

DRAMATIC EXPRESSION IN *FRENTE DE MADRID*: CONCHITA MONTES, THE FIRST FEMININE ARCHETYPE OF THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR*

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On the first *Sábado de Gloria* (Glorious Saturday) after the victory of Franco's forces the film *Frente de Madrid* [The Madrid Front] (Edgard Neville, 1939) was released and screened in Madrid's *Palacio de la Música* cinema. According to the press releases this was no minor film, but a work of huge importance dealing with an accurate representation of nothing less than the Spanish Civil War: "Cinema is a mirror of life [...] Cinema does not invent, it reflects and copies," (*RadioCinema*, 1940). At the top of the cast-list was an unknown actress without any previous experience, Conchita Montes, in the role of Carmen. This character defines one of the fundamental pillars of the popular consciousness under Franco's 'New State', that of service to the

"Conchita Montes, national cinema's latest sensation, Spanish cinema's innocent bride [...]. Here we have the stately essence of Spanish aristocracy that we've been looking for [...] emblematic of elegant womanliness [...]. Here is the woman we were missing, a representative for the great cities of our Fatherland. This woman is like the essence of Spain, destined, perhaps to be the perfume of Europe"

RadioCinema, 49, March 1940.

Fatherland (Rincón, 2014: 29), and also encompasses the concept of female sacrifice as a route to salvation. *RadioCinema* magazine introduced the promising young actress showing her a full-page photograph wearing an immaculate white dress, a slogan beneath reading: "THE BRIDE". These then were the first steps in the process of establishing a moral symbol (Dyer, 1979, 1987; Marshall, 1997; Gaffney and Holmes, 2007); using cinematic representations of the Spanish Civil War, a genre that might be termed the 'crusade films', to create a feminine archetype suitable for the post-war era: the virgin heroine of National Catholicism.

During the 1940's, the screen image of Conchita Montes was splashed across both the print and

advertising media, so supported by the Falangist machine, she became an “authentic Spanish star” (ABC, 1942). Following the unquestionable Hollywood paradigm for the creation of screen mythology (Babington, 2001: 3), early Francoism adapted foreign trends in cinematography to Spanish society and its more modest film industry (Benet, 2017: 34). In this way, a ‘star’ was forged to embody Spanish national values (Soila, 2009: 9), the ambivalent precepts of the Falange’s *Sección Femenina* (Women’s Section) (Labanyi, 2009; Gámez, 1997), and to coexist with the contradictions inherent between the actress and the characters she played.

The rigid, all-encompassing dictatorship, in a process overseen by the censors, forged its archetypes using the silver screen and magazines dedicated to cinema, directing its attentions especially toward women who comprised the majority audience for cinema and the film press. In this way, Conchita Montes ascended to the pantheon of stars alongside other names such as Imperio Argentina, Amparo Rivelles, Conchita Montenegro, and Aurora Bautista, coming to wield influence far beyond the screen. She became part of a phenomenon that was at once aesthetic, social, and even economic (Kuhn, 2002: 5), judged by some as the greatest cultural expression of a nation (Gaffney and Holmes, 2007: 1).

Throughout the dictatorship, the ideological apparatus of Francoism sought to take an active part in the audio-visual media, constructing stars and presenting them as ideal role-models. In so doing, the regime hoped to influence the thinking of its citizens, giving them object lessons in forms of behaviour and social interaction, defining the roles of women and men, providing a definitive interpretation of reality, and generating an aspirational consciousness amongst the population. This fictional process, reinforced by the press, the radio and advertising, was conceived with the aim of constructing a collective consciousness that was at one with the government’s ideals (Rincón, 2014; Álvarez Rodrigo, 2019); and categorising

people according to their sex, and ideology, among other characteristics, at the same time as defining the direction of their lives (Dyer, 1987: 17).

This article explores how Franco’s regime attempted to transform the public figure of Conchita Montes into the new feminine archetype in the wake of the Spanish Civil War. To this end, we will analyse the film, *Frente de Madrid*, in which this actress took a starring role and, ultimately, became hugely important in ways that went far beyond her performance. Furthermore, we will consider how, during the early period of Francoism, the press hailed Montes as the first cinematic personification of the archetypal female Falangist.

Through an analysis of the historic and cinematographic context, this work proposes the hypothesis that, despite the media strategies deployed, the transformation of Concepción Carro into Conchita Montes did not fulfil the regime’s expectations, due to the excessive dissonance between the qualities of the actress as a person, and those of the star she was supposed to be as formulated by the dictatorship’s ideology.

THE CONVERSION: FROM CONCEPCIÓN CARRO TO CONCHITA MONTES

The process of constructing Conchita Montes as an elegant and cosmopolitan star, presenting an image of a sophisticated Spain that could be exported to the rest of Europe, is entirely bewildering considering that only three years before, Concepción Carro Alcaraz, as she was then known, had been a declared liberal and a republican. No less surprising is that her participation in the film, *Frente de Madrid*, in the role of a Falangist heroine was financed thanks to a state accord signed between the Spanish dictatorship and Fascist Italy (Torreiro, 2009) with the objective of creating a politically and ideologically driven filmmaking industry involving co-productions shot in the Cinecittà studios for subsequent distribution in Latin America.

The metamorphosis of the young actress can be explained by her complicated life-story. In 1934, Concepción Carro had just finished her degree in Law and was working as a critic writing reviews of film releases for the *Diario Madrid* newspaper (Montes, 1944). One year later she obtained a grant to continue her studies and travelled to the prestigious Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York State (Piñon Varela, 2015: 324), to prepare for entry to the diplomatic service. Her first direct contacts with the film industry were sporadic and brief, taking place during a breath-taking vacation trip to Hollywood with Edgar Neville (Gómez-Santos, 1962), her lover and partner on numerous film projects. The very week of her return to Madrid, the Spanish Civil War broke out. Conchita Montes abandoned the Republican zone for France but later came back, entering the Nationalist zone where, in 1937, she was detained and taken to the civil authorities in San Sebastián. There she remained as a prisoner for a month and a half after being denounced as a Republican supporter (Torreiro, 2016: 263). Without a doubt, this experience brought Montes to a point of inflexion in her young life and began the process by which she constructed a new ideological narrative for herself in order to ensure her survival (Franco Torre, 2015: 137-138).

After several anguished months, Montes was offered the opportunity to travel to Rome to start preparing a screenplay for *Frente de Madrid* with Neville as the film's screenwriter and director (Montes, 1944). Neville had been working with the Nationalist radio-propaganda broadcaster *Altavoces de Guerra* (Hernández-Francés León and Justo, 2020) and in the company of Conchita Montes he visited the frontlines at the University City, Madrid. Until now, the fact that he made this trip has passed unnoticed by historians and the only reference to it is found in the writings of Manuel Iglesias-Sarria, a member of the Nationalist forces:

One day a group of journalists arrived in our trench, amongst them was a woman: Conchita Montes. Accompanying her were Edgar Neville, Sir Wal-

ter Starkie. [...] After taking in the view of the besieged city which made a big impression, especially on the Americans, we went back along the covered walkway. [...] The machineguns and mortars began firing quite intensely. [...] Conchita and Edgar, who were very close to me, looked at one another very solemnly, not saying a word. Their eyes did not show any sign of panic. [...] Moments later we were sitting around the fire. [...] Edgar, [...] joked: "this mess" is something you all cooked up with those guys over the other side especially to give us a scare (Iglesias-Sarria: 1987: 109-111).

On arrival in the Italian capital, when the Basoli brothers (film manufacturers) met Conchita Montes, they agreed with the director that her face was perfect for the role of Carmen, the film's female lead (Aguilar and Cabrerizo, 2018). In the winter of 1939, shooting for the film, *Frente de Madrid* started with the intention to produce two versions – one in Spanish and a second in Italian.

The fledgeling actress knew at first hand the advantages and duties of being a film icon. In the United States she had watched how the major film studios worked and had observed the publicity mechanisms used to promote their stars. In addition, she had personal experience of seeing the stars at work, including Bette Davis, Lesley Howard, and Humphrey Bogart. She had also struck up several long-term relationships with well-known figures such as Charles Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks (Ríos Carratalá, 2007; Aguilar and Cabrerizo, 2018), who had shown her the freedom granted by 'star power' (Marshall, 1997). This phenomenon is most clearly demonstrated by actresses like Great Garbo and Norma Shearer (Bou, 2015: 37) and, in fact, is perhaps more commonly found in the European 'star system'. As Ginnet Vicendeau points out, the stars of the Old Continent, despite their success, tended to maintain a certain artisan-like element to their practice, strong links to theatre, and took on much shorter contractual agreements with production companies, all of which translated into greater control over their own image and creative freedom (Vicendeau, 2013). Conchita Montes was to

make good use of these essential insights in both her professional and personal lives, standing outside the narrow view of the Francoist regime.

At only twenty-five years of age, Conchita Montes debuted with two well-known actors, Rafael Rivelles for the Spanish public, and Fosco Giachetti for the Italian audience. Her interpretation of a Fascist heroine of the Falange suggests a closing off from her previous identity, at least in public. Concepción Carro disappeared, sacrificing her ideological convictions to make way for the star, Conchita Montes. This was the necessary tribute to enable her survival and allowed her to return to the beloved Madrid of her memories, the city she abandoned as a suspect and returned to, under the newly installed dictatorship, as a star of the silver screen. Conchita Montes' supposed ideological conversion was her passport to the future, at least until the middle of 1940 when the shadow of her Republican past brought her to the attention of the Italian secret police, suspected of collaboration with British intelligence services (Torreiro 2016: 399).

THE FRAGILE GLAMOUR OF CONCHITA MONTES

A multimodal analysis of Conchita Montes' image as a star through an assessment of her portrayal

in *Frente de Madrid* as the archetypal virgin heroine, reveals a consistent 'heterodesignation' in the language used on screen, in publicity and the news media (Rincón, 2014; Bernáldez, 2015). A phenomenon which, in fact, was normalised far further afield than the specifics of the political era that marked the actress's career.

Frente de Madrid is based on Edgar Neville's novel of the same title but it contains a fundamental change, specifically, the role of Carmen is developed to give her a similar level of prominence to the male lead, whereas in the novel he is the unique nucleus of action. In the film adaptation, Carmen is the co-lead, and if we examine the level of care and attention given to the arrangement and lighting of the sequences in which Conchita Montes appears, it is clear she is, in fact, meant to be the true star of the picture. Indeed, the first frames showing Montes, inspired by the classic techniques used for the North American stars of the thirties, highlight her presence exaggerating her fragile, glamorous beauty. As Morin (2005) declares, the face of Montes shines with a goddess-like quality (image 1).

The pre-eminence given to the female lead in the film is extremely relevant, indeed, the Italian title for this film identifies the heroine as the main character: *Carmen fra i rossi* [Carmen and the

Image 1. The first frames showing the actress Conchita Montes in *Frente de Madrid* (Edgard Neville, 1939)





Image 2. *Shanghai Express* (Josef von Sternberg, 1932) and *Frente de Madrid* (Edgard Neville, 1939)

Reds], leaving her soldier boyfriend playing second fiddle, at least in terms of the film's publicity.

Inspiration from the Hollywood repertoire finds its magic in the moment when the heroine smokes a final cigarette before she dies, recalling a scene from *Shanghai Express* (Josef von Sternberg, 1932) and although the female characters portrayed in each film are very different, they both sacrifice themselves for their lovers (image 2). However, while the in the Hollywood movie “neither one of the characters trusts the other, thus when the ‘hap-

py ending’ comes, Marlene Dietrich muses ironically about this dream factory imposition that creates a pompous moment of happiness portrayed with maximal theatricality” (Bou, 2015: 40), in *Frente de Madrid*, the two main characters do trust each other, and it is a tragic (and ideological) immolation that accompanies the “maximal theatricality”.

The film is set in two areas in Madrid: the zone loyal to the Republicans, and the tiny strip in the University City occupied by the Nationalist army. For many years it had been assumed that the film

Image 3. Shots showing the ruins of the Hospital Clínico (Madrid University Hospital) in *Frente de Madrid* (Edgard Neville, 1939)



was shot entirely in Rome, however, a closer look at the footage reveals that the exteriors and the scenes of fighting were in fact shot in the ruins of the Hospital Clínico (Madrid's university hospital) and the *Pasarela de la muerte*, (Footbridge of death) across the Manzanares. As Pérez comments, in the propaganda of early Francoism, the ruins of the University City became the regime's 'place of memory' (Pérez, 2016: 42) (image 3).

The film's plot tells the story of a Falangist soldier, Javier (Alfredo, in the Italian version), who's orders are to go to the capital to deliver important information to one of his superiors who has managed to infiltrate the Republican forces. Having achieved his aim, he makes the most of this dangerous assignment to visit his fiancé, Carmen, a young lady from a well-to-do family who is at home, apparently decorously awaiting the 'liberation' of Madrid. When he attempts to return to his position on the front, a bomb destroys the tunnel connecting the two zones. As a result, he seeks help from the fifth columnist to whom he had recently brought intelligence and is sent to a night club where he must contact a stranger, "an important person [...] the only one who can help you escape Madrid". To Javier's surprise, the spy

that can help him turns out to be Carmen, who, under the guise of a cigarette seller, extracts information from the communist militia and relays it the Nationalists using a clandestine radio transmitter located in one of the night club's dressing rooms. An assault by the Reds aggravates the situation, so, Carmen rapidly organises the escape of her lover and then surrenders to her own tragic destiny, waiting beside the radio transmitter until she is discovered. In the meantime, Javier, having reached safety is astonished to hear a voice on the radio – it is Carmen, narrating her last moments. In a desperate attempt to go back to rescue her, he crosses the battlefield and is hit by shrapnel. He dies lying next to an enemy soldier reminiscing about the Madrid of their childhood. Carmen and Javier meet as spirits in the afterlife from whence they contemplate proudly the victorious Spain for which they sacrificed themselves.

The film opens with the image of Conchita Montes, dressed as a bride; she turns to the camera and her gaze illuminates the frame. The camera pans round to show a luxurious room – there is even a grand piano – bathed in sunlight, which tells us not only about the character's personal background but also serves as a vehicle to

Image 4. The opening sequence and following three frames of *Frente de Madrid* (Edgard Neville, 1939)



demonstrate the happiness of her environment. This first scene situates Carmen and the rest of the film's characters, all of whom are allied to the Nationalist side, and is perhaps one of the most comic moments of the film, making a subtle dig at the rituals of marriage (image 4).

In this way *Frente de Madrid* revisits the concept of woman as an allegory for the land, the 'happy fatherland', a concept that draws on associations with fertility and has a tradition in diverse artistic disciplines. The cinematic presentation humanises the events that have befallen Madrid, expressing these through Carmen's character: first, the vivaciousness and joy of the capital under the Republicans, later the suffering caused by the war's violence, and finally the mortal sacrifice and destruction that brings about salvation.

The identification of the female lead with Madrid, rather than the whole of Spain is underscored by the symbolism of this city as the last Republican stronghold (along with the Levante region), and also by Conchita Monte's own devotion to the capital: "I am from Madrid. My parents too... and also my grandparents. Three generations of *Madridileños*. Not at all bad, don't you think?" (Tolcido, 1947). This dedication to the capital is also reiterated by the director: "The cinema and Madrid come together, and they are the two poles of my passion", (Fernández Barreira, 1945) and we see this passion clearly in the screenplay where being from Madrid, being *Madridileño*, links people regardless of ideology and is a means of reaching a peace.

The portrayal of the female character in *Frente de Madrid* is highly innovative. Carmen manages to combine the everyday, her behaviour entirely in accord with the expectations of the era, with political activism and an extraordinary ability as a strategist, displaying the archetypal star 'superpersonality' (Morin, 2005: 38).

The construction of Carmen's character is in large part down to Conchita Montes herself and this not simply because she co-authored the screenplay. Her own commentaries on the subject have been interpreted by historians as part of a

strategy to explain Montes and Neville's departure from Spain and as a public justification of her ideological position, however it is clear that the role was shaped using Montes' own personality as a model. Recalling that, the young woman previously known as Concepción Carro, debuted as an actress with no previous training or stage experience, this is how she herself remembers the experience:

The truth is that the first film I did was so easy to do. It had a freshness, spontaneity; it allowed me to be how I was. [...] The character was very close to my own genuine personality. I think I performed worse in my second film because I no longer had that same spontaneity and I had no acting technique to fall back on [...] that's something I had to acquire with study and practice (Vizcaino Casas, 1976: 71).

This personal testimony identifies the source of Montes' success in the role of Carmen and indeed, her inexperience can only be discerned in certain aspects of her manner on camera. For instance, in the sequences where Montes' character is silent for an extended period, and there is no concrete action related to her own narrative, she reveals a certain timidity. This is certainly due largely to her lack of acting technique or the shock of confronting the camera for the first time "in character" and Montes' inexperience comes through in these scenes in the way she repeats certain expressive gestures, particularly caressing elements of the set, for example, her bridal veil, or the crumpled rag in the scene at the *checa* (secret police HQ). Her particular way of "writing with her body [...] what she really wished her character to say", described by Gonzalo de Lucas (2018: 57), referring to other work by this actress, would develop in the coming years as her passion for acting lead her to develop a style that could be moulded to each new role. In this first performance, however, and key to the film's appeal, was that Carmen is the image of Conchita: an intelligent, entertaining, modern woman, a risk-taker, in charge of her own life and, in the public sphere, legitimised due to her intellectual capacities in a world of men who treat her as an equal.

FALANGISM'S IDEOLOGICAL AMBIVALENCE TO THE FEMININE AND ITS REPRESENTATION ON FILM

Frente de Madrid exposes how Franco's regime was deeply indoctrinated by Falangist ideology in the early days of the dictatorship when this movement was at its height. Of prime importance in Falangist thinking was the distinction of human capabilities, qualities, and behaviours from the point of view of the masculine-feminine dichotomy: virility, strength and intelligence contrasted with emotion, sensitivity, and intuition. This framework did however permit exceptions depending on social status and the needs of the Fatherland thus, the traditionally feminine qualities of surrender, sacrifice, and self-denial, could become deeply masculine in the military environment (Labanyi, 2009). José Antonio Primo de Rivera explains this in the following way: "Behold, women, how we have made a cardinal virtue of the virtue of self-sacrifice, which above all, belongs to you. Oh, that we should come to be so successful in it as you are. Oh, that we should come to be so feminine in this respect, so that one day you might call us truly Men!" (Primo de Rivera, 1935).

In this way, the Falangist approach unifies the values of the military with femininity, duly breaking the gender binary and justifying a "masculinised femininity". Furthermore, it approves the activism of women in the public sphere provided that such activities are in defence of a patriotic cause. These ideas enabled the leaders of bodies such as the *Sección Femenina* to simultaneously tell women to go back to their homes and child-rearing responsibilities in order to become the principle vessels to transmit the values of Franco's new Spain, whilst they themselves wielded power in public office (Enders, 1999). Be that as it may, the subjugation of women was imposed from two directions: for the benefit of Spain and of the masculine person, as some of the 'recommendations' of the Falangist *Sección Femenina* dictate: "You must

attempt always to be the wheel of the cart and allow yourself to be governed by whomsoever has that duty. Action does not fall to you, spur yourself to comply", (Morcillo Gómez, 1988: 82). As ever, power relations between people must be governed by sexual difference (Scott, 2008).

The inconsistency in Falangist thinking can be appreciated in the numerous writings from the era of the dictatorship which define women at once as "a delicate soul" in which "everything that touches her leaves a mark", and who should be encouraged to live "some distance from people and material things", at the same time as exalting her fortitude in sacrifice: "the independence of the strong woman in the accomplishment of her duties, how she sacrifices her own desires to the will of any who call on her" (Pastor i Homs, 1984: 34). Alternatively, there is reference to woman's intellectual limitations, "the woman is intuitive, in contrast to the man who prefers logic", (Pastor i Homs, 1984: 31-34), whilst highlighting the need for her to hide her cleverness under a veil of emotion (Barrera, 2019). This perversity can be explained in psychoanalytic terms as consisting in women acting out a role of passivity and submission to satisfy the masculine desire for control, while at the same time negating said role, the subordination of women being only a pretence (Kaplan, 1991).

Frente de Madrid fits perfectly into the complicated ideological mould of early Francoism since it amply demonstrates the only gender equality

FRENTE DE MADRID FITS PERFECTLY INTO THE COMPLICATED IDEOLOGICAL MOULD OF EARLY FRANCOISM SINCE IT AMPLY DEMONSTRATES THE ONLY GENDER EQUALITY PERMITTED: THAT OF SUBMISSION AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN THE SERVICE OF THE FATHERLAND AS A VALUE BOTH OF FEMININITY AND THE MILITARY

permitted: that of submission and political activism in the service of the Fatherland as a value both of femininity and the military. Thus, Javier and Carmen represent heroism in the same way: “I fight from this side and you fight from the other, but we fight for the same cause”, Carmen asserts. The female lead also complies with the theory of perversion posited by Kaplan (1991): an educated woman, sensitive, with impeccable manners and fragile in appearance, masking her role as a spy and as an activist who, under cover of night broadcasts over the clandestine radio transmitter and has a third, fake identity, passing for a friendly, innocent cigarette seller. In short, all the feminine attitudes taken up by the film’s heroine, and as we saw, in large part aimed first at enabling Conchita Montes’ performance of the character, are justified by Carmen’s own words: “In this war we all have to make sacrifices... and if it’s necessary we must risk our lives. [...] At this moment, this is how it is for women too”.

As we see, there is a double discourse that could be justified according to context. Even so, certain guidelines were fairly clear: women should avoid active protagonism, “Don’t seek to highlight your own personality, help the other to be the one who is noticed”, (Morcillo Gómez, 1988: 82); and the impossibility of women participating in armed conflict, since explicit violence, in the Falangist symbolic dichotomy, was indelibly linked to masculinity (Barrera, 2019). In this regard, it is important to mention a common female stereotype of the era, that of *la miliciana* (the militia-woman). This caricature was developed in the years prior to the conflict through cartoons, and in the more conservative elements of the press, to ridicule women members of the militia by assigning them traditionally masculine attributes. In *Frente de Madrid*, we are introduced to an example of *la miliciana* who appears amongst the upper echelons of the Republican army, the part being taken by a corpulent woman characterised by her slovenliness, crude speech, and disagreeable personality.

CONCHITA MONTES’ INTERTEXTUAL AND POLYSEMIC IMAGE AS A STAR

Once the film had been approved, the totalitarian media machine went to work creating a star. On the 25th of November 1939, while the film was still in production, Conchita Montes appeared on the cover of the Italian magazine *Cinema*, whose chief editor was none other than Vittorio Mussolini, the dictator’s son (image 5). In Spain, on 30th of March 1940, *RadioCinema* announced a double page photo reportage to mark the arrival of the new and much anticipated actress: “a charming star, who, because she is ours, entirely ours, will be able to take the art of entertainment to conquer screens worldwide”. The article highlights the distinctive idiosyncrasies of the new star, her cultivation and refinement, far removed from anything that had ever been known before. On the 23rd of March, *Frente de Madrid* was released in Spain and in the same month, *Carmen fra i rossi* was released in Italy where it received a rapturous welcome (Fernández de Córdoba, 1940). The Italian version was later dubbed into German and rebaptised as *In der roten Hölle* [In the Red Hell] where it achieved huge success in January 1943 (*Primer Plano*, 1943). Montes’ performance as the ‘tragic heroine’ received particular acclaim from the German critics: “She won our hearts through her elegant beauty and the emotion of her expressions”, (Herzberg, 1942).

In Spain, however, the media maintained conflicting positions, although these were more to do with the adjustments going on inside the government than her performance on screen. Some critics considered that the portrait of Madrid occupied by the Republican army was made to seem excessively pleasant, while others defended *Frente de Madrid* as a trailblazer for the newly forged, state sponsored Spanish cinema. One commentator, well-recognised for their intellectual rigour and who held particular sway in the new status quo, praised Conchita Montes for her definitive performance calling it

unaffected, and filled with an “attractive simplicity” in a film that offered some “meaty lessons” (Fernández Flórez, 1940: 6). At the time, the film press defined the actress as “Spanish cinema’s feminine sensation, [...] to be consecrated as the first cinema star (everything about her is art, naturalness, and beauty)”, (*RadioCinema*, 1940) (image 5).

The publicity surrounding the release of *Frente de Madrid* presenting Conchita Montes as “Spanish cinema’s innocent bride” is, however, a long way from the essence of the character she plays in the film. Press commentary over-accentuated the love-life of the female lead at the expense of other elements of her narrative. Throughout the film, Carmen makes her own destiny, she prioritises her work as a spy, takes decisions independently, and her status as a fiancé does not subordinate her. This of course, was at odds with the general direction of

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the Nationalist cinematic project which attempted to normalize the emotional guardianship of women and the loss of their rights. An identical dissonance is seen between the images shown on the posters advertising *Frente de Madrid* and the actual

Image 5. Photo-reportage in *RadioCinema*, issue 49, 30th March 1940 and in *Cinema* issue 82, 25th November 1939





Image 6. Posters for *Frente de Madrid* in Spain, Italy, and Germany

role played by Montes in the film. Advertising images, both illustrations and photographs, released to promote the film in Spain, Germany and Italy uniformly present a picture of Carmen as contemplative, aloof, omnipresent and, at times, sexually suggestive, totally marginalising the ideological activism engaged in by her character (image 6).

In the same way, the photographic montage used by the film distributors Hispania Tobbis (image 7), by an unknown author, includes a prominent image of the female lead presented as an object of desire — asleep, lying in a suggestive attitude, watched over — and gives only a small

space at the bottom to a depiction of the character in her more courageous spy persona.

The contradiction between the image of Conchita Montes shown on posters as an impassive, distant, figure and the role she plays in the film as an active, joyous personality filled with resolve reflects the Francoist state's interest in situating women in specific contexts and spaces.

Francoism's ideological apparatus understood the instructive power of film — and the cinematographic press — with its potential to transmit knowledge, emotions, and values. However, it regarded cinema productions as a neutral device, as a reflection of reality.

Image 7. Photographic montage from the catalogue produced by the distributor, Hispania Tobbis



CONCLUSIONS CONCERNING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN CHARACTER, STAR, AND ACTRESS.

The construction of a star requires contributions from all sectors of the media and any analysis of these many discourses needs to take a multi-modal approach (Dyer, 1979: 60). From the cinema reviews to the radio interviews, all parts of the media machine attempted to frame Conchita Montes in the paradigm of Spanish femininity, and as vehicle through which to transmit the values of the regime. It was a complex task as certain magazines, such as *Primer Plano* and *Cámara*, soon began to discuss: "Conchita Montes is no ingenue nor is she a vamp, she is extensively cultured and an expert antiques collector", (Demaris, 1944). Other commentary included: "She speaks no less than four languages, she doesn't play much sport, she doesn't she ride, nor does she have a favourite flower as far as anyone knows" (*Cámara*, 1941). In no uncertain terms, Conchita Montes broke with the standard expectations of the time, both professionally and personally: lawyer, writer, and later on, a screenwriter, translator, businesswoman, and leader of her own theatre company;¹ she renounced marriage and maternity focussing solely on her career as an actress.

In addition, Montes did not cooperate in the construction of the public persona desired by the regime, rejecting media scrutiny: "I'm not unwilling to talk to the press, but I want to be sincere, and I am. Besides, it's not a case of shyness, rather of modesty; I don't like to tell stories about my personal life, because I feel they are absolutely mine", (Carabias, 1954). That her personal identity remained extremely distant from any officially imposed model, was something that troubled a number of intellectuals: "I'd prefer her to be one thing only: either a woman, or an actress, or a writer, or an intellectual" (González-Ruano, 2004: 519). It is impossible not to notice how, in this author's comments concerning his preference for Montes to be

only one "thing", among the options he offers her is that of being a "woman". Humour helped Conchita Montes to ease some of the tensions generated by the gulf between societal norms and her own freedoms. She would frequently joke about the content of interviews and imitate the absurdly overblown compliments of the media: "The girl is adorable! Just adorable! She sings, she dances, she writes, she cooks... And you should see her sew! ... What a girl!" (Carabias, 1954). This quote gives us a fleeting glimpse of a moment in which the actress attempted to manage her situation, bolstering her own convictions and feelings.

To conclude, we might say that the differences between Conchita Montes' screen image and the real woman elucidate a polysemic star that gave the public layers of meaning to identify and interpret in numerous ways beyond a hermetic archetype. Precisely as David Marshall (1997) pointed out, the dissonances between an actor's on-screen persona and their personality both negotiate and resolve themselves in favour of the dominant paradigm. The media tried to silence or at least moderate Montes' life-choices and attitudes, a reality which, moreover, reflected the double moral standards of the totalitarian state.

There is evidence of doubt in Montes' own mind concerning the roles that the regime systematically aimed to inculcate into the population as coessential to womanhood, and as she herself interpreted in her screen performances. Once the dictatorship came to an end, the actress reflected: "When I'm not on set, I feel like an exile, an exile out of time, and so all that time is not free, but dead [...] but then my conscience starts to berate me, accuses me, because I don't apply myself to all the things that, well, I don't know whether they're important, but perhaps they should be important to me: learning how to cook well, tidying up that bottom drawer that's always in a mess, and other things that might be useful", (Montes, 1980). Here, the words of Edgar Morin take on a particular significance: "The star is not only an actress. The characters she plays are

not only characters. The characters of her films infect the star. Reciprocally, the star herself infects these characters.” (Morin, 1973: 35).

NOTES

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- 1 Conchita Montes (1914-1994) acted in 22 films, 8 television productions and 56 theatre productions, she also translated or adapted 23 librettos. She was a theatre entrepreneur, screenwriter, T.V. presenter, theatre director, cinema critic for the magazine, *Diario Madrid*, and worked with *La Codorniz* magazine in addition to various other media outlets such as, *Vértice* and the newspaper, *ABC* among others. In 1989, she was awarded the *Medalla de Oro al Mérito a las Bellas Artes* (Gold Medal for merit in the Fine Arts) in recognition of her professional career.

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DRAMATIC EXPRESSION IN FRENTE DE MADRID: CONCHITA MONTES, THE FIRST FEMININE ARCHETYPE OF THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

Abstract

This article studies the creation of National Catholicism's virgin heroine archetype embodied by Conchita Montes in the film *Frente de Madrid*, the first of what might be termed 'the crusade' genre, released after the triumph of Franco's dictatorship. Different elements of the media contrived to create a cosmopolitan and sophisticated star who would personify both Spanish national values and the perverse ambivalence of Falangist ideology inherent in its construction of gender. Nevertheless, the contrast between the public person and the actress herself constituted a polysemic image that offered the public multiple meanings and interpretations beyond the hermetic archetypes imposed by Franco's 'New State'.

Key words

Conchita Montes; Female Archetype; Spanish Star System; Virgin Heroine; Gestural Style; *Frente de Madrid*; Madrid.

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LA EXPRESIÓN DRAMÁTICA EN FRENTE DE MADRID: CONCHITA MONTES, EL PRIMER ARQUETIPO FEMENINO DE LA GUERRA CIVIL ESPAÑOLA

Resumen

El presente artículo estudia la creación del arquetipo de heroína virginal del nacionalcatolicismo encarnado por Conchita Montes en el film *Frente de Madrid*, primera película del cine de cruzada estrenada tras el triunfo de la dictadura franquista. Los diferentes discursos mediáticos colaboraron en la creación de una *star* cosmopolita y sofisticada, que personalizaba los valores nacionales y las perversas ambivalencias falangistas, en lo que a construcción del género se refiere. No obstante, la distancia entre el personaje público y la actriz mostraba una imagen polisémica, lo que permitió al público percibir otros significados y realizar distintas interpretaciones, más allá de los herméticos arquetipos impuestos por el Nuevo Estado.

Palabras clave

Conchita Montes; Arquetipo femenino; *Star system* español; Heroína virginal; Estilo gestual; *Frente de Madrid*; Madrid.

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