

From Concha Pérez to Lola Montes, from Cosmopolitanism to Nationalism: the Reinventions of Conchita Montenegro.

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Resumen: *Conchita Montenegro (1911-2007), la primera actriz española que se convirtió en una gran estrella del cine internacional, trabajó en Hollywood, Francia, Italia, Brasil y Argentina, casi siempre como una exótica y glamorosa mujer fatal. A su regreso a España durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial, su imagen tuvo que reinventarse para adaptarse a los dictados ideológicos del régimen franquista. El cambio de su personaje en la pantalla —de "liberal" a "conservador" y de cosmopolita a nacional— dice mucho sobre los conflictos ideológicos del cine español de los años 40.*

Palabras clave: *cine mudo, Hollywood, exotismo, coproducciones, Francia, Italia, América Latina, cosmopolita, nacionalismo, propaganda*

Abstract: *The first Spanish actress to become a major international film star, Conchita Montenegro (1911-2007) worked in Hollywood, France, Italy, Brazil and Argentina, most often as an exotic and glamorous femme fatale. On her return to Spain during World War II, her image required a degree of reinvention to fit the ideological dictates of the Franco regime. The change in her screen persona —from 'liberal' to 'conservative' and from cosmopolitan to national— says a great deal about the ideological conflicts in Spanish films of the 40s.*

Keywords: *silent cinema, Hollywood, exoticism, co-productions, France, Italy, Latin America, cosmopolitan, Nationalism, propaganda*

“Famous? Couldn’t you find anything better than that?”
(Conchita Montenegro, *Lumières de Paris*, 1938)

Conchita Montenegro was an illustrious international star and almost nobody has ever heard of her. That sounds like a contradiction. But then maybe contradiction was at the heart of everything Conchita Montenegro ever was. From her breakthrough role as Concha Pérez in *La Femme et le pantin* (Jacques de Baroncelli, 1929) to her premature retirement after *Lola Montes* (Antonio Román, 1944) she was the Spanish actress of her day who embodied the ideal of a modern, sophisticated, cosmopolitan and sexually liberated woman. Fluent in five languages, she made films in Hollywood, France, Italy, Brazil and Argentina. Her belated return to Spain under General Franco was a choice wildly at odds with her earlier screen image. The shock could not have been greater if Marlene Dietrich had agreed to return to Germany and make films under the Nazis.

The mystery of her decision was compounded by her early withdrawal from films and her decades of silence and seclusion. From the day she retired in 1944 to her death in 2007, Conchita Montenegro gave only one interview (to the author José Rey Ximena) and refused all requests to appear in public. “For all intents and purposes,” writes Jorge Pérez (2021), “Conchita Montenegro tried to disappear from the history of Spanish cinema, and she was quite successful for a long time” (p. 19). Only in the years since her death has there been a significant revival of interest in her life and work. Her life has even been fictionalised in two recent novels, *Mientras tú no estabas* by Carmen Ro (2017) and *Mi pecado* by Javier Moro (2018).

Her posthumous rebirth tells us something about the nature of film history. Far from being an objective record carved in stone, the story of film is a work in progress, a tale as fluid and as mutable as time itself. A star may spend decades in eclipse and then burst back into our consciousness with the force of a supernova. My own discovery of Conchita Montenegro came about through a chance encounter in the basement of Discos Balada in Barcelona, a VHS of *Ídolos* (1943) by Florián Rey that was on sale for two euros. Within seconds of putting the tape into the machine, I knew that I was watching a unique and indelible star presence.

A light romantic comedy with overtones of Nationalist propaganda, *Ídolos* marked the climax of Conchita Montenegro's (very brief) career as a 'national' Spanish star. Its heroine Clara Bell is a film star who has lost touch with her Spanish heritage while pursuing a career in Paris. Walking out on her glamorous but empty life, she goes on a voyage of discovery to her homeland. There she falls in love with a handsome bullfighter (Ismael Merlo). (Nobody in movies goes on holiday to Spain to fall in love with a plumber or a parking-lot attendant.) A lecherous producer gets jealous and ruins her career. Clara is reduced to the indignity of modelling clothes in a Paris dress shop. (That is the one job that will allow her to wear haute couture.) But the bullfighter comes to her rescue and Clara realises her destiny is to be a proud and patriotic Spanish housewife **[Figura 1]**.



[Figura 1] *Ídolos* (Florián Rey, 1943)

Dramatically and politically, *Ídolos* is every bit as absurd as it sounds. What makes it fascinating –apart from the star and her Cristóbal Balenciaga outfits– is the way it replicates in fictionalised form the return of Conchita Montenegro to Spanish cinema after years of working abroad. “Beautiful, lean and sophisticated,” writes Valeria Camporesi (2014), “Montenegro was a suitable Latin substitute for a standard Hollywood actress” (p. 15). Yet her sophisticated and cosmopolitan image stood in direct opposition to the values that Spanish cinema under Franco worked so hard to promote. In order to re-import her back to her native land with any degree of success, the Spanish film industry had no option but to remodel and reinvent her. It helped that the Conchita Montenegro was already an expert at reinvention.

She was born Concepción Andrés Picado in San Sebastian but moved to Madrid as a child. In their teens, she and her sister Juanita attended the Opéra Ballet School in Paris and formed a dancing double act called “Las Dresnas de Montenegro.” Their fame on stage led to small roles in Spanish films and both sisters appeared in the silent drama *Rosa de Madrid* (Eusebio Fernández Ardavín, 1927). But it was a French film that turned Conchita Montenegro into a global icon. *La Femme et le pantin* (Jacques de Baroncelli, 1929) was adapted from a then-scandalous novel by Pierre Louÿs. Published in 1898, *The Woman and the Puppet* tells of a stolid middle-aged bachelor and his fatal erotic obsession with a young dancer named Concha Pérez. Its author had been a close friend of Oscar Wilde and his young lover Lord Alfred Douglas –and to this day there are some who interpret it as a ‘gay’ story in thinly heterosexual disguise–.

But its theme of obsessive and destructive passion is in fact universal. The novel became a silent Hollywood film *The Woman and the Puppet* (Reginald Barker, 1920) with the opera star Geraldine Farrar. It has spawned three other famous film versions. *The Devil Is a Woman* (Josef von Sternberg,

1935) was made in Hollywood and starred Marlene Dietrich. *La Femme et le pantin* (Julien Duvivier, 1959) was a French film shot in Spain and starring Brigitte Bardot. *That Obscure Object of Desire* (Luis Buñel, 1977) was the last film of the veteran Spanish surrealist Luis Buñuel and cast two actresses –Carole Bouquet and Ángela Molina– as conflicting aspects of the capricious and enigmatic heroine. In 1994, when Conchita Montenegro declined to attend a gala screening of *La Femme et le pantin* at the San Sebastian Film Festival, it was in fact Molina who showed up in her place.

If she remains the definitive incarnation of the role, that may have something to do with the specific cultural moment. The years 1928 and 1929 are a milestone in the cinematic history of the femme fatale. In Berlin at that time, Louise Brooks played Lulu in *Pandora's Box* (G W Pabst, 1928) and Marlene Dietrich played Lola-Lola in *The Blue Angel* (Josef von Sternberg, 1929). In London, Anna May Wong starred as the Oriental temptress Sho-Sho in *Piccadilly* (E A Dupont, 1929). What all of these women share with Concha Pérez is a lethal innocence and a disregard for pieties and taboos that is truly amoral. They do not scheme or manipulate like the classic silent era vamps. They sin on impulse because that is the most natural thing to do. They do not so much destroy men as allow men an opportunity to destroy themselves. It is not that they enjoy being bad; they are bad purely because they enjoy it.

Although she is barely 17 in *La Femme et le pantin*, Conchita Montenegro holds the screen with effortless ease. She is as frisky and as feral as a man-eating tiger cub. Her lover Don Mateo (Raymond Destac) has no hope of ever taming her. What makes the film erotic is the multiplicity of barriers between him and his desire for Concha. As Paola Cristalli (2020) writes:

There is always something that stands between Don Mateo's gaze and the object of his attraction; first, the dividing glass window inside the train; then, during the first encounter at Conchita's house, a closed door and a candid arm appearing and stretching out, a curtain beyond which the profile of a nude body can be distinguished. (para 1)

Dancing in a smoky back room for an audience of salivating men, Conchita Montenegro became the first star in screen history to appear as a full-frontal nude. Her nudity easily predates that of Hedy Lamarr in *Extase* (Gustav Machatý, 1933) or Edwige Feuillère in *Lucrece Borgia* (Abel Gance, 1935). Yet the scene is tantalising precisely because we do not see a direct shot of her naked body. She is a shadow cast on a wall, a silhouette glimpsed through a bead curtain, a reflection seen on the surface of an empty champagne bottle. Both literally and figuratively, she has become “that obscure object of desire” [Figura 2].



[Figura 2] *Juguete de una mujer* (*La Femme et le Pantin*, Julien Duvivier 1959)

This international succès de scandale brought Conchita Montenegro to the attention of Hollywood. She was put under contract by MGM, yet there was no way this most genteel of studios would ever let its young star dance nude in a seedy cabaret. They employed her chiefly in Spanish-language versions of films made initially in English, notably *De frente, marchen* (Edward Sedgwick, 1930) with Buster Keaton and *Sevilla de mis amores* (1930) directed by and starring Ramon Novarro. When at last they found her a star vehicle, it was a film a mouldy and moralistic South Sea island tale called *Never the Twain Shall Meet* (W.S. van Dyke, 1931). It starred Conchita as Tamea, a Polynesian girl of mixed

race in love with a white man (Leslie Howard). Her first appearance sets the tone for most of what follows. Her French father tells Howard he is dying of leprosy and then introduces him to his daughter. She is not a woman but a beautiful and exotic disease.

The film flopped and MGM dropped her contract. But most of her later Hollywood roles follow the same pattern. In *The Cisco Kid* (Irving Cummings, 1931) she does an absurd Mexican hat dance with castanets while luring a bandito (Warner Baxter) to his doom; she crouches next to a gramophone in a pose that echoes the dog in the logo for “His Master’s Voice”. In *Laughing at Life* (Ford Beebe, 1933) she dances a sexy tango and tries but fails to seduce an American soldier of fortune (Victor McLaglen). “Is there anything wrong with me?” she asks him. “Am I poison?” The gringo gives her a condescending look. “Your merchandise is alright,” he sneers. “But I’m not in the market.”

Cast invariably as a sinister all-purpose exotic, the young star soon grew disenchanted. She found better roles in the low-budget films that were produced for Spanish-language markets. But as Núria Bou (2019) points out: “In *Hay que casar al príncipe*, *En cada puerto un amor* and *Marido y mujer*, the actress portrayed a Parisian, a Londoner and a New Yorker in Hollywood plots that erased the actress’ nationality” (p. 159). Small wonder that one Spanish film magazine complained: “Conchita Montenegro Does Not Want To Be Spanish.” Her role as a fiery Hungarian gypsy in the French-language version of *Caravane* (Erik Charell, 1934) did at least give her an outlet for her sense of mischief and fun. It is quite impossible to believe the hero (Charles Boyer) prefers a pallid aristocrat played by Annabella.

Can we be surprised if Conchita paid less attention to her movies than to her love life? After a passionate affair with the older (and married) Leslie Howard, she became romantically involved with another actor, the Brazilian tango star Raul Roulien –her co-star in *Granaderos del amor* (John Reinhardt, 1934) and *Asegure a su mujer* (Lewis Seiler, 1935)–. They married in 1935 and left Hollywood for Brazil. The film they made there (which Roulien also wrote and directed) was *O grito da mocidade* (1936). It is a charming if virtually plotless comedy-drama about interns in a hospital in Rio de Janeiro. Conchita plays a Spanish immigrant nurse who talks wistfully of her homeland and (poignantly) drops dead of consumption while carrying out a life-saving operation on her boyfriend’s mother.

It was a role of greater substance than Hollywood had ever allowed her. The film was successful enough to spawn a Spanish-language remake shot in Argentina, *El grito de la juventud* (1939) which starred Montenegro and Roulien with an otherwise all-new supporting cast. But the marriage was short-lived and the couple divorced in 1939. By this time, Conchita was based once more in Europe and ready for a new reinvention.

With a Civil War raging in Spain, it was impractical for Conchita Montenegro to base herself in Madrid. Her sister Juanita had put her show business career on hold and become a driver for the Republican forces. (She would later go into exile and end her days in Brazil.) Nor did Conchita have any Spanish career to come home to. Her work abroad had not found favour in her homeland. “The actress’s sensuality in France and Hollywood,” writes Núria Bou (2019), “could not be celebrated in the conservative and religious context of commercial cinema under the Republic” (p. 159). Paris was a more viable option and she had appeared in the French film *La Vie Parisienne* (Robert Siodmak, 1936) in between her Hollywood and South American careers. It was a new film made in France, *Lumières de Paris* (Richard Pottier, 1938) that forged her new image as a glamorous international diva.

In this light musical starring Tino Rossi, she plays little more than a glorified cameo: a temperamental dancer with the gloriously unpronounceable name of Pénélopeia de Parquiacarca. She looks sensational in haute couture gowns and dances on a stage bedecked with enormous sequined cacti and a giant white Mexican hat. In one frenzied diva rampage, she falls through a trapdoor in the stage and seems barely to notice. She is breathtakingly elegant and more than a little ridiculous, at once a goddess and a parody of one. We can only regret that an annoying trained seal gets more screen time than she does. On any but a purely literal level, Conchita Montenegro is the undisputed star of this film.

She won a leading role in *L’Or du Cristobal* (Jacques Becker and Jean Stelli, 1939) as La Rubia, a duplicitous showgirl who lures two unwary men (Albert Préjean, Charles Vanel) into a hunt for sunken treasure. If only World War II and France had not fallen to the Nazis, Conchita Montenegro

might have been a major star in French films. It was history that forced her to seek alternate employment. It came in the form of a wholly unexpected offer from Spain. As Jorge Pérez (2021) explains:

In 1940, CIFESA –the foremost production company in Spain until the mid 1950s– hired Conchita Montenegro as part of an ambitious attempt to create a star system similar to the Hollywood studio model...The idea was to use her as the star vehicle to sell the CIFESA brand abroad (p. 129).

She was based not in Madrid but in Rome, which the Franco regime saw as something of a safe haven. A whole mini-industry of Spanish-Italian co-productions soon sprang up there, employing stars and directors from both countries. Conchita Montenegro would star in three of these films: *El nacimiento de Salomé/La nascita di Salomé* (Jean Choux, 1940), *El último húsar/Amore di ussaro* (Luis Marquina, 1940) and *Yo soy mi rival/L'uomo del romanzo* (Mario Bonnard, 1940). She also made two that were purely Italian: *Melodie eterne* (Carmine Gallone, 1940) and *Giuliano de' Medici* (Ladislao Vajda, 1941).

These films exploited and perpetuated her image as a glamorous cosmopolitan diva. They gave the illusion of a leading Hollywood star –which Conchita had narrowly failed to become –making frothy divertissements for two unsavoury right-wing regimes. In *Melodie eterne* –an ultra-romanticised biopic of Mozart – she plays the archetypal ‘bad sister’ Aloisia Weber who tries to lure the composer (Gino Cervi) away from his loyal and long-suffering wife Constanze. In case we miss the point, the film climaxes with Aloisia in costume for her stage role as the “Queen of the Night” in Mozart’s last opera “The Magic Flute”. She is a vision in her tall powdered wig, her black lace gloves up to the shoulders and a black silk gown the size of a hot-air balloon. Yet on his deathbed, Mozart rejects Aloisia in favour of his wife [Figura 3].



[Figura 3] *Melodie eterne* (*Eternal Melodies*, Carmine Gallone, 1940)

This is the morally edifying finale that any true Fascist production was obliged to have. In playing the woman as temptress, the woman as libertine, Conchita Montenegro embodied everything the new moral order was meant to disavow. This tension between the roles she played and the ideological context in which she played them would become only more problematic after Italy entered the war on the Axis side and the star relocated back to Spain. The film industry under Franco had gone into full-on propaganda mode, as if to justify –in retrospect– the brutality and bloodshed that had led to the Nationalist victory. The five films Conchita Montenegro made in Spain are all (broadly speaking) films of this type. Yet invariably, she plays a woman who cannot (or will not) play by the rules of the new regime.

The Civil War melodrama *Rojo y negro* (Carlos Arévalo, 1942) cast her as Luisa, a Nationalist woman who does the unthinkable by falling in love with a Republican man (Ismael Merlo). Both the lovers are punished quite mercilessly for this infraction. In a lurid scene that blends the excesses of German Expressionism and Soviet propaganda, Luisa gets thrown into a Republican jail and raped by a brutal and grimy guard. We do not see the act itself. What we do see, in a bold ellipsis, is her terrified face

before the assault and her traumatised and corpse-like expression just after it. Then she is shot and dumped into a mass grave. Her lover is shot too, but only after belatedly recognising the error of his ways. Yet even this was just a shade too left-wing for Franco's censors. *Rojo y negro* was pulled from distribution and banned after only a few weeks.

Far greater success greeted *Boda en el infierno* (Antonio Román, 1942). Conchita here plays Blanca, a White Russian ballerina left destitute in the streets of Odessa under the Bolsheviks. After killing a thuggish commissar who tries to rape her, she marries a Spanish sailor (José Nieto) because that is her only way to flee the country. In Spain she walks out on her marriage of convenience and becomes a star dancer –flouncing about in a black sequined gown to the tune of a Chopin waltz–. But when the godless Republican government comes to power, she feels the claws of Bolshevik savagery reaching out once more to grab her. She reconciles with her cast-off husband and joins in the struggle to build a world safe from the Red Menace. Like the far more sophisticated *Ídolos*, this film is a parable of ideological redemption through fascism. Conchita Montenegro plays a woman who breaks the rules, but only in order to repent and reform at the last possible moment.

Her roles of the 40s are at once a summation and a negation of everything she had played up until that point. An amoral temptress turned virtuous housewife, a sultry exotic turned domestic icon, a cosmopolitan sophisticate turned apostle of conservative and nationalist values. In an unsettling case of “Life imitating Art”, Conchita formed a close liaison with the man who would become her second husband, the Falangist diplomat Ricardo Giménez-Arnau y Gran. The last and most dramatic chapter in her story was still to be told.

After her success in *Boda en el infierno* and *Ídolos*, Conchita Montenegro would make only two more films. In *Aventura* (Jerónimo Mihura, 1944) she plays an amoral actress who lures a clean-living –and married– young peasant (José Nieto) away from his wife. She would end her career with *Lola Montes* (Antonio Román, 1944) a role whose iconic power is a rival to Concha Pérez in *La Femme et le pantin*. As she was making her final film, her life off screen took one of those turns that a Hollywood scriptwriter might reject as too far-fetched. In the spring of 1943, her one-time lover Leslie Howard arrived in Madrid. According to the story Conchita told the author José Rey Ximena –in an interview just before her death– he was on a mission from Winston Churchill to dissuade General Franco from joining World War Two on the side of the Nazis.

A flair for self-mythologizing is part of an actor's craft. It is risky to accept any film star as a definitive source when it comes to his or her own life. But at the time she gave her interview, Conchita Montenegro had spent six decades in seclusion and done everything in her power to avoid the public eye. Hence it seems unlikely that she told this story in the interests of anything other than truth. Using her connection with Giménez-Arnau, she was able (she claimed) to set up a meeting between Howard and Franco –one that was instrumental in keeping Spain neutral through the darkest days World War II–. After the meeting, Howard boarded a plane from Lisbon back to London on 1 June, 1943. His return flight was shot down by the Nazis over the Bay of Biscay. A year later, Conchita Montenegro cut all ties with her past, married Giménez-Arnau and went into seclusion for the rest of her life. She was possibly the only major film star who consciously wrote herself out of film history.

All of which makes the lavish folly of her final film seem oddly poignant. An absurdly opulent biopic of the 19th century dancer and courtesan, *Lola Montes* marks the apogee of Conchita Montenegro as a glamour icon. She too is an astute political player and the mistress of powerful and dangerous men, notably King Ludwig I of Bavaria (Jesús Tordesillas). “I'm not just a revolutionary,” she boasts. “I'm a revolutionary who eats chocolates. And that's a very dangerous thing!” At the climax, the populace of Munich rises up in outrage over Lola's scandalous liaison with their sovereign. Hurling stones through the windows of her palace, they shatter the mirrors all around her. Blithely unruffled, Lola picks up a fragment and admires her exquisite reflection in a shard of glass. It is a moment that encapsulates ‘camp’ as defined by Susan Sontag (1994) –which, “even when it reveals self-parody, reeks of self-love” (p. 283) [Figura 4].



[Figura 4] *Lola Montes* (Max Ophüls, 1955)

One might argue that without the florid and flamboyant star persona of Conchita Montenegro, the tradition of camp in Spanish popular cinema –as embodied by such later stars as Sara Montiel and Carmen Sevilla– might never have existed in anything like its familiar form. It goes without saying that in the final five minutes, *Lola Montes* gives up her glamorous and decadent lifestyle and runs away with a patriotic Spanish officer (Luis Prendes) who has been pursuing her off and on since the start of the film. She has dazzled us with her wit, her glamour, her sophisticated and cosmopolitan allure –but only, in the end, the better to renounce them–. As for Conchita Montenegro, her retirement and her marriage to Giménez-Arnau may seem less like an episode from actual life than like a scene from any one of her later films, only tawdrily and rather depressingly replayed.

She left little behind her but a seductive and tantalising enigma. An icon of cinematic glamour who wound up as a woman nobody knew. A star who stepped down from the sky and made herself consciously and deliberately invisible. Our rediscovery of her life and work is complicated by a sense that it is not a thing Conchita Montenegro ever would have wanted. Her wish at the end was only to be forgotten. No matter that her image –on and off the screen– was unforgettable. For anybody who has ever felt trapped between the person they are and the person they long secretly to be, Conchita Montenegro may well be a sort of patron saint. Does it take a woman we can never truly know to allow us to know ourselves?

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