

A Sentimental and Sexual Education: Men, Sex, and Movie Theaters in Mexico City, 1920–2010

Anne Rubenstein*
York University

Alongside all the other functions of movie theaters over the past century, in Mexico City men have used them as sexual spaces. A few cinemas like the Cine Teresa became notorious as sites in which men could find male sex partners. Yet even there, behaviors of and narratives by men who had sex with men mirrored those by men who had sex with women. This article focuses on the history of masculine sexuality in Mexico City movie houses from 1920 to 2010. The presence of women in these houses, either as workers, on the screen, or in men's memories, along with the presence of men who went there to watch heterosexual sex on the movie screen, suggests that moviegoing in Mexico City can be analyzed through the lens of gender history as much as through that of the history of sexuality. Despite major social, cultural and technological changes over the twentieth century, examining movie audiences in terms of the histories of sexuality and gender reveals a startling amount of continuity in movie theaters as spaces of male sexuality.

Keywords: cinema, gender history, history of sexuality, masculinities, Mexico City, movie audiences, queer history, sex.

Junto con otras funciones de los cines durante el siglo pasado en la ciudad de México, los hombres han usado estas salas como espacios sexuales. Algunos cines como el Cine Teresa se hicieron famosos como espacios en los que los

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hombres podían encontrar parejas sexuales masculinas. Incluso en dichos espacios, sin embargo, los comportamientos y narraciones de los hombres que tenían relaciones sexuales con otros hombres reflejaban aquellas de hombres que tenían relaciones sexuales con mujeres. Este artículo se centra en la historia de la sexualidad masculina en las salas de cine de la ciudad de México de 1920 a 2010. La presencia de mujeres en estas salas, ya sea como trabajadoras, en la pantalla o en los recuerdos de los hombres, junto con la de hombres que iban a ver sexo heterosexual en la pantalla, sugiere que la experiencia de ir al cine en la ciudad de México puede analizarse tanto desde la perspectiva de la historia de género como de la historia de la sexualidad. A pesar de los grandes cambios sociales, culturales y tecnológicos durante el siglo XX, el estudio del público en las salas cinematográficas desde la perspectiva de historias de sexualidad y género revela una sorprendente continuidad de los cines como espacios de sexualidad masculina.

Palabras clave: asistentes a cines, ciudad de México, historia de los cines, historia de género, historia de la sexualidad, historia queer, masculinidades, sexo.

Introduction

This article examines men's sexual behaviors in Mexico City's movie theaters across the 1920–2010 period in the context of other things men did in movie theaters. It ends with a study of the Cine Teresa, which showed hard-core pornographic movies to an almost entirely male audience from 1994 to 2011. These movies featured women and showed heterosexual sex acts that appealed to some men, but the Cine Teresa also sheltered men who wanted to have sex with each other, and the theater grew notorious in the city and beyond as a space where men went for same-sex encounters. The men who masturbated while watching the screen, by all accounts, shared the movie theater peacefully with the men who ignored the screen while engaging in sex with each other.

How did this unusual situation develop? Answering this question requires an examination of the range of ways in which men behaved in movie houses over a long period of time. Hence, I have divided this essay into three parts. The first section describes the written and unwritten rules, norms, and expectations for moviegoing that developed in the transition from live theater to cinema in the 1920s, were refined during the transition from silent film to talking pictures in the 1930s, and persisted through television's rise to dominance in the 1960s. The second section analyzes accounts of men having sex or looking for sex partners in movie theaters and concludes that stories about men, sex, and moviegoing frequently are stories about young

men's emotional and intellectual growth as they come to understand the (gendered) world around them and their own places in it as men—a process I refer to as their “sentimental and sexual education.” The third section applies these observations to the history of the Cine Teresa.

Movie theaters across the 1920–2010 period were, of course, much more than masculine sexual spaces; they had many uses for people of all genders. From the 1920s on, *chilangos* carried on their intimate lives while the movies played: families carried picnics to movie theaters for Sunday dinners, men shouted and whistled at the screen, couples flirted. People complained about uncomfortable conditions in the earliest movie houses, and as grand new ones began to be built in the 1930s, they luxuriated in their amenities: heating and air conditioning, plush seating, clean bathrooms. Well into the era of talking pictures, vendors continued to stroll the aisles, hawking cigarettes, candy, gum, and tacos. And throughout this time period, women scrutinized the latest fashions on the screen, kids snuck into the cheap seats together, and everyone watched who sat where and who they sat with in the local movie house. Adult men often played the roles of respectable providers, dutiful sons, and wise fathers when they went to the movies.¹ Thus, cinemas offered stages on which Mexicans could shape their performances of gender.

How men acted at the movies cannot be separated entirely from the ways that the movies acted on them; one of the purposes of moviegoing, after all, was simply to watch the movies. As elsewhere in the world, the movies that played in Mexico City in the twentieth century were full of images, ideas, and narratives about idealized masculinity and femininity.² Members of the audience could, and

1. The details in this paragraph were drawn from Anne Rubenstein, “Theaters of Masculinity: Movie-Going and Male Roles in Mexico Before 1960,” in *Masculinity and Sexuality in Modern Mexico*, ed. V.M. Macías and A. Rubenstein (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), 132–54. For Mexican movie audiences more broadly, see Juan Felipe Leal and Eduardo Barranza, *Anales del cine en México, 1895–1911*, vol. 12, *Los cines pueblan la Ciudad de México* (Mexico City: Juan Pablos Editor, 2017); Aurelio de los Reyes, *Cine y sociedad en México, 1896–1930*, 3 vols. (Mexico City: UNAM, 1979–94); and Mary Kay Vaughan, *Portrait of a Young Painter: Pepe Zúñiga and Mexico City's Rebel Generation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). For a comparison with Brazilian movie audiences, see Lena Suk, “Girls Night Out: Gender, Cinema, and Urban Growth” (PhD diss., Emory University, 2014).

2. The literature on gendered representations in global cinema is vast; however, much of it refers to Hollywood movies and their US audiences. Of the scholarship on gender in Mexican film, these studies are exceptionally helpful: Bernard Schulz-Cruz, *Imágenes gay en el cine mexicano: Tres décadas de joterío, 1970–1999* (Mexico City: Fontamara, 2008); Joanne Hershfield, *Mexican Cinema/Mexican Woman* (Tucson:

often did, come to their own conclusions about the meanings of such highly gendered stories—what to emulate, what to reject, what to attend to, and what to ignore. Mexican moviegoers' cinematic tastes contributed to the shaping and reshaping of their identities in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways. On the one hand, admiring a particular film, a certain genre, or a specific star could be a means of affiliating oneself with a local, regional, national, or international community. On the other hand, asserting an esthetic preference might be a way to distinguish oneself from everyone else, rather than a way to affiliate oneself with any particular group. Painter Pepe Zúñiga, for example, defined his own style of masculinity through his admiration for golden-age movie star Pedro Infante, in contrast to his father's appreciation of Infante's rival, Jorge Negrete.³ More broadly, Carlos Monsiváis observed that, from 1940 to 1960, "teenagers around the country use film to 'expropriate' a variety of ways of behaving that their ordinary lives otherwise deny them," modeling their actions and their "sensibilities" on the mass-media melodramas that were supposed to show them what not to do, exaggerating the dramas of their daily lives and the importance of their feelings, taking romantic risks, and placing their individual desires ahead of their duties to their families and their society.⁴

In addition to all of these uses of moviegoing, Mexico City's cinemas were also sexual spaces. Movie theaters served as stages for enacting dramas in which Mexican men could entertain and educate themselves on questions of gender, sex, and sexuality. And these dramas had a surprising amount of continuity over time. Sometimes men in movie theaters had sex with women, sometimes with other men, and sometimes by themselves. Sometimes men had sex in the context of an intimate relationship, and sometimes they found partners who were otherwise strangers. Sometimes men used the cinemas of Mexico City to meet sex partners for encounters outside the movie theaters, and—more rarely—sometimes they had

University of Arizona Press, 1996); Julia Tuñón, *Mujeres de luz y sombra en el cine mexicano: La construcción de una imagen, 1939–1952* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México and Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía, 1998); and Sergio de la Mora, *Cinemachismo: Masculinities and Sexuality in Mexican Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006). For discussion of how some Mexican men's imaginations were shaped by Hollywood movies, as well as by Mexican cinema, see also Vaughan, *Portrait*, esp. 44–57.

3. Vaughan, 19.

4. Carlos Monsiváis, *Escenas de pudor y livianidad* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1981), 152–53. Translation of this and all subsequent Spanish-language quotations by the author.

sex inside the cinemas. These disparate experiences were connected by these moviegoers' gender identifications as men. The people who initiated such encounters might or might not have identified themselves as law-abiding or criminal, gay or straight or neither, *chilango* or newcomer—but they all understood themselves to be men. Thus, this article is as much a study of gender as it is a study of sexuality.

All over the world, across the twentieth century, men met in movie theaters for sex with each other. In Rio de Janeiro, New York City, and other global cities, the cinemas in which men had sex with each other tended to be homosocial.⁵ However, these encounters worked differently in Mexico City in the 1994–2011 period. In Mexico City at this time, women were frequently present in the movie theaters where men met male sex partners: often women worked there, and most of the time they were visible on the movie screen. At least one site where men went to find male sex partners, the Cine Teresa, was decorated with murals and sculptures depicting female celebrities and mythological figures. Most of all, women appeared in men's memories and imaginations; as section three shows, some men described thinking of female relatives, acquaintances, and movie stars as they entered the Cine Teresa looking for a male sex partner. The many ways in which women were present in what might have been an exclusively male space, as well as the presence of men who were in the movie house to masturbate to images of heterosexual sex, supports the argument for continuities among many different kinds of male sexual expression, even as all these expressions changed over time.

How Not to Behave at the Movies: Learning and Contesting Movie-House Etiquette

Some of the best evidence about how people behaved in Mexico City movie houses is contained within texts written about moviegoers.

5. Discussions of public and semi-public urban spaces in which men had sex with each other—including movie theaters—can be found in George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Rosío Córdova Plaza and Jesús Pretelín Ricárdez, *El Buiñuel: Homoerotismo y cuerpos abyectos en la oscuridad de un cine porno en Veracruz* (Mexico City: Editorial Itaca, 2017); Samuel Delany, *Times Square Red/Times Square Blue* (New York: NYU Press, 1999); Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); James Green, *Beyond Carnival: Male Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century Brazil* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and Robert Reachy, *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015).

These texts—jokes, sermons, cartoons, etiquette manuals, letters to fan magazines, and newspaper stories, as well as the documents of municipal movie-theater inspectors and police and judicial records—contain clues to social knowledge that was so widely shared that it did not need to be stated explicitly. Such documents allow us to imagine the processes through which this shared social knowledge developed and spread alongside movies themselves.

From the earliest days of cinema, advice columns and etiquette manuals codified social understandings about male behavior in tent theaters, opera houses, and other sites of “public diversion,” and applied them to movie theaters.⁶ In the 1920–1945 period, etiquette manuals (which often were reprinted multiple times and sometimes circulated across the Americas) recycled the advice that they had already offered to men attending live performances in theaters.⁷ These texts assumed that men in theaters and movie houses were likely to come into contact with women to whom they were not related; they decreed how men should treat these women, with the underlying assumption that men would initiate contact with women. The question was, How should a gentleman pursue a lady politely? “It is not proper for a well-mannered, sensitive person to present an excessive quantity of candies or fruits to ladies during a show,” warned one etiquette manual, nor should a gentleman ever insist on taking another gentleman’s seat in order to speak to a lady.⁸ Such uncouth behavior could create conflict between men or threaten a respectable woman with disgrace.⁹

Other kinds of texts, however, underlined differences between attending a live performance in a theater and visiting a movie house. Newspaper stories made cinemas seem unique as sites of encounter between ambiguously gendered, raced, and classed strangers. For example, in 1939 *El Universal* published a pair of linked articles, intended as comedies, that played on the ambiguities inherent in encounters between unrelated men and women in movie theaters.¹⁰ The first of these two stories described a businessman’s visit to a movie theater. The businessman met someone he believed to be

6. Manuel Antonio Carreño, *Manual de urbanidad y buenas maneras*, 15th ed. (Paris: Garnier Hermanos, 1898), 146.

7. See, e.g., Irma Carlota Limantour, *Etiqueta, urbanidad, y distinción social* (Mexico City: Libros y Revistas, S. A., 1941), 113.

8. Limantour, 147.

9. Limantour, 110–16; Carreño, *Manual*, 148.

10. “Aventura que acaba en chantaje,” *El Universal*, 17 February 1939, sec. 2, 1; and “Regocijada comedia: Un médico la víctima,” *El Universal*, 18 February 1939, sec. 2, 1. Thanks to Pamela Fuentes for these citations.

“one of those women who goes to the movies in search of generous friends.”¹¹ When the businessman accompanied the women home, however, the couple were accosted by a man who claimed to be the woman’s outraged husband and who demanded the businessman’s valuables—cash, a watch, a pen with a gold nib, a silver cigarette case. The next morning, realizing that he had been set up by the pretty blonde and had been blackmailed by her supposed husband, the businessman took a lawyer to the woman’s home, only to discover that it was a hotel and that the thieving pair had already checked out.¹²

El Universal published a follow-up article the next day under the headline “Exhilarating Comedy: The Victim a Doctor, the Blonde a Man in Disguise!” The article explained that, upon reading how the “wealthy industrialist” had been blackmailed, a “doctor just returned from Paris” realized that he, too, had been the victim of the same criminals. The doctor had gotten more intimate with the blonde blackmailer than the businessman had—the newspaper claimed—and that was how he came to suspect that “prosthetics” had created “certain curves that were exceptional.”¹³ Eventually, the doctor confirmed his fears by pulling off her wig. Enraged, he beat his would-be blackmailer until the landlady intervened, bringing the episode to a close.¹⁴

These articles help to make implicit social knowledge explicit. Their logic depends on widely shared assumptions: men might expect to find sexual adventure in cinemas, and women had to defend themselves from masculine sexual attention, while both men and women might sometimes have to defend themselves from aggressive men. Some young women went to cinemas in search of “adventure.”¹⁵ People connected to young women—husbands, mothers, landladies, neighbors—were supposed to prevent them from doing more than flirting, while facilitating longer-term attachments between men and women. The newspaper articles described these scenarios—perhaps counterintuitively—as risky for men rather than women. Men, in these stories, might suffer a scolding from an angry chaperone, lose their wallets, or face the possibility of unwanted sex with another man. Readers took pleasure in such supposedly funny stories in several ways; one was the joy of fully comprehending the social rules that governed their world.

11. “Aventura que acaba,” 7.

12. “Aventura que acaba,” 7.

13. “Regocijada comedia.”

14. “Regocijada comedia.”

15. “Aventura que acaba,” 1.

Not all the rules for moviegoing were set out in print. Unwritten but widely understood rules for moviegoing included restrictions on who could sit where and with whom. Cinema operators in the silent-film era, prior to 1930 and afterward into the first decades of talking pictures, divided up movie-theater interiors between heterosocial and homosocial spaces.¹⁶ Men and women normally shared lobbies and the lower levels of the viewing spaces (though not on equal terms, of course). Men who wanted to surround themselves with other men usually had the balconies to themselves, as well as the men's restrooms. Women had less space: usually the women's restrooms and, perhaps in the fanciest cinemas, a lounge area outside the restroom were reserved for their exclusive use. Class hierarchies complicated the gendered division of space. For example, some cinemas charged higher ticket prices for seats in those parts of the movie theaters in which respectable families could seat themselves (the main floor salon and the mezzanine), while they charged less (and made fewer efforts to keep gate-crashing young men away) for seats in the upper balconies. Advertisements in *El Universal* that show different ticket prices for seats in different parts of the movie theater reveal that this practice was the norm in the 1930s, and although it declined after 1950, it was still practiced in some movie theaters into the 1960s.

Another set of unwritten gendered rules involved who could do what with their bodies while sitting in movie houses. From the start, movie houses became a site for assertions of masculine power—sexual or otherwise—and remained so throughout the twentieth century. Often men asserted themselves with their voices. The inspectors who visited movie theaters daily in the 1920s complained that male audience members were too loud: they whistled, hissed, shouted provocative comments when attractive women appeared on screen, and sometimes got into noisy discussions with each other.¹⁷ By the end of the 1920s, the gendered pattern of noise making in movie theaters was so well established that not even the advent of sound cinema challenged it, and it continued through the rest of the twentieth century.¹⁸

16. Rubenstein, 144–47.

17. See vols. 812, 813, 853 and 854, 1919–27, *Diversiones Públicas*, Gobierno del Distrito Federal (DF), Archivo Histórico del Distrito Federal (AHDF). Male moviegoers also continued whistling and hissing into the 1990s. Jeffrey Pilcher, personal communication to author, 1 December 2017.

18. For the transition to sound, see Francisco Peredo Castro, “La transición del cine mudo al sonoro en México,” in *Historia sociocultural del cine mexicano: Aportes*

Loud, provocative comments also advertised men's sexual knowledge to other members of the audience through the vigor of their wordplay and the size of their obscene vocabularies. This behavior also continued across the 1920–2010 period. One of ethnographer Oscar Lewis's informants recalled occasions in the early 1940s when a local gang of young men, "the terror of the neighborhood," visited the local cinema: "If the movie were a daring one, you could hear them saying dirty things."¹⁹ And in the 1970s, a film-industry study interviewed three thousand moviegoers from all over Mexico and found that 25 percent of them "considered the behavior of members of the audience scandalous and found that they interrupted the movies excessively."²⁰ Conversely, literary critic Guillermo Sheridan wrote in 2000 that sometimes men's overheard conversations in movie houses could be more entertaining than the movies themselves, to the point that "when the movies were bad enough, this behavior served to attract customers to the cinema."²¹ Across the twentieth century, male moviegoers made space for themselves with their raised voices, despite the occasional disapproval of their neighbors.

Strong smells sometimes marked male space in cinemas, too. Cinema inspectors in the 1920s complained about the stench of the men's bathrooms at certain cinemas and occasionally mentioned smells caused by men smoking.²² In *The Children of Sánchez*, Lewis's informant remarked that the gang often "sat up on the balcony and smoked marijuana."²³ Sheridan remembered, with nostalgia, the disruption of a magnificent new cinema's opening day sometime around 1962 by a man's "truly gargantuan fart" that forced

al entretejido de su trama (1896–1966.), ed. Francisco Peredo Castro and Federico Dávalos Orozco (Mexico City: UNAM, 2016), 111–54.

19. Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sánchez* (New York: Vintage, 1963), 44.

20. Luis Lesur, "Estudio sobre los hábitos y costumbres del público que asiste al cine: Preparado para el Banco Cinematográfico, S.A. y la Dirección de Cinematográfico," unpublished report, 1977, p. vii, Acervo de la Filmoteca de UNAM, Mexico City. While Lesur's brief qualitative summary of the quantitative survey's results does not indicate the gender of the noise-making people, it is safe to assume that the majority of the complaints were about men.

21. Guillermo Sheridan, *Lugar a dudas* (Mexico City: Tusquets Editores, 2000), 43. Thanks to José Montelongo for drawing my attention to this source.

22. See vols. 812, 843, 853, 854, *Diversiones Públicas*, Gobierno del DF, AHDF. Conversely, a new theater that did not smell bad was so unusual that an inspector remarked on it, noting, "The building has magnificent ventilation." Informe especial del Teatro Olimpia, 12 December 1921, exp. 317, vol. 853, *Diversiones Públicas*, Gobierno del DF, AHDF.

23. Lewis, *Children of Sánchez*, 147.

the audience to exit the theater.²⁴ Filling movie houses with sounds and smells probably was not a deliberate strategy intended to give men a claim on these crowded public spaces. However, this long-standing pattern of masculine behavior reveals some of the unwritten rules of moviegoing: men could use their bodies to make room for themselves, and they were allowed to use their voices to call attention to themselves and their desires. The freedom that men felt to express themselves physically in the movie theaters of Mexico City underwrote the ability of some men to use those cinemas as sexual spaces.

A Sexual and Sentimental Education: Men's Narratives of Moviegoing

Moviegoing was not normally an occasion for men to have sex. But it could be a form of sexual, emotional, and social education: going to the movies helped people understand and articulate their desires and come to terms with the social contexts that shaped their desires and their ability to act on them. Texts produced by male moviegoers of different social positions—including ethnographies, memoirs, and autobiographical fictions, as well as blog posts and court testimony—reveal the history of this process of education.

Throughout the 1920–2010 period, certain working-class cinemas in central Mexico City seemed to offer people just enough security, space, and privacy to have sex when they could not afford a hotel room and could not—for a variety of reasons—bring partners to their homes. This was at least a lively possibility as early as the 1920s, when municipal inspectors worked diligently to make sure that every part of every movie theater in the city was well lit—even the halls in which the movies were shown—“to prevent immoralities among the public,” as one inspector wrote.²⁵ And this possibility remained open across the 1920–2010 time period.

Reflecting the uses of moviegoing as a sentimental and sexual education, narratives about movie theaters and sex sometimes tell stories about young men's earliest sexual thoughts and actions. For example, Oscar Lewis quoted a thirteen-year-old informant who described the neighborhood movie house in 1944 as the place where he and his girlfriend “could kiss and embrace.”²⁶ Film critic Jorge

24. Sheridan, *Lugar a dudas*, 44. The new movie theater replaced one with a memorable “smell of rancid popcorn,” according to Sheridan, 41.

25. Hipólito Amor, “Informe,” 19 October 1922, exp. 225, vol. 812, *Diversiones Públicas*, Gobierno del DF, AHDF.

26. Lewis, *Children of Sánchez*, 147.

Ayala Blanco told an interviewer that he lost his virginity in Mexico City's Cine Mina sometime around 1958. "Cinema was more erotic in those days, more aphrodisiacal," he explained.²⁷ Movies from many eras could be seen as "aphrodisiacal." In 2011, a fan webpage devoted to Lola la Trailera's movies inspired a comment in internet-inflected English:

Lola the Trucker . . . was the first time ever I saw a Naked woman in a movie. My Dad and I was waiting the Bus in the town of Teziutlan, the bus has to stop there around 01 am and to kill time we go to the Cinema there, now they was playing only that movie.

My dad dont like much the idea but outside was freezing. . . . So we get in there, i dont rememebr much shit of it, just when some of the actresses stand in front of the camera and tadaa, hair everywhere xD

I was stunned and dont even try to turn my head to said something to my dad. . . . I was 9 or 10.²⁸

Like many commenters on fan websites, this anonymous male writer has as much to say about the experience of moviegoing—how he ended up seeing the movie, who he saw it with, what the weather was like, and where he was going—as he does about his favorite movie star. Seeing this movie at this point in his childhood was an occasion for his father to begin his initiation into masculine adulthood. It seems that the actual content of the film—misremembered in most details the writer cited—mattered very little. What counted was that this movie and the visit to a provincial movie theater near the bus station were a milestone in this fan's sentimental education as a son and in his sexual education as a man.

In most such accounts of male sexuality in relation to movie theaters, the men in question desired women. However, a small number of these documents, starting in the 1930s, suggest that some male moviegoers desired each other.²⁹ Journalist Eduardo Delhumeau reported in a 1939 book that "the movie theaters were full of *maricones*," specifying three cinemas in the middle of the city on San Juan de Letrán Avenue, then situated in a comfortably

27. Donato M. Plato, "Entrevista con Jorge Ayala Blanco," *Generación* #68, 2006, p. 26. Thanks to Ernesto Reséndiz Oikión for the citation.

28. Anonymous comment on Lola la Trailera fan art page, accessed 22 February 2015, <http://biesiuss.deviantart.com/art/Lola-la-Trailera-184969224>.

29. See Rodrigo LaGuarda, *Ser gay en la Ciudad de México: Lucha de representaciones y apropiación de una identidad, 1968–1982* (Mexico City: CIESAS/Instituto Mora, 2010), 88–108.

working-class neighborhood.³⁰ Delhumeau complained that “neither the cinemas nor the police did anything to stop them.”³¹ He was wrong: sometimes the police and movie theater employees did prevent or interrupt sex acts. In 1958, for instance, a sixty-two-year-old man was charged with the crime of corrupting a minor after he was found to have picked up a sixteen-year-old boy who had been playing pinball near the Cine Isabel. The man took the boy to see a movie there, where

the accused began to caress his thighs, and all of a sudden extracted his male member and introduced it into his mouth, explaining that he liked men and “would die for one of them”; the victim, due to inexplicable fears, could not refuse the perpetrator and in that moment someone turned on a light and they were both . . . taken into custody.³²

Scraps of narrative like these do not prove that men regularly used movie theaters to have sex with each other before the 1970s, but they do reveal the deep roots of a more recent, better-documented patterns of men having sex with men in movie theaters in the center of the city, especially in cinemas on or near San Juan de Letrán Avenue, now renamed the Eje Central Lázaro Cárdenas.

Two novels set in the 1970s and 1980s, Luis Zapata’s *El vampiro de la colonia Roma* (1979) and Hugo Villalobos’s *Jacinto de Jesús* (2001), paint detailed pictures of men who frequented central Mexico City’s movie theaters looking for male sex partners.³³ Both novels depict the lives of self-consciously gay protagonists in and around the center of Mexico City. Both include multiple scenes set in and near movie theaters. And both novels open with scenes set in movie theaters during the protagonists’ early adolescence, sometime between 1960 and 1965, which take up the theme of movie theaters as sites of sexual and sentimental education.

In the first chapter of Zapata’s novel *El vampiro de la colonia Roma*, the protagonist, Adonis García, recalls his childhood near the

30. Eduardo Delhumeau, *Los mil y un pecados* (Mexico City: Editorial Omega, 1939), 117. Thanks to Gabriela Cano for this reference. *Maricones* in this context meant an effeminate man who was likely to have sex with other men. English translations appropriate for 1939 might include “sissies,” “nellites,” or “fairies.” Thanks to Israel Estrada, Víctor Macías-González, Jenny Low, Patrick O’Connor, and Pete Sigal for help with the translation.

31. Delhumeau, 117.

32. Moreno Rodríguez Federico, 29558 Corrupción de menores, México DF, 1961, Departamento de Prevención Social, 8/421/254, Archivo General de la Nación. Thanks to Eileen Ford for the reference.

33. Hugo Villalobos, *Jacinto de Jesús* (Mexico City: Fontamara, 2001); Luis Zapata, *El vampiro de la colonia Roma* (Mexico: Grijalbo, 1979).

city's southern border, in a house "across the street from the Cine Cosmos":³⁴

I took myself off to the movie theaters in the mornings when they had only just opened up to be cleaned I loved settling down in the empty movie theaters with all the lights on and a smell of coal-tar soap that I loved . . . I sat looking at the men while they cleaned up . . . I really liked being there I felt different I forgot about everything I felt awesome well and in the afternoon of course I would see the movie I saw so many movies everything they put in front of me I saw Mexican movies I saw gringo movies I saw it all, right? . . . I think that's . . . how I developed a taste for going to the movies for being in the movie theater although now I go there for other reasons, you know?³⁵

(The "other reasons" mentioned here refer to his work in central Mexico City as a prostitute; he describes certain movie theaters as infallible sources of clients, including the "magic corner" of Insurgentes Avenue and Baja California Street, in front of the Cine las Américas.)³⁶ Adonis remembers enjoying all kinds of movies in that childhood movie house, with one exception: "love stories," especially "the moment in the movie when the boy and the girl kiss each other," which was "the part that disgusted me most."³⁷ This passage establishes movie houses as intensely physical spaces, full of sights, sounds, and smells unrelated to the movie being shown. And it depicts cinemas as sites of sexual education. Sitting in the movie theater, Adonis learned what he did not want—the heterosexual love stories he saw on the screen—as well as what he did: the men cleaning the movie theater.

Villalobos's novel *Jacinto de Jesús* opens with a similar mid-1960s scene of sexual awakening in a movie house in the protagonist's Michoacán hometown:

That afternoon a triple bill was showing, including a Kitty de Hoyos picture which had a scene showing her wearing a bikini; . . . Jacinto made himself comfortable, half lying down with his thighs apart and supported on the back of the seat in front of him.

A few minutes later someone came up to him, occupying the seat on the right, next to him, but . . . he barely noticed . . . he felt a light touch on his knee, thus, his body barely accustomed itself to this when he looked hard to the side, it was a stranger. . . . Jacinto didn't pay much attention . . . he

34. Zapata, 17.

35. Zapata, 22–23. Punctuation and spacing follow Zapata's text. "I felt awesome" translates the common expression "Sentía padre," which literally means, "I felt [like a] father."

36. Zapata, 43, 90.

37. Zapata, 23.

returned his attention to the extravagant body of the actress who that very moment uncovered part of her abundant breasts on that yellowed and dirty screen.

Moments later the stranger returned to gently touching his knee.³⁸

Soon, the male stranger has masturbated the young man to orgasm—his first sexual encounter—and then disappeared. The two-page episode sets the plot in motion: soon after, the young protagonist leaves home to look for love and sex in Mexico City.

These two opening scenes have significant similarities. Both are rich in sensory detail about the movies and the movie theaters: Zapata's protagonist focuses on the smell of soap and the films he enjoyed or disliked, while Villalobos's protagonist focuses on the position of his body and the discomfort of sitting in the movie theater, with its hard wooden seats and bad screen, along with his interest in the actress.³⁹ In both cases, intense attention to these physical details seems to substitute for descriptions of the men whom the protagonists desire. In the passage from *El vampiro de la colonia Roma*, Adonis fantasizes about the men cleaning the theater:

Imagine they never said anything to me if even one time they had said "get out of here, kid" or "hey you what's up" but they never noticed me.⁴⁰

Adonis imagines what the men might have said to him and feels the disappointment of being ignored by them, without ever describing them. Similarly, the eponymous protagonist in Villalobos's novel goes into detail about Kitty de Hoyos's body, while saying almost nothing about the looks of the man he meets in the movie theater beyond that "he appeared to be an agent of the Agriculture Bank"—which is less description than fantasy.⁴¹

In both novels, the protagonists have their first stirrings of sexual and romantic feeling in their neighborhood movie theaters, before moving to the middle of Mexico City. One young man was repulsed by watching women on the screen in romantic or sexual situations, while the other was attracted to such scenes, but moviegoing remained central to the affective and sexual lives of both characters.

38. Villalobos, *Jacinto de Jesús*, 19–21.

39. Kitty de Hoyos (1941–99) starred in several films that belonged to the 1950s *cine de desnudas* cycle of B-movies, supposedly the first Mexican movies to show partially nude women. The movie that Jacinto de Jesús is watching is likely one of her later films, perhaps *Juventud sin ley*, *Rebeldes a Go Go*, or *Los jinetes de la bruja* (all 1966).

40. Zapata, *El vampiro*, 23.

41. Villalobos, *Jacinto de Jesús*, 20.

And in both novels, choices of what movie to watch, which movie theater to attend, and which movie stars to admire illuminate the protagonists' developing characters.

Villalobos notes Jacinto de Jesús's changing moviegoing preferences as an index of his increasing sophistication. Readers first see him enjoying a low-budget Mexican movie, but by the middle of the novel, Jacinto allows his new boyfriend, a university student, to decide what to watch:

Little by little, Jacinto was accepting Ricardo's cinematic tastes, so they went to the Cineteca Nacional to see a Romanian, Bulgarian, or Russian film; they went to the Regis where they were showing a cycle of Swiss films and to the International Film Festival at the Roble. Of course, they didn't omit from their repertory, in the spring of '74, some commercial movies like *The Way We Were*.⁴²

This passage reflects a feature of class identity in urban Mexico after about 1960: middle-class people, and those who aspired to that status, either disdained films made in Mexico or claimed that they did.⁴³ Jacinto's growing appreciation for internationally made cinema also might have implied an increasing sense of affiliation with a particular self-consciously gay community marked by its use of identities, politics, and styles, which some Mexican men referred to as *internacional*, a term that had implications about both sexual preferences and racial and class affiliations.⁴⁴ Conversely, in Zapata's novel, Adonis looks for clients at some of the most expensive

42. Villalobos, 114.

43. Lesur, "Estudio," xi.

44. In the 1970s and 1980s, some Mexican gay activists rejected the division between *activos* (men who had sex with men by inserting their penises into their partners) and *pasivos* (men who had sex with men by having their partners insert their penises into them). Instead, they claimed a gay identity as *internacionales*, men who valued and practiced many forms of sex with other men, including but not limited to both active and passive anal sex. There were relatively few such gay men, and they tended to have university educations and close contacts with gay men in the United States and elsewhere. Thus, to be *internacional* was simultaneously a claim on a sexual identity and a class identity, as well as a political statement. See Joseph Carrier, *De los otros: Intimacy and Homosexuality among Mexican Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 193. See also Héctor Carrillo, *The Night Is Young: Sexuality in Mexico in the Time of AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 58–59. Héctor Carrillo points out that Joseph Carrier first recorded the phrase in use among Mexican gay men in 1972. For more recent uses of the term in a different Mexican gay male community, see Córdova Plaza and Pretelín Ricárdez, *El Buñuel*, 233–35.

movie theaters in Mexico City, but outside of working hours, he visits much less fancy movie houses to see Mexican-made B-movies. While Jacinto's cinematic choices suggest that he is entering the middle class, Adonis's tastes imply that he has moved away from the preferences of his middle-class family.

This pattern is reversed when the protagonists of both novels go to movie theaters in search of male sex partners. Adonis repeatedly names the "magic corner" outside the luxurious Cine las Américas as his favorite cruising spot.⁴⁵ In contrast, when Jacinto breaks up with his boyfriend, he comforts himself by repeatedly visiting "fleabag cinemas," which, in the 1970s,

had grown famous as cinemas *de ambiente* . . . saturated with *gays* from distant neighborhoods, like the Opera, where . . . everyone was constantly and too obviously in motion, flirting in the aisles . . . [and] the bathrooms were too crowded, provoking constant police raids.⁴⁶

Jacinto's visits to such movie theaters in search of sex partners continue into the 1980s, when he begins to frequent the Cine Gloria, "a few blocks from the corner of Baja California and Insurgentes"—Adonis's magic corner.⁴⁷ In a graceful moment of intertextuality, this corner becomes the site where the two characters' class trajectories—Jacinto moving up in the world, Adonis's downward mobility—cross over.

These novels, alongside the other texts cited in this section, demonstrate that movie houses have been sexual spaces for men in Mexico City from the 1920s at least through the 1980s. While the evidence is more detailed for more recent decades, it is clear that sex acts—heterosexual and homosexual—were taking place in at least some movie theaters, at least occasionally, from the beginning of this time period. Evidence for sex between men in movie theaters is rare before the 1970s, but as the cliché goes, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence; enough documentation exists to prove that it did happen. In more recent times, the evidence for this, too, has grown much more substantial.

45. Zapata, *El vampiro*, 90 and passim.

46. *De ambiente*, which literally means "of the environment," is a slang term that lacks any precise English translation. It means "belonging to/in a gay subculture." The English word *gay* as used in Spanish in this passage, in italics, indicates that the speaker has adopted the English-language usage: sexual orientation has become a category of identity for them. Villalobos, *Jacinto de Jesús*, 151.

47. Villalobos, 153.

The Rise and Fall of the Cine Teresa

Men have occasionally been having sex in movie theaters almost from their inception as public spaces in Mexico City and have more often been finding partners in movie theaters and taking them elsewhere. From the 1990s to the present, at least one movie theater has provided a space in which some men could have sex with each other, while other men could masturbate alone while watching heterosexual pornography in the presence of others.

Change over time in the uses of movie theaters as sexual spaces for men who wanted to have sex with men can be tracked through successive editions of guidebooks written for queer tourists. Specialized Danish, Dutch, and US guidebooks published in the 1960s and early 1970s listed certain Mexico City bars, restaurants, parks, bathhouses, nightclubs, hotels, and department stores as good spots for cruising—but not movie theaters.⁴⁸ This changed in 1990, when a new “gay guide” informed readers that “in Mexico there are two ideal locations for cruising unobtrusively: public parks and movie theaters.”⁴⁹ The guidebook described an ideal encounter as beginning with a conversation in the movie theater but concluding “three blocks away.”⁵⁰ It warned tourists not to “do anything in the theater itself with . . . the other *bombres* horsing around in the movie theater” for fear of “extortion” and categorized hundreds of cinemas in Mexico City as “‘dangerous’ or ‘very dangerous,’” while listing only twelve movie theaters as appropriate for discreet cruising.⁵¹

The visibility of movie theaters as sites for cruising and for sex may have increased when a few central Mexico City movie theaters began to show soft-core pornography in the 1980s. By the 1990s, a few cinemas in the center were showing hard-core porn, which excluded women from their audiences—sex workers and women who worked for the movie theaters excepted—and made these

48. See, e.g., *Guild Guide* (Washington, DC: Guild Press, 1964), 91–92; *Eos-guide* 72 (Copenhagen: Eos, 1971), 198; *Spartacus International Gay Guide*, 3rd ed. (Amsterdam: Euro-Spartacus, 1973), 222; Joseph Itiel, *De onda: A gay Guide to Mexico and Its People* (San Francisco: International Wavelength, 1991), 48–55. Note that these guides *did* include movie theaters in other countries in the 1960s and 1970s. Many thanks to Josh Mentanko, who researched the tourist guidebooks for me.

49. Itiel, 48. Additionally, the *Spartacus Guide* for 1990–91 added five Tijuana movie theaters to its list of cruising sites. *Spartacus International Gay Guide 1990–1991*, 20th ed. (Berlin: Bruno Gmünder Verlag, 1990), 528.

50. Itiel, 53.

51. Itiel, 71. This 1991 list of safe movie theater cruising spots in Mexico City did not include the Cine Teresa or the Cine Savoy but did include the Cine Regis.

cinemas more obvious locales for men looking for male sex partners to find each other. The Cine Teresa was one such movie house.⁵² Between 1994 and 2011, it grew notorious among city dwellers as a grindhouse—a movie theater dedicated to showing pornography—where men went to have sex with each other. But that was only one relatively short chapter in its long history. The Cine Teresa sat about halfway between the attractions of the “Pink Zone,” as one guide for gay male tourists called the Zona Rosa, and the open spaces of the historic center (the Zócalo and the Alameda Central), which the guidebook recommended as cruising sites.⁵³ Thus, the theater was conveniently located for men who visited, lived, or worked in the center of the city to use as a cruising spot. But long before that, it was one of the grand movie palaces at the heart of Mexico City.

The Cine Teresa first opened in 1924, with six thousand seats, a central location on the avenue then known as San Juan de Letrán, and luxurious fittings. It closed in 1939 when San Juan de Letrán was widened, destroying the front half of the building. It reopened in 1942, having been remodeled into a three-thousand-seat art deco palace. A mural showing portraits of forty women, major figures of the time, filled the wall above a grand double staircase to the balcony level, with the legend “The fairy godmothers of this cinema of dreams” inscribed above.⁵⁴ This mural—along with the luxurious new lounge for women outside the bathroom and new marble sculptures of the Three Graces and nine Muses—led the Cine Teresa to advertise itself as “Dedicated to the Metropolitan Lady!” in advertisements in every Mexico City newspaper celebrating its return.⁵⁵

For the next fifty years, the Cine Teresa offered daily showings of a double bill of first-run movies, usually made in Hollywood. At some point in the 1950s, the theater was further modified: the Cine Teresa was probably the first Mexican movie house to feature the Cinerama system, which enabled it to project brighter colors onto a wider

52. This description is based on journalistic accounts of the Cine Teresa’s closing in 2011 and its partial reopening in 2013 as a satellite theater for the Cineteca Nacional. See Arturo Cruz Bárcenas, “El emblemático espacio, ejemplo de arquitectura art decó, es transformado en plaza comercial,” *La Jornada*, 15 February 2011; and OCT, “Cinemas Teresa,” *Time Out Mexico*, 2 April 2013, 13.

53. *Spartacus International Gay Guide* (1990–91), 522.

54. OCT, “Cinemas Teresa,” 13.

55. The sculptures and most of the luxurious fittings have vanished over the years, but the staircase and mural remain. Gabriel Revelo, “Vagando con sopitas.com presenta: Cine Teresa,” *Sopitas.com*, 13 August 2013, <http://www.sopitas.com/242019-vagando-con-sopitascom-presenta-cine-teresa/>.

screen.⁵⁶ Between 1942 and approximately 1975, its seats were full on weekends and sometimes on weekdays too. Its ticket prices were among Mexico's highest, and its audience seemed happy to pay for the luxury and convenience of a centrally located movie palace easily accessible by car from the city's middle-class neighborhoods.⁵⁷ Yet many of its customers in this era came from the surrounding neighborhood. One man who grew up nearby recalled visiting often as a child, seeing *Planet of the Apes* there sometime around 1968, for example. But as the economic crisis of the mid-1970s began to limit Mexican consumers' moviegoing, the Cine Teresa grew shabby and lost the ability to show first-run films; as a teenager, the man visited it to see B-movies like *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS*. Forty years later, he still remembered the movie house's size, the "clean utilitarian lines" of its remaining art deco architecture, its white and red decor, and its aroma of cigarette smoke.⁵⁸

Several intersecting transformations in transnational media sent the movie palaces of Mexico City's Centro Histórico into a decline, like grand movie theaters all over the world. This began around 1975, just as Mexico's long period of economic expansion was also coming to an end. These global and national changes coincided with a local reordering of space. Beginning in the 1940s, the professional class and the elite of Mexico City had migrated to the wealthier south of the city, leaving the center to the tourists, the poor, and the bohemians (which included those for whom the local label *raras* might best be translated as "queers"). The 1985 earthquake accelerated this process of spatial reorganization.⁵⁹ By 1992, the street in front of the Cine Teresa (renamed Eje Central) was closed again, this time for construction of a new subway line. At this point, the historic center no longer housed the wealthy and powerful or served as a global tourist destination. Instead, it provided homes and livelihoods to a dense population of working-class and poor people, as it had for

56. Cine Teresa Mexico City, n.d., Evan Miller Collection of Cinerama Theater Plans, box 167, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles; Clara Itzel Hernández Valladares "Adiós al cine Teresa," *Cinepremiere*, 13 July 2010.

57. For the history of the Zona Rosa, see Rodrigo Laguarda, *La calle de Amberes: Gay street de la Ciudad de México* (Mexico City: Centro de Investigaciones Interdisciplinarias en Ciencias y Humanidades-UNAM/Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José María Luis Mora, 2011).

58. James Fallone, personal communication to author, 4 April 2018. Communication in English.

59. See Diane Davis, *Urban Leviathan: Mexico City in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994). See also LaGuarda, *La calle de Amberes*.

decades, and developed a reputation as a filthy, crime-ridden, and dangerous place.

Besides challenges posed by subway construction and the global decline of film audiences, the Cine Teresa's owner, Jesús Ceballos, had another problem: he had quarreled with powerful Mexican movie distributors, who hoped to consolidate independent theaters like the Cine Teresa into enormous chains. The Cine Teresa remained independent, however, so that early in the 1980s it had stopped showing first-run film made in Hollywood, and by 1992 it had been forced to stop showing commercial film altogether. Instead, European and other art films played at the Cine Teresa to a dwindling audience. In 1994, the film producer and businessman Carlos Amador, hoping to prevent the complete failure of the once-grand movie theater, gave Ceballos a collection of pornographic films that he had supposedly inherited.⁶⁰ And so the Cine Teresa began a new incarnation as a porn theater.

As a grindhouse in such a central location, the Cine Teresa had a highly visible presence, even to people who never entered it. Many men wrote about their experiences in or near the infamous porn palace in tones of nostalgia, sometimes tinged with fear, shame, and even disgust. But this disgust was rarely expressed as a response to the sex that men could be seen having with each other in the movie theater. Instead, at least as these men remembered it, the disgust was a response to the conditions in and around the movie theater. For example, one man, born in 1979 and raised in the south of the city, vividly remembered the exterior of the Cine Teresa as a site of his sexual and emotional education. His middle-class family occasionally traveled, via the Eje Central, to and from the historic center, which they considered "crowded and 'dangerous.'"⁶¹ Their anxious reactions to the central city perhaps added to his uneasy fascination with a movie theater he never entered:

Of course, the Cine Teresa is hard to miss . . . especially back then for the suggestive titles in its marquees (e.g. "Duro de Mamar"; "Colegialas en Celo," etc.). The titles were complimented with very explicit posters outside the movie theatre. I always made efforts to look at them through the car window, ashamed yet fascinated. I used to wonder what it would be like to be inside

60. A rumor maintains that these were all Italian-made hard-core porn from the 1970s showing heterosexual encounters; see Itze-Leib Schmuilowsky, "El Teresa," *Otro* (blog), 23 July 2010, <http://otrootroblog.blogspot.com/2010/07/el-teresa.html>.

61. Alejandro García, personal communication to author, 26 November, 2012. Communication in English.

that place; not that I wanted to venture inside though, the people outside loitering looked scary to me.⁶²

Another account of the Cine Teresa invoked the presence of male classmates rather than family when describing the author's reluctance to visit the Cine Teresa:

I am not even capable of counting the number of times that my classmates and I have mentioned the name of the Cine Teresa in jokes and asides. More than one of us used to swear to having already entered those theaters in which, they used to say, there were orgies happening. The truth is that none of us had enough courage to buy a ticket and venture into the interior of that cinema which we already had connected with sinfulness.⁶³

A similar combination of fear and disgust, anxiety and self-consciousness, led blogger David Lida to report his reluctance to enter the Cine Teresa, despite his curiosity: "It's a porno theatre. . . . on the corner there is a doctor who will treat you for venereal diseases. . . . The place has such a seedy appearance that even I (with a customarily high tolerance for seed) have not gone in there."⁶⁴ One of Lida's male readers responded, "About a decade ago, I *did* go inside. . . . Some transsexuals were offering various pleasures in the aisles. . . . (I was too chicken to ask what WAS on offer)."⁶⁵

The male friends and relations mentioned in these accounts are often found in mens' narratives of movie houses, and this fits a pattern described by ethnographers of Mexican masculinities: the reassuring presence of other men (relatives, friends, or colleagues) stabilized masculine and heterosexual identities of urban Mexican men in public—at movie theaters, on the streets, in the workplace, in dance halls and bars, at soccer matches and on subways.⁶⁶ Conversely, the presence of women protected and enabled self-consciously gay male

62. García.

63. Revelo, "Vagando."

64. David Lida, "Teresa," *David Lida* (blog), 12 December 2008, <http://davidlida.com/?p=360>. Original in English.

65. Tapen, 12 December 2008, comment on Lida, "Teresa," <http://davidlida.com/?p=360>. Original in English.

66. Stanley Brandes, *Staying Sober in Mexico City* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), esp. 24–25; Héctor Carrillo, "Neither *machos* nor *maricones*: Masculinity and Emerging Male Homosexual Identities in Mexico," in *Changing Men and Masculinities in Latin America*, ed. Mathew Gutmann, ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 351–79, esp. 358–62; Matthew Gutmann, *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Roger Magazine, *Golden and Blue Like My Heart: Masculinity, Youth and Power among Soccer Fans in Mexico City* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007), esp. 96–103; Mara Viveros Vigoya, "Contemporary Latin American Perspectives on Masculinities," in *Changing*

life in Mexico City at midcentury and after, as Víctor Macías-González has shown. He found a pattern of middle- and upper-class gay male couples in Mexico City including female relatives in their households as a screen of respectability.⁶⁷ Entering a movie theater like the Cine Teresa that showed heterosexual pornography was another way to invoke the presence of women. Writers commenting on Mexico City's porn theaters sometimes remarked on the paradox of men having sex with each other in movie theaters "even though the flick is hetero."⁶⁸ Understood from this angle—that the presence of women, on or off screen, may have been necessary to the formation of gay male identities in urban Mexico—the paradox then resolves itself.

Thus, many accounts of visiting the Cine Teresa in this time period refer to the women whom the authors saw there.⁶⁹ Beyond the women on the screen, there were several other female presences at the Cine Teresa. Several reports of visits to the porn theater mention the ticket seller's "distant expression": she "smiled coldly" at men entering the theater, no matter how friendly they acted.⁷⁰ Other women turn up in these stories sometimes. A nostalgic tale of a winter afternoon spent at the Cine Teresa with anonymous sex partners opens by noting that the author's grandmother had been to the same movie house when she was a girl and the Cine Teresa had just opened and that she then returned on dates with the man who would become the author's grandfather.⁷¹ This writer invoked a respectable and respectful feminine presence to counterbalance the "white goddesses" on the screen and the grim-faced ticket seller at the front.⁷²

Gossip added other women to the Cine Teresa's habitués. Supposedly, the venerable actress Irma Serrano had owned the theater at some point and purchased the library of porn films that had enabled it to continue operating.⁷³ Another inaccurate rumor suggested that after the Cine Teresa started showing porn, so many

Men and Masculinities in Latin America, ed. Mathew Gutmann (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 27–59, esp. 42–45.

67. Víctor Macías-González, "Transnationalism and the Development of Domesticity in Mexico City's Homophile Community, 1920–1960," *Gender History* 23, no. 3 (October 2014): 519–44.

68. Pavel M. Gaona, "Visitamos el Savoy, un clásico del cine porno," *Chilango*, 25 March 2015.

69. Dulce Ahumada, "El Teresa, de cine de oro al porno, y otras modificaciones," *máspormas*, 29 June 2016, <https://www.maspormas.com/ciudad/teresa-cine-oro-al-porno-otras-modificaciones/>.

70. Christian Gaudi, "Teresa," *Anal* 1 (2009): 62.

71. Gaudi, 62.

72. Gaudi, 62.

73. Ahumada, "El Teresa."

female prostitutes had taken male customers to the balcony of the cinema to have sex that the management had been forced to shut the balcony entirely and, furthermore, to ban all women from the theater.⁷⁴ Real or invented, present or absent, all kinds of women were on the minds of moviegoers when they thought about the Cine Teresa: grandmothers and ticket sellers, legitimate Mexican actresses and Italian porn stars, female sex workers (both cisgender and transgender), and marble sculptures of the Muses and the Graces.

The men who wanted to have sex with each other in the Cine Teresa, by all accounts, shared the space peaceably with men who were there to enjoy the heterosexual pornography on the screen. One internet commenter reported, "When I entered the Cine Teresa, I was then 18 years old . . . and I went with a friend. You know: dudes who were barely 18, and, well, we wanted to see some porn flicks."⁷⁵ He and his friend quickly got over any trepidation at entering the theater and sat down to watch the first half of a double bill. He reported, calmly enough, that, soon after they sat down, "an old guy" approached them, but seeing that they were not interested, sat down a few seats away to masturbate. When they changed seats, "a rat the size of a rabbit" ran over their feet, pursued by a cat. Unlike the unwanted advances from the man sitting near them, the vermin in the theater disgusted the two boys. "Well," he concluded, "I never returned to the Cine Teresa, but that was, for certain, quite an experience. And I survived!"⁷⁶ Another internet commenter wrote that he went to the Cine Teresa with three male friends to watch porn. When they seated themselves, a man "with his hard-on exposed" sat down next to them, and every time they changed seats, he followed until—too distracted to watch the movie—they left the theater.⁷⁷ This is, of course, a story about harassment. But it is a remarkably peaceful story, too: four young men preferred to change seats repeatedly, and finally left the movie theater, rather than confront one man who was bothering them.

A visit to the Cine Teresa in the 2000s meant moving through crowds of people, as well as the occasional encounter with a rat.⁷⁸

74. Revelo, "Vagando."

75. Breaker, 2007, reply to "Han entrada en el Cine Teresa del DF?," Yahoo! Repuestas, accessed 6 September 2017, <https://mx.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20061011110817AA2SkMY&page=1>.

76. Breaker.

77. Chivadecorazon, 2007, reply to "Han entrada en el Cine Teresa del DF?," Yahoo! Repuestas, accessed 6 September 2017, <https://mx.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20061011110817AA2SkMY&page=1>.

78. Gaudi, "Teresa," 62.

The ticket booth was often surrounded by a small crowd of sex workers and their clientele.⁷⁹ Ticket buyers pushed through them to purchase a ticket, which entitled the buyer to stay as long as he liked. Visitors then passed through a curving hallway to enter a huge auditorium, normally only half-full, which contained “only men” (except for the gigantic “women and their genitals” on the screen).⁸⁰ Many of these men were there with the intention of having sex with each other, although not necessarily in the main salon of the movie theater; as one gay man wrote, “Growing up and coming out of the closet in 2002–2005, I can tell you that Cine Teresa was a place for people to find sexual partners. Sometimes they would masturbate or have oral sex inside the theater. Sometimes they would go to the lavatories.”⁸¹ Another explained, “Couples sit upstairs in the balcony and single men seeking action beyond the screen sit downstairs.”⁸² Some men circulated throughout the theater while others sat in the seats waiting for partners to come to them. Sex in the movie house usually included acts of voyeurism, exhibitionism, frottage, masturbation (either solo or with a partner or partners), and fellatio. Anal sex was less common and took place in the second-floor balcony. Because of all of this, and despite the vermin, patrons of the Cine Teresa in this era remembered it as a sexual utopia—a site of pleasure without shame or danger.

Like any utopia, the Cine Teresa existed outside of time. The hours that men spent there were not bounded by the beginnings or endings of the movies being shown. Nor were moviegoers’ visits to the Cine Teresa scheduled to coincide with the arrival of new films. In fact, the only way to find out that the Cine Teresa was offering a new bill would be to look at the theater’s marquee, as no general-circulation publication printed advertisements from the Cine Teresa after 1990, while the management appears not to have bothered advertising in the underground, cinephile, or queer press. The regular clock and calendar of movie time had no relevance to the operators and patrons of the Cine Teresa, and this added to the shock of its sudden closure.

The Cine Teresa closed abruptly in July 2010, after a short polemical debate over its value as a local icon and cultural institution. This

79. Gaudi, 62.

80. Gaudi, 62.

81. Manuel Bautista, personal communication to author, 6 September 2017. Original in English.

82. Guille Monzon, 27 October 2009, comment on Lida, “Teresa,” <http://davidlida.com/?p=360>. Original in English.

argument pivoted on questions of respectability and cosmopolitanism. One former denizen of the Cine Teresa told a journalist, “They only started showing pornography out of economic necessity. But this kind of film also has its audience, and it too is respectable.”⁸³ The Cine Teresa, for some commenters, signified Mexico City’s participation in global modernity. Architectural preservationists pointed to the “global fame” of the movie theater’s art deco facade and interior.⁸⁴ An internet commenter boasted that it was “the biggest porn theater in the world.”⁸⁵ One of the organizers of Mexico City’s Gay Film Festival explained that “for a city to be able to boast of being cosmopolitan, it has to have a porn theater.”⁸⁶ All of these arguments failed in the face of economic reality; the owners of the Cine Teresa could no longer afford to operate it. As one reporter put it,

Many times I promised myself that someday I would visit the Cine Teresa . . . to know what went on in there. . . . Unfortunately, I left it too late. The ease with which you can get adult films in the streets and the arrival of the internet made it so that the unhealthy curiosity of a whole generation stopped being focused on . . . the Cine Teresa.⁸⁷

In other words, the development of digital technologies gave men looking for porn or male sexual partners more options than porn theaters did and made the Cine Teresa comparatively less attractive to them.

Global changes in media consumption again intersected with local circumstances. The neoliberal reordering of property rights in the city after 1985 enabled developers to promote the Centro Histórico as a clean, safe, and respectable playground for wealthy tourists and Mexico’s business elite. This redevelopment included movie theaters. One or two, like the Teatro Metropolitan, became nostalgic showplaces for mid-twentieth-century art and architecture; others, like the Cine Latino, were demolished to make way for boutique hotels, upscale restaurants, and private museums; and a few, like the Cine Opera and the Palacio Chino, were left to decay. The Cine Teresa itself was not torn down, as its art deco facade had been declared a historic landmark. Instead, a shopping center

83. Cruz Bárcenas, “El emblemático espacio.”

84. Cruz Bárcenas.

85. javiers, 2007, reply to “Han entrada en el Cine Teresa del DF?,” Yahoo! Repuestas, accessed 6 September 2017, <https://mx.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20061011110817AA2SkMY&page=1>.

86. Cruz Bárcenas, “El emblemático espacio.”

87. Revelo, “Vagando.”

dedicated to mobile phones and their accessories opened up behind the facade of the old movie theater, a reminder of the trend toward digitization that had contributed to the porn theater's demise. Then in 2013, three years after the Cine Teresa closed, the prestigious Cineteca Nacional—the government-sponsored institution charged with preserving and promoting film culture—announced that it had acquired and renovated half of the Cine Teresa for use as a satellite cinema, to provide extra screenings of movies that had already played in its main cinema in the southern neighborhood of Coyoacán.⁸⁸ So the Cine Teresa was reborn once more, participating in the historical transformations that had led to its closure: the rise of digital communications and the neoliberalization of Mexico City's historic center.

Epilogue

The functions that Cine Teresa had fulfilled remained important to some Mexico City men. Shortly after the Cine Teresa closed, a nearby movie house, the Cine Savoy, took its place as a porn theater where men could have sex with each other. A journalist reported it was not nearly as spacious as the Cine Teresa had been, and that the men he saw there were mostly fifty years old, or even older, and seemed to be working class; he implied that they could not afford or did not understand the technology necessary for more efficient hook-ups.⁸⁹ Still, this suggests remarkable continuity in the uses of Mexico City movie theaters as masculine sexual spaces, even as the range of possible sexual identities and activities available to men varied according to social class and changed dramatically over the decades.

A wide array of documentation shows that men were finding sex partners from across the gender spectrum in movie houses from the 1920s onward. The earliest evidence I have found for sex acts occurring inside Mexico City cinemas dates to the late 1950s, but men most likely began having sex in movie houses long before that. In sum, cinemas have been sites of male sexuality in Mexico City from the beginning of their history, and this male sexuality has been neither entirely gay nor exclusively straight. Some men visiting movie theaters in search of sex were very clearly interested only in sex with other men, like the man who was jailed for sex with a minor in the Cine Isabel in 1959. Some were clearly uninterested in male partners and

88. Tania Alemán Saavedra, "El antiguo Cine Teresa a través de los años," *México Desconocido*, 2 July 2019, <https://www.mexicodesconocido.com.mx/antiguo-cine-teresa-en-la-cdmx-mucho-mas-que-porno.html>.

89. Gaona, "Visitamos el Savoy."

upset by approaches from them, like the man who was fooled by the blond(e) blackmailer in the newspaper story from 1939. Some were willing to masturbate in the presence of other men, as accounts from the Cine Teresa demonstrate; these men were uninterested in other men as sex partners but not especially concerned by being approached by men for sex. Others at the Cine Teresa identified as gay men but seemed to tolerate or even to welcome the presence of women there: depictions of women, remembered women, imaginary women, living women who were cisgender and transgender. In sum, sexual orientation may not be the most important category of analysis in thinking about these men's experiences; what connected them was their gender. Sex was just one among many ways that men enacted their masculinity when they went to the movies. From the beginning of the twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty-first, no matter how they identified sexually, Mexican men at the movies have acted like men.