Silencing and Celebrating Spain's Roaring Twenties: Negotiations of Identity in the Films *La Venenosa* (1928) and *La sin ventura* (1923)

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The few remains of 1920s Spanish cinema harbor a plethora of illicit themes: drugs, prostitution, white slavery, decadent cosmopolitan casinos, venereal disease, adultery, and miscegenation. *Frivolinas* (Arturo Caballo, 1926) for instance, is a musical comedy of diverse skits ranging from comedy routines, strip teases, orientalist morphine and opium homages to Ziegfeld-type chorus lines and parodies of prostitution. The extant fragments of this film confirm that Spanish silent cinema spectacularized female sexuality in the same lurid recounting of modernity's social ills that had been scandalizing and thrilling other European and American audiences. Practices innately linked to cinema such as star publicity, pulp fiction celebrating/condemning stardom, and consumerism, further promoted cinema's complicity in the construction of Spanish female subjectivity as a complex and uncomfortable coupling of acceptable and threatening models of womanhood. Which model prevailed at any given moment, and whether favoring one over the other was a conscious strategy of either contestation or consent to the norm, was a matter of radical indeterminacy.

Representations of women in *Frivolinas* or in narrative films such as *La venenosa* (1928 Roger de Lion) and *La sin ventura* (1923 E.B. Donatien and Benito Perojo) failed to mold to the Catholic mentality that condemned the influx of malicious and corrupting displays of capitalism, fashion, frivolous consumerism, and worst of all, those degenerate individuals, the movie stars, *cupletistas* and show girls living in sin.[1] Educational and religious institutions pressured women to imitate the *angel del hogar*, or the angel of the home, a late 19th-century construct of femininity. This paragon was the perfect wife and mother, the defender of home, *patria*, spiritual family

values, religion, and patriarchal honor, someone who willfully gave herself up to unpaid household work in the home which was her natural place (Nash 28-30). In an attempt to counter this role model, prominent feminists in Spain promoted an image of women more in tune with the discourse of the New Woman, or the *Nueva Mujer Moderna*, an idea already common in other Western countries. This gender model challenged both women's restriction to the home and discriminatory practices toward them, thereby allowing women to stake a claim to public space and further the struggle for emancipation. It would nevertheless be simplistic to ascribe responsibility for this talk of sex and stardom to the image and discourse of the New Woman, which was emerging triumphantly with the onslaught of modernity. Mary Nash argues that the *Nueva Mujer Moderna* was ultimately a model of traditional gender identity due to its emphasis on childbearing and motherhood (32). It is likewise risky to collapse the ideology of stardom into the rhetorics and practices of prostitution or the sex philosophy of the anarchists, given their highly marginalized status, compared with the broad mainstream media distribution of cinematic female stardom. While much scholarly work has presented the New Woman and the *angel del hogar* as constructed in Spain, few if any analyses have accounted for the constellation of the erotic female sex symbol, star and/or vamp with the more consensual, "acceptable" gender models that circulated in cinematic discourse. I employ Benjamin's concept of constellation to emphasize that these combined identities "suggest historical meanings through the way in which they are linked to one another and to the context from which they derive" (McGee 25). In other words, these imagined conjunctions of different feminine identities transcended previous categories of subject formation.

Of these newly created identities was the 'not so bad Bad Woman' in early Spanish cinema. Films about the lives of female stars and entertainers combined the previous model of the Fallen Woman with the new female identities associated with consumerism, stardom, and related popular entertainment forms. In other words, a model emerged that was dangerous but invoked desire for something beyond what conventional society commanded. An examination of the star-text of Raquel Meller, consumerism, and the two silent films, *La venenosa* and *La sin ventura,* shows how the context of this imaginary transformation amplified the margins of subjectivity for women in Spain in the twenties. As we map these discourses that

described and prescribed different models of femininity, a more nuanced view surfaces, suggesting that through consent, women and "female" individuals negotiated the multiple practices and identities that silent cinema had to offer. If women were spectacularly bombarded with some attractive options for shaping their own identities, they were simultaneously and necessarily careful to show deference not only to a powerful status quo but also to enormous peer and family pressure.

Negotiating Identity: Consent and Contestation

The only too well-known images of the good wife-mother-abnegated saint-martyr, the girl-next-door, the nun and old maid, and alternatively the Fallen Woman, constituted a deeply ingrained "public transcript of performance" that women knew by heart. James C. Scott describes these roles as the acting "required of those subject to elaborate and systematic forms of social subordination" (2). "Performance" meant not only set speeches but a whole and variable range of practices which included dressing appropriately, denouncing "inappropriate" films at cinemas but going faithfully to see "good" films, consuming a film's by products, namely the extra-cinematic press and paraphernalia and even directing or acting—again, in the right films. Such public performances tell only part of the story about power relations. They are performed to appeal to the dominant party's interests and expectations in an act of deference and consent (2). In the Gramscian sense, however, rule is also by consent, by the acquiescence that hegemony must win in order to assure and maintain its legitimacy. And since the ruling class must win the consent of subordinate groups in order to sustain its hegemonic position, its order is not permanent: the dominated continually pose a threat to its hegemony by the sheer nature of their existence. At the same time, consent must also inform the actions of subordinated groups, for they have a practical interest in avoiding overt confrontation with institutions of authority. Consequently, a negotiated ideological settlement becomes attractive to both groups, and popular culture plays an important ideological function, both in endorsing and challenging ideological consensus. Film and its imaginary possibilities constituted for Spanish spectators in the twenties a domain of popular culture that could propel them into new configurations of knowledge, however temporary and brief.

Regarding the making and reception of cinema, film's ability to prove its usefulness to the state and its capacity to appease censors were instances of consent. Unresolvable contradictions or gaps in film narratives were most often symptoms of censorship, but filmmakers and filmgoers complied by maintaining an appearance of consent, a fact reflected in film's balancing of sex content with "correct" conclusions. It was in the industry's (stars and fans included) best interests to not discredit hegemony by rebelling against standards, so as to avoid having the film banned. Consent on a larger scale was won by cinema's contributions to the Spanish national economy, which lent credibility to cinema's claim that its existence complemented the common good of the nation. And yet necessary practices such as co-productions and star-making threatened to break down the very ideological security that had supposedly been assured by film's acquiescence to state intervention.

The internationalization of Spanish cinema opened a Pandora's box of Hollywood influences that undeniably sparked women's attention. For instance, movie sets were often an amalgamation of nationalities extending not only to the set workers, and the extras, but also to the stars, the directors and producers. Co-productions were the name of the game, given the scant material resources such as film stock, camera technology and technicians; *La Venenosa* and *La sin ventura* were no exception. Most of Benito Perojo's early films were made with French capital or in French studios, earning him the scorn of Spanish film critics eager to promote an autochthonous industry.[2] Thus, foreign influences, discourses, agents, stars, and directors were part and parcel of moviemaking. The mere contact of Spaniards with other European and Hollywood artists presupposed a creative and collaborative brainstorming of ideas that would echo throughout Spanish silent films, despite critics' claims that Spanish cinema did or should constitute an exclusively national cultural form. Spanish cinema was tied to Hollywood both by its fierce desire to defend its own territory against the onslaught of Hollywood imports, and by the inevitable borrowing and cultural transcription that characterized Spanish films. Although folkloric, Andalusian, and Gypsy topics were prevalent (*La gitana blanca* (Ricardo de Baños 1919/1923; *Carmen* Jacques Feyder 1925-6) even these plots carefully intercalated traditional manners and customs scenes with modernist, cosmpolitan, and other scandalous discourses. The world of the spectacle and the circles of cosmopolitan society were themes that, according to Gubern, most easily transcended the

national boundaries of this early cinema (67).

From the perspective of hegemony, and thus the Spanish government, the business of stardom, a pernicious element attacking the wholesomeness and innocence of all Spanish women, was anathema to the implicit patriarchal need to keep women under control. The star system was, however, a vital necessity to fledgling film production companies that relied on star appeal to attract spectators and to compete with other producers. Since it was tied to the economic success of the film industry, the star system also contributed to the national economy and by extension the patriarchal system of rule and social order. Despite a certain hegemonic discontent, therefore, it was neither possible nor desirable to destroy entirely the semi-autonomous discourses of the subordinate groups that made up Spain's small but growing star industry, even if they tended to promote alternative and progressive perspectives. Like the leniency toward prostitution under Primo de Rivera and its near-legal status under Franco, then, stardom enjoyed the status of a "necessary" industry that patriarchy both persecuted and protected.

Explaining how contradictions in films arose from technical manipulations and how, on the other hand, cinema audiences actually dealt with these aporias is difficult yet crucial. Scott's Gramscian-inflected assessment of the nature of discourse as it is contested in the public arena provides some insight into how Spanish spectators negotiated and played out potentially subversive identities, if only by imagining them in the space of the cinema theatre. Gramsci saw hegemony as working primarily at the level of thought, not action, which explains why the working class under capitalism, even though involved in struggles with revolutionary implications, is bound to a condition of "moral and political passivity" (Gramsci 333). The "dominated consciousness" of that class prevents it "from drawing the radical consequences inherent in much of its action" (Scott 90). Gramsci himself offers a way out of this bind:

> Critical understanding of self takes place therefore through a struggle of political 'hegemonies' and of opposing directions, first in the ethical field and then in that of politics proper, in order to arrive at the working out at a higher level of one's own conception of reality. Consciousness of being part of a particular hegemonic force (that is to say, political consciousness) is the first stage towards a further progressive self-consciousness in which theory and practice will finally be one. (333)

Gramsci's faith that subaltern groups will work out their own "conception of reality" at a "higher level," nevertheless acknowledges that one's position in the social field is determined in part by hegemony, and that these sites are unstable and characterized by overdetermined and shifting relations of power. Such an understanding presupposes a space for negotiated meaning in a text, even though that space is necessarily limited by the awareness of hegemony. Gramsci's belief—that subversion must first take part in consciousness before it can effectuate itself in action—translates into the many formal and practical ways in which popular film provided audiences with the means for enacting interior dramas of consent and contestation.

Raquel Meller and Popular Entertainment

The competing discourses of femininity that circulated in Spain in the 20s were enacted in both Meller's star text and in the complicated character roles that she played, roles that fused the femme fatale, the whore with a golden heart, and the girl-next-door.[3] Meller was born Francisca Marqués López in Tarragona, near Barcelona, to a lower-class family of dressmakers and tailors in 1889. Among those who frequented her family's shop was Marta Oliver, a performance artist of Barcelona's demi-monde, who convinced Meller that she could become rich by singing *cuplés*. Changing her name (supposedly inspired by a former Dutch lover named Pierre Moeller), Meller debuted at around sixteen years of age at La Gran Peña earning seven pesetas per night. As her fame grew, Meller transferred to the Salon Madrid, the headquarters of the *género ínfimo*, where she shocked audiences with her sexually suggestive songs and her scant clothing. Meller would later be known for her dramatis personae on stage and screen and her close relationship with figures such as Sarah Bernhardt. But her inchoate stage career was firmly rooted in the *género ínfimo*. These short, cheap, erotic variety shows were performed in cafés and concert halls catering to all-male audiences; in time they engendered the development of the *cuplé-varieté*.[4] When Meller debuted, the *género ínfimo* was in its death throws while the *cuplé* was in ascent. The *género ínfimo* provided fuel for the genre's characterization in the middle class mind as a hotbed of

prostitution and the world of varieties undoubtedly served in part as a pretext for upscale, call girl types of prostitution until the sexual revolution in the 1970s (Barreiro 27). Magazine advertisements for some *cupletistas* included among their descriptions of merit the qualifier, "viaje sin madre" (traveling without mother), effectively announcing hassle-free access to the performers when offstage (37). The pervasiveness of *sicalipsis*, or sexual naughtiness as it was popularly referred to by critics, enhanced business for female artists, businessman, and authors alike. Because the *cuplé*'s inherited many stars who had performed in earlier sexually provocative styles, *cupletistas* were branded, even if they moved on to the supposedly innocuous folklore genre. Despite her ascension to international star status and an elite sphere of cosmopolitan celebrity standing, the star text of Meller was inevitably tainted by a congenital relationship to these popular *varietés* acts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and their chorus lines of anxious hopefuls.

Clearly, the growing vogue for the *cuplé* in Spain developed alongside, within, and around the star system (Salaun 1990). As in the rise to stardom sequences in cinematic narratives, the locales where the *género ínfimo* was performed offered a means of escape from poverty and mediocrity. For *cupletistas*, the situation was, if not lucrative, certainly a way to rise above the dreary and predictable life that women were supposed to lead. *Cuplés* and bullfighting were the two fastest ways to change one's economic status, and even the performers of *zarzuelas* (short, popular operettas considered to be somewhat higher in the hierarchy of popular performance genres) sometimes crossed over into the *género ínfimo* where they were assured a better salary.[5] Writing about the history of early cinema spectacles in Asturias, a northwest autonomous region in Spain, Juan Carlos de la Madrid confirms that *sicalipsis* was the main ingredient in the *varieté* shows that were combined with cinema shorts (226).

The explosion of leisure culture and the many forms of mass culture entertainment aroused dismay in many petit-bourgeois intellectuals and critics who saw high culture struggling to compete with new low forms of entertainment such as the aforementioned *cuplé* and *género ínfimo*. The same critics were regular clients of these lower-caste theatres but mocked *cupletistas* for their ignorance or lack of talent, revealing a love-hate obsession that found its counterpart in the struggles of women to negotiate their own identifications

with and rejection of these female models of being. Popular novelists and playwrights participated enthusiastically in modernity's craze with the spectacle, so much so that many of these texts became film adaptations in the 1920s. The majority of folkloric musical comedies of the 1930s and 40s (and even the 50s) were adaptations of the less sexually and morally explicit plays by the prolific Quintero brothers, or by tamer writers who nevertheless foregrounded the Andalusian motifs of salacious female gypsies, flamencoized music, bullfighters, or similarly loose adaptations of *sainetes* and *zarzuelas* from the turn of the century.[6] Many of the films in the 20s, however, were specifically products of the popular erotic novel. El Caballero Audaz (The Audacious Gentleman), the pseudonym for José María Carretero, the foremost erotic and ludic popular writer during the first third of the century, was the author of both *La venenosa* (1927) and *La sin ventura* (*Vida de una pecadora errante*, 1921). Eager for literary and media publicity, Carretero was equally well known for his interviews of celebrities and politicians, and for his own fickle political affiliation. An incarnation of the consensual process of subject formation, Carretero vigorously defended licentious customs but was a severe critic of religious orthodoxy (Gubern 68). His two novels dealt with the decadent world of the spectacle and were often more lurid and scandalous than their filmic adaptations. In *La sin ventura*, a biography of the first Spanish *cupletista*, La Fornarina (Consuelo Bello Cano 1884-1915), the protagonist commits suicide at the end of the film by ripping off her surgical bandages after an operation to cure her "sickness," a euphemism for venereal disease. In the film, however, she is the victim of a botched operation, a more "correct" ending that circumvents both disease and the mortal sin of suicide. Yet even these "appropriate" plot insertions are rendered ambiguous, darkened by contextual influences both within and outside the film.

Clearly, film was a more dangerous medium than the novel, requiring more censorship because it actually showed the images that books only suggested to the private imaginations. Paula Marantz Cohen discusses how the psychological novel of the 19th century penetrated the surface of a character to reveal the internal life, whereas film had to dramatize inner states of mind (42). But since psychological processes are not so easily spatialized, silent film minimized what it could say about feeling and thought (past) and concentrated more on action (present) (42). Thus the cinematic guide

for identity, unlike the novel, emphasized less the idea of *being* than *becoming*, illustrating how forward-moving action was the crux of film's vitality and power (42).The notion of a modern self that was more plastic, more adaptable and capable of being transformed into models of glamour and authority, such as the movie star, easily merged with silent film's philosophy of becoming. As the market flooded with faces of stars—the section of *Cinegramas* dedicated to "Rostros"—notions of becoming inevitably and simultaneously intertwined with consumerism and shifting identities.

The Interplay of Consumerism and Stardom

The serial format of many of Meller's films, which were screened over a series of nights, reinforced this flexible notion of the individual as a process. But it also entailed the idea of consumption: to see the finished product of the character one had to keep paying. *Los arlequines de seda y oro* a.k.a. *La gitana blanca*, one of Meller's earlier films, and *La sin ventura* shared this episode format, *La sin ventura* being available through the *Novela Semanal Cinematográfica* that featured photos of the film. Indeed, the ideology of consumerism enhanced the cinematic techniques of suspense and those of character development, which now required an iconography of the self as a "mutable surface" (Marantz Cohen 14) or continuing development, to allow for more complex characters and therefore more complicated star texts.

Meller's climb to national stardom in the teens and international stardom in the 20s coincided with a period of social upheaval in Spain in which discourses of domesticity, religion and modernization converged upon the site of the female body.[7] The kind of stardom that Meller exuded was a paradoxical mix of consumption, success, sexuality, patriotism, and ordinariness. Marantz Cohen posits that cinema played to a new kind of public involved in a consensual process of creating the self by the exercising of consumer power (14-15). While capital remained in the hands of the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, the petit bourgeoisie and merchant classes, the "power" to envision other selves through advertising and new stores was reflected and magnified by the explosion of popular theatre entertainment described above. Consumerism thereby significantly fostered access to the public sphere at the same time that it promoted the spectacularization of the female body. Women were both looking and being looked at. As consumers they were participating in the

regulation of their bodies and identities, and as female entertainers they allowed the paying spectators to gaze upon their fetishized bodies.[8] Consumerist practices such as window-shopping and department store browsing offered a space, if only temporary and imaginary, for women to act out alternative identities that challenged more restrictive feminine roles.

In Barcelona during the teens, the brand name "Meller" proliferated on objects such as hats, perfumes, ties, fans, and cigarette paper (Amado 8).[9] Meller even claimed that Louise Brooks had copied her hairstyle, thus giving a name to the vamp cut. Knowledge of Meller as a champion of consumerism reinforced the buying habits of the spectator. Gómez Santos' claim that Meller was the first Spanish actress to appear on stage smoking a cigarette surely had an impact on both male and female audiences, perhaps foreshadowing the publicity myth that equates cigarette smoking with the acquisition or consumption of the sexualized female body (41). An aesthetic of wealth and cosmpolitanism, imaged by art deco styles and the foregrounding of elitist leisure practices, dominated Spanish product advertising in the twenties (Alonso and Conde). In a similar way, Meller's cosmpolitanism, displayed through her minglings with the international star crowd of the 1920s (Charlie Chaplin, Rudolph Valentino), royalty (Alfonso XIII and several famous aristocrats), and intellectuals (her husband Gómez Carillo and Manuel Machado) added sophistication to her star persona. Anecdotes about Meller's vast wealth proliferated and were mythified by interviews and articles in the popular cinema journals of the time. In 1926 Meller's contract with Empire in New York earned her $50,000 (Díaz 129). Inventories of her stock of luxury items was minutely documented in the gossip news: Rodin sculptures, drawings by Matisse, and a piano that supposedly belonged to Mozart (Gómez Santos 41). This lust for *things*, even though inaccessible to the many, diverted attention from the pervasive lack of material goods and the monotonous world of labor.

Meller was a model for consumers and a fashion leader; the spectacle of her jewels and gowns was fetishized in almost all of her films dealing with narratives of stardom and it amplified the awe and excitement that energized her performance sequences. In the credit sequence of *La Venenosa,* for instance, the film announces that Meller will be modeling dresses by the Parisian designer, Jeanne Lanvin. The camera interpellates spectators' craving for the wealth

represented by Liana's jewels through close-up shots of her bracelets and rings, punctuated by several point of view shots that capture the devouring looks of a lumpen bar crowd eyeing Liana's jewel bedecked body. This sequence foregrounds the protagonist as an object of consumption both on the part of the audience and the bar clientele but also as a luxury item to be coveted, just as advertisements in the 20s displayed goods that few could aspire to own. In *La sin ventura*, starring the well known Lucienne Legrand, the orphaned and impoverished protagonist Margarita peers longingly into the window of a shoe store containing the quintessential symbols of commodity fetishism.[10] When a white-bearded passer-by offers to buy her shoes, Margarita unhesitatingly accepts "the love that offers shoes and silk stockings." From point of view close-up shots of the shoes in the windows, to the medium shot of Margarita's transaction with the old man, the cinema spectator is finally transported to a high angle close-up of rhinestone-buckled pumps sparkling in the sunlight. The scene's closing shot of the universally desired fetish commodity slyly circumvents uncomfortable connotations of female corruption by degenerate older men. Indeed, throughout the film, Margarita benefits from this man's attention and money, indexing a consensual mode of relations. In a later scene, Margarita, having already triumphed as a star and now searching solitude and anonymity, is horrified at finding her photograph reproduced on postcards, proof that the consumption of stardom and mass-produced images of *cupletistas* and stars was widespread even in the remotest Andalusian village. Such images, circulated not only on postcards but also on the covers of magazines, calendars, match boxes, chromolithographs, and labels for anise, invaded daily life and consummated the marriage of the spectacle with commodity capitalism.

Meller's star text, however, implied that there were other sides to the cosmopolitan and glamorous Ziegfeld-like star. Her public would not forget her naughty side, as Meller notes bitterly in interviews later in her life. She was constantly reminded of her censored past which frustrated her personal desires to transcend the role of sex symbol. In interviews, Meller nonetheless reveled in her admissions that she shocked publics with her scandalously, revealing clothing: "era capaz de convertirme en un diablo" (I was capable of becoming a devil). Her striking features, carefully, even minutely detailed in press eulogies—rebellious black hair dramatically contrasting with white skin, large, lustrous black expressive eyes and bold features—were the classic ingredients of the twenties vamp. Her reputation—temperamental and capable of sadistic cruelty—was embellished by publicity rumors implicating her in the death of the dancer Mata Hari, a former lover of her husband and the subject of his biography. Parisian society apparently shunned Meller and Enrique Gomez Carrillo when it was said that Meller had collaborated with the police in locating the outlawed Mata Hari.

The other side of the media spectrum characterized Meller as a good ol' gal, loyal to her country and humanely compassionate, qualities that coalesced nicely with models of the honorable and upright Spanish woman. Publicity strategies that closed the distance between fans and their stars were evident in Meller's doctored interviews. She characterized herself as a simple, loving girlfriend: "lo que más quiero en este mundo es a España y a mis pobres. A mis animalitos también los quiero. Y a mis amigos de verdad" (What I most love in this world is Spain and its poor ones. I also love my little pets. And my true friends.) (Gomez Santos 58). Meller speaks in simple language and by naming her "animalitos," includes the domestic space, thereby appealing to her fans as a girlfriend, neighbor, or someone with whom the average housewife could relate. Along the same lines, Meller cast herself as the most Spanish of all Spanish women: "Más española que nadie! Porque hasta en el cariño a la Patria soy celosa y egoísta y nadie puede quererla más que yo" (I'm more Spanish than anyone! Because even in my affection for my country I am jealous and selfish and no one can love it as much as me) (55 Gómez Santos). Actions such as wrapping herself in the Spanish flag on stage or convincing her friends to switch sides during the war suggest a fanaticism incompatible with the life of an artist, especially in light of the numbers of performers and artists who defected, were exiled from Spain, or worse, became casualties of the Nationalist purgings. Whether Meller's hystrionic patriotism was a symptom of fear or motivated by candid views is again, a matter of radical indeterminacy. Yet the close-ups in her films seemed to reveal an inner, private side of Meller's star character that transcended her screen performance because it embodied different social and personality types. Marantz Cohen notes that "the development of personal information about stars was a gradual movement to narrative form" and that, conversely, as film narratives became more complex with the rise of the feature-length film, con-

structed star personas were also able to portray more complex private life narratives (141). Star texts and narrative form were thus connected by complex analogies between the screen and the private life.

Virtually all of Meller's identities were media constructions designed to sell her image to the broadest possible audience. Nevertheless, these constructed extra-cinematic identities relied on the actual stage and cinematic performances for their authority. As Marantz Cohen indicates, "the star system as it evolved during the silent era was the outgrowth of the films whose moving images flooded the consciousness of their audiences" (14). The extra-filmic star personality was inseparable from the films, although subordinate to the intra-filmic star ontology. And both constructions were powerfully appealing because they were sexually ambiguous—both racy and acceptable to the public. Stars embodied the desires and fears of their audiences: as consensual creations between the audience and the film industry, they mirrored both the ideal and the monstrous spectator. Meller's image resonated in the public imagination not because she was a foreign model imposed on a rural Spanish audience, but because she constituted an icon of contradictions that made sense to a Spanish spectator.

Both *La venenosa* and *La sin ventura* are useful films for examining the multi-layered meanings embedded in the female star character. Both female characters embody three different personas, as reflected in their names: Margarita/La Ambarina/La sin ventura; Liana/Liana the star/La Venenosa. The films' titles refer to the Fallen Woman (The venomous woman, The unlucky woman) while the name eventually used throughout each film is the star name, Liana and Ambarina. The displacement in these names from Fallen Woman to Bad Woman—the star is bad but not so bad, especially since everyone secretly desires to be her—thus manifests a transgressive impulse despite the collapsing of religious discourses and utopian freedom in the films' conclusions.

La venenosa

La venenosa presents us with Liana, a famous trapeze artist and star of the prestigious Paris circus, who has climbed the entertainment ladder of success yet remains unhappy in her stardom, due to a curse that gave her the power of fatal seduction over all men. The circus performers who fall in love with her inevitably encounter

death, giving Liana the reputation of a femme fatale and black widow. But through a double plot line Liana finds true love with Luis Sevilla, a former famous criminal of the Apache crime group who, like Liana, desires to escape infamy just as Liana longs to flee the media saturated celebrity world. In an open-ended gesture the film predicts the couple's move to America, leaving the issue of marriage and stardom unresolved.

The film's narrative begins with an inter-title explaining the curse of "La Venenosa," which condemns Liana as a Fallen Woman, binding and endangering men, as her name suggests. Once bitten by the sacred serpent of her snake charming mother, she is transformed into the fatal seductress of all men who "love".her. It is as if her success and exceptionality, the result of discarding her "natural" and domestic role as a female, carry the black widow effect, literally rendering her a femme fatale. This ambivalent commentary on stardom censors women who take this inherently dangerous route—Liana is a victim of her success, enslaved by rules of stardom that enforce the same kind of confinement as the curse of the "Venenosa" that marks her identity. The connotations of impure blood (impureza de sangre) are unavoidable, twisting the stereotype of the Fallen Woman into that of a racialized social element requiring expulsion.[11] On the other hand, the legend affirms the female figure's power over men. In her role as a trapeze artist—practically the whole first third of the film concentrates on her circus career—she is both untouchable and certain to enflame male desire. Alone among the electric lights at the top of the black circus tent with her dazzling costume and pale white skin, she is the embodiment of the celestial star. As both a controller of her spectators' gazes and the subjective focus of their adoring, incredulous up-tilted faces, Liana/Meller complicates any facile notion of the unidirectional gaze. Implicit within this complexity is a displacement of Liana as Fallen Woman to Liana as Bad Woman, a feminine model still dangerous but captivating, awe-inspiring, titillating—heroic, perhaps, for some.

Because the film medium struggles to simulate live entertainment, in addition to indexing the star's relationship with a cinema audience already familiar with the extra-cinematic persona, the symbolic and cultural coding of Meller's image must be negotiated both with the character she is playing as well as with the spectator's previous knowledge of her star iconography and her sexy performances as a *cupletista*. In this film, it is not Meller's singing that becomes the

vehicle of her character's success but the spectacle of her body, and the low angle shots of her trapeze tricks, edited so as to conceal Meller's stunt double. The film enacts live performance by intercutting between the audience of the heavily attended Paris circus, and the performance of Liana, using long, medium and close-up shots in both cases. This sequence of multiple point of view shots reinforces the extra-diegetic spectator's desire for Liana-the-acrobat but more importantly, it foreshadows the camera work of the later Andalusian musical comedy films that incorporate similar performance modes. These quasi-erotic entertainment sequences evoke the female entertainers of the early theatre halls and cabarets, whose performances were really just an excuse to display skin. These performances—as they are registered by the condoned narrative—present what is, in effect, a peep show inserted into a "decent" narrative, thereby providing women and audiences with much more than just a morally sanctioned view of womanhood.

The film *La Venenosa* positions Meller as the cosmopolitan and glamorous star while simultaneously foregrounding her character's noble and saintly qualities, and in this way sutures identification with women who publicly performed the role of the saint and devout citizen while acting out star fantasies in a hidden transcript (the privacy of their minds, in their bedrooms, etc.). The filmic narrative is careful, for instance, to mention that Liana is a virgin. Men fall in love with her, but they never get beyond the first kiss before they die from the supposed venom. Nevertheless, the film acquits Liana of the blame for these corpses by having them succumb to occupational hazards—the clown falls off the trapeze and the lion tamer faces a predictable ending. Indeed, Liana displays a saintly compassion and caring for the wounded criminal, Luis Sevilla, who has hijacked her car, accidentally bringing them together. And by generously donating her blood and putting her own life in danger, she breaks the stranglehold of the curse. Her sacrifice could be read as her consent to the authority of medical discourse, the male voice of power that had supplanted that of the clergy after the turn of the century. Fainting and anemic, she returns to the circus that night, but is unable to perform her act, and is thus forced to descend the ladder amidst jeers and taunts from the audience. Liana, like many women of the time, yields herself to pressure to perform the saintly female role of motherly sacrifice; "challenging it meant contesting not only the scientific basis for modernity but also traditional religious

canons" (Nash 35).

Tired of being under constant scrutiny, Liana retires from show business to a sumptuous palace in Nice—again, a performative gesture that outwardly rejects stardom as unhealthy while conjuring fabulous sets of Liana/Meller basking in luxury, subtly evoking the lounging flapper girls in product advertisements. Karidjean, the wealthy Indian prince and former circus fan, asks for her hand but dies in a bizarre plot twist before the wedding is consummated. The threat of miscegenation is thereby introduced but conveniently resolved, dispersing the shadow of impure blood. Liana then marries Luis Sevilla, who like her, desires a life of anonymity, away from the public eye. Both Luis and Liana gained their social status through money rather than blood and share the desire to move beyond the confines of a society that refuses to let them change. Liana wishes to be free from the curse of "La Venenosa" while Luis hopes that going to America will allow him to begin a new life as a gentleman rather than a criminal. As the couple embraces, the audience is reassured that legends die since both characters will overcome what fate had carved out for them, including superstition, myths, and the prejudice of small communities. Such an ending provides an ample compromise: Liana turns her back on stardom and the couple escapes from an oppressive society, while simultaneously, Liana-the-star lives on in the figure of Raquel Meller.

La sin ventura

The film *La sin ventura* was shot five years before *La Venenosa* but contains more explosive material. While it critiques stardom by associating it with prostitution and sex slavery, it also allows women to identify with a titillating story of sexual scandal and orphaned girls living without the protection of a father. Reviews of the film were highly favorable, proclaiming it the best Spanish film to date (Gubern 74), but its release also provoked highly polemical debates given the sexually daring content. On the 12th of December of 1923, *Mundo Gráfico* number 623 noted that each night (the film was shown in serial form) the public anxiously awaited the projection. Such curiosity and expectation was surely not due to any moral proselytizing that the film had to offer.

On the level of diegesis, *La sin ventura* tells the story of Margarita Reyes, a 14 year-old Spanish girl from the *barrios bajos*, forced to serve her physically abusive mother and her good-for-nothing broth-

er. When the latter's hoodlum friend comes to the house with a book containing "detalles sicalípticos del amor y el veneno de la tentación" (sycalyptic details of love and the venom of temptation) the seed of vice is sown and Margarita falls prey to her precocious nature—the sin of which all women are supposedly capable. The book of knowledge also incites Margarita's desire for freedom, portrayed through frontal medium shots of Margarita longingly looking through a window in which hangs a caged bird. When the hoodlum character rapes Margarita, leaving her sprawled on the kitchen floor, the mother kicks her out of the house. Thus begins her training on the street as a picaresque petty thief and streetwalker. The henceforth recurring paradigm of sex for money subversively conflates patriarchy with pimping, and the lack of positive male images in the film does nothing to reverse that impression. In a gentler form, such plot elements will dominate musical comedy films of the 1930s and 40s. In a similar development, white slavery stories in U.S. films after 1910 had exploited audience's fears of a very real phenomenon, but they also drew massive crowds eager and horrified to view their deep-rooted anxieties on screen. Shelley Stamp writes: "even as white slave warnings expressed communities' collective fears about their daughters and sisters, the stories imagined independence and prohibited sexual encounters, at the same time rendering their participation involuntary" (51). The narrative of *La sin ventura* is permeated with dangerous influences that, as in *La Venenosa*, frame themselves within public transcripts that acquiesce to moral societal structures.

Through her sugar-daddy Ricardo España, Margarita meets the man who will be her downfall, Julio Monreal, an elegant conman/business empresario/pimp who proposes to transform her into a desirable object for consumption: "la mujer más deliciosa de la tierra" (the most delicious woman on earth). Through dance classes, social etiquette training, new clothes, and exposure to high society, Margarita becomes a fabulous star. Changing her name to La Ambarina, which recalls her exotic amber-colored hair and skin, and resonates with the name La Fornarina, on whom the story was based, Margarita begins her career as a dancer and singer. Following her through the sumptuous, expensive sets, the enthralled spectator comes to know the wealth and decadence of the stardom into which Margarita/La Ambarina is reborn. Demonstrating her jump in economic status, the film fetishizes even her everyday rituals as she

dines at the fanciest casino/restaurant in the city. With its choreography of frolicking, naked, diving nymphs, and its drugs, and hedonism, this sequence metonymically conveys the iconography of the jazz age in Spain: "la algarabia del jazz-band, el champán y la locura que inundaban las salas de la Alhambra Palace, el cabaret de moda" (the lively clamour of the jazz band, the champagne and the craziness that inundated the salons of the fashionable cabaret, the Alhambra Palace).[12] This casino scene was celebrated in the reviews of the time not only for the money that was spent filming it but for its visual extravagance and lush mise-en-scène.[13] For one of the ways that film sold itself was to show spectators fabulous worlds otherwise inaccessible to them such as dinners in expensive casinos and costly evening spectacles.

But despite her wealth, Ambarina is severely unhappy because Julio the upper-class pimp controls her life, exploiting her labor on the stage and prostituting her to his wealthy friends to fund his gambling addiction at the race track. The culmination of her success is actually the point at which the film begins, while her previous life of subsistence survival is a flashback to "how it all started." But the film does not treat her previous life as more desirable than her present one, rather it negotiates a form of stardom with a model of conventional womanhood. Mirroring Liana's desire to escape the lime light, Ambarina exclaims: "Quisiera ir donde nadie me conociera, donde pudiera ser una de tantas mujeres que viven un poco para su alma" (I wish to go where no one knows me, where I could be one among so many other women who live a bit for their soul).

Consequently, Ambarina rebels against Julio, and with the help of her former "protector" she flees to a remote Andalusian village, a dwelling place for mendicants and lepers. Framed within a religious discourse—the Augustinian commitment to an ascetic life—the action here is motivated by her former protector, who instructs her to isolate herself, renounce her jewels, furs and carnal love for men, and assume a new identity. In a sort of temptation in the desert, a young doctor, an appropriate mate from the wealthy land-owning aristocracy, falls madly in love with Ambarina. But she sticks to her promise shuning his attentions; she also fears that he will uncover her sordid past, for as mentioned earlier, postcards and posters bearing her image continue to circulate, making it impossible for her to escape completely her former life. But Ambarina buys all of the postcards in the town and burns the remaining traces of her shame,

symbolically purifying herself in the process. In a scene of her leaving the church, point-of-view shots from the perspective of a group of beggars who have gathered frame her walking out in a long black veil. "Miraculously" the camera dissolves this image of Ambarina while fading into a new image of her in a long *white* veil, a virgin-bride apparition that prompts the rag-tag crowd to drop to their knees. The metamorphosis from black to white, from whore to virgin is blatant and its consequence is the creation of a miracle, a religious star who is the final negotiation of stardom and moral codes. Shortly after this point, the film stock has deteriorated and we must rely on the synopsis provided by the novel. According to this text, Julio secuesters Ambarina in the city to revive his failing starlet business which collapsed after she deserted him. Forced to continue her "mala vida," Ambarina becomes seriously ill and must undergo an operation, the surgeon being none other than the young doctor who nobly pined for her back in the village. But Ambarina dies in the hospital from the surgery and the young doctor goes mad. In the meantime, the town celebrates Ambarina as a saint and her strange "disappearance" is pronounced a miracle.

In both films, a powerfully optimistic ending does not entirely negate the earlier contestatory material because, as everyone knew, the ending was merely a convention. The channeling of contradictions through a morally sanctioned image of beatitude—a public transcript (performance) with which women were intimately familiar—was a consensual strategy necessary in order to retain the previous "negative" images. But despite the conventional ending, the open-ended character of both death and escape to "America" leaves more room for affirmation of subject positions. In *La venenosa*, Liana and Luis transcend their pasts and castes; America is the quintessential icon of new beginnings. In *La sin ventura*, Ambarina achieves her long wished-for freedom—"Necesito respirar, ser libre, y vivir mi vida alejada de los hombres y de la faena" ("I need to breathe, be free, and live my life far way from men and toil [i.e. prostitution)—if only briefly. In both films stardom does not die but lives on forever through the will of the public who will always create another goddess. Such an interpellation of the active role of the spectator in creating the meaning is inscribed into the palimpsest of constantly shifting identities present throughout the film. The complicated mix of types of the Fallen, Bad, Vamp, Good, and Saintly Woman provided audiences with a variety positions from which to

imagine and embellish the available models for womanhood and thus negotiate not just acceptable but desirable identities.

Toward the end of her life, Raquel Meller retired to Barcelona, shunning all publicity and interviews. Alone at the top of an eight-story building with no elevator, accompanied only by a horde of cats and dogs, whom she considered her children, and the relics of her stardom (medals of honor, objects, pictures), Meller appeared to be seeking refuge from stardom. Like La Bella Otero and countless others, Meller had either squandered her vast fortune or, as she told it, given it to the poor and needy. She herself had become a beata, wearing a rosary everywhere and rising daily at dawn to attend mass. Was this an act of contrition or an escape? And from what was she escaping? In Meller's last interview she condemns the journalists who betrayed her and only agrees to be interviewed if she is allowed to tell her own story. Perhaps Meller simply desired to reclaim her life and to control her own image. When asked about her reclusive attitude she defiantly retorts, "Por qué se empeñan la gente en retirarme si no me he retirado?" ("Why do people insist on retiring me if I haven't retired?") It seems that for Meller, identity was like hegemony, an on-going process of becoming, consent, and negotiation.

•NOTES

[1] The *cuplé*, a bastardization of the French couplet, was a popular narrative song that most often recounted stories of prostitutes, lost love, sexual escapades, or the trials of a poverty-stricken life. Their tone was therefore both provocative and oppositional regarding the dominant culture. The cupletista was the female or male transvestite singer of these songs.

[2] Perojo was officially the producer of *La sin ventura* but many accounts attest to his extensive role as artistic director. His vague role has resulted in discrepancies among different filmographies.

[3] By "femme fatale" I mean an independent female protagonist capable of undermining male identity by manipulation and seductive prowess, both qualities which are antagonistic to male patriarchal values. The femme fatale icon was not just another foreign import. The star La Chelito (Consuelo Portella), for instance, was known as "una devoradora de hombres" (Díaz 82). See also Carmen Posadas, *La Bella Otero*. Madrid: Planeta, 2001.

[4] The origin of the *género ínfimo* is generally accepted to be the musical play *El*

género ínfimo by Alvarez and Quintero in 1901 (Madrid 225). However the work that actually became the standard symbol of the genre was *La corte del faraón*, composed in 1910 by Vicent Lleó, and brought to the screen in 1985 by José Luis García Sánchez. The term *ínfimo*, as defined by the Real Academia Española, has two different denotations. One refers to its quantitative aspects (inferior in size and quantity) while the other takes into account qualitative traits (inferior in moral capacity). Serge Salaün categorizes the genres and periods as follows: *género chico*1880-1910, *género ínfimo* 1895-1910, *cuplé-varieté* 1900-1935, *revista de visualidad* 1920-1936 (56).

5 Because performance artists, bullfighters, and writers published their earnings in the press during the teens and the twenties, their success can be accurately measured.

6 I use the term "gypsy" to refer to representations of real, actual and historical *Calés*, the Spanish branch of the Rrom race.

7 Meller's other films include: *Violetas imperiales* (Henry Roussell 1923), *La terre promise* (H. Roussell 1924), *Ronde de nuite* (Marcel Silver 1925), *Nocturno* (Marcel Silver 1926), *Carmen* (Jacques Feyder 1925-26), *Arlequines de seda y oro* (Ricardo de Banos 1919), *Les opprimés* (Henry Roussell 1922). Chaplin wanted her to star in *City Lights* but she fell ill. On another occasion she had a previous engagement, and had already signed a contract, when Chaplin wanted her to star as Josefina in a film on Napoleon I. In the mid-20s William Fox produced musical shorts of her most famous songs such as "El relicario," "El noi de la mare," and "La mujer del torero" using the Western Electric Movietone sound-on-film sound system.

8 Because of the limited scope of this study, I focus solely on female representation, despite the interesting issues that arise with the question of male images, such as Rudolph Valentino, and their consumption by women and men in the early part of the twentieth century in Spain.

9 In the town Villefranche on the French Riviera, the Avenue Raquel Meller attests to Meller's international name.

10 The French actress Lucienne Legrand is remarkably still active, appearing most recently in a minor role in *L'Extraterrestre* (Didier Bourdon 2000). Her films from the 1920s include: *Bohnheur conjugal* (Robert Saidreau, 1922), *Le Chateau de la Morte Lente* (Donatien 1925), *Au revoir et merci* (Pierre Colombier and Donatien 1926), *Le martyre de Sainte-Maxeuse* (Donatien 1927), *Miss Edith* (Donatien 1928), and *L'arpète* (Donatien 1929).

11 For reasons of space I do not dedicate an extended discussion of race in this analysis. Nonethless, the need for an in-depth study of racial ideology and representations in Spanish silent film is glaringly urgent.

12 "La postguerra [WWI] nos trajo el jazz, las meretrices con cocaína, la cocaína sin meretrices, unas cuantas putas francesas [...]" (44). For this see Francisco Umbral in *Memorias de un hijo del siglo*. Madrid: Ediciones El País: 1987.

13 Gubern documents and quotes several French and Spanish film magazines that featured stories on *La sin ventura* between 1923 and 1924: *La Cinématographie Française*, *Hebdo-Film*, *Cinémagazine*, and *Ciné-Journal*.

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