at home, alone and getting ready for a night at the opera, when he receives an unwelcomed phone call from Aurora. At this point, the first descent to the gates of hell is prefigured through a circular panning shot at high angle as Judge Luque walks down the stairs, his figure projecting tall shadows against the wall (Figure 7). Throughout the scene, set against a background of ominous nondiegetic music, an off-screen chorus of voices echoes in the judge's head, combining the secretary's drunken tirade, the mellifluous recriminations of Luque's wife, and Aurora's enticements. The ritornello of voices finally seems to be poking a hole in the unbreakable justice's will.

In Goethe's play and in Von Sternberg's film, old Doctor Faustus awakens to a sudden lust for life when the temptation to make up for lost time through carnal desire comes



**Figure 7.** Moving down to a path of shadows, Judge Luque descends the stairs while hearing a chorus of voices inducing him to temptation in *Sensualidad* (Alberto Gout 1951).

calling. Similarly, the exemplary figure of justice Alejandro Luque takes the bait that same night. The subsequent amorous scenes play out without dialogue, via a sound bridge featuring the theme song “Sensualidad” interpreted by the Puerto Rican crooner Bobby Capó. Invoking the voyeuristic drive of spectators to witness the secret love affair, the sequence shows the couple in a series of dissolves, dancing and kissing at night, inside Aurora’s rundown dwellings or on the rooftop of her building, avoiding public exposure.

The next sequence presents various settings portraying the judge’s new double life. Such comportment was not an infrequent practice among corrupt politicians and captains of industry of the 1950s but was clearly unacceptable for an aspiring magistrate, a position at the top echelon of the Mexican judicial system and one step below the Supreme Court. After ensuring that Luque is madly in love, Aurora launches the next phase in her personal vendetta to publicly humiliate and destroy him. In a boisterous altercation at a cabaret, she breaks up with her new lover, mocking the hypocrisy of his double life and deriding his ridiculous aspiration to keep her without the means to pay for her expensive tastes in clothing and lavish partying.

After additional rejections from his former concubine, the judge commits the unthinkable. In a frantic sequence dominated by Dutch-tilt shots, dimmed lights and close-ups showing a face pearly by sweat, the passion-blinded Luque extracts three hundred thousand pesos from the court’s deposit box and offers the cash to Aurora. The *rumbera* assumes the money is stolen and refuses the proposal to elope, as she has sworn to never go back to prison for him or for anyone else. Luque departs disappointed and confused. As he walks late at night along the dark streets, he is attacked by El Rizos who has heard about the small fortune the judge is carrying. The assailant, batters and badly wounds the frustrated Luque and flees with the money. The following scenes present the despairing efforts of the judge’s wife and his son Raúl to restore him to health and keep him out of jail for embezzling court’s funds.

At this point, the film acquires a new narrative intensity when Raúl and Chief of Police Santos concoct a desperate plan to make Aurora confess what she knows about the attack on the judge. This sequence is perhaps the most problematic in terms of plausibility yet remains within the boundaries of verisimilitude. After his mother dies, Raúl approaches Aurora, attempting to make peace and cultivate her trust to obtain information and solve the mystery of the assault on his father. Apparently, the *rumbera* is also capable of self-delusion, and she begins to dream of a utopian escape to the future in pursuit of social respectability and marital bliss with the young son of her judicial nemesis and former lover. To make amends and demonstrate her moral conversion, she aids in the capture of El Rizos, who finally hands over what is left of the loot. Judge Luque, however, hell-bent on eliminating any obstacle to his plan to regain his former lover back, shoots and kills his assailant in an altercation at the cabaret. In despair, and full of rage over the cruel rebuffs from his lover, the judge chases Aurora through the dark hallways of the deserted venue. The urgent images of the second sequence in the film thereby close the circular narration and precipitate for the final act.

Under duress, Aurora agrees to flee with the judge and they, proceed to her new residence for her to pick up some clothes and money. In fact, however, the showgirl is only buying time until she can call Raúl to come and save her from his crazed father. Spectators witness the effective deceptions of the *rumbera*, who is once again prospering while pitting father against son. In a crescendo of passion and irrationality on the part of the father, the film comes to close in a graphic scene where Alejandro Luque strikes his own son unconscious and strangles Aurora. As Chief Santos enters the yard of the mansion, the judge is shown at high angle in a canted shot, moving away from her motionless body. The images of Aurora's corpse match those in the title sequence.

In a *mise-en-scène* designed to thrill audiences and shock the moral sensibility of his critics, Alberto Gout reaffirms his command of the *cabaretera* film discourse by breaking the mold of his previous work. Released in 1951, which could be considered the *annus mirabilis* of Mexican film noir,<sup>6</sup> *Sensualidad* raises the bar in its capacity to deliver sharp criticism of the hypocrisy and inoperability of the postrevolutionary nation's moral code. The film not only severely questions the chivalric gestures and supposed probity of the civil servant but also demolishes the most fundamental elements of traditional Mexican masculinity representing them as ridiculous misconceptions of ancient mores. If this *rumbera* film was initially tasked with artificially bolstering the founding male fantasy of Mexican cinema—the triumph of a masculine will to “save and rescue” the prostitute with a heart of gold (originally deployed in the numerous filmic adaptations of Federico Gamboa's 1903 novel *Santa*)—its images definitely expose the social impotence of the discourse in question and its tendency to feed toxic masculinities that tailspin out of control. To be sure, the female protagonist in the film was most likely the victim of circumstances, but it is not with charity and bleeding-heart bourgeois gestures that the social problem she represents is solved. The realist and historical elements in the film make reference to the failed attempts by the Mexican government to reduce and control prostitution, suggesting that this moral imperative required not a simple change of rules but commitment to a full reform of the justice system as well as deliberate social policy addressed to working-class and poor migrant women and a gender-based approach to the problem of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. Such social reforms and ideas were in fact proposed to the government by feminist groups, socially progressive collectives, and professional organizations of doctors and lawyers but were never adopted by the administration (Bailón Vásquez 2016, 132–137).

<sup>6</sup> Under the criteria used, the year with the highest yield in the two decades considered here was 1951, with 17 films classifiable as noir. This was also the year with the highest proportion of films featuring urban themes during this period.

At this point it should be clear that *Sensualidad* was far from breaking with the misogynistic mold of American or Mexican film noir, but Gout's images nonetheless end up questioning some of the most insidious stereotypes of the femme fatale. If, immediately before the final scene, the judge's son verbally accuses the *rumbera* of causing the disgrace of the family, her answer reminds Raúl and the spectators that although she "may be scum," Luque is both "a thief and a murderer." Indeed, Aurora's words and actions confront spectators with the possibility that rehabilitation could have worked in her case, as the supposed femme fatale repeatedly refuses to participate in any new crime despite the violent advances and emotional enticements of the men surrounding her. In contrast, the film's cinematic discourse via images that predominantly represent Judge Luque's emotional and ideological point of view insistently points toward the moral turpitude and accumulation of emotional excesses of the father and civil servant (an extreme version of the toxic masculinities being built by media and the justice system) as the real source of grief and disgrace.

The melodrama of the closing sequence is well deployed to put in play the tensions and conflicts between traditional Christian virtues (hope, prudence, justice), the secular and civic values of the regime, and the pleasures and economic temptations brought about by urban modernity and capitalist development (Cunningham 2000; López 1993, 150). These images seem to eloquently allege that in modern times nothing can break the fall of a virtuous man when he loses hope, acts with impulsive and repetitive imprudence, and completely abandons his sense of justice. Furthermore, *Sensualidad* seems to tell us that Mexican film noir was ready to deliver spectators from some of the more monomaniacal and oppressive stereotyping of female characters, which traditionally portrayed women as the sole source of moral weakness and corruption. After reviewing and analyzing other films in the corpus of this research, it is difficult to believe Mexican film noir sought to mark a social agenda or that it constituted a solid source of social critique. And yet in its frequent recourse to popular media discourse highlighting current social issues, its confirmation of popular notions of criminal literacy, its complex plots, and the exaggerated roles of certain of its characters all seemed designed to expose the hypocrisy of moral conventions of the time and indirectly remind the public that the modern Mexican state of the 1950s and its representatives did not merely comprise a formidable structure that could bring about progress via its powers as a "philanthropic ogre"—as Octavio Paz once called it—but could also summon corrupting and destructive forces that ordinary individuals, rich or poor, private or official, were unable to confront on their own.

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