This article was downloaded by: *10.2.97.136*
On: 22 Mar 2023
Access details: *subscription number*
Publisher: *Routledge*
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK

The Routledge Companion to World Cinema

Rob Stone, Paul Cooke, Stephanie Dennison, Alex Marlow-Mann

Women's (r)evolutions in Mexican cinema

Publication details
https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315688251.ch9
Niamh Thornton
Published online on: 27 Sep 2017

How to cite :- Niamh Thornton. 27 Sep 2017, *Women's (r)evolutions in Mexican cinema from:* The Routledge Companion to World Cinema Routledge
Accessed on: 22 Mar 2023
https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315688251.ch9

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Downloaded By: 10.2.97.136 At: 05:57 22 Mar 2023; For: 9781315688251, chapter9, 10.4324/9781315688251.ch9

9

WOMEN'S (R)EVOLUTIONS IN MEXICAN CINEMA

Niamh Thornton

Introduction

Women's Cinema is an elastic and slippery term. It can mean film for or by women, cinema with women's stories at its centre or with powerful female stars and/or significant female protagonists, and encompasses many genres, techniques, aesthetic concerns and approaches. A look at mostly Anglophone feminist film criticism that traces developments in industry and extra-industrial practice, production, and representation from the 1970s on reveals as much (see, for example, Pietropaolo and Testaferri 1995; Jayamanne 1995; Humm 1997; Rich 1998; Chaudhuri 2006; and Hollinger 2012). The stories told, who created them, and how they were distributed and consumed is central to much of their analysis. This writing necessarily cannot capture the full picture and is looking and listening from a particular vantage point, but reflects the complicated, differentiated, and knotty issues that affect industrial and creative practice and its consumption. As access to basic rights (such as education, universal suffrage, economic independence, and so on) is variable from one nation state to another, the particularities of women's lives and stories told on film concurrently have distinct peaks and troughs that have as much to do with changes in the industry and more equal and distributed access to the means of production as they have with struggles for legal rights.

For my purposes, as the high profile faces of filmmaking, the actor and director are useful means of examining cinema, not least because insufficient work has been carried out on the other roles to be able to map out a complete trajectory. The story of women in film is as complicated, faltering, and densely circumscribed by access and circumstance as is the case for women in any professional career in the last hundred or so years. Much as with other creative fields, it is tempting to ascribe an upward trajectory to women's involvement in filmmaking, to draft neat lines around the movements that have emerged, and ignore the forms of storytelling that do not fit easily into preconceptions about women-centred narratives. But this does not allow for the inequalities that still stymy much of this history and persist into the present day.

Given that it is a costly endeavour that requires close collaboration with (often) large teams of people, figuring through who holds the power over the final product in filmmaking can be tricky. The lively debates that regularly take place around awards ceremonies evidence this and often privilege the above-the-line workers, not least the performers and directors.

Downloaded By: 10.2.97.136 At: 05:57 22 Mar 2023; For: 9781315688251, chapter9, 10.4324/9781315688251.ch9

This approach puts much onus on individuals and their successes and failures, or our success or failure as audiences and critics in recognising their achievements rather than focusing on a complex inter-relationship between industry conditions, historic developments and individual attainment. As a consequence of the dearth of research into women's creativity from multiple levels of filmmaking it is currently impossible to provide a complete picture of the development and evolution of their roles. Therefore, this chapter will consider directors and actors, taking into account figures with differentiated access to the industry, and examine their output in relation to the social, industry, and production conditions in which they were working.

This chapter will consider Mexico as a case study because of its simultaneously unique and representative position in global cinema and focus on war films, because of their popularity as a genre in Mexican cinema, but one that is not conventionally thought of in terms of women's cinema. Over the course of its long history Mexican filmmaking has dominated the Spanish-language market, often working in parallel and, sometimes, in tandem with Hollywood. This allows a look at an industry that has been, simultaneously, a financial powerhouse in some markets and a successful arthouse producer in others (McKee Irwin, Castro Ricalde *et al.* 2013). Previously in Mexican scholarship, important work of recuperation and recognition of Mexican filmmakers and stars has been carried out by film historians and scholars that focuses on two key periods: the so-called Golden Age of the studio period 1930s–1950s (Joanne Hershfield 1996, 2000 and 2008) and the 1970s and 1980s which saw the emergence of feminist directors concerned with women's narratives (Elissa Rashkin 2001 and Patricia Torres San Martín 2004). Both of these periods are important touchstones for how women's filmmaking has evolved and will be expanded upon here. Building on their work yet taking a different frame, this chapter will shift the focus onto a key historical moment, the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), in order to allow space to draw out the larger picture, challenge preconceptions about women's presence in bellicose films, and consider how women's film has evolved in Mexico.

Conventionally in film historiography, war films are not closely associated with women filmmakers. War films represent moments of national crisis, provide an unusual perspective on women's stories, and, as a consequence, they have considerable capacity to afford unique insights into women's participation in cinema as cast and crew. Despite this, through critical oversight, their presence has been ignored in favour of more clear-cut women-centred narratives. In Mexico women direct, write and feature in films of the Revolution as key characters and in starring roles and, yet, as with other cinemas, this is seen as anomalous or denigrated rather than taken as an opportunity to follow how women's presence is a recurrent feature of a national preoccupation. This chapter will draw on this rich strand as a productive means of considering women's filmmaking in Mexico from a greatly neglected perspective through a chronological exploration of the development of women's creative output on screen and the changes in the industry.

Film and the Mexican Revolution

The Revolution, writ large and in upper case to designate its foundational status, was a defining conflict in Mexican political and cultural life. It resulted in seismic population changes, millions dead, and led to the birth of the current political system whereby a single party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional [Institutional Revolutionary Party] (PRI) has held power almost uninterruptedly for nearly 75 years over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Downloaded By: 10.2.97.136 At: 05:57 22 Mar 2023; For: 9781315688251, chapter9, 10.4324/9781315688251.ch9

For this to succeed, there was a concerted effort by the party to take ownership of the Revolution and strengthen its claim to have been the principal actors in over-turning the old order and, thereby, to have brought about political and social change. Film has been integral to this nation building agenda whereby the PRI has actively funded and supported creative representations of the Revolution. As a consequence, there are more than 250 films of the Revolution of multiple genres and periods and it continues to be a focus and setting for films up to the present day (Vazquez Mantecón 2010: 17). Following on from Susan Dever (2003), "Revolution" must be understood to refer to multiple referents: a bellicose period (1910–1920); a process (1920–1942); and a trope continually renewed and recycled for political and socio-cultural ends. In this way, the presence of women on and off screen in films of the Revolution is part of an iterative creative process of nation building that has also seen many opportunities for divergent and unique challenges to the status quo.

The first films of the Revolution were documentaries distributed as newsreels or for campaigns (see Pick 2010). There are a few extant and they have considerable indexical and aesthetic value. In critical studies of the films of the Revolution, *Vámonos con Pancho Villa!* (Let's Go With Pancho Villa, 1936, Mexico, Fernando de Fuentes) is presented as the archetypical and high point of the early fiction films (Pick 2010: 7). It was one of many studio-made films from the 1930s onwards that were often adaptations of novels of the Revolution or modelled on the tropes of these, which focused on bands of brothers going off to battle, paying little attention to women characters. The prestige attached to this film was determined by critical frameworks deployed by a series of filmmakers in the 1960s and 1970s keen to find aesthetic and narrative antecedents that did not cleave to the generic tropes of more popular, often female-centred stories of the 1930s–1950s. The premise of canon formation of Revolutionary films was that they consisted of films centred on male enterprise and were frequently devoid of women.

In the early twentieth century, Mexico developed a highly successful industry that was, in part, modelled on the Hollywood studio system and was part-financed and supported by successive governments that produced popular films for local and international audiences. The peak period for the studios was between the early 1930s and the late 1950s and is often referred to in the literature as the Golden Age of Mexican cinema (see Hernández Rodríguez 1999; Tierney 2007: 1–2). During the Golden Age, female stars had a significant presence. In a cinema that favoured melodrama as a "dominant genre", with a particularly Mexican inflection, the woman's film had a significant place (Mistron 1984: 47). Iconic roles often identified with well-known stars are the lasting legacy of this era, yet few are included in lists or academic studies that ascribe prestige to the films. In a book about the best-paid actor of the period and a woman who repeatedly appeared in films set during the Revolution, María Félix, critic and author Paco Ignacio Taibo lays this out in idiosyncratic style when he delineates key characteristics associated with female stars of the period, and indicates how Félix defied convention (Taibo 2004: 16–17). Unlike other critics and historians of Mexican cinema, Ignacio Taibo highlights their performance styles rather than indicating archetypal roles. There is no mention of what John Mraz concisely summarises as, "the mother, the Indian and the shrew" (2009: 9), to which must be added the numbers of prostitutes, soldiers and sacrificing wives that many of these women (and others) played, which Alicia Vargas Amésquita explores in her writing (2010). Exceptionally, and as an early proponent of star studies in Mexico (his work was originally published in 1985), Ignacio Taibo foregrounds their individual strengths and the popular reading of their star texts. His list is but a sample of significant stars who were integral to this period of filmmaking. Where few female directors

Downloaded By: 10.2.97.136 At: 05:57 22 Mar 2023; For: 9781315688251, chapter9, 10.4324/9781315688251.ch9

emerged during the Golden Age, the performances of the female actors of this period were integral to the construction of womanhood and were opportunities to either establish fixed representations of women in Mexican society or to challenge these.

The Golden Years: 1930–1958

Two films set during the Revolution that play at either end of the good/rebellious woman spectrum also star two of the biggest film stars of the era: the conformist woman of *Flor silvestre* (Wild Flower, 1943, Mexico, Emilio Fernández) starring Dolores del Rio and Pedro Armendáriz, and the tension between conformity and dissent in *La cucaracha* (The Soldiers of Pancho Villa, 1959, Ismael Rodríguez, Mexico) starring Félix, del Rio and Fernández. Both films are indicative of critical reception of the women in film from the Golden Age. *Wild Flower* has garnered many plaudits and critical acclaim with its "maudlin, melodramatic plot" (Mistron 1984: 51). It is the story of a woman who sacrifices much for her country and the future of her child, where "the revolution is seen as the painful birth of a new generation of families who are able to live in the more just and equitable society envisioned and created by those who came before" (Mistron 1984: 51). This was del Rio's first role on her return from Hollywood and is structured as an extended flashback narrated by José Luis/Armendáriz who is telling her son the reasons why she has sacrificed so much to create a better future. José Luis Armendáriz is her husband who defied his wealthy father in marrying Esperanza and then becomes a leader in the Revolution. Esperanza operates as the impetus for José Luis' rebellion against his father and can be read as a proxy for the people for whom he has gone into battle. Given the nature of women's activities in the Revolution as nurses, cooks, laundresses, companions, prostitutes, and combatants, Esperanza's presence alongside her husband is typical of how women are represented in the films of the Revolution (Soto 1979). Hers are the more respectable responsibilities of cooking and cleaning, not unlike the domestic chores expected of her in peacetime. She is upset by the losses of war, but accepts the need for Revolution as a necessary process of attaining a better future for her son. The representation of Esperanza's acceptance of loss and self-sacrificing love for her child is a repeated trope in the films that reiterate the significance of Revolution as the foundational national narrative.

Where *Wild Flower* has been lauded for privileging and fetishising conformity and sacrifice, *The Soldiers of Pancho Villa* both deploys these tropes and plays with its opposite. As a consequence, *The Soldiers of Pancho Villa* has been largely reviled by critics. Del Rio revisits her role as self-abnegating woman while Félix switches between being a cross-dressing combatant and a supportive camp companion. The plot is concerned with the love triangle between La Cucaracha (Félix), Isabel (del Rio) and Colonel Antonio Zeta (Emilio Fernández). Zeta first pursues La Cucaracha, a combatant who also has a reputation for drinking, fighting, and having multiple sexual relationships with men. After he seduces her, she briefly adopts new responsibilities and moves from being a combatant to the domestic chores associated with women. Her clothes also shift from what is coded as masculine attire to the skirts, shawls and blouses similar to those of the other women. These transformations do not remain fixed. La Cucaracha has not been tamed through seduction. Unable to fit in with the other women or leave her drinking and fighting behind, she soon returns to battle and loses Zeta. He is then seduced by Isabel, which results in tension between the women until La Cucaracha discovers she is pregnant whereby her wardrobe changes again and she blends in with the other women.

Through plot twists and wardrobe changes Félix's performance shifts between masculine coded open body gestures and closed guarded feminine movements. The absence of moral

Downloaded By: 10.2.97.136 At: 05:57 22 Mar 2023; For: 9781315688251, chapter9, 10.4324/9781315688251.ch9

lessons mean that the film opens up spaces for gender non-conformity in a genre that is generally understood to be highly conservative. This ambiguity can be attributed to the leads and their star texts. As I have written elsewhere, Félix had a public life that defied convention (Thornton 2013). She had multiple romantic partners, led an extravagant lifestyle and was the centre of many public scandals. In contrast, del Rio had a glamorous, but quiet life generally conforming to the traditional Mexican idea of a good woman. Their star texts are inscribed in any reading of these films and are further reinforced through their performances. Not only is it significant that La Cucaracha is an unmarried mother of the new Mexican child of the Revolution, but also that Félix's star text refuses conformity to mores of the state in the same way that del Rio's Esperanza in *Wild Flower* can only ever be self-sacrificing and traditional because of how her star text is to be understood in the light of her other performances.

Extravagant and outspoken, Félix was an outlier who became the best paid star (male or female) of the industrial era, but is the least researched by scholars, while del Rio also attained considerable fame and success she did so by conforming to an idealised form of womanhood that has led to considerable critical attention. Stars of the Golden Age, such as del Rio, appear to attract critical attention through conformity to type and narrow ideas of taste and prestige, because value is given to films by particular male auteurs. In contrast, women directors are evaluated differently from their male contemporaries.

Women had great difficulty in entering the director's union, therefore it was a role dominated by men. Just two female directors managed to break into the profession with any success during this period: Matilde Landeta (1910–1999) and Adela Sequeyro (1901–1992). Landeta and Sequeyro were pioneers who made genre films that reveal distinct creative decisions, but cannot be easily read as auteurs. As a consequence, like some of their male contemporaries working in industrial cinema, they have been overlooked. Unlike the male directors they had to overcome barriers unique to women. Their careers have been recuperated by film historians such as Patricia Torres San Martín (2004), but rarely appear in traditional film historiography because of their gender and the somewhat stop start nature of their careers. In the interest of space I shall focus on one of Landeta's films as exemplary of how women filmmakers of this era found ways to critique the Revolutionary project while working from within an industrial context.

B. Ruby Rich, in her construction of a revisionist history of Latin American cinema, picks out *La negra Angustias* (1949, Mexico, Matilde Landeta) because, for her, it functions as an "anomaly" (1995: 173), which challenges the categories and labels ascribed to Latin American cinema where its "entire history [. . .] has come to be judged by the yardstick of its early classics" (1995: 168). Rich's focus is on reassessing Latin American cinema and moving it away from the strictures of New Latin American cinema and the attendant emphasis on political and socially conscious filmmaking. Rich's reading brings attention to a neglected filmmaker, but does not recognise that, in many respects, *La negra Angustias* conforms to local filmmaking practices, techniques, and thematic concerns that "managed, in imperfect and sometimes surprising ways, to reflect on the revolution as a disruptive and contradictory event" (Pick 2010: 4). The plot follows the coming of age of Angustias (María Elena Marqués) and her participation in the Revolution and elevation to the position of colonel. She is a young woman who bears the multiple stigmas—in Mexico of that time—of being an illegitimate child of rape and of mixed White and Black race (she is described as *mulata* in the book and film). There are few films with Black Mexicans at their centre, which places the narrative focus at a vanguard. However, the decision to cast a White actor and black her up reveals a racial insensitivity that should not be ignored, but is not unusual for this time.

Downloaded By: 10.2.97.136 At: 05:57 22 Mar 2023; For: 9781315688251, chapter9, 10.4324/9781315688251.ch9

The casting of Marqués as Angustias confuses the racial concerns of the film. She was a star whose roles often emphasised her purity through accentuating her Whiteness in a country that still privileges pale skin. An example of such a role is in *Doña Bárbara* (1943, Mexico, Fernando de Fuentes and Miguel M. Delgado), where she is, also, the child of a rape, a "primal scene that organises the narrative" of both films (Arredondo 2011: 76). In *Doña Bárbara* she vies with her mother—the eponymous Doña Bárbara played by Félix—for the love of a man, whose narrative and allegorical role is that of civilizing the people and place. Given this antecedent and other similar roles, Marquéz is difficult to read as *mulata*. As a product of the studio system that relied on a star system that lacked stars of colour, the casting of Marquéz is a flawed attempt at exploring race. Although others did not explore Blackness, *La negra Angustias* could be compared to star films where White actors browned up to perform indigeneity. Two examples of these can be found in del Rio as the eponymous *María Candelaria* (1944, Mexico, Emilio Fernández) and Félix in *Maclovia* (1948, Mexico, Emilio Fernández). Neither are films of the Revolution, a type of film that rarely included race as a self-conscious theme.

While the focus on race in Revolutionary films may be rare in Mexican cinema, *La negra Angustias* shares other commonalities with studio films of the time. It is an adaptation of a Novel of the Revolution, one that the critic Seymour Menton (1954) compares to two other novels: *Doña Bárbara* by Rómulo Gallegos (1947), a canonical Regional Novel, and the iconic and foundational Novel of the Revolution, *Los de abajo* (The Underdogs, 1915) by Mariano Azuela (Azuela 1996). As reliable sources of ready-made and popular narratives or texts that provide prestige to the film, adaptations have been common in Mexican cinema since the early period (Thornton 2016). In addition, there are other strong female roles that have significant military responsibility, such as those starring Félix, *The Soldiers of Pancho Villa* and *La generala* (1971, Mexico, Juan Ibáñez), that had space for characters who were "ambiguous and contradictory" (Dávalos Orozco 1999: 46). As with the Félix star vehicles and other films that address the contemporary anxieties around women's demands for rights in the 1940s and onwards, *La negra Angustias* tackles issues of sexuality and orientation in ways that allow a space for a nuanced exploration of these. Rich may over-declare how anomalous Landeta is, but rightly credits her with having "laid the groundwork for the Latin American women's films of the 1980s, which began to incorporate women's struggles for identity and autonomy" (1995: 174). Rich, here, is referring to the women directors who made low budget independent films that I will discuss below.

Years of rebellion and change: the 1960s and 1970s

By the 1960s increasing numbers of women in Mexico, as elsewhere, were shifting from working in informal sectors and conforming to traditional domestic roles to attaining greater legal rights and access to secondary and university education that was expected to lead to professional careers. Feminist magazines provided a forum for sharing ideas and debating issues, as did labour movements, and activist and social solidarity groups. In 1968 there were worker and student protests that culminated in a massacre on 2 October, days before the opening of the Olympic games staged in Mexico City. Many students filmed the protests and unrest, and several films, largely documentaries, were consequently made from this footage. As was the case in many other countries, 1968 was utterly transformative socially, culturally and politically and marked filmmaking by those involved in the protests and their creative output for decades to come.

At this time studio filmmaking went into decline for multiple reasons including: the rising popularity of television, the lack of investment in cinema theatres, changes in government

Downloaded By: 10.2.97.136 At: 05:57 22 Mar 2023; For: 9781315688251, chapter9, 10.4324/9781315688251.ch9

support, and a decline in audiences because of the formulaic nature of the output. The shift also took place thanks to the confluence of social, political and cultural changes in the 1960s. A small, but vocal, group of critics, filmmakers and academics began to write about film in the *Nuevo cine* (New cinema) journal (see Noble 2005). They organised screenings of international arthouse and experimental films, held discussion groups, and created awards and festivals with the aim of fomenting a cinema culture distinct to that of the studios. The first Mexican film school opened in 1963 which provided a new generation with the technical and intellectual skills that previously were only acquired through apprenticeships and had required membership of the studio-affiliated unions.

A small number of women attended film school at this time, but it would take some years for there to be a critical mass. The feminist scholar Elissa J. Rashkin found records from the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos (University Centre for Cinematic Study, CUEC), for only two female students between 1963 and 1970 and only three graduates from 1975 to 1980 at the *Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica* (Centre for Cinematic Training) (2001: 68). Both are prestigious institutions. One of the select few to complete her studies and gain a foothold in the industry in the 1960s was a formidable pioneering figure in Mexican cinema, Marcela Fernández Violante. Hers is an unusual trajectory in relation to both her contemporaries and the history of women filmmakers in Mexico. While her male contemporaries were getting support from the government-backed film bank and sidestepping the unions associated with the studio films, she was the first woman admitted to the director's union and worked on both studio-based projects and films supported by the Universities as well as being the director of the CUEC from 1984 to 1988. She worked hard to revive interest in her female predecessors, such as Landeta, but has received scant attention because she too has an anomalous place in Mexican film history.

Rashkin has described Fernández Violante as "an always-controversial figure [, who] can perhaps best be described as a maverick" for her outspoken manner in interviews and for inhabiting an unusual "borderline between industrial and university cinema" (2001: 77). Despite receiving awards for her work, her industrial and university prominence, and the repeated recognition of her importance in film histories, especially as a representative of a growing number of women filmmakers, Fernández Violante's work is little studied by academics. This is for a variety of reasons: her early work, while independent in aesthetic, thematic and narrative terms, was made within the studio system unlike her male contemporaries; unlike many other women filmmakers, her films cannot be easily categorised as feminist; and she often tackles historical figures who are out of political favour. In sum, her output is difficult to place along the lines of previous studies of this period of male or female Mexican filmmaking.

Fernández Violante directed two films of the Revolution: *De todos modos Juan te llamas* (The General's Daughter aka. Whatever You Do It's No Good, 1975, Mexico) and *Cananea* (1978, Mexico). The first is set during the short-lived *Cristero* Rebellion (1926–1929) and the second in the run-up to the Revolution. The *Cristero* Rebellion was a religious war between the state and a small group of radical priests and lay people who wanted to challenge the government's decision to reform the relationship between the church and the state (see, Meyer 2008). The film centres on the family of General Guajardo (Jorge Russek, voiced by Federico Romano), an authoritarian figure who has a difficult relationship with his wife, Beatriz (Patricia Aspillaga) and three children, Armanda (Rocio Brambila), Andrés (uncredited), and Gabriel (uncredited). Encouraged by a rousing speech from the pulpit by the priest, the village women beat Beatriz to death in front of Armanda. Traumatised by this, Armanda turns to her cousin, Colonel Gontrán Bonilla (Juan Ferrara), in whom she has evident amorous interest. He, in turn, despite being a serving officer, is disillusioned with the state's turn from the ideals of the Revolution. The

Downloaded By: 10.2.97.136 At: 05:57 22 Mar 2023; For: 9781315688251, chapter9, 10.4324/9781315688251.ch9

unfolding of the narrative is tragic and leads Armanda to escape the small village for an uncertain future in Mexico City. The original Spanish title, *De todos modos Juan te llamas*, rendered in the alternate title *Whatever You Do It's No Good*, alludes to the fact that this story is not just about Armanda's coming of age and sexual awakening, it is about a family falling apart. In the nuanced and complicated realisation of this story, this family can both act as an instance of how outside, public political forces play on family life and as an allegory of the Mexican state and its failings.

Bonilla is seen reading a book by one of the intellectual leaders of the Revolution, the anarchist Ricardo Flores Magon. His story is fictionalised in *Cananea*, where he is renamed Baca Calderón (Carlos Bracho). In Fernández Violante's words, it attempts to "portray anarchists as the conscience of society, but not as the solution to society's problems" (Burton 1986: 200). Baca Calderón arrives in a mining town controlled by the US citizen, Colonel William Greene (Steve Wilensky), who has gone from a struggling miner in the deserts of Northern Mexico to a wealthy businessman. While Baca Calderón is shown as having a significant role in organising labour, he is also a flawed individual who has much to learn about class difference and leadership. His successes are mired with poor communication skills and a willingness to impel others to their death in pursuit of his cause. At the same time, Greene is portrayed as a sympathetic but flawed businessman, whose greed has blinded him to the needs of his workers. Both films are instances of looking at the Revolution from an alternate perspective. They are complex and nuanced, yet have received little attention because Fernández Violante falls outside of the usual mould for women in Mexican film.[1]

Talent among the trash: the 1970s and 1980s

In the 1970s and 1980s, popular cinema became dominated by straight-to-video releases, B-movie horrors and superhero films, what Victoria Ruétalo and Dolores Tierney have labelled Latsploitation (2009), on the one hand, and, due to the potential to shoot cheaply independent of the studio system, it opened up a space for alternative filmmaking practices and gave opportunities to those who had been heretofore marginalised to take up a place behind the camera, on the other hand. There were few films about the Revolution made during this period. Just as in other filmmaking countries, women were getting opportunities to make films and doing so in a multiplicity of styles. Directors, such as María Novaro, Busi Cortes, Marisa Sistach, Eva López Sánchez, Dana Rotberg and Guita Schyfter emerged during this period (see Rashkin 2001). Researchers, such as Rashkin, concerned with women's filmmaking, have privileged these filmmakers because they represent a remarkable moment of artistic output and the important act of recuperation and historiography has been "a formidable challenge to a long-standing cinematic tradition of female objectification, erasure, and displacement" (2001: 2). Writers on this period, like Rashkin, have focused on directors, but I want to include actors in this discussion because they prove a fruitful contrast with stars of the studio system.

Two actors who are productive to consider because they illuminate female performances from the 1970s up to the present day are María Rojo and Diana Bracho. Rojo started in television on soap operas, then had her first film role in *Los cachorros* (The Cubs, 1973, Mexico) by the independent filmmaker Jorge Fons, with whom she would later work with on the first fiction film about 1968, *Rojo amanecer* (Red Dawn, 1989, Mexico). Rojo has performed in films that tackle thorny political themes, such as *Bajo la metralla* (Under Fire, 1983, Mexico, Felipe Cazals), the aforementioned *Red Dawn* and, more recently, *La dictadura perfecta* (The Perfect Dictatorship, 2014, Mexico, Luis Estrada). Bracho had some walk-on roles as a child, worked in television, and had her first major role in *El castillo de la pureza* (The Castle of Purity,

Downloaded By: 10.2.97.136 At: 05:57 22 Mar 2023; For: 9781315688251, chapter9, 10.4324/9781315688251.ch9

1973, Mexico, Arturo Ripstein), who is himself the son of a major film producer. Many of her extended family were involved in filmmaking including her father, the director Julio Bracho, and her aunts, Andres de Palma and del Rio, and her roles have been wide-ranging. They include performances in arthouse films by male auteurs, such as Fons and Ripstein; on early films by women directors; in television soap operas; and genre films. One of her recent roles is as Félix in a short entitled *María Bonita* (Eternal Beauty, 2015, Mexico, Amanda de la Rosa Frisccione). Both Bracho and Rojo have become heavily identified with strong female roles and employ a naturalistic performance style drawn from their time working in theatre. In particular, in critical analysis of their roles, their performances in films by women filmmakers are favourably analysed and, because of their perceived congruity in aesthetics they have become linked with the aforementioned growth in female directors who operated outside of the studio system during the 1980s and 1990s.

The misperception that the 1980s in Mexican cinema was a period of decline in quality is, in part, because women filmmakers were seen to be marginal in their approaches, and because there is an over-emphasis on external validation (sales or awards) on the success of the film industry. Both Rojo and Bracho acted in films by women or where female characters were part of a strong ensemble cast. An example of this is the aforementioned and under-valued *Under Fire* in which Rojo appeared. It is an adaptation of *Les justes* (The Just Assassins), a 1949 play by Albert Camus. The action and events in the play are transposed from 1905 plot to assassinate the Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich by a group of Russian Socialist Revolutionaries to the attempted kidnap of a corrupt politician in Northern Mexico by a group of armed Socialist Revolutionaries. In *Under Fire* the account of the attack transmitted via the media is distorted and portrayed as a narco gang dispute. Male and female members of the group are on equal footing, that is, they have shared responsibilities and are shown to be as competent with weaponry, they vie for power and distrust one another equally. It is a highly charged political film that is illustrative of the choice Rojo has made in her career to pick challenging roles that crossed genres and styles.

There is a deliberate naturalism to Rojo's performance as María in *Under Fire*. This is reinforced by naturalistic lighting, few cuts with long takes, and frequent medium to long shots. To an extent, the audio-visual techniques employed by Cazals are auteurist touches that seek to achieve a heightened and, somewhat sordid, realism. These are also evident in his earlier film *Los Poquianchis* (1976, Mexico), a film based on a true story of a prostitution ring involved in serial murders. It is another ensemble piece with performances by both Rojo and Bracho. They are actors who employ restrained performances, despite their start in television soaps, a genre associated with excess in movement, tone, and voice all in service of heightening emotion. They keep their gestures to a minimum, are expressive only in moments of drama or action, and modulate their voices to convey subtle emotional responses. This contrasts greatly with studio stars such as Félix's full use of her vocal range, expansive gestures, and capacious movement through the mise-en-scène. To an extent some of these elements were peculiar to Félix, but there are commonalities with other actors of the studio era.

Bracho and Rojo's naturalistic performative style suited the male auteurs of the 1970s, who wanted to move away from studio-style aesthetics, and the realist approach to genre narrative by the women directors of the 1980s. Rojo's naturalistic performances are distinct from the melodramatic performances associated with the female-centred films made by the studios up to the 1950s. Few independent women filmmakers made films of the Revolution starring women. Rojo has only had a small role in a film of the Revolution, *Zapata en Chinameca* (Zapata in Chinameca, 1987, Mexico, Mario Hernández) about the final days of the Revolutionary leader, Emiliano Zapata. This is worth remarking upon because of her significance as an actor and the

Downloaded By: 10.2.97.136 At: 05:57 22 Mar 2023; For: 9781315688251, chapter9, 10.4324/9781315688251.ch9

disregard for films of the Revolution because of their association with studio films. Women filmmakers appeared to move away from the Revolution as a setting, theme or context during the 1970s and 1980s in favour of contemporary stories. After a two-decade decline, the 1990s saw a renewed interest in the Revolution.

NAFTA and internationalisation: the 1990s and 2000s

The 1990s saw another shift in the film industry after the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Canada, Mexico and the US, which stipulated that Mexico must decrease state investment in cinema. Funding was reliant on private sources, the most lucrative of which was via transnational co-productions with US studios. A key example of a financially lucrative film following this model is *Como agua para chocolate* (Like Water for Chocolate, 1992, Mexico, Alfonso Arau, 1992), set during the Revolution. Directed by Arau, it was adapted by Laura Esquivel, his then-wife, from her eponymous bestselling novel. This collaboration brings to the fore questions of auteurship (and authorship) and how we ascribe ownership to creative work.

Both the film and novel form of *Like Water for Chocolate* are well-studied texts. The novel heralded a publishing Boom in Mexican women's writing (Hind 2010). On the back of its success, in Mexico, more women were getting published and promoted by publishing houses and there was a new interest in women-centred narratives. Also, due to the sales of the novel in translation, it saw increased attention paid to the broader category of Latin American writing by women at a global level. Both novel and film have been categorised as magical realist, a label that is often mistakenly deployed as a placeholder for the exotic, strange and surreal. In *Like Water for Chocolate* it is a conceit employed to blur distinctions between the living and the dead and sees fantastic occurrences take place in what is to be understood as realist narratives. The novel has received considerable attention for its form. It is the fictional recovery of a missing piece of the narrator's personal history using recipes that celebrate the domestic and supposedly mundane aspects of the everyday set against the dramatic backdrop of the Revolution. The film is less experimental, yet, unusually for a film of the Revolution, it privileges the domestic by focusing on the family drama over the potentially action-filled war taking place beyond their purview.

It is practice in adaptation studies to privilege the source text and to measure the adaptation in terms of its faithfulness. When the scriptwriter is the original author, faithfulness is taken as read, even more so in this case where the creative team were husband and wife. Consequently, the film can be ascribed with Esquivel's authorial imprimatur. It is often noted that *Like Water for Chocolate* marked a turning point in Mexican filmmaking because of its sizeable international box office earnings. What few highlight is that the most significant Mexican film of the 1990s was a woman-centred, woman-authored popular genre film of the Revolution. Ignacio Sánchez Prado (2014) has studied how this then led to a growth in Romantic films for a bourgeois, largely female audience. Such subsequent films rarely make it to the international arthouse or film festival circuit, but do have considerable domestic audiences (see Sánchez Prado 2014).

Despite its box office earnings *Like Water for Chocolate* did not result in an upswing of films by or about women, nor of a renewed interest in films set during the Revolution. One of the few other films of the Revolution from the mid-1990s attempted to go further in its radical critique of the Revolutionary project. Starring Diana Bracho, *Entre Pancho Villa y una mujer desnuda* (Between Pancho Villa and a Naked Woman, 1995, Mexico, Sabina Berman and Isabelle Tardán) is based on a play written by Berman. The film tells the story of Gina (Bracho), a businesswoman who is undergoing a personal crisis after Adrián (Arturo Ríos), her lover, leaves her just when he appeared to have decided to commit to their relationship. Troubled by this change

Downloaded By: 10.2.97.136 At: 05:57 22 Mar 2023; For: 9781315688251, chapter9, 10.4324/9781315688251.ch9

and influenced by a theory that all Mexican men model themselves on the Revolutionary leader, Pancho Villa's machismo, she decides to "act like a man" herself and takes a younger lover, Ismael (Gabriel Porrás), to whom she refuses to commit. Gina is torn between the two men. In an extra twist that provides an element of screwball comedy, Villa (Jesús Ochoa), provides advice to both Gina and Adrián. His hyper-masculine heroic manner is straight out of the studio era films, which clashes with the naturalism of the performances and settings inhabited by the other characters. The farce is to be found in the incongruous intervention of Villa as synonym for Revolutionary ideology in a woman's love life. Gina realises that this model of masculinity is redundant and is not what she really wants. This film is illustrative of the shift away from narratives clearly set during the Revolution at this point in Mexican filmmaking and, although largely ignored in film analysis, has a significant meta-critical role on the stylistic tropes of Mexican films of the Revolution.

The 1990s and 2000s are often read as a period of renaissance for Mexican film. In terms of scale and range, this is not the case. In the 1990s the volume of films made plummeted and there was a shift towards transnational film productions from the early 2000s following a pattern that can be seen around the world. The release of *Amores perros* (2000, Mexico, Alejandro González Iñárritu) heralded this new period whereby the so-called three amigos, Alfonso Cuarón, Guillermo del Toro and Iñárritu have attained international attention and moved from the national to the inter- and transnational stage (see Shaw 2013). This has been followed by a select number of (mostly male) auteurs gaining international attention such as Carlos Reygadas, Amat Escalante and Gerardo Naranjo. These successes have been limited to a small number of individuals, whose reference to the Revolution has been tangential, thematic, or meta-textual, at least up until the 2010 centenary commemorations.

In a return to a more sideways look at the Revolution reminiscent of Berman and Tardán's *Between Pancho Villa and a Naked Woman* two women directors contributed to the anthology *Revolución* (2010, Mexico): Patricia Riggen's *Beautiful and Beloved*, about a woman's decision to bury her grandfather in Mexico with his gun from the Revolution, and Mariana Chenillo's story of a young woman's struggle to pay for a new front tooth in *The Estate Store*. *Revolución* is made up of ten shorts and was released to commemorate the centenary of the Revolution. Gael García Bernal and Diego Luna's production company Canana were behind the project. Luna asked the filmmakers to respond to the question, "Where is the Revolution today?" (Ellis 2010).

The Estate Store is set in contemporary Mexico. Yolanda (Mónica Bejarano) is a young woman working on the shop floor of a large supermarket. She has a false tooth and wants to save up to get an implant in time to go out on a date with the floor manager. In advance of her appointment, which she must pay for in cash, instead of being given her full pay she is given in-store vouchers. She complains and loses her job. The title refers to the practice of indentured slavery common on large plantations from colonial era onwards and invites the viewer to draw a correlation between this and the exploitation inherent in transnational capitalism. One of the aims of the Revolution had been to free workers from this oppressive practice prevalent during colonial times. As Maricruz Castro Ricalde (2014) convincingly argues, *The Estate Store* is an insightful exploration of the effects of neoliberal economics on the individual, which can be read as a form of neocolonialism, and presents another failed promise of the Revolution.

In Riggen's *Beautiful and Beloved* Mexican-American Elisa (Carmen Corral) comes to terms with her Mexican-ness through having to smuggle her dead grandfather back to Mexico, as she is unable to afford to do so by legal means. The film is named after the song "Beautiful and Beloved Mexico", composed by Chucho Monge. It is a patriotic *ranchera* whose lyrics explicitly reference the desire to be repatriated after death "if I die far from you" (Ramírez-Pimienta 2010: 32).

Downloaded By: 10.2.97.136 At: 05:57 22 Mar 2023; For: 9781315688251, chapter9, 10.4324/9781315688251.ch9

The "you", here, is Mexico. Riggen's most successful film to date, *La misma luna* (Under the Same Moon, 2007, Mexico/USA), also had immigration as a central narrative concern: a child wanting to reunite with his mother. *Beautiful and Beloved* employs music to create a sentimental portrait of the loss and longing of migration. Riggen has consistently worked outside of Mexico, like the "Three Amigos"; her most recent project is *Los 33* (The 33, 2015, Chile/USA), about the Chilean miners who were trapped for seventeen days after an explosion. Where Riggen draws on elements of comedy and melodrama in her filmmaking, Chenillo's approach is more subtle, employing a realist aesthetic, yet both are keen to make explicit the affective consequences of Revolution. Just as it is impossible to describe a male aesthetic, the two shorts by these two directors demonstrate how women in film are influenced by the patterns and developments in the Mexican film industry as well as responding to the demands of inter- and transnational cinema.

Conclusion

The history of Mexican film is told as one of volume and quality. Success is measured by external awards (Cannes, Oscars) and influential historians or critics' valorisations according to their taste. Women are largely overlooked in this framing of the story. In a country that has had a significant film industry with a range of talented creatives, it is tempting to tell the story in broad sweeps that ignore disparities and disruptions. Women's involvement in film, whether as cast or crew, is a welcome complication to neat historiography and a necessary challenge for scholarly research.

Films of the Revolution are a productive means of looking at Mexican women in film as they allow for a reflection upon consistencies and differences. These examples go against the grain in contemporary critical analysis, as women are not usually associated with war narratives. In the Mexican context there is such a volume of films of the Revolution as well as variation in generic and aesthetic approaches that it allows for useful comparisons across time periods and styles. Critical attention to women in film should look for women in the expected and unexpected places because many of the models for examining women's place in cinema are modelled on Hollywood cinema. Women's cinema is still a contentious label because there is insufficient research into the many ways they have participated in the industry and those who do get attention conform to pre-existing patterns. It is productive to follow the career trajectories of global women filmmakers and to look at those who fit easily within existing frameworks. It is also important to consider those other anomalous figures in order to find alternative movements and yet, to avoid the temptation to create neat categorisations that allow for simple brushstrokes. In the case of Mexican cinema, taking the Revolution as the focal point is a way into considering a particularly productive nation-building project from the perspective of women creatives and the multiple approaches they have taken to tackle it in film.

Note

1 I have previously written on *Cananea* (Thornton 2013) and *General's Daughter* (Thornton 2017).

References

Arredondo, I. (2011) "Watching Rape in Mexican Cinema", in Barrios, N. B. (ed.) *Latin American Cinemas: Local Views and Transnational Connections*, Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 175–198.

Azuela, M. (1996) *Los de abajo*, Mexico City: Fondo de Cultural Económica.

Burton, Julianne (1986) *Cinema and Social Change in Latin America: Conversations with Filmmakers*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Downloaded By: 10.2.97.136 At: 05:57 22 Mar 2023; For: 9781315688251, chapter9, 10.4324/9781315688251.ch9

Castro, R. M. (2014) "Revolución y neocolonialismo en La tienda de raya de Mariana Chenillo", *Cinémas d'Amérique latine*, 22, http://cinelatino.revues.org/861: 129–139.

Chaudhuri S. (2006) *Feminist Film Theorists: Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, Barbara Creed*, London: Routledge.

Dávalos Orozco, F. (1999) "The Birth of the Film Industry and the Emergence of Sound", in Hershfield, J. and Maciel, D. R. (eds) *Mexico's Cinema: A Century of Film and Filmmakers,* Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 17–32.

Dever, S. (2003) *Celluloid Nationalism and Other Melodramas: From Post-Revolutionary Mexico to Fin de siglo Mexamérica,* New York: State University of New York Press.

Ellis, C. (2010) "Gael García Bernal and Diego Luna Stage Their Own Revolución", *The Huffington Post*, 17 November, www.huffingtonpost.com/cynthia-ellis/diego-luna-and-gael-garci_b_784008.html.

Gallegos, R. ([1947]2005) *Doña Bárbara*, Madrid: Catédra.

Hernández Rodríguez, R. (1999) "Melodrama and Social Comedy in the Cinema of the Golden Age", in Hershfield, J. and Maciel, D. R. (eds) *Mexico's Cinema: A Century of Film and Filmmakers*, Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 101–121.

Hershfield, J. (1996) *Mexican Cinema/Mexican Woman, 1940–1950,* Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press.

—— (2000) *The Invention of Dolores del Rio*, Minneapolis, MN and London, University of Minneapolis Press.

—— (2008) *Imagining la chica moderna: Women, Nation, and Visual Culture in Mexico, 1917–1936,* Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.

Hind, E. (2010) "Six Authors on the Conservative Side of the Boom Femenino, 1985–2003: Boullosa, Esquivel, Loaeza, Mastretta, Nissán, Sefchovich", in Finnegan, N. and Lavery, J. (eds) *El Boom Femenino Mexicano: Reading Contemporary Women's Writing*, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 48–71.

Hollinger, K. (2012) *Feminist Film Studies*, London: Routledge.

Humm, M. (1997) *Feminism and Film*, Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press.

Jayamanne, L. (ed.) (1995) *Kiss Me Deadly: Feminism and Cinema for the Moment*, Sydney: Power Publications.

McKee I., Castro Ricalde, R. and M. with Szurmuk, M. Álvarez, I, and Sužnjević, D. (2013) *Global Mexican Cinema: Its Golden Age "el cine mexicano se impone"*, London: BFI Palgrave.

Menton, S. (1954) "La negra Angustias, una Doña Bárbara mexicana", *Revista Iberoamericana* XIX (38): 299–308.

Meyer, J. (2008) *The Cristero Rebellion: The Mexican People Between Church and State 1926–1929*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mistron, D. (1984) "A Hybrid Subgenre: The Revolutionary Melodrama in the Mexican Cinema", *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 3: 47–56.

Mraz, J. (2009) *Looking for Mexico: Modern Visual Culture and National Identity*, Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.

Noble, A. (2005) *Mexican National Cinema,* London and New York: Routledge.

Pick, Z. M. (2010) *Constructing the Image of the Mexican Revolution: Cinema and the Archive*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Pietropaolo, L. and Testaferri, A. (eds) (1995) *Feminisms in the Cinema*, Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press.

Ramírez-Pimienta, J. C. (2010) "Chicago lindo y querido si muero lejos de ti: el pasito duranguense, la onda grupera y las nuevas geografías de la identidad popular mexicana", *Mexican Studies/Estudios mexicanos* 26 (1): 31–45.

Rashkin, E. J. (2001) *Women Filmmakers in Mexico: The Country of Which We Dream,* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Rich, B. R. (1995) "An/Other View of New Latin American Cinema", in Pietropaolo, L. and Testaferri, A. (eds) *Feminisms in the Cinema*, Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 168–192.

—— (1998) *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement*, Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.

Ruétalo, V. and Tierney, D. (eds) (2009) *Latsploitation, Exploitation Cinemas and Latin America*, London: Routledge.

Sánchez Prado, I. (2014) *Screening Neoliberalism: Transforming Mexican Cinema, 1988–2012*, Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.

Downloaded By: 10.2.97.136 At: 05:57 22 Mar 2023; For: 9781315688251, chapter9, 10.4324/9781315688251.ch9

Shaw, D. (2013) *The Three Amigos: The Transnational Filmmaking of Guillermo del Toro, Alejandro González Iñarritu and Alfonson Cuarón,* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Soto, S. A. (1979) *The Mexican Woman: A Study of Her Participation in the Revolution, 1910–1940*, Palo Alto, CA: R & E. Publications.

Taibo, P. I. (2004) *María Félix: 47 pasos por el cine*, Mexico: Ediciones B.

Thornton, N. (2013) *Revolution and Rebellion in Mexican Cinema*, New York: Bloomsbury.

—— (2016) "Writing Cinema: The Communicating Vessels of Literature and Film", in Nogar, A., Ruisánchez Serra, J. R. and Sánchez Prado, I. (eds) *A History of Mexican Literature*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 411–425.

—— (2017) "Re-Framing Mexican Women's Filmmaking: The Case of Marcela Fernandez Violante", in Martin, D. and Shaw, D. (eds) *Latin American Filmmakers: Production, Politics, Poetics*, London: I.B. Tauris, 197–216.

Tierney, D. (2007) *Emilio Fernández: Pictures in the Margins*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Torres San Martín, P. (ed.) (2004) *Mujeres y cine en América Latina*, Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara.

Vargas Amésquita, A. (2010) "Si Adelita se fuera con otro", in Garza Iturbide, R. and Lara Chávez, H. (eds) *Cine y Revolución: La Revolución Mexicana vista a través del cine*, Mexico City: Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía/Cineteca nacional, 149–163.

Vazquez Mantecón, Á. (2010) "La presencia de la Revolución mexicana en el cine: apuntes hacia un análisis historiográfico", in Garza Iturbide, R. and Lara Chávez, H. (eds) *Cine y Revolución: La Revolución Mexicana vista a través del cine*, Mexico City: Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía/Cineteca nacional, 13–27.