

Conchita Montenegro and the Spanish press: From national pride to nationalist melodrama.

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Abstract

The Spanish press reported on Conchita Montenegro, a Spanish actress who moved to Hollywood in the early 1930s, with ambiguous and contradictory messages. On the one hand, her stint in Tinseltown was celebrated as a national triumph: a young Spanish woman had managed to seduce and conquer the Hollywood film industry. On the other hand, the fact that in Hollywood she played female archetypes at odds with the conservative morality of Catholic Spain was silenced. Decades later, after her death, the Spanish press has restored Conchita Montenegro's fame, this time through a sensationalist, melodramatic story similar to the way Hollywood stars are promoted. Based on a comparative study between journalistic sources from both periods, this article demonstrates that the way Montenegro was treated as a film star in the press reflects the same nationalist fervour, even though the focus of her patriotic exemplariness in the 1930s gave way to a melodramatic vision of her Hollywood career more recently.

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Introduction

Between 1930 and 1935, the transnational actress Conchita Montenegro was hired by the Hollywood studios and appeared in ten Spanish-version films and seven feature films in English, working with stars like Leslie Howard, Victor McLaglen and Warner Baxter. This brief stint in the vast US film factory was initially celebrated by the Spanish press as a national triumph. However, the actress's career and behaviour did not always fit the patriotic discourses that journalists had built around her. The way they discussed her fluctuated ambiguously between celebration and mistrust. The brevity of her stint in Hollywood and the rest of her career, as she retired from moviemaking in 1944, meant that attention to the actress gradually waned. However, after her death in 2007, her public image was restored and her figure celebrated in numerous journalistic texts and two novels based on her life story, both published in 2017. In this article, we will perform a comparative analysis of how the nationalist story of Conchita Montenegro that the press pitched in the 1930s and 1940s has been transformed more recently into a melodramatic story of keen narrative interest, in line with the way celebrities are promoted today. Our survey does not aim to judge the truthfulness of each of these approaches; instead, we view celebrity as a discursive construction and are interested in thinking about this phenomenon as a *fictional continuum* (Monaco 1978, p. 10) over the course of nine decades. In this sense, even though the nationalist and melodramatic stories are astonishing for their contradictory claims, we will demonstrate that the initial patriotic construction of the star still survives in the contemporary press and the imaginary created in the novels featuring Conchita Montenegro.

Both approaches stem from the narrative power of what Conchita Montenegro was *assumed* (Monaco 1978, p. 10) to have experienced when she moved to Hollywood. Her sentimental relationship with the actor Leslie Howard and the glamorous life that she

herself promoted in statements to the Spanish press, claiming that she had rubbed shoulders with Greta Garbo, Norma Shearer and Charles Chaplin (Abizanda 1942, pp. 8-9), are fertile ground for journalistic confabulation, which was dealt with differently in each of the two periods studied.

Yet, despite her blazing stint through the leading studios, Montenegro never earned widespread recognition as an 'international star'. The limited impact of the majority of films in which she acted in the US, coupled with the fact that she was only on contract until 1935, kept her from earning this status. The particular nature of Montenegro's career is perhaps best understood in terms of her status as a 'transnational star, a concept that refers to stars who seek success outside their home countries (Yu 2012, Sardou 2020) but do not necessarily achieve fame on the level of the 'global popular' (During 1997, p. 815). It would also be fitting to classify her as what Ribke and Bourdon (2017) call a 'peripheral star', who was expected to enhance the national image of her homeland in Hollywood. But with the exception of her film *Sevilla de mis Amores* (1930), none of the roles Montenegro played during her American period were Spanish. This should hardly be surprising because, as Sánchez Biosca (2006, p. 135) writes: 'While Hollywood has shown interest in the stereotype of the Austro-Hungarian, the French, the German and the Russian, often reflected in the choice of actors and actresses, as well as locations, the Spanish have not elicited much interest in American popular culture, with the exception perhaps of the myth of Carmen. A Spanish actress was not considered necessary.' The disconnect between the desire for Montenegro to triumph in Hollywood as a Spanish icon and the reality of an industry with no real interest in Spanish identity posed a dilemma for the Spanish press, as we shall see.

The concept of transnationality, as extensively examined in studies on celebrities (Durovicova and Newman 2010, Yu 2012, Meeuf and Raphael 2013, Radner 2016, Ribke

and Bourdon 2017, Sandeau 2020), enables us to address the relationships between the global and the local within a constantly shifting dialectical framework. This dialectic entails a change of scale in the status of a star who is famous in their own country when faced with the chance—and dangers—of being drawn into the machinery of the Hollywood film industry (Philips and Vincendeau 2006, Miyao 2007, Navitsky 2011). However, Conchita Montenegro cannot be analysed from this comparative perspective because she was not yet a star in Spain when she began to work in the US industry. She had only played supporting roles in three films in her homeland¹ before moving to France and starring in *La Femme et le Pantin* (Jacques de Baroncelli, 1929). Her virtual anonymity in her homeland before reaching Hollywood raises questions about how the Spanish press responded to a figure whose Spanish roots still needed to be established. However, the aim of this article is not to attempt to confirm any hypothesis of Conchita Montenegro's celebrity status, even in her homeland. Instead, we aim to show that she received very little publicity from the Spanish press in the 1930s and 1940s, possibly due to the contradictions outlined above. Film reporters from that period (from the end of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship to the start of the Franco regime) wrote with a clear aim to construct a national imaginary (García Carrión 2013). But Conchita Montenegro's social or sentimental life in Hollywood seemed to be of little interest to the press, especially considering that the national discourse was striving to promote a conservative, wholesome image of womanhood. In this context, the actress's relative stardom was sometimes used but just as often silenced. As Brighenti (2007, p. 334) says, 'visibility attracts adoration and hatred, sometimes fatefully combined'; the Spanish press in the 1930s only expressed this adoration when it was interested in promoting her as a Spanish woman, and replaced

¹ *Sortilegio* (Agustín de Figueroa, 1927), *La Muñeca Rota* (Reinhardt Blothner, 1928) and *Rosa de Madrid* (Eusebio Fernández Ardavín, 1928).

hatred with 'invisibility' when her statements or the characters she played were not conducive to their construction of Spanish cinema. Studying the material published in the magazines *Arte y Cinematografía*, *Popular Films*, *Cinegramas* and *Primer Plano* (which focused on movie stars) helps us to identify this 'process' (Giles 2000) that rendered Conchita Montenegro intermittently 'visible' as a celebrity for a few years, before disappearing and then being rescued from oblivion in the twenty-first century.

The mainstream media's consequent *recycling* (Rojek 2001, p. 189) recently turned Conchita Montenegro back into a high-profile celebrity using almost always metaphorical language (Lakoff and Johnson 1991), but unlike those associated with her intermittent fame in the past. Celebrity images evolve over time. Leo Braudy (1986, p. 591) argues that 'fame is metamorphic', a cultural process constantly *in process* and therefore, as Sean Redmond and Su Holmes state, in a consequent 'process of interpretation' (2007, p. 127). A star's image, though associated with a specific historical context, is presented in changing and at times contradictory ways (Dyer 1986). However, an exploration of this metamorphosis, which is so clear in the case of Conchita Montenegro, reveals that the way the actress is promoted in the twenty-first century does not preclude still writing about her with an exacerbated nationalism, even if this is in the guise of *banal nationalism* (Billig 1995), as we shall see below.

Construction of a national star

After playing minor supporting roles in three Spanish films and then starring in *La Femme et le Pantin*, Conchita Montenegro moved to Hollywood with the advent of sound to act in the Spanish-language versions of the films that US producers were making to

retain their non-English speaking audiences.² This move was reported by the entertainment news: in 1930, an article by Carmen De Pinillos entitled ‘Nueva flor de la raza en Hollywood’ (New Spanish Flower in Hollywood) on Conchita Montenegro’s arrival in Los Angeles was published in the magazine *Popular Film*. The author praised this young star’s ambition at seeking to ‘triumph’ in Tinseltown because her success could prove valuable to the nation, ‘a conquest’ for Spain. The metaphorical language which De Pinillos used, drawn from the ‘domain’ of war (Lakoff and Johnson 1991), used by journalists from both the 1930s and the twenty-first century, indicates to what extent the actress’s American adventure was being ‘highlighted’ to celebrate the impetus of a nation which saw itself as capable of ‘conquering Hollywood’, projecting a triumphalist and conservative ideology that scarcely matched the shortcomings of the Spanish film industry at the time. Indeed, Lakoff and Johnson (1991, p. 46) state that systematic metaphors ‘highlight’ yet also conceal: ‘In allowing us to focus on one aspect of a concept (e.g., the battling aspects of arguing), a metaphorical concept can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor’. Thus, this metaphor conceals what historians like Pérez Perucha (2017) and García Carrión (2013) have diagnosed as the virtual non-existence of Spanish cinema and difficulties of creating a local film cinema.

On the other hand, in the same article, Carmen De Pinillos cited the film *La Femme et le Pantin*, but only to underscore Montenegro’s importance, as proof that she had already ‘triumphed’ in Europe, without going into further detail. The fact that this French film featured a full frontal nude scene of Montenegro was not mentioned by De Pinillos or by any other Spanish journalist of the period. The Primo de Rivera dictatorship was

² Between 1930 and 1936, more than 100 Spanish-language films were shot in Hollywood. See Heinink, J.B. and Dickson, R.B. (1990), where the authors catalogue around 175 titles.

collapsing when *La Femme et le Pantin* premiered in Barcelona and had fallen by the time the film was shown in Madrid. Although the government of the Republic decentralised censorship, the liberal and socially reformist ideology propagated by the new democratic regime had little impact. As Gubern (1977, p. 224) claims, commercial cinema during the Republic ‘was left to the control of private capital and subject to the commercial laws of supply and demand, as well as the ideological interests of the conservative, clerical right’. It is thus unsurprising that Carmen De Pinillos attached such importance to Conchita Montenegro’s education at a religious school. Likewise, through statements by the actress confessing that she was ‘not thinking about boyfriends but preferred to concentrate on her acting career’ (1930), the reporter praised the actress’s unimpeachable moral rectitude, suggesting that she may become an ‘idol of the Spanish colony in Hollywood’. We view Montenegro’s determination to ‘concentrate’ on her acting and the fact that this was deemed praiseworthy as one of the ‘extratextual signs’ (Marshall 2011) that the Hollywood film industry used to show that achieving fame depended on the ‘myth of the democratic art’ (2011, p. 91). Alternatively, as Dyer says, it was a way of showing that the ‘myth of success’ is part of a society that is ‘open enough so that anyone can reach the top, regardless of their background’. In this sense, it is not surprising that the Spanish press liked to use the same imaginary, in which ‘humility’ in the early stages of any acting career involved ‘hard work’ and ‘professionalism’ (Dyer 2001, p. 61).

Like Carmen de Pinillos, other critics also sidestepped the actress’s nude scene and highlighted her moral and religious upbringing. Her stardom can thus be interpreted as ‘a way of setting and reinforcing the dominant values’ of the day, although these values could be ‘displaced’, as will be shown below (Dyer 2001, p. 45).

By 1935, Conchita Montenegro had starred in five Spanish-language versions of English-language films, two remakes and three original Spanish-language productions made in Hollywood studios,³ as well as seven English-speaking productions.⁴ But none of them is considered a major film or was celebrated in Spain in the 1930s. Hollywood's practice of making multi-language versions of their own films was generally rejected by the journalists of the day: writing in *Popular Film*, Juan Piqueras (1931) expressed his opposition to them, dismissing them as mere copies of stories with a Hollywood imaginary—'foreign transplants'—which had none of the 'national flavour' that Spanish films should have. This discourse predominated in magazines like *Arte y Cinematografía*, which initially defended Spanish-American productions for the mere fact that they were in the Spanish language. It is important to note that the production of Spanish-American films in Hollywood diminished considerably after 1932 because of Spanish-speaking audiences' scant interest in them. However, there was one exception: *Sevilla de mis Amores* (1930, premiere in Spain in April 1931), the only Spanish version starring Conchita Montenegro which the promoters of Spanish cinema applauded. It was advertised in magazines with photographs and full-page spreads which spotlighted the actress (the cover of issue 243 of *Popular Film* featured the actress, and there was another

³ The five Spanish-language versions of English-language films were: *Sevilla de mis Amores*, a version of *Call of Flesh* (Charles Brabin, 1930); *¡De Frente, Marchen!* (filmed simultaneously with *Doughboys*, directed by Edward Sedgwick); *En Cada Puerto un Amor* (Carlos F. Borcosque), based on *Way for a Sailor* (Sam Wood, 1930); and two romantic comedies from 1933: *Marido y Mujer* (Bert E. Sebell), a version of *Bad Girl* (Frank Borzage, 1931) and *Dos Noches* (Carlos F. Borcosque), a version of *Revenge at Montecarlo* (Reeves Eason, 1933). She also starred in two remakes: *Su Última Noche* (Carlos F. Borcosque, 1931), a remake of *The Gay Deceiver* (John M. Stahl, 1926), and *Hay que Casar al Príncipe* (Lewis Seiler, 1931), a remake of *Paid to Love* (Howard Hawks, 1927). The three original Spanish-language productions in which she participated were: *La Melodía Prohibida* (Frank Strayer, 1933), *Granaderos del Amor* (John Reinhardt, 1934) and *¡Asegure a su Mujer!* (Lewis Seiler, 1935).

⁴ The films shot in English were: *Strangers May Kiss* (1931), *Never the Twain Shall Meet* (1931), *The Cisco Kid* (1931), *The Gay Caballero* (1932), *Laughing at Life* (1933), *Hell in the Heavens* (1934) and *Handy Andy* (1935).

picture of her inside). In *Popular Film* (1931), Miguel de Zárrega praised the film as ‘the first Spanish movie on a Spanish topic with Spanish characters spoken in our language and written in the Andalusian dialect’. In fact, in issues 242, 243 and 244 (1931) of the same magazine, Carmen de Pinillos published a serialised version of the film’s plot, which was a love story about a novice—played by Conchita Montenegro—who falls in love with the angelic voice of a singer, played by Ramón Novarro. Even though the apprentice nun escapes from the convent and lives under the same roof with her beloved, she retains her virginity and thus becomes a model of virtue and goodness for spectators. Two months after this premiere, Mario Arnold wrote a glowing two-page spread complete with pictures of the star in *Popular Film*, associating the character’s chaste ingenuousness with the disciplined life that the actress lived in the Mecca of Movies: ‘Conchita Montenegro is popular in Hollywood because of her artistry, her beauty, her elegance and her charm, and also because she never smokes or drinks or wrecks marriages. I believe she will soon be dwarfing all the top stars’ (1931). Clearly the press’s nationalist agenda involved ignoring the star’s private life—her social and sentimental life and possible illicit affairs in Hollywood—and instead holding her up as an exemplary Spanish woman. Tellingly, the article closed with a patriotic declaration by Conchita Montenegro herself: ‘I want to become world-famous to celebrate the name of my fatherland, to offer it all my glory’. With this biographical profile as an irreproachable woman, the actress thus participating in constructing herself as a national icon.

‘I don’t want to be Spanish’

Yet Conchita Montenegro never became that national icon. In Spain, her fame was fleeting: no other film she made in Hollywood was advertised with more than a few lines,

and pictures of her virtually disappeared from magazines. Exceptionally, on 18 February 1932, Mateo Santos broke this trend when he wrote in *Popular Film*: ‘Conchita Montenegro: attractive, elegant, with Spanish blood boiling in her veins, is the living, ardent symbol of that wholesome, artistic, archetypal Spanish woman that is yet to come into being’. He wrote nothing further about the actress, but the critic was trying to revive what Conchita Montenegro had been a just few months earlier with those words and a picture of the star wearing traditional Andalusian dress. However, no one else in the press expressed any interest in the actress. She continued to make films for two more years, but none of them was promoted in the magazines.

One reason may be that after *Sevilla de mis Amores*, the actress never again played another Spanish woman. Montenegro played an American woman in *¡De Frente, Marchen!*, a Parisian in *Hay que Casar al Príncipe*, a Londoner in *En Cada Puerto un Amor* and a New Yorker in *Marido y Mujer*. Advocates of a ‘truthful’ construction of the Spanish popular imaginary would hardly take much interest in these stories, where the characters were from faraway lands and were ‘lacking a national [Spanish] personality’ (Piqueras 1931). Conchita Montenegro may have been acting in ‘Spanish-language’ productions, but they were ‘designed and made in Yankeeland’ (Guzmán 1934). Likewise, after 1932 Spanish critics began focusing their attention on productions made in Spain, which were gradually on the rise, while the number of American productions in Spanish had fallen by a third (Gubern 1977, p. 41). Around the same time, Imperio Argentina, later nicknamed ‘*la novia de España*’ [the bride of Spain], was a rising star in Spanish cinema. Argentina played young women representative of common Spaniards (from Aragon or Andalusia) in folkloric films set in Spain. Her success lasted for years, and she was the actress who best represented mainstream cinema throughout the 1930s.

Obviously, Conchita Montenegro was in no way part of this local scene that was so celebrated by the Spanish press.

One could say that Montenegro was deliberately playing her roles in Hollywood so she would not be identified as Spanish. It was unusual for the actors in multilingual films to copy the most iconic gestures of the stars in the English-language original, but Conchita Montenegro literally mimed the American actresses, even their most less perceptible gestures, as if she were trying to offer a carbon copy of the performance of the actress who starred in the original version (Bou, 2019). It is therefore unsurprising that the Spanish press would stop writing about her: praising her actions would have been tantamount to accepting 'the Yankee invasion' and consequently giving up on the possibility of creating a Spanish film industry.

Yet we believe that there is one other key factor explaining the press's silence about the actress: One year after *Sevilla de mis Amores* premiered in Spain, the actress made the blunt declaration that she did 'didn't want to be Spanish'. In *Popular Film* on 14 April 1932, the journalist Mario Arnold wrote the report that had already spread through local newspapers and magazines that week: 'Conchita Montenegro doesn't want to be Spanish', the title headlining his melodramatic article which included sentences like 'Conchita Montenegro is turning her back on her nation... on her mother'.

The weaknesses of the Spanish press's paradoxical discursive construction of Conchita Montenegro were suddenly laid bare. Montenegro had never been a star in Spain, but her statement undermined all the nationalistic rhetoric that had been marshalled around the opportunity presented by a Spanish actress landing in Hollywood. The actress had unwittingly thwarted the nationalist press' dream of having a star who would take Spain to the international silver screen.

One spectator expressed her contempt for the actress in a long letter published in the newspaper *El Socialista* on 20 March 1932:

(...) I found out you've given up on your Spanish nationality to become a Yankee. (...) I've asked why you've turned your back on the land where you were born. I've been told that it's all about money. (...) I hasten to write you to tell you that your portrait will no longer be hanging on the blue walls of my bedroom, that you've fallen from the pedestal where I'd put you... I think that many women will do like I have and won't care if you stay to live in 'Uncle Sam's pot of gold', a home I realise you have chosen. Please don't answer this letter because I don't speak English, especially Yankee. Your former admirer,

Juanita Pérez y López

(Martí Bataller 2018, pp. 245-6)

A one-time fervent admirer of the actress was thus expressing her outrage at Conchita Montenegro's statement. Stacey (1994) claims that female British viewers in the 1950s had 'cinematic identification fantasies' with Hollywood stars and would buy the clothing and cosmetics used by the actresses; that is, they were not passive admirers but empowered women who had certain expectations of their star's image both on and off screen. In a similar vein, Juanita Pérez confesses that she had 'worshipped' Conchita Montenegro 'like a goddess', but given the actress's antipatriotic statement, she was washing her hands of Montenegro. What is particularly interesting is the nationalist interpretation that suggests something more than Juanita Pérez's mere personal opinion: she warns that 'many women will do like I have', as if she had already shared her disgruntlement with other fans. It is clear that the rhetoric of the press had taken root in viewers, turning the nationalist ideology into one of the extra-cinematic signs informing their identification fantasies.

There is no way Conchita Montenegro was unaware of the stir caused by her statement; in this sense, her proclamation can be viewed as a *transgression* (Rojek 2010, p. 31). Cook underscores that some feminist stars 'resist the role assigned to them' and offers the provocative speculation that 'perhaps this is where true star quality resides' (1993, p. XV). Indeed, the moment the actress transgressed the dominant ideology by confessing

that she did not want to be a Spaniard, she became a star with her own voice for the first time. Conchita Montenegro asserted herself as a subject, or an 'autonomous subjectivity' (Marshall 2011, p. 106), thus demonstrating her star power, a power that allowed her to 'displace' (Dyer 2001, p.45) the image of a dedicated, respectable actress that the press had constructed for her.

It is true, of course, that the star made this statement after the Spanish press had stopped writing about her films and the US press was still promoting her for *The Cisco Kid*. The *halo* or duration of her *visibility* (Brighenti, p. 332) in Spain seemed to be at risk. Most likely for that very reason, her admirer in *El Socialista* was right: Conchita Montenegro would have rather been a 'Yankee'. But the salient point here is that the actress dared to make her wish public and to transgress the image of her that had been constructed. She herself chose to *fall from the pedestal* and stop being a national icon. Rojek suggests that celebrity and transgression go hand in hand, even though the latter may ultimately *disintegrate* the image of the public persona (2001, p. 85). Conchita Montenegro virtually vanished from the press for more than two years, until the magazine *Popular Film* broke the silence on 9 August 1934 with articles once again praising the star in a two-page spread that was entitled 'Una española en pleno triunfo' (A Spanish Woman at the Height of Triumph):

We are 'proud of her success... Because Conchita Montenegro is ours, and her artistry and spirit are ours as well. She was born under the Spanish sun [...]. It doesn't matter whether Conchita has been Americanised, or even whether she is forced to accept American citizenship. [...]. Nobody, not even she herself, can take her triumph from us, just as nobody can erase from her soul the traces that Spain has left on her since her birth' (1934).

Finally *redeemed* (Rojek 2001, p. 87) from her statement, Conchita Montenegro was once again held up as a model of Spanish womanhood. The article has echoes of the patriotic

tone that Carmen de Pinillos had used when talking about the young actress in 1930 in her article ‘New Spanish Flower in Hollywood’, with the same language from the domain of war metaphors. Four years later, Conchita Montenegro was once again a symbol of the ‘race’, a national triumph abroad:

‘...And with her artistry she bewitched the stages of Europe, leaving something of the spirit of her undying race’ (1934).

This text—which has no by-line—was clearly attempting to relaunch the star. The assertion that ‘It doesn’t matter whether Conchita has been Americanised, or even whether she is forced to accept American citizenship’ acknowledges the resentment that Spanish critics felt towards Montenegro. A few months after it was published, a new situation arose which also restored the actress in equally enthusiastic terms: a new magazine, *Cinegramas*, was launched in September 1934 featuring a triumphant Montenegro as the Spanish actress who once again had ‘conquered Hollywood’. The 29 September 1934 issue devoted a full-page spread to her with the headline ‘Conchita Montenegro in Madrid. The Star, her Mother and her Husband’. In this article, her husband Raul Roulien, a Brazilian actor with whom Conchita Montenegro had co-starred in two Spanish-language films, is asked about their relationship, and he answers: ‘There are no affairs or scandals in our love. Everything is upright, totally proper and honest’. The author supported Roulien’s statements in patriotic terms: ‘This couple has a marriage by the book, Spanish style. After all Conchita is Spanish, and the blood of the Conquistadores runs through Raúl’s veins’ (Aguilar 1935). Thus, as Montenegro was regaining her star status in Spain, her conservative image was being reaffirmed as a moral role model for Spaniards. Her star persona was constructed as a responsible, upstanding family woman. Thus, as befits as an exemplary Spanish woman, Conchita Montenegro

was shown in a somewhat rigid pose, dressed quite demurely, far from the sensuality she had displayed in Hollywood. None of these articles ever again mentioned the type of characters the actress had been portraying; Conchita Montenegro was the 'pride' of the Spanish people, a fine example of a Spanish artist, but there was no interest in delving into her past.

The fact that Montenegro had been metaphorically billed as 'a new Spanish flower' even before she had acted in a Hollywood film and ended up being promoted in the same patriotic terms some years later (even though Spanish critics took little interest in the 14 films she had made in Hollywood) spotlights to what extent her fame was not constructed around the films she acted in but solely around the nationalist imaginary circulating among the intellectuals of the period. It no longer mattered that she had declared that she did not want to be Spanish; the sole goal was to hold her up as an example of Spain's moral and colonising capacity. It wasn't long, however, before Conchita Montenegro disappeared from the Spanish national imaginary once again: a story in the magazine *Cinegramas* reported in 1936 that that same year she travelled to France to star in the Robert Siodmak film *La Vie Parisienne*. The actress subsequently starred in three other films in France, in addition to being directed by her husband Raoul Rulien in the Brazilian film *O Grito da Mocidade* (1936) and its Argentine remake *El Grito de la Juventud* (1939). Later, in 1940 and 1941, she played the leading role in five historical melodramas shot in Italy before permanently returning to Spain.

The source of the contemporary narrative

Two years after the Spanish Civil War ended, the actress resumed working under the new regime in a country with a fledgling film industry that had been held back by the war but

wanted to improve production and ‘control this medium of expression in order to guarantee that it contributes to the overarching political objectives’ (Vallés Copeiro del Villar 2000, p. 51). The five films that Conchita Montenegro made in Franco-era Spain before retiring in 1944 were *Rojo y Negro* (Carlos Arévalo, 1942), *Boda en el Infierno* (Antonio Román, 1942), *Ídolos* (Florián Rey, 1943), *Aventura* (Jerónimo Mihura, 1944) and *Lola Montes* (Antonio Román, 1944).

In the years immediately after the Civil War, two important magazines were launched: *Primer plano* (1940), the Franco regime’s flagship publication for the film industry, and *Cámara: revista cinematográfica española* (1941). A review of the articles published in these two magazines from 1940 to 1944 reveals that Conchita Montenegro did not get much coverage, most likely due to the fact that ‘she was not terribly popular in Spain because she had pursued her career in France, the United States, Brazil and Italy’ (Ríos Carratalá 2010, p. 279). Alberoni (1973, p. 53) noted generally that ‘international divos’ were not viewed favourably by the proponents of nationalism because they undermined their objectives of ‘patriotic ethnocentrism’. *Primer Plano* did use a cover photo of Conchita Montenegro for its first issue (dated 20 October 1940), but not a word was written about the transnational star inside the magazine. The Spanish press did not conceal its distrust of the actress: in a later article in the same magazine dated 11 May 1941 (before the actress had returned to Spain), a journalist wrote that he was surprised that Conchita Montenegro had yet to star in ‘any film that can be considered national in any sense of the word’. However, this admonishment was mitigated by a kind of patriotic pride expressed a few lines further on, when the reporter said that in its search for European artists, RKO production company had chosen Montenegro to star in three US films: ‘Conchita’s wonderful representation of Spanish artistry is essential’. However, these RKO films were never produced, and the actress finally moved home to star in the five

Spanish films cited above. Yet we want to highlight the fact that this article again reveals a dialectic around Spain's wary suspicion of the Americanisation of its local talent. The 'local-gone-famous structure' imposed on peripheral stars breaking into the hegemonic English-speaking film world inevitably provokes tensions between the 'high expectations' about their future and a 'somehow provincial (dis)taste' for their cosmopolitanism and success (Fernández Labayen and Rodríguez Ortega 2013, p. 173). And as we have seen in the case of Conchita Montenegro, this dialectic led to contradictions in film industry publications. Thus, even though she ultimately did star in Spanish films, the reporters never expressed unanimous satisfaction with her.

In short, Conchita Montenegro's star persona was promoted very little. She was only advertised when her films were premiering, such as *Boda en el Infierno*, the winner of the Sindicato Nacional del Espectáculo award and the film that garnered the most press. Thanks to *Boda en el Infierno*, she appeared on the cover of the 31 May 1942 issue of *Primer Plano*, and her photograph appeared in several other issues as well. It is clear that the success of what was essentially a propaganda film—which criticised the Soviet Union and Spanish communists from the Civil War—was deemed more important than the actress's return to the Spanish film industry. Conchita Montenegro was praised for her 'masterful' performances, distancing her from her former status as a sex symbol (Bou and Pérez 2018, pp. 41-54) that French and US magazines had promoted in the late 1920s and early 1930s, no doubt to stress the value of local productions.

Even though the actress received little press, especially in the magazine *Primer plano*, a few of her opinions on food, sport and Christmas Eve do appear. In a report where several stars are interviewed, Conchita Montenegro (Walls 1942) states that she *hates* journalists after the interviewer asked her for her greatest weakness: 'I have to admit that my greatest flaw is my capacity for hatred (though momentary) that I feel towards you every time you

ask questions like these'. The need to convey the actress's arrogance shows that the press did not hold her in high esteem. Even on the two-page spread (and cover photograph) that the magazine *Cámara* (1942) dedicated to her with the long, bombastic title 'Conchita Montenegro's Memories. Goddesses Up Close. Fantasy and Truth of Life in Hollywood', the reporter Martin Abizanda presents her as a woman with a hectic lifestyle who is always in a flurry of activity, and he writes that it was a monumental feat just to get a few pages about her life. This exclusive is unprecedented: beyond taking up two pages and offering four photographs of the actress, the text written by Montenegro herself contains the clearest source material of the actress's reconstruction as a celebrity in the twenty-first century. Montenegro boasts of the parties she was invited to at Hollywood mansions with swimming pools, and she mentions that she was friends with Greta Garbo, Norma Shearer and Charles Chaplin. She also recounts that her first screen test in MGM Studios was alongside Clark Gable, and that the legendary actor tried to get fresh with her by kissing her longer than the scene required. Yet she also tells that she was the butt of practical jokes at first. Recalling a party in the house of director W. S. Van Dyke, she says, 'I should say that the golden rule at these parties is that you mustn't take the jokes to heart. People take some liberties there that are quite intolerable for our strict, stern Mediterranean upbringing. But over there, people really enjoy them.' Thus, amidst the boasting about her relationships with glamorous celebrities, the actress also spoke quite naturally about cultural differences between Spain and Hollywood. She explained the 'strange' habits of the 'gods of the celluloid,' thus distancing herself from them and thereby aligning her own point of view with that of her Spanish readers.

In a clever narrative construction that explicitly suggests that she has lived among 'gods' as a 'mere mortal', Montenegro presents herself as simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary (Morin 1972, [Richard](#) Dyer 1986, Marshall 2011). By sharing her

perspective on the Hollywood stars—turning herself momentarily into their spectator—she drew closer to her audience, but the fact that she had rubbed elbows with the celebrities confirms that she is not just ‘an average person’. Thus, the unpretentiousness of her story paradoxically helps to depict her as anything but ordinary. One of the key qualities of celebrities is that they project a ‘complex’ and ‘unique’ idea of individuality in order to stand out from other people, yet this personality must also be built upon a recognisable, familiar foundation that highlights their ‘naturalness’ (Dyer 1986, p. 8). In short, Montenegro took an approach that is still common among Spanish stars, namely acting ‘as a “transmitter” of the American experience’ who takes on a ‘didactic role consisting in getting closer to media culture and US celebrities, and then domesticating them for the average Spanish audience member’. In this way, the star comes across ‘as a down-to-earth, “normal” individual, who, at the same time, *creates opinion* and is on his way to become a celebrity himself’ (Fernández Labayen and Rodríguez Ortega 2013, p. 173). Conchita Montenegro’s rhetoric comes from the same kind of marketing strategies that Hollywood used to launch celebrities (Gamson 1994, p. 67). The actress’s story, with its delicate balance of the contradictions that prefigure celebrity status, supported her depiction more than 60 years later as a unique star from the early years of the sound film era in Spanish cinema.

The new contemporary narrative

Let’s take a look at the highlights in the obituary entitled ‘Conchita Montenegro Dies’ in the newspaper *20 Minutos* (2007), one of the most popular free newspapers in Spain:

The actress Conchita Montenegro, the first Spanish woman to triumph in Hollywood, died on 26 April, according to a report received yesterday. She was 96. Her full nude scene in the French film *La Femme et le Pantin* captivated the

world. She arrived in Hollywood in the 1930s. In a film shoot, she once refused to kiss Clark Gable.

These highlights sum up the direction that the new process to ‘celebritise’ the actress would take. Even though it reused the phrase that launched her in the Spanish press in the 1930s, ‘(the) first Spanish woman to triumph in Hollywood’, the focus was now on controversy and the actress’s determination. This use of the ‘sexual scandal’ as the ‘primal scene of all star discourse’ (De Cordova 2001, p. 141) had not been embraced by Spanish journalists from the last years of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship to the early years of the Franco era. At that time, the press silenced her nude scene and promoted the image of a woman serving her nation, whereas the tone of her obituary decades later spotlights the actress’s sexual anecdotes and strong personality. The goal was no longer to avoid publicising any scandal, the ‘mechanism whereby some actions, behaviours or state of affairs that were assumed to remain invisible are suddenly revealed to a wide public’ (Brighenti 2007, p. 334). Instead, it was to naturalise the actress’s uninhibited Hollywood life while sweeping aside the previous discursive construction of an irreproachably respectable, conservative young woman who had been raised and educated as a Catholic.

The two novels published about Conchita Montenegro in 2017, *Mientras Tú No Estabas* by Carmen Ro and *Mi Pecado* by Javier Moro, portray the actress with a sexual desire and modernity that are a far cry from the image cultivated in the magazines from the 1930s and 1940s. For example, in *La Vanguardia* newspaper (Quelart 2018), Javier Moro declared: ‘She couldn’t be without a man by her side. She was a rule-breaker and free...’ And in *El Mundo* (2017b), Carmen Ro said: ‘Conchita Montenegro was ahead of her time. She was a pioneer and an extremely valiant woman who broke down barriers’. A

two-page summary of Montenegro's life that appeared in *Rumore* (2018a, pp. 58-59) underscored the fact that in Los Angeles she had taken flying lessons, had an affair with Leslie Howard (who was married and had two children), 'ignored the critics' and was 'a woman ahead of her time'. And in an article tellingly entitled 'Conchita Montenegro, icon of modernity' in the digital newspaper *Okdiario* (2018), the actress's nephew, Jimmy Giménez-Arnau, claimed that his aunt 'anticipated modernity and did what she pleased'.

It is impossible to read a report in the contemporary press on Conchita Montenegro where the word 'Hollywood' doesn't appear, showing to what extent the actress's celebrity was based on her work in the American film industry. What was downplayed in the 1930s and 1940s is now magnified and even embellished. The magazine *Rumore* (2018a, p. 58) claimed that Conchita Montenegro starred in over 30 Hollywood films, when she actually only acted in 17. Such hyperbole is also used to praise her beauty: the newspaper *El País* (Galán 2018) claimed that 'she was pretty, very pretty, one of the greatest beauties in Hollywood in the 1930s. Everyone fell in love with her and she conquered them all. In fact, at the beginning of her career Clark Gable got fresh with her in a love scene and in response got a slap in the face that went down in history'. In the 'El Cultural' supplement in the newspaper *El Mundo* (2009), the writer José Rey-Ximena summarised it as follows: 'Hollywood was looking for a young diva. The year was 1930. Her charm, youth and beauty captivated American audiences. The gates to stardom, closed to most mortals, opened up to this charming Spanish woman'.

Yet her on-again-off-again relationship with Leslie Howard, first as lovers and later as partners on a diplomatic mission, clearly takes up the most space in contemporary newspapers. *El País* (Galán 2018) reports that Conchita Montenegro facilitated the actor's mission on behalf of Churchill to convince Franco to declare Spain a neutral

country: ‘Conchita had had a passionate affair that had been the talk of all Hollywood. Franco adored the actor, whom he had seen in a private screening of *Gone with the Wind*. She arranged the meeting between Franco and Leslie Howard through her husband, the diplomat Ricardo Giménez-Arnau, who overcame his jealousy to help the British agent.’

However, the mission ended tragically with Howard’s death, an event which has been interpreted as the reason Conchita Montenegro retired from the world of film one year later at the age of 32:

The main actor in the plot hatched by the secret service was Leslie Howard. He still held sway over Conchita, and Conchita [exerted her power] over the bigwigs of the regime and General Franco, who was captivated by her beauty (...). Conchita Montenegro fell into a terrible depression when her old flame was murdered. After completing the film *Lola Montes*, she retired from the world of film, burned all her mementos and refused to give any more interviews. (Rey-Ximena 2009).

At this point, the actress’s melodramatic dimension take on what Peter Brooks (1985, p. 22) calls a ‘moral occult’, where a human being’s inner tensions are sensed but cannot be understood or viewed in their entirety. There is a secret at the heart of any melodramatic tale—usually the main character’s secret—that is offered in a veiled fashion to an audience that tries to work out or imagine the part they cannot access. The fact that Conchita Montenegro was caught between two opposing political forces embodied by her old flame Leslie Howard and her Falangist fiancé Giménez-Arnau, a friend of the *Generalísimo*, places the actress inside a melodramatic plot which, beyond the romantic intrigue, conjures up the Manichean battle between Good and Evil that Peter Brooks demonstrates is at the core of all melodramatic stories. The term ‘melodrama’—as Linda Williams reminds us— ‘indicates an exciting, sensational and, above all, moving story’

(1998, p. 51). It is clear that the actress's story, with all its 'fabulous details' (Gamson 1994, p. 99), works as a narrative for contemporary readers. The fact that she ended up vanishing from the scene makes her story even more compelling. The 'Spanish Greta Garbo' becomes a 'mystery', an enigma with even more powerful romantic and melodramatic appeal in the stories imagined by the press and the novels, essential ingredients in the public lives of the majority of stars—or celebrities—to help them connect with audiences, as Gledhill (1991, p. 210) says.

Thus, stories were invented that she was always in love with Leslie Howard, that she felt guilty for his death or that she sacrificed her life as a star to be the good wife of a Falangist diplomat. Her life story continued to be recounted with melodramatic fantasy to make up for the narrative void that Conchita Montenegro left. In an interview in the 'celebrities' section of *Mujer Hoy*, Carmen Ro (2017b) stated that: 'We have forgotten her because she wanted us to. Our forgetting was her biggest success. She sacrificed herself to achieve stardom and then directed the same zeal towards disappearing. She didn't accept awards⁵ or go to the opening the Balenciaga Museum, even though she was the designer's muse. *She's intriguing*' (emphasis added). Carmen Ro's rhetorical language is melodramatic, as befits the celebrity life that the discourse has constructed for Conchita Montenegro.

⁵ The 3 May 2018 issue of *El País* reported again on the star's refusal to interact with the film world, even when she was older: 'The 1994 San Sebastián film festival sought to pay tribute to this local actress, the first Spanish woman to conquer Hollywood, but there was no way'. In fact, in his book of interviews entitled *Los que pasaron por Hollywood*, Hernández Girbal (1992, p. 12) confessed that he wanted to contact Conchita Montenegro, but 'despite expressing my interest with letters and phone calls, she didn't seem to show the least interest in appearing in this book. Her response was deafening silence. From what I can deduce, she has voluntarily turned her back on her life as an artist and has no desire to discuss it'. In his later interview with the actor José Crespo, when he found out that Girbal got no response from Montenegro, Crespo said, 'I'm not surprised. Even though we were cordial colleagues, she was always a bit strange and difficult to be with. I know that she lives in Madrid now, but she avoids having anything to do with her past as an actress and doesn't want to see anyone from the profession. I remember that she got along swimmingly with Ramón Novarro, who was another oddball' (1992, p. 123).

Nationalist melodrama

Anderson (2005) explores the need for ‘imagined communities’ to rewrite a ‘glorious’ national history. In the contemporary press—and in the statements by the two novelists—the melodramatic narrative of Conchita Montenegro revives the imagined notion of a triumphant, conquering Spain forged in the 1920s (García Carrión 2013). In his book *Banal Nationalism* (1995), Billig discusses less visible signs commonly found in the press which are rooted in the collective consciousness: he detects an everyday—or banal—nationalism in the contemporary world through routine symbols and language habits. In the newspapers mentioned above, ‘deixis is routinely used to signal the nation as the readers’ home (Billig 1995, p.11). The repetitive formula of considering the actress ‘our own’ (‘our’ being ‘Spain’, as in ‘Conchita Montenegro is *ours*, and her artistry and spirit are *ours* as well’) in the magazines from the 1930s and 1940s can also be found in the contemporary story: in *El Mundo*, José Rey-Ximena starts his article with the following rhetorical questions: ‘What happened to *our* lady? Why did she abandon *us* at the peak of her fame, without saying goodbye?’ This repeated use of ‘we’, ‘our’ and ‘us’ underscores Billig’s point that ‘nationalism is an ideology of the first person plural’ (1995, p. 70).

Similar to Lakoff and Johnson, Billig reveals to what extent the media use ‘a language of war’ (1995, p. 123) in collective stories. We have seen how the press in both centuries has repeatedly used the verbs ‘conquer’ or ‘triumph’ metaphorically, turning the star’s successes into a veiled substitute for the national epic. It is important to note that the expression ‘the first Spanish actress who conquered—or triumphed in—Hollywood’, which first appeared in the early 1930s, is the element that is echoed the most today. In the same newspaper mentioned above, *El Mundo*, Carmen Ro stated: ‘for the history of Spanish film and the history of Spain in general, I think it’s essential to revive her figure

as the first Spanish woman to triumph in Hollywood'. Similarly, the interview that *Europapress* (2018b) held with Javier Moro says: 'I am reviving these historical figures because I think that we Spaniards look at history as if it weren't important when actually it defines us. We have believed a black legend that our enemies dreamt up, and we have internalised it; we have to throw off its yoke, and these figures help us to understand that.' Thus, the actress's 'intriguing' story represents not only an individual story but a part of the history of all Spaniards that is unequivocally 'intriguing'. For this reason, her celebrity status cannot be understated—exaggerations are needed—and the fact that she didn't want to be Spanish cannot be mentioned. It is telling that neither of the two novels, whose authors had clearly read the articles published in the 1930s and 1940s, explores why Conchita Montenegro stated that she didn't want to be Spanish. Carmen Ro (2017a, p. 417) refers to it indirectly when the main character in her novel comes upon a chest filled with pictures and articles on the actress and reads the headline: 'Conchita Montenegro, our most international star, denies having applied for US citizenship because she would rather remain Basque'. No other information is provided. Similarly, in chapter 54 of his novel *Mi Pecado* (2017, p. 256), which touches on the deportations ordered during the Great Depression which the foreign actors so dreaded, Javier Moro imagines what Conchita Montenegro must have been feeling at that time:

The only thing she knew was that now, with her career on the rise and desperately in love with Leslie Howard, she didn't want to be forced to leave it all behind and go back to Spain. Her photo, dressed in a long woollen skirt and a leather hat, filling out the application for American citizenship in the Chicago offices, came out in all the newspapers in the United States with the headline: '*Would-be American*'.

Neither Ro nor Moro mentions the Spaniards' reaction to the articles published in *Cinegramas* and *Popular Film*, and they both omitted the actress's controversial statement.

Regarding the way Montenegro ended her Hollywood career, Javier Moro says that it was because of the contract restrictions at Fox (Moro 2017, p. 284). At no point does he blame Conchita Montenegro for the fact that the Hollywood studios didn't renew her contract. Nor does Carmen Ro. It is curious that neither of the two novelists cites an article published in *Hollywood* magazine in early 1935 (Maddox 1935, p. 13), which provides an overview of the actress's career and said that she had been very well received by the American press in 1931. Indeed, the US magazines had celebrated the actress's beauty and sensuality in articles illustrated with seductive pictures, like those that appear in *New Movie Magazine* (1931), *Screenland* (1931) and *Picture Play* (1931). In fact, before she was featured on the cover of the latter in 1932, it devoted a full-page spread to the star of *Sevilla de mis Amores* with the headline 'Conchita Montenegro!! There's zip and fire, lure and languor in that name!' Furthermore, the press had already offered unreserved praise for her performance in *The Cisco Kid*: in *Hollywood Spectator* (1931) they wrote 'Conchita is clever and I think we are going to hear [more] from her', and in *Silver Screen* (1931), the reporter said 'as a Spanish brusher-upper I know of none better than Conchita'. Yet the actress's popularity waned in the four ensuing years as she played less important roles. Against this backdrop, when the *Hollywood* journalist asked her about her the downturn in her fortunes, she responded with a statement that became the title of the article: *My good luck was bad luck*. Montenegro confessed to her ill temper on the sets and said that because she came from a very poor family, she had been unable to handle the pace of the luxurious life that MGM and Fox had offered her. She even admitted that she 'deserved a thrashing' for her capricious behaviour at work. What these statements reveal could have been significant literary fodder for both the novels we have cited, but neither of them seized upon this strand.

Yet our goal is not to detect whether the novelists used all the sources available in the periodical sources but to focus on the information they did choose to highlight. These choices are in keeping with an imaginary which amplifies the nationalist or patriotic discourse found in the Spanish press from the 1930s or 1940s. While the discursive construction of Montenegro's image was severely undermined by her declaration that she no longer wanted to be Spanish, and the Spanish press did not unanimously celebrate her subsequent return to Spain, in the twenty-first century she has been unreservedly hailed as a Spanish actress who was able to transcend her status as a local star and 'conquer' Hollywood. Given the sociocultural climate during her stardom, the Spanish press silenced her nude scene in *La Femme et le Pantin*, her relationship with Leslie Howard and her roles as a Latina seductress in the English-language films. Now, however, they are taken for granted without qualms, because the goal is to reframe her sojourn in Hollywood as a novelesque adventure.

Even though the contemporary press may have 'melodramatised' the star's statements, it has not created a new underlying rhetoric; in fact, it uses the same language to continue considering her part of a community that takes pride in its past celebrities.

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