

PRÓLOGO (PROLOGUE)

In the (very) short story “Frente a la pantalla” (Before the screen), published in the Mexico City weekly *El Universal Gráfico* in 1926, María—a common name for women in Mexico and thus perhaps an everywoman—goes to the movie theater alone to enjoy a “cinedrama” announced as “*the* cinematic super production.”¹ Surrounded by couples and “carloads of entire families,” she waits with her fellow spectators for the evening’s program to begin. The cinema’s jazz band attempts to smooth over the projectionist’s delay, while various advertisements projected on the screen urge the public to patronize a provider of unadulterated milk, a restaurant, “Los Antojitos Michoacanas,” and other local establishments.

Finally, the show begins. Tonight’s feature is the last installment of a serial, *Abnegation*, whose plot concerns the frustrated romance of a heroine, “alone, weak, and unprotected,” and her “completely noble” hero. During the course of the emotional final reel in which the pair are finally reunited, María’s neighbor slides first a foot, then both hands, and ultimately both feet and both hands over María’s exposed calves. Realizing that these attentions were not “part of the program,” María slaps her molester, who is subsequently escorted out of the theater by the police, accompanied by the shouts of the audience—who “having seen the nobility of a celluloid man became indignant in the face of such a rogue.”²

This short sketch of moviewatching in urban Mexico in the mid-1920s presents a constellation of characteristics that defined Mexican film culture from the end of the revolution to the mid-1930s. It features a foreign film, advertised in the hyperbolic register common to studio marketing departments, that offers a perhaps unrealizable vision of romantic love as the source of all suffering and all happiness. The film’s presentation involves popular American music and advertisements, which encourage the public to participate in local manifestations of the consumer culture that was spreading across the globe. Inside the cinema the anonymity of new public amuse-

ments provide a cover for sexual activity (whether invited or not), strangers from a range of walks of life form a community of viewers who filter their everyday experiences through the stories and images they have seen on the screen, and the state exercises its power over citizens' behavior.

This story's appearance in a popular, illustrated publication hints at the circulation of U.S. films and film culture across Mexico. It is a fitting figure for the film culture, constructed out of transnational and local elements that took shape in Mexico in the period between the end of the revolution and the emergence of Mexican national cinema as a significant cultural and economic force. If, as Dolores Tierney suggests, some analyses of classical Mexican cinema privilege audiences at the expense of texts,³ the reverse has been true of English-language scholarship on the silent period, which tends to privilege the few films that survive at the expense of the popular experience of Mexican audiences. This book seeks to redress this imbalance by focusing not on Mexican silent films, but on Mexican silent film culture in both Mexico and Mexican migrant communities in the United States, audiences that were bound by affective ties to the nation. Focusing on exhibition, distribution, and reception rather than production, I unpack the meanings made out of Mexican encounters with U.S. films to reveal the way that the cross-border circulation of cultural objects (films), cultural formations (fan culture, for example), and individuals (migrants) created a film culture that was at once transnational and national.