

Whiteness and the Ideal of Modern Mexican Citizenship in *Tepeyac* (1917)

Mónica García Blizzard*

Abstract: While cosmopolitanism in silent Mexican film has been accurately explained as mimesis of European and US models, this article examines the implications of one aspect of the cosmopolitan aesthetic, the dominance of whiteness, for the film's representation of Mexican national identity. We analyse the film *Tepeyac* (1917) in order to illustrate how its portrayal of ideal Mexican citizenship through the privileging of whiteness is tied to dynamics rooted in coloniality, eurocentrism, and the local racial formation. In this way, the article suggests that an analysis of *Tepeyac* can form part of a larger discussion regarding the dominance of whiteness in Mexican film as a local phenomenon that is related, but not identical to, the privileging of whiteness in Hollywood.

Key words: race, whiteness, nationalism, Mexico, *Tepeyac*

La blancura y el ideal de la ciudadanía moderna Mexicana en *Tepeyac* (1917)

Resumen: Aunque el cosmopolitismo en el cine silente mexicano se haya explicado de manera convincente como mimesis de modelos europeos y estadounidenses, este artículo examina las implicaciones locales de un aspecto de la estética cosmopolita, el protagonismo de la blancura, para la representación de la identidad nacional. Se analiza la película *Tepeyac* (1917) para ilustrar cómo su representación de la ciudadanía mexicana ideal que privilegia la blancura está atada a dinámicas arraigadas en la colonialidad, el eurocentrismo y la formación racial local. De esta manera, el artículo propone que el análisis de *Tepeyac* puede formar parte de una discusión más amplia sobre el predominio de la blancura en el cine mexicano como un fenómeno local relacionado, pero no idéntico al protagonismo de la blancura en Hollywood.

Palabras clave: raza, blancura, nacionalismo, México, *Tepeyac*

La brancura e o ideal da cidadania moderna mexicana em *Tepeyac* (1917)

Resumo: Embora o cosmopolitismo do cinema mexicano tenha sido explicado como imitativa de modelos europeus e americanos, este artigo examina as implicações locais de um aspecto da estética cosmopolita, a importância da brancura, em relação a representação da identidade nacional. Analisamos o filme *Tepeyac* (1917) para ilustrar como o retrato ideal de cidadania mexicana que privilegia a brancura está ligado a dinâmicas enraizadas na colonialidade, o eurocentrismo e na formação racial local. Neste sentido, o artigo propõe também que uma análise de *Tepeyac* pode ser parte de uma discussão sobre a dominação da brancura em filmes mexicanos como um fenômeno local que está relacionado, apesar de não ser idêntico, ao predominância da brancura em Hollywood.

Palavras-chave: raça, brancura, nacionalismo, México, *Tepeyac*

Introduction

According to Paul Schroeder, silent film production in Latin America can be divided into three chronological phases: “(1) actualities (1897-1907), (2) proto-narrative cinema (1908-1915), and feature narrative cinema (1915-1930).”¹ With respect to Mexican film production during the latter phase, Ana López has noted that multiple factors contributed to a turn toward fictional narrative in the style of French film d’art. Films produced in Mexico at this time largely avoided the revolution and the revolutionary documentary due to the political restrictions introduced by the Carranza government and because there was a desire to better the image of Mexico abroad, which had been damaged because of the revolution and Hollywood’s portrayal of the country.² López also informs us that the popularity of Italian melodrama had a significant imprint on Mexican production at this time.³

It is with an understanding of this context that we can approach the film *Tepeyac* (José Ramos, Carlos E. González and Fernando Sáyago, 1917), the only feature-length title successfully completed and exhibited by the ephemeral production company, Colonial Film.⁴ The film consists of a frame narrative that tells the story of the romantically involved Mexico City dwellers, Carlos Fernández and Lupita Flores, and a lengthy flashback to the colonial period that presents the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The film begins with Carlos and Lupita enjoying a loving and wholesome courtship until Carlos receives an important mission from the president, which requires him to travel abroad. Before departing, Carlos pays a visit to Lupita, who gives him a medal of the

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¹ SCHROEDER, Paul A. "Latin American Silent Cinema: Triangulation and the Politics of Criollo Aesthetics". In: *Latin American Research Review*. N° 43.3, 2008, p.40.

² LÓPEZ, Ana. "Early Cinema and Modernity in Latin America". In: *Cinema Journal* N° 40.1, 2001, p.60.

³ LÓPEZ, Ana. *Ibid.*

⁴ DE LOS REYES, Aurelio. *Cine y sociedad en México (1896-1930)*, Vol. I. México: UNAM, 1996, p.227.

Virgin of Guadalupe to keep him safe during his journey to war-torn Europe. After his departure, the already inconsolable Lupita is further devastated when the local newspaper announces that a German submarine has sunk the French ship Carlos was sailing on. Not knowing the fate of her beloved, Lupita turns to her image of the Virgin of Guadalupe and prays for Carlos' safety. Because she is unable to sleep later that night, Lupita's mother advises that she read the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe. At this point, the film shifts to a lengthy flashback that narrates the apparition of the Virgin to Juan Diego, beginning with unsettled animosity between the conquistadors and the local indigenous population, and ending with the revelation of the image on Juan Diego's *ayate* (garment made of local fibers) and the recognition of the apparition site as holy ground by colonial religious authorities. The film then flashes forward as an exhausted Lupita falls asleep after her long reading. She awakens to the happy news (via telegram) that Carlos is safe and sound. When he returns to Mexico and visits Lupita, her mother suggests that they visit the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe. While at the religious site, Carlos and Lupita explore the surrounding area, occasionally interacting with merchants. The film ends as they reach the top of the Tepeyac Hill, proclaiming their distinct investments in the tradition of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and affirming their mutual love for each other through a kiss that is mentioned in the intertitle, but not visually presented on-screen.

Scholars have differed slightly on how to categorize the film. Aurelio de los Reyes has suggested that *Tepeyac* can be understood as an offshoot of historical films, and has highlighted the film's nationalist intention.⁵ Approaching it from a transnational perspective, Paulo Antonio Paranaguá has seen the film as part of a religious subgenre alongside *Canção da primavera* (Cyprien Ségur e Iginio Bonfiolo, Brasil, 1923) and *Los Milagros de la Divina Pastora* (Amábilis Cordero, Venezuela, 1928).⁶ He has also called attention to the film's eclectic nature; while the flashback portion tends toward religious and nationalist films, the final sequences at the basilica are a semi-documentary.⁷

⁵ DE LOS REYES, Aurelio. Ibid.

⁶ PARANAGUÁ, Paulo Antonio. *Tradicón y modernidad en el cine de América Latina*. Madrid: Fondo de Cultura Económica de España, 2003.

⁷ PARANAGUÁ, Paulo Antonio. p. 60.

Beyond the issue of classification, analyses of the film have shed light on its richness for evidencing diverse aspects of early 20th century Mexican society. Emilio García Riera has observed the film's combination of religion and patriotism.⁸ James Ramey has further explored this connection showing that the film is indicative of the negotiations that anticlerical revolutionary leadership was willing to make, given that they were faced with a predominantly Catholic population.⁹ According to Paranaguá's reading, the film aims to render the tradition of the Virgin of Guadalupe as both thoroughly national and modern. He specifies that *Tepeyac* modernizes tradition, not in the sense of modifying it substantially, but through updating it with contemporary paraphernalia, such as modes of transportation (the train Carlos travels on) and communication (the telegram he sends to Lupita).¹⁰ Also reflecting on the national question, David M. J. Wood has suggested that by linking the events in the colonial sequences and the modern frame narrative, the film presents the nation as a historical reality.¹¹ Wood also posits that *Tepeyac* presents religious tradition as a refuge from the uncertainty of modernity.¹² Expanding on the question of modernity, Laura Isabel Serna has read the film as an attempt to produce a more acceptable version of contemporary Mexican femininity through the character of Lupita, who is in the midst of the modern urban environment yet retains her Catholic piety and traditional gender role.¹³ Serna also highlights how the film promotes a notion of citizenship that hinges on heterosexuality.¹⁴ Inspired by Paranaguá's proposal to view Latin American film in relation to US, European, and local processes, Paul Schroeder argues that the film displays a decidedly *criollo* aesthetic and world view, which result from early Latin American cinema's desire to insert "the young

⁸ GARCÍA RIERA, Emilio. *Historia del cine mexicano*. México: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1986, p. 41.

⁹ RAMEY, James. "La resonancia del exilio y la conquista en el cine indigenista mexicano". In: Claudia Arroyo, James Ramey, Michael Schuessler (Eds.). *México imaginado: Nuevos enfoques sobre el cine (trans)nacional*, México D.F.: CONACULTA y Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2011, pp. 124-125.

¹⁰ PARANAGUÁ, Paulo Antonio. pp. 44-45.

¹¹ WOOD, David M. J. "Cine mudo, ¿cine nacional?" In: Claudia Arroyo, James Ramey, Michael Schuessler (Eds.). *México imaginado: Nuevos enfoques sobre el cine (trans)nacional*, México D.F.: CONACULTA y Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2011. pp. 29-51.

¹² WOOD, David M. J. pp. 32.

¹³ SERNA, Laura Isabel. *Making Cinelandia: American Films and Mexican Film Culture before the Golden Age*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014, pp. 140-143.

¹⁴ SERNA, Laura Isabel. p. 143.

republics into a Euro-American modernity that was at times liberal and at times conservative (the two principal ideologies of the ruling classes), but always patriarchal, heteronormative, and ethnoracially whitewashed.”¹⁵

Given Paranaguá’s view of the film as “mimetically cosmopolitan”¹⁶ and Schroeder’s analysis of the film’s *criollo* aesthetic, here I wish to build on these observations in order to explore the film’s privileging of whiteness and whitening, not only as imitation, but as evidence of the persistence of “the coloniality of power”,¹⁷ (also referred to as “coloniality”¹⁸) with important implications for the representation of the national. Anibal Quijano’s term, “the coloniality of power”, can be broadly understood as one “that encompasses the transhistoric expansion of colonial domination and the perpetuation of its effects in contemporary times.”¹⁹ In a similar vein and speaking specifically about film, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have put forth the notion of eurocentrism in order to discuss the ways in which the medium has registered, “the residual traces of centuries of axiomatic European domination [that] inform the general culture, the everyday language, and the media, engendering a fictitious sense of the innate superiority of European-derived cultures and peoples.”²⁰ These concepts are central to this analysis of the film, which suggests that *Tepeyac*’s favoring of the white minority as representative of the national is just one manifestation of the implications of raced asymmetrical power relations that were shaped by colonialism, and have been reconfigured, but nonetheless result in the preference for varying degrees of whitening for the representation of the Mexican nation.

I believe that by approaching *Tepeyac* through this line of inquiry, an analysis of the film can serve as an opportunity to reflect on the privileging of whiteness throughout

¹⁵ SCHROEDER, Paul A. "Latin American Silent Cinema: Triangulation and the Politics of Criollo Aesthetics". In: *Latin American Research Review*, N° 43.3, 2008, pp. 35-38.

¹⁶ PARANAGUÁ, Paulo Antonio. *Ibid.*

¹⁷ QUIJANO, Anibal. "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America". In: *Nepantla: Views from the South* 1, no. 3, 2000, pp. 553-80.

¹⁸ MORAÑA, Mabel, Enrique D. Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui. *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008. pp. 2,17.

¹⁹ MORAÑA, Mabel, Enrique D. Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui. *Ibid.*

²⁰ SHOHAT, Ella, and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. New York: Routledge, 1994, p.1.

narrative Mexican film history. For while it is true that events such as the Mexican revolution, its aftermath, and the crash of 1929 contributed to the qualitative difference between silent cinema and the subsequent studio cinema in Latin America,²¹ it is also true that the privileging of whiteness is not an aspect of narrative Mexican filmmaking that changed significantly.²² *Tepeyac* explicitly represents the main white Mexican couple as an aspirational model for the nation, as many other films will later do either implicitly or explicitly.²³ In this way the film, like much of Mexican cinema, affirms the desirability and preference for white identity, much in the way Franz Fanon has argued that historical narratives and comic books did in his native Martinique during the early 20th century.²⁴

Whiteness in Mexico

A word must be said about the contextual nature of the term “whiteness” that I use throughout the text. Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s concept of racial formation, a historically and socially situated project within which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized,²⁵ allows us to appreciate the unavoidably contextual nature of racial categories. In post independence Mexico, the positive valorization of whiteness can be understood as a simplification and reconfiguration of colonial racial hierarchies within the context of the pressing needs of nation building.²⁶ After independence, “indian” was eliminated as a legal category, however the term came to be used to connote a combination of material poverty and backwardness.²⁷ Liberals believed that many aspects of indigeneity needed to be overcome if Mexico’s inhabitants were to become true national

²¹ SCHROEDER, Paul A. p. 39.

²² RAMÍREZ BERG, Charles. *Cinema of Solitude: A Critical Study of Mexican Film, 1967-1983*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992, p.57.

²³ TIERNEY, Dolores. *Emilio Fernández: Pictures in the Margins*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007. pp. 86-92.

²⁴ FANON, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 1967, pp. 146-147.

²⁵ OMI, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. New

York: Routledge, 1994, p.126.

²⁶ LOMNITZ-ADLER, Claudio. *Exits from the Labyrinth*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, pp. 263-280.

²⁷ LOMNITZ-ADLER, Claudio. pp. 276.

citizens,²⁸ and degrees of social whitening were possible through a combination economic improvement and acculturation.²⁹ By the late 19th century, although the notion of whiteness had changed significantly since the colonial period, by and large it continued to be the only condition in which material wealth and high status could be enjoyed together.³⁰ Its positive meaning was further enforced when progress came to be understood as attaining the level of development of the United States or Europe, and became an explicit national goal.³¹ This meant that through the post revolutionary period, whiteness continued to be a Mexican ideal, which is reflected in the official post revolutionary ideology that incorporates aspects of indigeneity symbolically and exalts *mestizaje*³² but is in effect more heavily invested in non-indigenous culture, institutions, and traditions. This social history results in a paradoxical reality elucidated by Claudio Lomnitz-Adler in the following passage:

Mexico is a society where Indian ancestry has been proudly acknowledged. On the other side, it is a society that clearly values whiteness as both a status symbol and as an aesthetic. Moreover, as opposed to racism in the United States, where blackness is marked (negatively) and whiteness claims the majority position, in Mexican racism it is whiteness that is marked (positively) and brownness claims the unmarked majority position.³³

Through its examination of whiteness in *Tepeyac*, this article aims to engage in a discussion that addresses how film and media in Mexico has participated in the process

²⁸ CASTELLANOS GUERRERO, Alicia. "Para hacer nación: discursos racistas en el México decimonónico". In: Gómez Izquierdo, José Jorge (Ed.). *Los caminos del racismo en México*. Mexico D.F.: Plaza y Valdés, 2005. pp. 89-116 and LOMNITZ-ADLER, Claudio. p. 274.

²⁹ Knight, Alan. "Racism, Revolution, and Indigenismo; Mexico, 1910-1940". In: Richard Graham (Ed.) *The idea of race in Latin America, 1870-1940*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990, pp. 71-113.

³⁰ LOMNITZ-ADLER, Claudio. Ibid. Alan Knight has noted that upwardly mobile exceptions to this rule, such as Porfirio Diaz, underwent a discursive whitening of their social identity after rising to prominence, which can be observed in how different historians described his ethnic origin (p. 73). This illustrates that while the racial formation of the 19th century had evolved from that of the colonial era allowing for the participation in elite economic and political circles of those who had been previously excluded, it still required a discursive negotiation of their identity that would aligned them with whiteness.

³¹ LOMNITZ-ADLER, Claudio. pp. 274-276.

³² LOMNITZ-ADLER, Claudio. pp. 278-279.

³³ LOMNITZ-ADLER, Claudio. p. 280.

of privileging whiteness as an ideal that becomes mobilized through visual representational conventions, effectively perpetuating and enacting the positive and preferential marking of the white minority. However, just as the Mexican construction of whiteness should not be confused with the WASP (white Anglo-Saxon protestant) ideal traditionally promoted by Hollywood, (and within which white Mexicans such as Dolores del Río would be cast as ethnic Others) I propose that the existing theorization of whiteness in film by Anglo-American scholars must be adjusted in order to understand the way in which film and media has enforced white privilege in Mexico. Writing about western film, Richard Dyer has argued that whiteness acquires its power because it attributes to itself a universal quality, an ability to represent anything because whiteness claims not to be a particularizing quality.³⁴ Although Mexican film has utilized whiteness in a similar way,³⁵ I suspect that in the case of Hollywood, the use of whiteness to represent anything and everything is strongly supported and rooted in the demographic reality of the U.S., particularly in the era of classical cinema. However in Mexican society, whiteness has always been a particularizing quality because it has been tied to socioeconomic privilege and because it has historically included only a minority of the population. Therefore, the illusion of a white homogeneity was never a possibility there, which I argue confers upon the Mexican film and media's privileging of whiteness a unique ideological force that requires further inquiry.

As Shohat and Stam have shown, a film's eurocentrism can more convincingly be brought to light through formal analysis.³⁶ It is only through close textual analysis that we can identify how the film uses its specificities as a visual medium to contribute to a larger discursive framework. In this vein, my examination of *Tepeyac* will be carried out with the purpose of illustrating the ways in which it privileges whiteness and promotes it as an ideal for Mexican national identity. An exploration of the film's representation of indigeneity will be central to the interpretation of *Tepeyac* that is presented here.

³⁴ DYER, Richard. *White*. London: New York: Routledge, 1997, pp. 3-12.

³⁵ TIERNEY, Dolores. *Ibid.*

³⁶ SHOHAT, Ella, and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 208.

Privileging Whiteness in *Tepeyac*

The narrative structure of *Tepeyac* allows us to appreciate the significance of the characters in the 20th century love story as essential components of the overall film. The melodramatic portions in which the film shows Carlos, Lupita, and her mother almost exclusively provide the context within which the colonial sequences are inserted because their content is presented as a way for Lupita to distract herself from the absence of her lover. While it has been suggested that the account of the Virgin of Guadalupe is the film's primary story,³⁷ I believe this view limits our ability to engage the way in which both portions work together to resignify the religious content. The significance of *Tepeyac*'s narrative structure has already been noted as an aspect of the film that works to present religious tradition as compatible with modernity.³⁸ This insight suggests that despite the duration of the colonial story, the frame narrative is indispensable for the film's overall message, which is not to merely reproduce the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe but to put it in the service of modern nation building in the present.³⁹ Speaking about the film, David M. J. Wood has clearly articulated this point:

Its force as an effective nationalist and historical national narrative is rooted in its linking of two time periods: the mythical past of Juan Diego, an Indian whose faith in the Virgin who appears to him on the hill of Tepeyac allows for the incorporation of his race (supposedly barbarous) into *criollo* civilization, and the present, which makes the story relevant the contemporary Mexican public.⁴⁰

³⁷ RAMEY, James. pp.127.

³⁸ PARANAGUÁ, Paulo Antonio. Ibid.

³⁹ In *La aventura del cine mexicano en la época de oro y después*, Jorge Ayala Blanco observes that the representation of indigeneity in Mexican film has often been conditioned by "middle class ideology" and the political rhetoric of the moment (p. 145). Although he does not mention *Tepeyac* specifically, he observes the importance of *indigenismo* for the elaboration of a patriotic discourse immediately following the revolution (Ibid). Clearly, *Tepeyac*'s representation of indigeneity in the colonial period is conveyed for the purpose of rearticulating a specific proposal for postrevolutionary national identity.

⁴⁰ "Su fuerza como una eficaz narrativa histórica nacional y nacionalista radica en su vinculación de dos tiempos: el tiempo pasado y mítico de Juan Diego – un indio cuya fe en la virgen, que se le aparece en el cerro del Tepeyac, permite la incorporación de su raza (supuestamente bárbara) a la civilización criolla- y el tiempo presente que vuelve relevante la historia para un público del México

The importance of the modern plot and its white urban characters is further made explicit through their sentimentalization via the melodramatic mode. The frame narrative within which the colonial account is inserted hinges on the separation of the couple and the anguish it causes for Lupita. Her pain is underlined not only through expressive gesturing during sustained medium shots, but also through the hyperbolic language in the intertitles that describe her state. For example, upon Carlos' departure, the following text dramatizes Lupita's condition "Carlos' voyage has caused a shadow of incurable sorrow to descend upon the happy life of his beloved."⁴¹ The extreme despair conveyed here is contrasted by the ecstatic joy Lupita experiences when she later receives a telegram from Carlos notifying her that he is safe and en route to Mexico: "The morning's first ray of sunshine brings a ray of happiness to the afflicted woman"⁴² and "With her heart overflowing with joy, Lupita prays at the feet of the image to which she is devoted."⁴³ Although some intertitles describe Juan Diego's modest material conditions and suggest that the Spanish captured by the indigenous meet an unfortunate fate, they do not dramatize any of the colonial characters' emotional experiences in the same depth or complexity that occur with Lupita or her counterparts. This device elicits greater emotional investment in the contemporary Mexican national subjects and not with the historically distant representatives of pure indigeneity or hispanicity. However, the national subjects towards whom the film foments a sense of endearment also happen to be white urban Mexican characters. Therefore, the film aims to generate identification and emotional attachment to the national, but the representation of the national is significantly skewed toward whiteness, which is in turn indicative of the persistence of coloniality. In this way, the film mobilizes affect to support a vision of national identity that privileges whiteness as an ideal, and can be placed within the tradition of melodramatic films that, as Ana López has indicated, play a role in creating negotiated proposals of Mexican national identity.⁴⁴

contemporáneo" (WOOD, David M. J. pp. 31-32). Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Spanish to English are my own.

⁴¹ "El viaje de Carlos puso sobre la risueña vida de su novia la sombra de una pena incurable".

⁴² "El primer rayo de sol de la mañana, trajo a la apesada novia un rayo de alegría".

⁴³ "Y con el corazón desbordante de gozo, Lupita reza a los pies de la imagen de su devoción".

⁴⁴ LOPEZ, Ana. "Tears and Desire: Women and Melodrama in the 'Old' Mexican Cinema". In: King, John, Ana M. López, and Manuel Alvarado (Eds.). *Mediating two worlds: cinematic encounters in the Americas*. London: BFI, 1993, pp. 152.



Lupita's gestures and facial expression externalize her distraught state.
Courtesy Filmoteca UNAM.



Lupita is ecstatic with joy upon hearing that her beloved is safe.
Courtesy Filmoteca UNAM.

The film's projection of a whitened ideal for the nation is reinforced by the ambivalent representation of indigeneity in the colonial era. At the beginning of the colonial sequence, the spectator is shown indigenous characters capturing a Spanish conquistador, and taking him to a cave to be sacrificed to the goddess Tonatzin. The intertitles that accompany these actions cast them in a negative light by associating them with vengeance, ("The conquered race does not waste the chance to take revenge on a white man for the humiliations they have suffered"⁴⁵), and establishing the conquistador as victim, ("The Indians preserve the ancient practice of sacrificing enemy prisoners and take a victim for Tonatzin.")⁴⁶ Although the first intertitle mentioned does suggest that the indigenous have suffered injustices⁴⁷, implying mutual aggression, it is significant that what is presented on screen for the spectator to witness is violence on the part of indigenous people, in contrast to merely narrating Spanish aggression through text. The indigenous are further discredited when pious adherence to Catholicism is presented as the only way for conqueror and conquered to live peacefully, effectively casting their traditional religion in an unfavorable light. Despite the later recognition of Juan Diego's piety, overall the colonial episode presents an ambivalent view of indigeneity as a potentially threatening reality that must be ordered and guided through western influence.

Beyond the emotional and narrative privileging of the 20th century cosmopolitan couple as representative of the Mexican ideal in the present, the film reinforces the association between whiteness and the national in another significant way: through the whitening of the Virgin of Guadalupe herself. The film explicitly establishes the Virgin as a national icon with an opening quote by the nineteenth-century Mexican author, Ignacio Altamirano: "The day that the virgin of Tepeyac is not worshipped in this land, it is certain that not only will the Mexican nation have disappeared, but even

⁴⁵ "La raza conquistada no desaprovecha la ocasión de vengar en un blanco las humillaciones sufridas".

⁴⁶ "Los indios conservaban la vieja práctica de sacrificar prisioneros enemigos y llevan una victima para Tonatzin".

⁴⁷ RAMEY, James. pp. 128.

the memory of those who live in Mexico today...all consider her an essentially Mexican SYMBOL.”⁴⁸

Although according to Mexican popular tradition the Virgin of Guadalupe revealed herself to Juan Diego in the form of an indigenous woman, in the film this aspect of the apparition story is not made explicit. In contrast, we can observe that Juan Diego’s indigeneity is frequently noted, and that throughout the film he is often referred to simply as “el indio.” Thus by comparison, Juan Diego is always ethnically marked, while the opposite is true of the Virgin.⁴⁹ The difference in the way the film marks them ethnically is further emphasized through casting. The indigeneity of Juan Diego and his family is marked though the darker skin tone and facial features of the actors who play these parts, and it is accentuated through costume (in particular with the women’s long thick braids). The actress who plays the Virgin of Guadalupe, Beatriz de Córdova, has much lighter skin than the indigenous characters, and no effort is made to mark her physically as indigenous. This is clear if we compare the film’s image of the Virgin, with its image of indigenous womanhood (Juan Diego’s aunt). By explicitly and repeatedly emphasizing the indigeneity of Juan Diego on the one hand, and marking the Virgin of Guadalupe only as Mexican (“an essentially Mexican SYMBOL”) while representing her with lighter skin, the film continues to assert a preferential association between the national and whitening. It is possible that the decision to cast the virgin with lighter skin is an effort to present her as a synthesis of indigenous and European elements in Mexico (as the film’s opening quote by Ignacio Altamirano⁵⁰ could suggest) and not simply to

⁴⁸ “El día en que no se adore a la virgen del Tepeyac en esta tierra, es seguro que habrá desaparecido, no solamente la nacionalidad Mexicana, sino hasta el recuerdo de los moradores de la México actual...todos la consideran como un SIMBOLO esencialmente mexicano” (emphasis in the intertitle).

⁴⁹ One possibility for the absence of the mention of the Virgin’s indigeneity is the fact that it would have been common knowledge for the spectators, and therefore considered unnecessary to include in the intertitles. However, this does sufficiently explain why Juan Diego is consistently marked as indian while she is not because Juan Diego’s indigenous identity is as well know in Mexico as the Virgin’s.

⁵⁰ “Los mexicanos adoran a la Virgen de consuno: los que profesan ideas católicas, por motivos de religión; los liberales, por recuerdo de la bandera del año 10; los indios, porque es su única diosa; los extranjeros por no herir el sentimiento nacional; y todos la consideran como un SÍMBOLO esencialmente mexicano”

align her with Europeanness. However, the point remains that the recuperation of indigeneity for explicit national purposes in the film requires a degree of whitening, resulting in a Virgin who is theoretically but not perceptibly indigenous. Looking at the film as a whole, we can observe that though the cosmopolitan aesthetic of the melodramatic narrative may be derived from foreign models, in representing the white Mexican couple as the ideal of the Mexican nation and the whitening of its icons, the film participates in upholding whiteness as an ideal for the nation.



Beatriz de Córdova, the actress who plays the part of the Virgin of Guadalupe.
Courtesy Filmoteca UNAM.

(The Mexicans worship a Virgin of Common Consent: those who profess Catholic ideas, for reasons of religion; the liberals, in memory of the flag of '10; the Indians, because she is their only goddess; the foreigners in order not to offend national pride; and all consider her an essentially Mexican SYMBOL) [emphasis in the intertitle].



Juan Diego's aunt, an example of *Tepeyac's* representation of indigenous womanhood in the colonial era.

Perhaps unwittingly, the film calls attention to the fictional nature of its representation of the national. In the portion of the film that Paranaguá has described as “a semi-documentary,”⁵¹ Carlos and Lupita visit the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe and explore the surrounding areas. In these scenes the actors are shot walking through groups of non-professional actors who ostensibly happened to be there that day. Their behavior suggests that they were not included in the film as fictional characters, but as authentic street performers and passersby captured in the film's closing *mise en scene*.⁵²

⁵¹ PARANAGUÁ, Paulo Antonio. p. 60.

⁵² It is possible that the filming of these people can be understood as an example of the early cinema practice of advertising a future filming in a public space in order to promote the attendance of non-actors at the filming and exhibition of the film (see de los Reyes). Although we do not know whether the filmmakers included these people intentionally or unintentionally, the shots nonetheless make plain a contrast between narrative's characters and the non-actors.

Few of them notice the camera. Those that do notice it, stay still and stare at the camera directly. The majority simply walks by, going about their business. They appear on screen for only a few seconds and are not given any significance in the narrative. The intertitles written for the film do not refer to these people directly in any way.⁵³

As the couple moves through the crowd, the contrast between the comfortable white cosmopolitans of the narrative and the non-actors is blatant. Carlos and Lupita are dressed handsomely.⁵⁴ He sports a fine suit and Fedora, while she shows off an extravagant hat and fur garment. The non-actors wear much more humble clothes. Women wear long peasant skirts and *rebozos* while men have on simple white trousers, basic shirts and *sombreros*. The difference in clothing highlights the contrast in the economic status of the narrative representatives of Mexico, and that of the masses of incidentally filmed passersby shown throughout the sequence. Not coincidentally, Carlos and Lupita also stand out because of their whiteness. In this sequence we see a visual manifestation of the contrast between nonwhites and what Guillermo Bonfil Batalla has termed, “el México imaginario,⁵⁵” (the imaginary Mexico). For him, this term describes, “...a country of the minority organized according to western norms, aspirations and objectives that are not shared (or are shared from another perspective) by the rest of the nation’s population; that sector which incarnates and propels the dominant project of our country.”⁵⁶ Thus despite the film’s

⁵³ While we can contemplate the possibility that the opening quote by Altamirano (see footnote 50) gestures toward the racial variety that is visible in this shot, I believe the connection between the text and this particular shot is tenuous at best. As James Ramey notes on pages 126-127 of his article, the quote by Altamirano is a passage from his 1884 text, *Paisajes y leyendas. Tradiciones y costumbres de México*, and was written to describe early 19th century Mexican society. Furthermore, the spectator is not explicitly incited to make the connection between that text and this shot because of the lengthy amount of time (practically the entire duration of the film) that passes between the intertitle containing the quote and the image discussed here.

⁵⁴ María Gabriela Sandoval Méndez has also observed the elegance of the characters’ clothing in this sequence, and has suggested that it is one example of the ways in which several early Mexican films endeavored to create a civilized image of Mexican society (see Sandoval Méndez pp. 92). I am grateful to Laura Isabel Serna for pointing me toward this source.

⁵⁵ BONFIL BATALLA, Guillermo. *México profundo. Una civilización negada*. México DF: Grijalbo, 1990, p. 10.

⁵⁶ BONFIL BATALLA, Guillermo. *Ibid.* “...un país minoritario que se organiza según normas, aspiraciones y propósitos de la civilización occidental que no son compartidos (o lo son desde otra perspectiva) por el resto de la población nacional; a ese sector, que encarna e impulsa el proyecto dominante en nuestro país, lo llamo aquí el México imaginario”.

establishment of the white upper middle class as the national ideal, through the basilica sequences a more candid glimpse of Mexican material and social reality seeps into the film, effectively unsettling the diegetic narrative's aspirational and misleading view of Mexico.



Carlos and Lupita on their excursion at the basilica among non-actors.

“The Third Eye”

Given the historical fact of the conquest and the mixture among European and indigenous populations, the film's desire to present Mexico as modern and white requires a managing of the country's ethnic reality. The film recognizes the presence of Indians in the “epic age of the conquest,⁵⁷” however, ethnic variety in contemporary Mexico is only marginally represented at the very end of the film in its basilica sequence. In this way the film enunciates a particular discourse regarding the Mexican nation, implying that it begins with an encounter between distinct groups, and concludes with a homogenous modern Mexican nationhood in the present. This ideological goal, evident in the frame narrative that attempts to “contain” the place of the indigenous, is severely

⁵⁷ “los tiempos épicos de la conquista”.

problematized by the fact that in the basilica scenes ethnic (and socioeconomic) difference is plain for the spectator to see, leaving him/her to question what exactly the basis of national homogeneity might be. Clearly, the film posits that the adoration of the Virgin of Guadalupe is a cultural characteristic that performs this task.

The stark contrast between the idealized protagonists of the narrative and the crowds of people filmed at the basilica is not the only way in which the film *Tepeyac* reveals the constructed nature of the raced national discourse it projects. At specific moments in the film, ethnically marked subjects display an awareness of the delimited space that this kind of national discourse allocates to indigeneity. Because the insistence on common nationhood in the present requires a recognition of difference only in the past, there is, as discussed above, a clear ethnic marking of the conquest era indigenous characters through phenotype, costume, and intertitles. Interestingly, the desire to emphasize indigeneity as a historical reality is evident even in a non-diegetic portion of the films. Just after the quote by Ignacio Altamirano, several of the film's actors are presented by their real names in front of a curtain, drawing on the theatrical tradition.⁵⁸ First Beatriz de Córdova, who plays the Virgin of Guadalupe, is presented. When she appears on the screen in a medium close up, she moves her head very slowly from right to left (from the spectator's perspective), gracefully bowing her head when it reaches the center. She repeats this action as her head moves from left to right. Her intentionally stylized demeanor befits the character she plays, and in this way she presents herself as the character. Second, Pilar L. Cotta, the actress who plays Lupita, is presented. In her medium close up she initially appears with her back almost entirely turned toward the camera. She slowly and coquettishly turns her body so that her left shoulder is facing the camera, revealing the extravagant hat and fur that Lupita wears in the final sequences of the film. Here too, the actress is presented as the character she will dramatize. However, when Gabriel Montiel, the actor who plays Juan Diego, is presented something very different happens. The actor is shown emerging from the curtain in a fitted black suit, complete with a waistcoat, crisp white shirt, tie, and

⁵⁸ PARANAGUÁ, Paulo Antonio. p. 45.

handkerchief. His hair is parted down the middle and combed back. His gaze is sober and focused, and he quickly turns his head from right to left, and then from left to right in a neutral stance. His eyes turn as if to look at something located off camera, above and to his left. There is a cut, and we then see Gabriel Montiel remerge from the curtain dressed as Juan Diego, wearing a simple white tunic that leaves his chest semi-exposed. The garment is tied with a thin cord at the waist, and over it he wears a meager cloak. His hair is down and disheveled, and he has a headband made of cloth around his head. Beyond his change in costume, his demeanor is entirely different than before. He stands with his shoulders slumped downwards and with his hands crossed over each other at his lower chest, denoting humility and submissiveness which he emphasizes by bowing with his head and shoulders. His eyes are squinted and wander aimlessly as his mouth is slightly open, conveying simple-mindedness. He bows his head for a second time visually reiterating his docility.



Gabriel Montiel as himself. Courtesy Filmoteca UNAM.



Gabriel Montiel as Juan Diego. Courtesy Filmoteca UNAM.

Drawing on the work of Frantz Fanon and W.E.B. Dubois, Fatimah Tobing Rony has employed the term, “the third eye,” in order to describe the ability of raced subjects to perceive how they are othered within dominant discourses, and particularly through forms of visual representation. I believe that the double presentation of Gabriel Montiel, the only actor with whom this occurs in the film, is indicative of seeing with the third eye, and betrays an anxiety concerning modern Mexican national homogeneity in the present. Clearly there is an effort to assert a separation between the actor as a modern subject, and the actor in the role of the indigenous character he plays,⁵⁹ which is created through an explicit change in dress and body language. This emphasis implies a lack of confidence in the spectator’s ability to interpret Montiel’s rendition of Juan Diego as artifice, most probably because of the actor’s phenotype, which marks both Juan Diego’s and Montiel’s indigenous ancestry. We cannot know whether his double presentation was the actor’s decision, or if the filmmakers insisted on it. Given that both the narrative

⁵⁹ RAMEY, James. pp. 129.

and Montiel's performance designate to Juan Diego the characteristics of backwardness and docility, following the first hypothesis, the double presentation may be an effort to safeguard the actor from having these characteristics attributed to himself. In the second scenario, it could be that the filmmakers wish to underscore that people of indigenous ancestry in the present are able to fully participate in Mexican modernity. Whether these shots constitute Montiel shielding himself from racial stereotypes, or the filmmakers (*criollos*⁶⁰ who as Mexicans are raced by association from the US and European perspective) defending their representation of Mexico before national and (potentially) international spectators, I argue that the double presentation of Montiel is indicative of an underlying anxiety about the relationship between indigeneity and modern Mexican national identity. This is even more apparent if we consider that the actors who play the conquistadors are shown in the opening credits in their period costumes, yet it was not considered necessary to present them again in contemporary clothing to assure the spectator of the actors' participation in modern Mexican society. The only moment in which the film appears to recognize vestiges of indigeneity present in the 20th century urban landscape occurs while the couple is visiting the basilica. After Lupita and Carlos have been shown walking through the crowd, there is a series of five shots in which Lupita and Carlos are nowhere to be found. Instead, the camera films a group of individuals who have either full or partial indigenous ancestry. Most of them are wearing feathered headdresses while others wear masks. Three of the men are part of a street performance that involves dancing, which the others watch. The men attempt, in fits and starts, to perform a dance for the camera. The insertion of these shots, which exclude the narrative's characters, clearly implies that this performance is of some interest. There is no text that refers directly to the dance sequence, and our attention is quickly redirected to Carlos and Lupita with the intertitle, "among the traditional festival's delights."⁶¹ Although this residue of pre-colonial culture is plain for the spectator to see without direct mediation, as in the previous example, the film carefully presents it, this time within the space of the festival,⁶² and as an uncommon and marginal occurrence compared to the reality of modern daily life in which there is no interaction with non-white Mexicans. In

⁶⁰ SCHROEDER, Paul A. pp. 35-39.

⁶¹ "Entre las vendimias de la clásica feria".

⁶² RAMEY, James. pp. 132.

this way too, the film manages the hints of indigenous ethnicity in order to preserve and project the ideal of a white modern nation.

Conclusion

Here, I have carried out a close reading of *Tepeyac* in order to illustrate how the film privileges whiteness as the model for Mexican citizenship and national identity in the early 20th century. While *Tepeyac's* aesthetics have accurately been identified as cosmopolitan, I suggest that one aspect of this cosmopolitanism, the dominance of whiteness, has important implications in the Mexican context. In the film whiteness is made to be representative of the nation through the projection of Lupita and Carlos as the ideal citizen-couple, and through the whiter representation of la Virgen de Guadalupe herself. Furthermore, the film manages the visualizations of nonwhites by locating them in the past, or at the margins of everyday modern life. In analyzing *Tepeyac*, I have considered the film's relevance within a broader conversation about whiteness in narrative film and media in Mexico. Although the Mexican film industry would change significantly in myriad ways, the fantasy of whiteness will persist through time, not only because of mimesis, but because the positive valorization of the aspects that were imitated depended on a still pertinent racial asymmetry rooted in coloniality.

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* **Mónica García Blizzard** received her B. A. in Romance Languages (Spanish and Italian) and M.A. in Italian Studies from the University of Notre Dame. She holds an M.A. in Latin American Literatures and Cultures from The Ohio State University, where she is currently a PhD candidate in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese. Her research focuses on race, gender, and national discourses in Mexican film and visual culture. E-mail: garcia-blizzard.1@osu.edu.