

The Restoration and Musical Accompaniment of *El automóvil gris* (Enrique Rosas, 1919) Interview with Paolo Tosini and José María Serralde Ruiz¹

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Paolo Tosini and José María Serralde Ruiz during the release of the blu-ray of *El automóvil gris*. 38°
Giornate del Cinema Muto, Pordenone, 2019. Photo by Valerio Greco

The history of Latin American silent cinema is written from gaps. A very small portion of the films shot in the region during this early period survived, forcing us to analyze it indirectly, through film advertisements and synopses published back then in the press. For this reason, discovering a film of

¹ The conversation with the interviewees started during *Le 38 Giornate del Cinema Muto*, which took place in Pordenone, Italy, from October 5 to 12, 2019, and ended in a long remote session on April 19, 2020—then, Mexico and Brazil were going through the first phase of the quarantine due to the COVID-19 pandemic and Italy was getting prepared for a slow reopening. The interviewees were in Lecce (Italy) and Mexico City, while the interviewer was in Valinhos, São Paulo (Brazil). The interview was held in English, the only shared language of all three participants.

the period is always a cause for celebration. What to say, then, when such film is restored, programmed in film shows, and commercialized on DVD and blu-ray; finally reaching the general public? This was the case with the Mexican film *El automóvil gris* (Enrique Rosas, 1919).

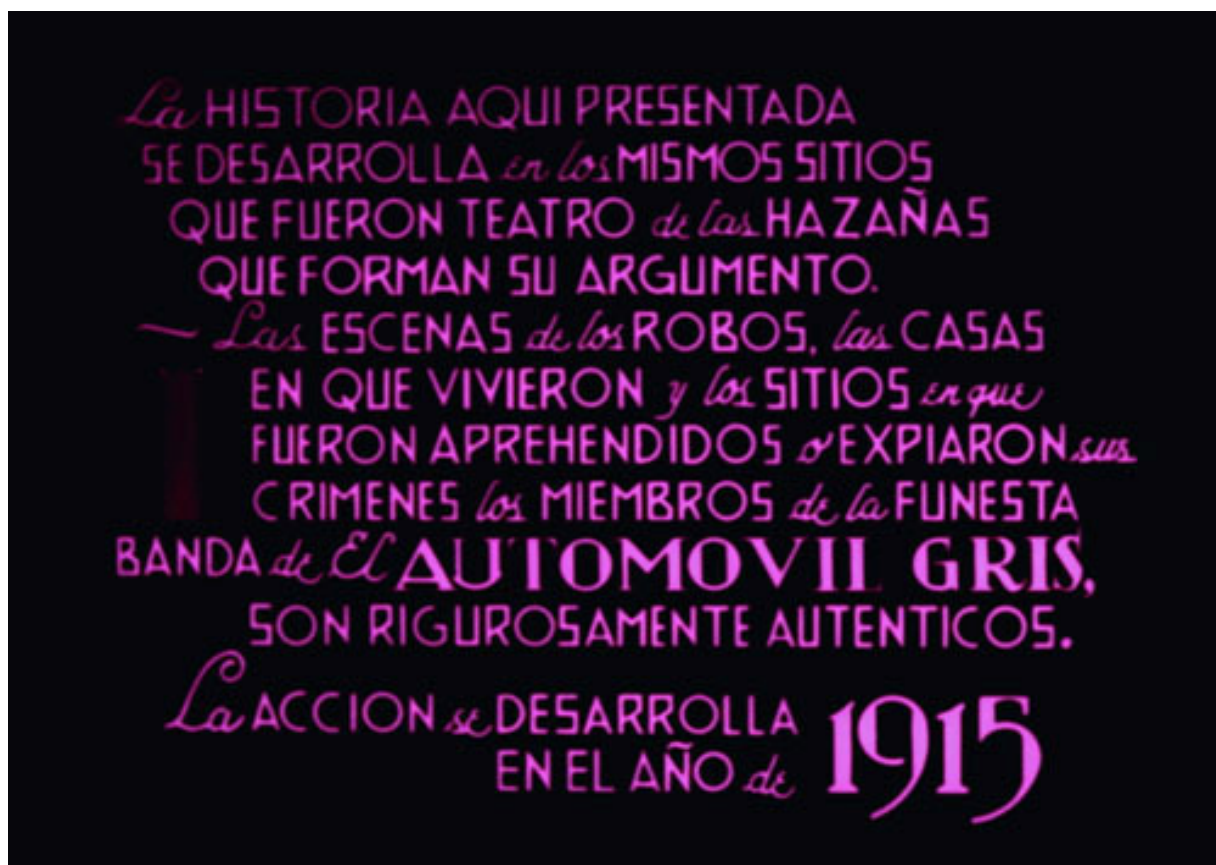
Adopting the structure of foreign cinematographic “serials”—which could hold the public interest for weeks, thanks to its *feuilleton* structure—*El automóvil gris* originally consisted of twelve episodes that were screened during three subsequent days, in December 1919. This serial establishes a direct dialogue with reality, depicting the story of Higinio Granada’s criminal group, which perpetrated crimes in Mexico City using one of the newest inventions of the time: the automobile.

Overlaps between the press—which then also exploited a *feuilletonesque* structure—and fiction have already been widely discussed around the world. The agility of action plots was perfect for cinematographic narratives, due to the temporal synthesis made possible by cinema. In the case of *El automóvil*, the boldness of the historical gang was a rather suitable theme for cinematographic appropriation. In fact, the gang itself flirted with fiction, reminding us of written and cinematographic serials like Eugène Sue’s *The Mysteries of Paris* (published between 1842 and 1843 in the *Journal des débats*), the French film *Fantômas* (Louis Feuillade, 1913) or the North-American *The Perils of Pauline* (Louis J. Gasnier, Donald MacKenzie, 1914).

The gang of the gray automobile was contemporary with the Mexican Revolution, which began in 1910 and was facing its final developments in 1919. Granada, the group’s leader, had escaped from jail after a cannon fired during the revolution broke the wall of the cell where he was imprisoned in 1913. In 1915, this gang gathered in a bar in the *bas-fonds* of Mexico City and committed crimes in the rented car that gives the title to the film. The group was dismantled by the end of 1915, after Higinio Granada made an agreement with the police.² Some members were punished with the death penalty by hanging, an episode captured by Rosas’ camera and incorporated into

² DELGADILLO, Magalli. “La primera banda que asaltaba en auto”, *El Universal*, February 17, 2017. Available: <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/entrada-de-opinion/colaboracion/mochilazo-en-el-tiempo/nacion/sociedad/2017/02/17/la-primera-banda> [Accessed on: July 28, 2020]

the film—attesting to the film’s overlap between reality and fiction. Noticeably, police chief Juan Manuel Cabrera served as scriptwriter to bolster the film’s realism.³ The narrative is divided between the presentation of the crimes perpetrated by the gang (robberies, kidnappings, and rapes) and the individual stories of its members; two spheres connected by the criminal intelligence of Granada.⁴



El automóvil gris (Enrique Rosas, 1919). Cineteca Nacional de México.

The serial was turned into sound cinema (one its surviving versions is a musical) and was popular until the 1960’s. The restoration of the film made use of extant film footage, which was shorter than the original version, and strived to reconstruct it from its script.⁵ The work was carried out under the auspices of the Cineteca Nacional de

³ TOSINI, Paolo. “El automóvil gris”. In: *Le Giornate del Cinema Muto 34: Catalogue*. Pordenone, 2015, pp. 123-124.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

México. The restored serial was presented at the 34th *Giornate del Cinema Muto* of Pordenone in three sessions, on October 6, 8 and 10, 2015.⁶

The recovery of this material, the challenges regarding its restoration, and the criteria that determined both the restoration and the composition of the musical accompaniment were discussed in depth by Paolo Tosini and José María Serralde Ruiz during a series of conversations that we had between Italy, Mexico, and Brazil: first in sunny Pordenone, during the last edition of *Le Giornate del Cinema Muto* in October 2019, and afterwards in a virtual meeting held in the midst of the coronavirus epidemic (and all the uncertainty it encompassed) in April 2020.

Paolo Tosini studied film restoration in his home country, Italy, and in Germany. Nowadays he is the academic coordinator and digital advisor in the Lecce's campus of the Roman Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia. He has previously worked in several archives around the world, such as the Archivo General de la Nación de República Dominicana and the Cineteca Nacional de México—where he headed the restoration of *El automóvil gris*. He has been working for several years for *Le Giornate del Cinema Muto*.

Trained as a classical pianist, José María Serralde Ruiz is a composer and performer of live music for historic archival films and multidisciplinary arts. By the late 1990s, he became a resident film accompanist at the Cineteca Nacional de México, and a frequent pianist at the Filmoteca of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. From then on, he has dedicated himself to researching, teaching, and performing live music for silent film screenings with a great concern on period authenticity—individually or collectively, with the “Ensamble Cine Mudo”, which he founded in 1998. Born and raised in Mexico, he expanded boundaries, playing in countries such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Canada, the United Kingdom, Brazil, and Italy. He composed the music that accompanied the DVD and the blu-ray's editions of *El automóvil gris*, and accompanied the screenings of the serial when it was programmed in *Le Giornate* in 2015.

⁶ LE GIORNATE DEL CINEMA MUTO 34: *Calendar*, 2015. Available: http://www.cinetecadelfriuli.org/gcm/ed_precedenti/edizione2015/immagini_2015/2015_GCM_Calendarario.pdf [Accessed on: July 31, 2020]

Danielle Crepaldi Carvalho: *El automóvil gris* (1919) was edited in a commemorative blu-ray edition in 2018, almost a hundred years after it was first exhibited to Mexican audiences. It is “the first blu-ray of a restored Mexican film”⁷ as the assistant director of the Laboratorio de Restauración Digital of Cineteca de México, Edgar Torres, pointed out during the film’s release. This is an extremely important event considering the Latin American context; since we do not usually restore our silent films, nor do we release them in high-definition. The restoration of this repertoire is more common in the European context, where there is a chain involving restoration and exhibition in festivals. So much so that *El automóvil gris* was shown in Pordenone. Would you both elaborate on the importance of this project, considering the Latin American context—where there is, in general, less money, political effort, and spectators interested in this repertoire. I also would like that you, Paolo, discussed the subject from your specific point of view as a European citizen who has worked in several archives around the world. What are the specificities of this project, when compared to the restorations and screenings that take place in Europe and in the US?

Paolo Tosini: This is an excellent question, actually. I think the answer will be surprising. We think, we the Latin Americans, don’t have the conditions to do this job as it is done in Europe. There is actually more knowledge, money, and people in Latin America. It is only different. To do a good job you have to be flexible. It is easier to do it in Europe, where there is the equipment and where you can reach archives within an hour, and without spending too much money. From my point of view, it is more complicated in the US, where everything is done separately. My perspective is that in the US the community is smaller and more commercial restoration takes place than archival restoration. In Latin America there is a mixture. In Mexico, a lot of money coming from broadcasts and TV is put into restoration (even if not always in the right films). There is also a great small archive in Uruguay. There are different realities when we face film preservation. In Colombia, for example, the regional archive is even stronger than in Mexico (although in Mexico there is—as I said—more money).

⁷ CINETECA NACIONAL DE MEXICO. “Presentaron la edición en Blu-ray de *El automóvil gris* en la Cineteca Nacional”. Available: <https://www.cinetecanacional.net/controlador.php?opcion=noticias&id=977> [Accessed on: July 28, 2020]

Brazil, from what I know, led for many years. Working in Mexico does not mean working only with Mexican titles, but considering all Latin American materials. When we started the film lab in Mexico, there was already a digital facility in the country run by Televisa but it was not doing restorations, it was doing digitalization, which is also a big deal. However, they didn't have an archival concern. It is comprehensible to do glamorous restorations but it is also fundamental to do less glamorous ones, of films that if they are not restored, they are going to be lost. This is crucial regarding archives. It is also important to exhibit the films you work with. A restored movie that is successful is a movie that is seen.

José María Serralde Ruiz: Paolo did a very elaborate Latin American and Mexican restoration; that is a big thing.

PT: We were the second laboratory in Latin America. The first was in Brazil. There was also the *Jornada do Cinema Silencioso*⁸ in São Paulo, that kept a close contact with people from everywhere. This means we are not at all that bad. Bologna had the knowledge, the machine, and the money; but they had to close the lab after one year due to lack of funding and started to work with private institutions. That's what I suggested in Mexico, but it was not accepted. It is important to underline that restoration is a very expensive job. They have to make money, if not they shut down. That does not mean they restore anything in Bologna (they are able to choose a lot more now), but you have to be open. You have to be able to keep up, and to be able to keep the people you train. And moreover, you have to let it go. As I was telling my students, my biggest problem with *El automóvil gris* is that I saw it in Puebla (Mexico) recently and I thought it was a disaster. There are so many options in restoration, many new softwares. You can keep working in the same project forever...

When we started the restoration lab in Mexico, I questioned myself about what could I do as a European. As I did not know anything about Mexican history, we put

⁸ The event used to screen the highlights of Pordenone's *Le Giornate del Cinema Muto*. It was curated by Carlos Roberto de Souza, organized by the Cinemateca Brasileira and went along six annual editions, from 2007 to 2012.

together people from the archive in order to decide what to do. I proposed I could do my own research. My restoration passion comes from Pordenone, therefore, from silent movies. I questioned the situation concerning silent movies in Mexico. My bosses in Pordenone came a few months after I started working in Mexico to see if there was any chance to make a Mexican program in the Giornate. That is how we prepared the first material, the Revolution material⁹. But everybody from Pordenone told me I had to do *El automóvil gris*, that it was a very important movie.

DCC: The day before the release of *El automóvil gris* blu-ray at the 2019 *Giornate del Cinema Muto*, Paolo Cherchi Usai presented the revised edition of his seminal “Silent Cinema”¹⁰, an event in which he highlighted the connection established between silent cinema and digital cinema. What is the role of digital in the restoration of this serial film? What are the characteristics of this restoration? Was an archival research carried out, for example, to retrieve information about the duration of the film when it was first exhibited in 1919? José María, regarding the musical sphere, did you use the information published in the press at the time of the first exhibitions of the film as a parameter for your work? What were your influences?

PT: The work started when we found a nitrate of the film that was in the vault. I was told it was decaying and that it was colored. After investigating it, I discovered it was actually tinted. I saw we needed to restore that. Ok, the idea of doing was there, but being able to do the job was another story. It took us a long time. We stopped there for a while. After a year working in Mexico, we did the Revolution restoration for Pordenone, which was hard work (and I still think it looks nice). We started doing restorations of longer Mexican pictures and there was a resistance towards doing *El*

⁹ The program was called “Mexico: Records of Revolution” and it was exhibited in 2013. *LE GIORNATE DEL CINEMA MUTO 32: Calendar*, 2013. Available:

http://www.cinetecadelfriuli.org/gcm/ed_precedenti/edizione2013/immagini_2013/GCM2013_Calendario_w_REV.pdf [Accessed on: July 31, 2020]

¹⁰ The book was originally entitled *Burning Passions* and published in 1994. In 2000, it was republished as *Silent Cinema: an Introduction*, by the British Film Institute. In 2019, it was expanded and became *Silent Cinema: A Guide to Study, Research and Curatorship*. Cf. USAI, Paolo Cherchi. *Silent Cinema: A Guide to Study, Research and Curatorship*, 3rd edition. London: British Film Institute, 2019.

automóvil gris, as it supposedly belonged to the family and not to the Cineteca. After going through its contract, I saw that the Cineteca was allowed to make a copy of the film. I suggested to make a digital copy and to make a restoration for free. After that, we brought in all the material we had of the film. We had good news. First, we had the tinted copy—a pretty good one, although not complete. We also had the black and white copy that had a higher resolution, and was a little more complete in some scenes. We digitalized all we had, even the sound versions (the movie was so popular that a few years after the release they made short, sound versions of it so there were several sound cuts of the film, either dubbed or musical versions). We didn't find the long three-day copy of the film. Originally, it was a very long movie. While researching we discovered there were several versions of it, even in the silent era. Unfortunately, we were unable to research abroad (I do not doubt we can find more material if we do). Luckily, we had a lot of paper material, such as the original script, the intertitles and lobby cards, which we also scanned. Without counting the research, the restoration took us twelve months. The restoration means: digitalizing everything, digitalizing the intertitles, creating a new edition of all the materials, restoring all the images (putting them together, correcting the colors, etc.) and watching the movie again and again. When you are in an institution, you have to find a way to do your work the best you can, in a way that things happen, regardless of the difficulties. These are the things that stay. We could have stopped when the rights issue was brought up, but we didn't. Besides doing the job, we left traces of what was done, traces that will help in other projects. Now it is done and it was released even in blu-ray; the first I know in Latin America in what concerns silent cinema. The last part—the music—was José María's.

JMSR: I should tell that I have the same feeling as Paolo. When you score for a film you realize after a while you can always make a better job. Every time I get to Pordenone, I enlarge my perspectives regarding aesthetics and historical performances and resources, listening to my colleagues. For years I have not heard my score. Film is a live entity, that's why we think we should work with it permanently.



El automóvil gris (Enrique Rosas, 1919). Cineteca Nacional de México.

PT: I also think we were lucky because we knew with whom we were working. José María knew the movie but he had to find the reference for the music and create it, which is a lot of pressure. And moreover, he had to present it in Pordenone. Even though it did not have the best spot¹¹ in the program, we saw the effects. Right after it was presented, things began to move. It is really difficult to be working with a restoration of that type.

JMSR: Indeed. I heard about the restoration because I am friends with many people involved. I knew that to compose almost four hours of music would be a titanic task. Provided that we were missing the original score (and therefore, any reference of what was played, or who played it), I decided on a philological approach. I gathered tons of references of other films performed by musicians during the period. The question became, rather, if Mexican music was included in the score or not. What I

¹¹ The three parts of the serial were programmed on Tuesday at 22:45, on Thursday at 11:45 and on Saturday at 17:00. *LE GIORNATE DEL CINEMA MUTO* 34: *Calendar*, 2015, *op. cit.*

learned was that at that time the major influence came from foreign music. So, basically, considering the social circle the producer of the film belonged to, it would not be very plausible for him to use music from the countryside. The band would be playing for this film in Mexico City. The influences for Mexican films in the 1910s—and I quote Aurelio de los Reyes—was basically European. The same applies to acting. Mexico was surely influenced by North American cinema, but at that time it was much more European-like. So, whether it is Mexican or not..., we needed to include what repertoires were played back then, for example, the *orquestra típica* (typical orchestra), which is a very peculiar ensemble that played here in Mexico from the late 19th century until the silent era. We had to take into account their repertoire, not exactly with “Mexicanity” in mind. So, if we play Mexican music, we do it in the way it was done in Mexico city at the time; in other words, filtered by the fancy exhibition centers, such as the Olympia cinema. They were filtering this very European view of what Mexico was, musically speaking. That is what I did. If not, it would be like a traditional performance or countryside music, but that is not what I felt while researching the exhibition environment in late 1910s Mexico. But, although it is European-like, it is still Mexican music. During that period, very famous composers in Mexico were coming back from Europe (where they had studied), for example Manuel María Ponce. These artists were rewriting Mexican music. It was a very interesting moment of cultural promotion in Mexico, because it is all about José Vasconcelos—a very important head of cultural activities. He was pushing this re-reading of what Mexicanity was. He was removing, and I quote him, the “barbaric” Indian cultures from the scene. This is what governed the edition of *El automóvil gris*. This came basically from Paolo’s ideas. It was a very sincere and, should I say, respectful approach to the materials that gave me the rules to choose an aesthetic. It is quite different from what I do for the Filmoteca. I am more stubborn and free to write other stuff there. For *El automóvil gris*, I stuck to the rules.

PT: While working in the Revolution Material, I talked a lot with José María about what to do with *El Automóvil Gris*. The only think I could do was offer suggestions. I knew he would do a great job. Many people already loved his work. A lot of silent movies were

screened at the Cineteca de México when I started working there, but people were, in fact, going to the projections for the band and not because of the films (they were good, but the quality of the copies was poor). There was a silent screening of the version of *El automóvil gris* that the Filmoteca had. They decided to do *benshi*¹² on that. This was cool, I liked the idea. But what I didn't like is that it did not have any connection with the film. I wouldn't care about it now that we have accomplished this work; that we have the movie as it is supposed to have been. As long as there is a good archive version of the picture, you can do whatever you want. This is not the case when we consider other pictures. *Santa*, for example, is missing, but we are working on that too. *El automóvil gris* is quintessential because there is this back-and-forth of fiction and reality (which was quite similar to the Revolution material that we restored). If you read the script, you will find some super-spectacular effects that were impossible to be filmed. In one scene, for example, Don Vicente and his family are all sitting on the table. A little bug comes in, it goes to the light bulb and, on the top of the bug there is a skull that everybody can see. Such a scene would have been impossible to shoot (or at least we didn't find it). The work that Aurelio de los Reyes did identifying almost every corner that is shot is incredible. What was more complicated was that there were different histories that were not related to reality. It was very difficult for us to get an idea of what belonged to the fictional dimension. Because of that, there are things that we are still unsure of. For example, I think nobody is really sure about what small town was pictured in the film, although Aurelio de Los Reyes has some idea of it. Still today several things are not clear. The problem with such a big movie is that it has so many things inside that you have to have the perspective. For example, after the restoration was done, I supervised the English translation of the subtitles for Pordenone, and I found it to be, probably, the hardest part of the job. While watching the film in Spanish for the restoration, I was paying more attention to the image than to what was being said. When the subtitles were written down, we always had a big discussion whether to put them at the beginning or in the middle of the scene, because we did not have any documents to follow. But when I did the translation, I realized it was written in a very complicated, extremely elaborated Spanish. There is so much French, and French references in it.

¹² During silent era, the *benshis* were Japanese performers who provided live narration for silent films.

And there are two words that I was never able to translate. I asked several native speakers but we couldn't translate them into English. The text itself is very decadent, totally in contrast with the image, which is quick and very beautiful. The plot is also very complicated. The original film was screened for three days. It would be nice to investigate how people reacted to that complicated plot that went on for so long. It was totally unheard of for Mexico to have such a complex level of storytelling that went on for days. And such a fast one, where there is so much going on. There is few comical relief in the film. The director had a very personal idea of melodrama. It is unfortunate that he died so young, because if not he would have been able to give us so much more.



Paolo Tosini during the release of the blu-ray of *El automóvil gris*. 38° Giornate del Cinema Muto, Pordenone, 2019. Photo by Valerio Greco

DCC: *El automóvil gris* is indeed a curious serial because it appropriates a format already consolidated in North American cinema. However, from a specific national focus, it depicts a crime that effectively happened. In Brazil we have several examples of films that depict real events, shot around 1908-1920. One of them, already widely discussed by the Brazilian historiography, is *A Mala Sinistra* (1908): a bandit murders the owner of

a shoe factory in São Paulo, collects his remains in a large luggage, and embarks on a steamer to Rio, being arrested when trying to throw the luggage overboard. At that time there was a thirst for reality that slid even to artistic productions. This is discussed in a beautiful book originally released in 1995, *Cinema and the invention of modern life*¹³. Due to the dialogue with reality this serial establishes, it is much more acute than those shot in North America, like *The Perils of Pauline* (1914) or *The Exploits of Elaine* (1914). Could you both comment on the production of *El automóvil gris*, considering the films shown in Mexico in 1919? During the blu-ray release, José María underlined that the North American cinematographic repertoire would not have been a deep influence to Mexicans, since it was almost completely banned in Mexico by that time. Could you contextualize this ban? What did Mexicans watch in movie theaters then? Considering the plot of the film, what is the relationship that Mexicans established with the red press? Would this have determined the success of the film?

PT: The thing that strikes me the most, is that if you read the intertitles as a novel, you would picture in your mind a totally different movie. The combination of both is striking. Even judging with today's eyes, I think it was an incredible combination, that is why it was so popular. The story itself was quite known at the time, being the actual story of a real band. Rosas got the idea to do the movie when he went to shoot the actual execution of the gang members. This fact could have helped the public to understand the story. Another aid could be the film lobby cards. We have the lobby cards for the first episode, which tells the whole story, which could help the public understand the plot. There is a balance that helps a lot in the silent era: some people were unable to read and were entertained by the action, while other people could also enjoy the text. *El automóvil gris* was influenced by Italy. The Italian diva was very present in Mexican society. Hence the many dramatic parts in the film. To my knowledge, women's stories went very differently from what they could be, considering Mexican filmmaking. All of them are doomed women that become widows or go to jail. None of the women are safe or "pure." There is no peace for them. The good guys are in peace at the end, but not the women. It is pretty interesting. The fact is that we still

¹³ The book was published in Brazil in 2004.

cannot connect all the dots. We have some idea of what was screened in Mexico that was not Mexican: European films or films from the US. We do not know of many other Mexican movies. Between, let's say, *El tren fantasma*, *El puño de hierro*, *El prisionero 13*, and *El automóvil*, there is also *Tepeyac*, and *Santa*, which has survived in a way. There is not much left. There are some other films that I did not mention; the Revolution material, for example. It gives a little idea of a bigger fresco that we do not know. We unfortunately do not have the full context of Latin American movies. If we did, we would understand it much better. More archival work is needed (already done in Europe); that is, to search for material in all Latin America. And when you think you have done the job, you have to redo it. We see Pordenone screening stuff that was unimaginable years ago. For example, the “Nasty Women”¹⁴ program. What a Festival does is to help connect the dots. Everything matters. That is why I am really open and I will always be pushing Pordenone (the archives are not helping me a lot) to be able to do a collection of more Latin American materials. I am not saying it is easy, but it is necessary. The Festival plays an important institutional role for that. Without it, I would never had been able to do *El automóvil gris*.

JMSR: In what concerns the ban, Aurelio de los Reyes published some books (for example, *Cine y sociedad en México*) that covered local screenings (specially of Mexico City, but also of other cities). He basically states that between 1914 and 1917 there is a shift in Mexican exhibition. There was a ban (rather than a prohibition) of North American films that depicted Latin American burglars. That is why the divas and specially the Italian cinema were so broadly accepted here. When I was in Venice a couple of years ago, right after Pordenone, I was able to get to Lyda Borelli's exhibit there and I learned a Mexican episode related to her. Borelli was a star in Mexico, with many fans, and special reports in the newspapers when her films were exhibited in the country. This is very important, because it molded the fashion and the characteristics of women. What I did not know was that, around 1912 or 1913, she was dating a Mexican pilot. She was touring Mexico then with a theatrical company, and from what I learned

¹⁴ The program is curated by Maggie Hennefeld and Laura Horak. It began to be exhibited in Pordenone in 2017.

at the exhibit she asked them to be released in order to meet him. Italian divas had connections with Mexican society and with the upper classes. For instance, the actresses featured in *El automóvil gris* were basically members of the high society. Secondly, I wish to point out that María Teresa Montoya, who would become a great Mexican theater actress, had her first appearance on the screen in this film (a very small role, at the end). This is so curious and compelling. So, definitely our influence comes from Don Porfirio's French inclination. Films that were famous then, such as *Intolerance*, were not shown in Mexico.

PT: Another thing related to this discussion: what I think European archives should be doing next (even if there is still a lot of work to be done regarding European movies), is to think about all the non-European material that is in Europe. It happens well the other way around (and the finding of *Metropolis* in Argentina is a good example of it). Only very little research was made on the subject in Europe.

DCC: Another fundamental feature of this film is its inclination towards the melodramatic genre. If there is any relationship between the mainstream cinema and the “reality” depicted in the newspaper, it is, in fact, the melodramatic genre, whose form built both the printed news and the cinematographic characters. Peter Brooks (1995) uses the expression “Melodramatic Imagination”, which accordingly to him was a specific way of looking at the world, guided for example by dichotomization, by excesses (and, therefore, by redundancy), by the defense of traditional morals, by Christianity. I would like you to comment a little about the presence of melodrama in Mexican society.

PT: I think this is a great question. The first time we saw the material, we were struck by how the movie looked. The city is a big character, but this goes beyond it. Some of the Mexican ideas of the city were there. The space is fundamental in the movie. We keep going back and forth from this fashionable inner theatrical spaces that are very functional to the drama (like, for example, the fancy European style houses) but then we go very far outside of Mexico city, as well as to the high society Roma

neighborhood (which is gorgeous); then we see the cathedral, and the poor small pueblos like Rancho, and we enter a train (which is a fundamental part of the film). So, why did the director decide to show us this? The structure and the use of the space are fundamental, and the way Rosas moves back and forth from this totally fictional inside spaces to the real outside spaces. We saw the film in Puebla in a theater that is in front of the cathedral where it was shot. Rosas knew what he was doing. Even when he showed us the small Mexican towns, he uses Mexican stereotypes in a very smart way. Every Mexican that would see the film would relate to it. In my opinion, we would not even find things like the *sombreros* or the rooster fight cheesy anymore. It is relatable because it does not portrait Mexico in a souvenir style. We see this in the Lumière materials shot in Mexico: while some scenes have a souvenir style, others (for example, the scene where the horses are washed in the river) look like *El automóvil gris*. This is the beauty of the place. You cannot say this movie is not Mexican. It is, and it is absolutely not. We noticed, for example, that in one of the first scenes, where the girl is captured by the guys in the room, there is a portrait on the wall that is also in the rancho (in the scene where the guy is pretending to be sick in order not to be captured). Of course, this is not intentional, but it reveals a melodramatic approach in what concerns the use and reuse of space. The ambivalence between the inside and the outside space should also be considered. Either we have a more contained camera to capture the melodrama in the inner space, or we have a wild camera that keeps trying to follow the gray car (which is also a fundamental character of the film) on the streets. This transit aims to capture the essence of the European-Latin-American bourgeois version of Mexico which everybody was aspiring to at that moment.

DCC: If society as a whole is shaped by melodrama, this genre also slips into the society microcosms, such as theater, cinema, and music. The theatrical melodrama relied heavily on music to achieve effects, in order to underline the dramas experienced by the characters. Italian and French opera made wide use of melodramatic plots. José María, did you consider the connections between the operatic genre and melodrama, and between the operatic repertoire and the silent

cinema, for the creation of your music for *El automóvil gris*? If so, could you give examples of how this happened?



José María Serralde Ruiz during the release of the blu-ray of *El automóvil gris*. 38° Giornate del Cinema Muto, Pordenone, 2019. Photo by Valerio Greco

JMSR: That is probably strongly connected with the Revolution. Opera was such an important showcase for high society in Mexico, especially during the 19th, because of the development of different orchestras in the capital and major cities. Basically, the connection between opera and silent cinema in Mexico is segmented, sociologically speaking. Some cinemas, such as Salón Rojo and Cine Olympia were really expensive. We learned that in

between films the orchestras would play bits of operatic works for their audiences in these places. If you split this pre-revolutionary society in half, you will find a huge amount of musical influences in very different social strata. For example, the *orquesta típica* played for bigger cinemas, while solo pianists or probably guitar players played for smaller ones. It seems that operatic culture and Gabrielle D'Annunzio stories were shown to different classes that were not opera goes through the divas films, through the Italian industry. So, it is amazing how this relation (especially in Mexico but also in other countries) had to do with very classist criteria. The reason why *El automóvil gris* meets these very strong operatic influences is because it comes from an upper-class society. These references had to be included

there because Manuel de la Bandera (which was an important theater teacher) founded the School for Film Actors and Actresses in Mexico. Half of his students were shown in *El automóvil gris*. The film included music by Juventino Rojas, the vals *Carmen*, that he wrote [in 1893] for Porfirio Diaz's wife. We used a kind of formula in the film: every time the storytelling of *El automóvil gris* goes operatic, the music follows. For example, when we made the music for the first kidnap, we used the *pasodoble*; a Spanish style (it features even castanets, which is even clearer when we play it in an ensemble). Spanish music was greatly accepted amongst Mexican upper classes, and it was also listened to by poor people: my grandfather belonged to the lower class, and he really loved Spanish music. We can only speculate about what people were listening at the time. The musical taste changed after the Revolution. *El automóvil gris* premiered in a society that was just recalling itself back from the fear of being killed in the Revolution. So, that is a reason why there is a shift in the operatic taste. Even Puccini is in the film. When the girl is kidnapped by her own boyfriend (a guy that belongs to the criminal band), the scene has a *Tosca* or a *La Bohème* intensity and the actress performs her role like an operatic diva. This is very evident. Like Paolo said, if we could access more films shot then we could better understand what was going on with these societies, and with their musical tastes. For instance, what was happening then in rural Mexico in relation to music? Surely opera was not the strongest musical influence of this community.

DCC: Paolo and José María, thank you very much for this incredibly illuminating interview!

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