The Domestication of the Ensign Nun: 
La monja alférez (1944) and Mexican Identity

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Abstract: This essay explores how and why, during the Golden Age of Mexican cinema, a studio nationalizes and renews a potentially problematic Spanish colonial figure, transforming her into a symbol of national identity. La monja alférez (1944) stars María Félix and is directed by Emilio Gómez Muriel, both of whom place the film at the heart of Mexican cinema’s época de oro. The film rewrites Vida i sucesos de la monja alférez (1625), the alleged autobiography of Catalina de Erauso, a Spanish woman who achieved military renown in América dressed as a man and eventually retired to New Spain. In a move that actively brings the colonial past to bear on the Mexican present, Gómez Muriel’s film recasts the historical character not as Basque, but as Mexican. This paper examines the process through which La monja alférez reimagines Erauso as a Mexican icon, and considers the intersecting commercial and governmental influences that gave rise to this adaptation.

Key Words: Mexican national identity, colonial literature, Mexican film, adaptation, Erauso (Catalina de), Félix (María), Gómez Muriel (Emilio)

In 1944 Mexican director Emilio Gómez Muriel brings the Mexican movie star María Félix to the screen as the protagonist of La monja alférez. The film is a reworking of the alleged autobiography of seventeenth-century Spaniard Catalina de Erauso (1592-1650), entitled Vida i sucesos de la monja alférez (1625), although the writers of the screenplay, Marco Aurelio Galindo, Max Aub, and Eduardo Ugarte may have also found inspiration, among several other possible sources, in a play that shares the film’s title written in 1626 by the Spaniard Juan Pérez de Montalbán. Born in the Basque Country, Erauso’s passed as a man for many years, attained the rank of lieutenant while fighting in Chile and Peru, and eventually retired in New Spain. In a move that actively brings the colonial past to bear on the Mexican present, Gómez Muriel’s film recasts the historical character not as Basque, but as Mexican. Erauso’s revised identity is highlighted during one of the first scenes in La monja alférez: the protagonist boldly declares—leaving no room for misinterpretation—that she was born in the city of Valladolid in New Spain. By transforming Erauso into a Creole, the film inevitably enters the contentious realm of Mexican national identity.

Erauso’s suggestive Vida, told with an ironic narrative style that reveals in each opportunity to shock readers with accounts of homoerotic seduction and “macho” feats of violence, has led to a number of subsequent treatments and has captivated audiences of many nations (see Velasco ix). The following passage openly alludes to Erauso’s desire for women: “[S]alía de noche e iva a casa de aquella señora, i ella me acariciava mucho, i con de temor de la Justicia me pedía que no bolviese a la Yglesia de noche, i me quedase allá, i una noche me encerró i se declaró en que a pesar del diacho havía de dormir con ella […]” (47). Stephanie Merrim writes that “Erauso […] makes a thinly veiled reference to her lesbianism” (9), and quotes the following lines from the Vida, in which Erauso refers to a “Negra fea como unos diablos, muy contraria a mi gusto que fue siempre de buenas caras” (70). Contrary to her characterization in the Vida, La monja alférez resurrects a clearly heterosexual Catalina de Erauso and presents her to the viewer as a morally acceptable representative of a foundational era of Mexico’s past. If Erauso is “domesticated,” so to speak, by her Mexicanization, the suppression of her sexual transgressiveness “domesticates” the figure in another sense. This essay explores some of the economic and political forces that led to such a domestication of Erauso, and how they serve to construct a national identity.

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political pressures that affected the film’s characterization of Erauso, as well as several of the strategies employed in La monja alferez—a film whose director and protagonist place it at the center of Mexican cinema’s época de oro—that enable the film to reconfigure the seventeenth-century Vida and advance Erauso as an icon of Mexican identity.

As a commercial project, it stands to reason that La monja alferez primarily sought revenue and not the manipulation of how Mexicans imagined the nation, which has arguably been the central concern of most (independent) Mexican films about the colonial period. CLASA Films,\(^5\) the studio that produced the film, seized upon the shocking appeal of Catalina de Erauso and, in addition to making her Mexican, associated her with the immensely popular Mexican actress María Félix in order for the film to excel at the box office.\(^6\) However, the tactics that the studio employed in order to stimulate ticket sales—how it flirted with the attraction of a cross-dressing lesbian at the same time that it Mexicanized the colonial figure—created a potential conflict. By thrusting the film into the arena of Mexican identity, CLASA Films could not avoid taking into account the reigning, religiously conservative government when considering how to rework Erauso’s tale.\(^7\)

The ideology of Manuel Ávila Camacho’s government might have indirectly influenced Gómez Muriel’s actualization of the colonial subject matter and, consequently, his commentary on the nation. Emilio García Riera points to the profound effect of Ávila Camacho’s famous declaration, “Soy creyente,” which was followed by the production of a number of explicitly religious films (Breve historia [131]; see also Mora [52] and Monsiváis [448–49]). The Mexican cinema industry complied generally as well: Alex Saragoza observes that during the period in which La monja alferez was filmed, “the idealization of family and of traditional morality punctuated Golden Age cinema” (27), thus advancing a particularly conservative conception of Mexican identity.\(^6\) Carl Mora adds that “melodrama based on attachment to traditional values—‘God, Nation, and Home’—was [...] an important component of the Mexican cinema as exemplified by Cuando los hijos se van [1941]” (57). I would argue that rather than acting as the explicit voice of the government, La monja alferez illustrates the dynamic described by Seth Fein in which films legitimize governments but do not necessarily act as instruments of the state (124).

Nonetheless, although the Mexican government’s influence on the cinema industry was less than overt, the state still undeniably, if subtly, affected La monja alferez’s presentation of history. In addition to Camacho’s statement of religiousness, the state managed to exert pressure through the infrastructure of the cinema industry. A preliminary look at CLASA Films begins to uncover the government’s reach. CLASA was one of the largest and most important studios in Mexico at the time (note in Figure 1—which may be viewed at: <http://flm.smu.edu/~rgordon/ensignmn/index.html>—the skyscraper-like grandness suggested by the company’s icon during the opening credits of the film). Part of CLASA’s growth was due to receiving more wartime funding from the United States government than any other Mexican studio (Fein 126–27). When Gómez Muriel made his film, the company had already absorbed several of its competitors, among them a company called Grovas, S.A., which had been infused with capital in 1942 by the Banco Cinematográfico (see Mora 59). The Banco would not officially become part of the government until 1947, but Emilio García Riera writes that it carried with it “el respaldo moral del presidente [Ávila Camacho]” (Breve historia 123–24), and funded nationalist cinema (Mora 62). Carl Mora explains one of the Banco’s strategies for creating nationalist cinema during World War II: “The chaos of war did nothing to disrupt its effect on such matters as copyright conventions, and Mexican producers took advantage of the situation to adapt for the screen the works of more than twenty foreign authors [...]. [T]he inevitable reaction was a nationalist cinema which the Banco Cinematográfico encouraged by granting more generous credits to those producers making such films” (60–62). La monja alferez, which adapts a foreign work and offers a Mexican protagonist, fits the described production profile. Indeed, CLASA’s connection to the Banco additionally suggests the likelihood that La monja alferez would embody a nationalist message, or one that coincides ideologically with the government. Moreover, by suppressing Erauso’s sexuality, the makers of the film managed to offer a representative of Mexican identity that did not conflict with
Ávila Camacho’s declaration of religiousness.

A brief consideration of María Félix’s importance within Mexican culture will contribute to illustrating how CLASA Films reconciled the box office with government ideology, the scintillating with the safe. When La monja alférez was produced in 1944, María Félix already resided at the pinnacle of stardom within a cinema industry that had just experienced an unprecedented surge in film releases beginning with the “great year,” 1943, as a result of the Banco Cinematográfico’s investment in the studios, which had begun in the previous year. Gómez Muriel’s film benefited from the actress’s fame at the same time that it contributed to her renown. In fact, in reference to La monja alférez, Emilio García Riera points out that “la construcción de una estrella importaba más a un cine mexicano comercializado que la construcción de una película de época” (Historia documental 218). With regard to Félix’s appropriateness for the role of Catalina de Erauso, it is important to note that the Mexican star system, which relied on typecasting for key stars as a means to generate consistent interest in cinematic production (see Mora 57), came to define María Félix as a “devoradora de hombres.” Félix augmented her aggressive image with a kind of heterosexual allure connected to cross-dressing in Doña Bárbara in 1943 and then again in La monja alférez in 1944. García Riera makes reference to María Félix’s cross-dressing fame, begun in 1943 through Doña Bárbara, in the following scathing review of La monja alférez: “Plana, estática, lenta, solemne, confusa, la película insistió en explotar las posibilidades prototípicas descubiertas a María Félix en Doña Bárbara: la ‘devoradora de hombres’ lo era en la medida que podía asumir con prestancia los gestos y el vestuario de los hombres mismos” (Historia documental 218). María Félix capitalized on the popularity of her soldierly garb and began to wear pants and weapons after the release of La monja alférez (Velasco 116). Her trademark androgyny, which lacks the sexual transgressiveness of Catalina de Erauso, provided CLASA Films with a lucrative vehicle for a retelling of Erauso’s tale that succeeded in deploying yet palliating the shocking implications of the colonial soldier’s cross-dressing and sexual identity, thus protecting the studio’s bottom line and promoting the state’s ideology. Furthermore, María Félix’s status as key representative of Mexican culture fused the film’s conservatism to conceptions of the nation and ensured a favorable reception of its message among Mexican spectators.

An emblematic moment from the beginning of the La monja alférez illustrates how the film not only exorcises Erauso’s lesbianism but also generally endorses Catholicism, thereby aligning itself more fully with the government’s promotion of religious cinema. The scene in question liberally stylizes an episode from the Vida. In La monja alférez, the scene takes place in a jail cell where Catalina’s male persona, don Alonso, awaits execution for public dueling in Peru. A priest has just arrived from a failed attempt to seek clemency for the protagonist and faces what he unswervingly takes as a man. (She will be saved at the end of the film by a gallant man with whom she falls in love.) I would like to draw attention to the ways in which Gómez Muriel presents religion in the scene in the jail cell. Upon entering the cell the cleric explains to Catalina that he has argued, albeit unsuccessfully, for her freedom, which establishes the priest as the protagonist’s ally. Furthermore, out of respect for the sanctity of the Church, for the first and only time during the film, Catalina chooses to abandon her masculine role in this scene. The film solidifies the favorable characterization of Catholicism with the placement of the cross hanging on the wall between the two characters during this scene. As the priest incredulously listens to Catalina’s confession of her “true” sex, the cross manages visually to weld the woman’s declaration of truth to the film’s characterization of the Church. Later in same scene Gómez Muriel elevates Catholicism by associating light with spiritual illumination. Figure 2 shows rays of light emanating from the head of a confessing María Félix. By means of both dialogue and visual symbolism, then, this scene favorably characterizes the Church. In fact, throughout the entire film, La monja alférez’s version of Catalina de Erauso maintains a respectful relationship with Catholicism.

Gómez Muriel draws on certain details from the Vida’s description of a Church that comes to the rescue of a confessing Erauso. In the narrative, the law pursues the protagonist, which leads
to her seeking the aid of a bishop. Catalina confesses her biological sex to the clergyman, a move that achieves her intended goal of respite:

El Santo Señor entretanto que esta relación duró, que fue hasta la una, se estuvo suspendo, sin hablar ni pestañear escuchándome: i después que acabé, se quedó también sin hablar i llorando [a] lágrima viva. Después me embió a descansar i a comer. Tocó una campanilla, hizo venir a un Capellán anciano i embióme a su Oratorio, i still me pusieron la mesa i me cernieron, i un traspordín, en que me acosté i dormí. (111)

The film stylizes the passage by replaying a focused version of it. The director’s adaptation encourages only one of its possible interpretive avenues. The *Vida* does associate truth and openness with the Church, and the protagonist commonly refers to the church with respect and to its officers with the proper titles of reverence, such as “El Santo Señor,” “Su Ilustrísima,” and “Vuestra Señoria Ilustrísima.” Nonetheless, as Stephanie Merrim points out, “Erauso’s confession […] hardly signals the beginning of her repentance and reformation, for she remains unregenerate and true to herself to the end of the work. The text, in its themes and structure, is more of an exposé than a confession” (7). Merrim goes on to write that “the protagonist on several occasions displays her disrespect for religion: consistently and opportunistically claiming her right to asylum in a church to escape arrest or death” (7). The text portrays a protagonist who confesses the truth only to achieve freedom, a strategy that pays off. The film, on the other hand, presents an unsolicited confession to a priest as its own reward; María Félix does not hope to be released from jail because of her confession. *La monja alférez* excludes from its portrayal of Catalina’s relationship with the Church Erauso’s unrepentant pragmatism, and thus avoids a rendering of the story that could compromise the film’s pro-Catholic message; what is more, the film galvanizes the scene’s revised message with the cinematic *mise en scène* that I have discussed (i.e., the placement of the cross and the use of light).

The director’s approach to the issue of the protagonist’s gender responds to the religious focus of the adaptation and represents a significant departure from the *Vida*. When viewing *La monja alférez*, anyone familiar with Catalina de Erauso immediately notices the absurdity of the characters’ acceptance of the protagonist’s masculine disguise, given María Félix’s persistent femininity. Figures 3–5 show several images of the “male” protagonist with whom the priest meets. The director has obviously made no attempt to disguise María Félix’s sex, as Figure 4, in particular, plainly illustrates. In contrast, consider Figure 6, a portrait of Erauso from the seventeenth century that illustrates just how far the film strays from the masculine image that the historical figure so carefully cultivated. In the *Vida*, the protagonist constructs an unquestionably masculine persona, murdering men and seducing women at several turns. Even after Catalina de Erauso admits to being a woman, Philip IV allows her to maintain her attained rank of lieutenant and Pope Urban VIII grants her permission to live indefinitely in New Spain as a man. In Gómez Muriel’s adaptation of Erauso’s tale, despite her dress the protagonist never abandons her heterosexual sex appeal. The film does suggest that some women feel attraction for Catalina’s male persona, but because María Félix does not approximate truly passing as male the film encourages the viewer to take such flirtations as a joke. Moreover, *La monja alférez* is plotted entirely around a heterosexual love affair that has no textual basis and runs counter to the seventeenth-century text’s presentation of Erauso’s sexuality. The final, heterosexual resolution to *La monja alférez* shows the protagonist—still in male dress and considered to be a man by the other characters—kissing don Alonso (who knows that she is a woman, of course), to the shock of onlookers (see Figures 7–8).11 As I have shown, the film dilutes the representation of sexuality found in Erauso’s narrative, due in part to the conservative ideological influence of the Mexican government. We have seen that in many ways *La monja alférez* only borrows certain elements of the *Vida*, following, for example, the cross-dressing and flirtation among women, but abandoning the provocative queer tones of Erauso’s writing. However, the financial objective of *La monja alférez* points to a way that the film clearly emulates Erauso’s narrative. Just as Erauso managed to create and capitalize on the notoriety gained through her writing, the film uses shock in exchange for ticket sales and as a means to push María Félix further into the spotlight.
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Perhaps ironically, La monja alférez attempts to seduce filmgoers and affirms Mexican national identity by drawing on a colonized past and by exalting a figure that it reanimates as Creole. However, such an approach to identity was not unprecedented in Mexican culture. A more powerful irony lies in the film's negative treatment of the indigenous population, especially considering the importance of indigenismo at the time. Also, this aspect of the film surprisingly represents one of the clearest examples of how La monja alférez follows Erauso's text. Indigenous peoples, frequently and unkindly described in the Vida, are oddly absent in La monja alférez, except for one short sequence. A series of Western-like nocturnal shots shows fragments of bellicose native bodies: arms drawing taut a bow and arrow, feet silently sliding their way through the forest while sneaking up and viciously attacking a Spanish encampment. La monja alférez's revision of the figure of Erauso reconciles both economic and ideological pressures, yet its brief, negative treatment of indigenous peoples—which necessarily limits and compromises its characterization of Mexican identity—would appear to respond to neither of the aforementioned influences. Perhaps the film’s characterization of Mexico’s indigenous population can be explained as an unwitting (or cynical?) emulation of Hollywood’s formulaic representation of “Indians.”

Referring to 1941, just three years before the release of La monja alférez, Roger Cailllois insisted that in the middle of the twentieth century, “the idea that history should be an impartial reconstruction of the past has been increasingly abandoned in order to make it [...] a means of national glorification” (258). Although Cailllois had in mind fascist propaganda, La monja alférez responds in part to the tendency that he underlines. The film, which makes no claim of adaptation fidelity, clearly shapes history in accordance with aspects of the Mexican government’s ideology. Gómez Muriel’s adaptation of a colonial text modifies the tendency described by Cailllois, by combining the pursuit of revenue with a manifest attempt to inspire national pride through the glorification a certain conception of Mexico’s past, one centered on a profoundly conservative and religious view of the nation.

NOTES

1See Velasco (115). As Stephanie Merrim explains, “we possess no autograph or original printed copies of the work, which was deposited for publication in the printing house of Bernardino de Guzmán in 1622” (6). The issue of the narrative’s authorship remains unsolved (see Merrim 259, note 5). For examinations of the figure and writings of Catalina de Erauso, see Rima de Vallbona’s introduction to her edition of Vida i Sucessos de la monja alférez: Autobiografia atribuida a Doña Catalina de Erauso (1992); Chapter One of Stephanie Merrim’s Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Early Modern Women’s Writing (1999), entitled “From Anomaly to Icon: Border-Crossings, Catalina de Erauso and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz”; Marjorie Garber’s forward to Michele Stepho and Gabriel Stepho’s translation of the autobiography; and Sherry Velasco’s book, The Lieutenant Nun: Transgenderism, Lesbian Lestry, and Catalina de Erauso (2000).

2In the interest of clarity, I will refer to the historical figure and the protagonist of the Vida as Catalina de Erauso or simply Erauso, and I will call the protagonist of the film Catalina.

3I distribute the attribution of La monja alférez’s authorship among the studio, the director, and the writers.

4Sherry Velasco points out an example of the economic forces that contributed to the way that the film was produced: “Although the script was adapted by Max Aub and Eduardo Ugarte from the autobiography, the producers insisted on a story that would exploit Félix’s appeal as the strong, masculine, and sexy femme fatale. The Spanish writer Max Aub, one of the most important antifascist intellectuals in exile in Mexico after the Spanish Civil War, did not hesitate to express his disappointment with the final script regarding its inability to explore the more interesting aspects of Erauso’s life [...].” (115). La monja alférez’s concern with the commercial potential of its subject matter coincided with the tendency in Mexican film at the time: “A fines de los treinta, el comercialismo ya ha desplazado del cine al precario nacionalismo revolucionario. Para vender, el cine se concentra en los productos más difundibles, de seguro impacto” (Monsivais 439).

5Carlos Monsivais refers to conservative ideological influence on popular culture during the period: “Por lo mismo, el examen de esta cinematografía nos familiariza—de un modo u otro—con los procedimientos de la ideología dominante, que han moldeado la cultura popular y han ofrecido a la vez una interpretación del mundo y un catálogo de conductas ‘socialmente adecuadas’” (435–36).

6Carlos Monsivais discusses the central role of Mexican Golden Age cinema in the construction of national identity: “tiene la palabra la pantalla que nutre a los espectadores y de ellos (de su asistencia fiel y abierta) recibe la seguridad de su acertadísimo proceder; la pantalla, desde donde se ajusta y ofrecen identidades (definiciones internas, estructuras morales instantáneas y permanentes) [...]” (435).
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Carlos Monsiváis further examines aspects of the ideology promoted at the time in Mexican films: “Desde los treinta, el cine mexicano pese al impulso cardenista, funciona mayoritariamente como sustrato de referencias de la moral periférica, inventario general que excluye oficialmente la política, la poesía extrana, la crítica social y la sexualidad abierta. ¿Esta ideología despolitiza y reprime? Sí, pero lo refleja a su espectador a mínimas certezas, las escalas valorativas directas: sigue viviendo en un país temeroso de Dios [...]” (447).

Carl Mora explains that 1943 “saw the Mexican cinema show promise of fulfilling its potential and becoming a true industry. Seventy films were produced in ‘the great year,’ while Argentina’s output declined sharply to thirty-six motion pictures” (59).

Luis Trelles advances a similar argument: “Filme más que de exposición histórica, de lucimiento estelar, La monja alférez es ante todo y sobre todo una vitrina para el destaque de María Félix” (67).

Alex Saragoza argues that María Félix’s “male-baiting” roles challenged, to some degree, the state’s conservative ideology: “In the cinematic schema of the Golden Age, women were foils for the conservative, patriarchal role of the state. Women in Mexican movies, therefore, tended to be one-dimensional archetypes signifying a simple message: stay in the place deemed best by the state. These films and their numerous counterpoints are revealing historical documents of the prevailing conservative ideology of the Mexican state through the 1960s. There were, of course, exceptions, such as the male-baiting roles of María Félix” (28). However, I would argue that Mexican cinema also used the figure of the “devoradora de hombres” as a means to criticize female power. In La devoradora (1946), for example, María Félix plays a powerful and manipulative woman who is ultimately punished (shot dead) by a man whom the film presents as righteous.

Sherry Velasco speculates on why, in recollections of Erasmo’s story, the protagonist passes for male only within the story: “One of the keys to understanding how the transvestite spectacle functions on different levels is revealed through an examination of diegetic and extradiegetic spectatorship. While historical accounts of Catalina de Erasmo’s experience attest to her ability to live successfully as a man, the subsequent narratives based on her actual cross-sex passing are characterized by a diegetic passing. However, the extradiegetic reader or viewer remains unconvinced by the disguise, since she knows the ‘truth’ about the absent phallus under Erasmo’s male clothing. In this sense, transvestite spectacles serve to police gender-bending by reaffirming the body as the location of fixed sexual identity. Once the ‘truth’ of sexual difference is established, the transvestite no longer threatens the location of the ‘natural’ order of things. Mainstream audiences can now enjoy the disguise, anticipating the pleasure of watching the diegetic characters shock when the ‘truth’ is finally revealed” (10).

La monja alférez’s exploration of identity through Creole culture in the colonial period had a precedent in Mexican literature: Carlos Monsiváis explains how the “colonialists” “intentan, en una suerte de nacionalismo coetáneo u de exposición hacia la Edad de Oro, capturar literalmente lo que ven como la más bella identidad de México, la castiza; exhumar lenguaje y anecdotarios milíticos del virreinato para ‘interpretar póstumamente la historia de México’” (392). More generally, postrevolutionary efforts to define la mexicana often recuperated and exalted both indigenous and Creole heroes from Mexico’s past. Henry Schmidt observes such an approach to identity in José Vasconcelos: “Reinforcing the ideal of mestizo culture, [Vasconcelos] sought the origins of Mexican identity and outlined a creation myth based on the towering figures of pre-Hispanic Mexico and New Spain such as Quetzalcóatl, Netzahualcóyotl, Vasco de Quiroga, Pedro de Gante, Motolinía, and Antonio de Mendoza” (121). Carlos Monsiváis similarly discusses the insistence, during the same period, on Mexico’s bicultural past in order to foster a sense of national unity: “La Unidad Nacional es el requisito para el Progreso, la exaltación del sincerismo como garantía del equilibrio político, cultural y social. Desunidos, somos víctimas propicias del enemigo (el imperialismo, la oligarquía, la subversión, la derecha, la izquierda). Nos congregan el sentimiento nacionalista (virtudes insustituibles de nuestra problemática, perfiles propios, sustentación en las raíces), el culto a los héroes (el cuerpo y la historia como antología de personalidades y obras excepcionales), el pasado como catálogo o enumeración orgullosa, de las raíces prehispánicas a Juárez, del muralismo a José Gorostiza” (399).

The film’s arguably anti-indigenous nature is especially curious since Gómez Murid co-directed one of the founding films of indigenismo, Redes (1934), and María Félix appeared in several of Emilio “El Indio” Fernández’s films of the same genre: Enamorada (1946), Maclóvia (1948), and Río Escudero (1948). For an examination of indigenismo in Mexican cinema, see Joanne Hershfield. Though criticized for perpetuating stereotypes, indigenista films sought to “legitimize the Indians’ status in Mexico as poor but honorable” (Hershfield 85), an effort consistent with the conception of the nation promoted by the Cárdenas government. Hershfield clarifies some of the roots, extensions, and problems with indigenismo in Mexican cinema: "Despite [Sergei Eisenstein’s] undeniable influence on directors such as Fernández, there is substantial evidence that Eisenstein’s film and the indigenista genre as a whole were inspired by post-revolutionary Mexican theater (tendor and coros) and art and the intellectual promotion of indigenismo during the 1920s and 1930s. Artists such as Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros were intent on creating a revolutionary Mexican art through an expression of mexicanidad grounded in the ideology of indigenismo [...]". However, their paintings reinforce stereotypical representations of racial and ethnic divisions that marked Mexican society since the Spanish conquistadors first meted with Indian women in the fifteenth century. Indians in this “national art” were portrayed as pure and simple, like children who had to be led to social (and revolutionary) consciousness by the intellectual mestizo elite. The Indianist films of the Golden Age reproduced these stereotypes (86).

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