
Reading Angeles Mastretta's *Arráncame la vida* through the Lens of Mexico's Golden Age of Cinema

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In a number of ways, Angeles Mastretta's 1985 novel, *Arráncame la vida* [*Tear This Heart Out*], marks a turning point in Mexican letters. Initially dismissed by many critics as an example of what has since come to be known as "literatura light," the work's broad commercial appeal, its best-seller status, and its irreverent treatment of Mexican history and politics seemed to work against its acceptance as a serious piece of literature. The vehemence with which some critics denounced Mastretta's work, as well as the personal attacks and innuendos linking her success to good connections and family money, made her popular text a topic of critical debate whose aftershocks are still felt in any discussion of women's writing in Mexico today.¹ Not surprisingly, feminist scholars were quick to observe that the standards used by critics to dismiss Mastretta's work were informed by a longstanding association of good writing with patriarchal values and male-biased assumptions about literature, which have traditionally functioned to marginalize the feminine and exclude women who write *as* women from Mexico's literary canon. By focusing on the ways in which *Arráncame la vida* rubs against the grain of conventional writing and subverts standard notions of women, the family, and the relationship between the sexes, these scholars have attempted to create a space for a new kind of women's writing in Mexico and broaden the definition of literature to include a wider body of works. I want to expand on that discussion here by looking at the novel against the filmic traditions of Mexico's Golden Age of cinema, where so many of the cultural stereotypes dealing with the notions of femininity and masculinity are rooted. This approach allows us to see how Mastretta's novel successfully plots a space for women to insert themselves into nationalist narratives without glorifying the ideology of machismo.

Several important studies have been done regarding the duplicitous nature of the narrative and the way in which the novel's protagonist, Catalina Ascencio (or Cati, as she is known to her friends), uses artifice as a strategy for survival. Attention has also been given to the interaction between the real and the invented, the historical and the fictional, in the novel's portrayal of Mexico during the 1930s and 1940s.² Danny Anderson, for example, calls *Arráncame la vida* "an

‘effective history’ of these decades that have been crucial to the formation of the contemporary Mexican state” (15). The project of modernity undertaken by the post-revolutionary government in Mexico is linked in the popular imagination to achievements by powerful males, such as the construction of factories, the industrialization of agriculture, and the development of new technology. Mastretta of course is not the first to take up this idea in fiction, for two decades earlier Carlos Fuentes’ *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* [*The Death of Artemio Cruz*] (1962) filtered the post-revolutionary history of Mexico through the life of a shrewd self-made man who resembles Catalina’s husband, Andrés. But, unlike Fuentes’ novel, where female characters are merely appendages of the male, tied to him through sexual and material desires and relegated to the erotic or domestic sphere, Mastretta creates a network of female characters who work behind the scenes, independently of men, to promote another kind of modernity, one aimed at improving the conditions in which Mexican women live. Their projects are not broad and sweeping in scope, but small steps toward economic and social independence, with the same rights as men. In this way, *Arráncame la vida* is the flip side of traditional nationalistic discourse, taking literally the feminist maxim that the personal *is* political as its point of departure.

To accomplish its revisionist goal, the novel relies heavily on a disjunction between standardized images of women in Mexico and the self-portrait which Cati offers us as narrator of her own life story. Specifically, Cati shows us through her actions and her words that the virgin-whore dichotomy that has traditionally been used to catalogue female characters in Mexican literature and film bears little resemblance to the real-life experiences of most women.³ Joanne Hershfield has noted that during Mexico’s Golden Age of filmmaking, “women were still required to function as idealized virgin and sexually alluring whore; the virgin worked to shore up nationalism and the family, the whore to support patriarchy and the myth of Mexican male identity. Both were incorporated into narratives of national identity” (34). Sergio de la Mora agrees, pointing out that such a model of womanhood “condenses the attributes promoted by sexist gender ideologies that deny ‘good women’ sexual agency and the right to erotic pleasure and deny ‘bad women,’ those who embrace sexual pleasure and/or engage in work linked to sexual commerce, the right to be considered fit as mothers” (14). *Arráncame la vida*’s narrator, Cati, rejects this dichotomy and claims both spaces simultaneously as her own. She is aware of what de la Mora calls “the particular self-conscious form of national masculinity and patriarchal ideology articulated via the cinema and also vigorously promoted by the post-revolutionary State as official ideology” (2). But she simply does not buy into the idea. For Catalina, this male-centered

vision of national and personal identity is no more real than the films that gave rise to it.

Obviously, Catalina is a fictional creature herself; but what sets her apart and gives her greater autonomy in the shaping of her tale is the fact that she does not bother to conceal the artifice which goes into the production of herself as an object meant for consumption by others.⁴ As narrator of her own life story, she calls attention to the mechanisms of production that set in motion a complex interplay between object and subject positions, for while she is both a work of art (the character in the text) and the creator of the work of art (the voice that controls the reader's reception of information), she eludes attempts to frame her in either role by constantly slipping back and forth between them. With a wink of the eye, she allows the reader to see that she is not what she appears to be, that the various roles she plays are nothing but roles, and that the complexity of her character cannot be contained in any single image. Although she is speaking decades before Lyotard critiqued the notion of grand narratives, Cati effectively takes on the same task in *Arráncame la vida*, showing that Mexican womanhood cannot be conflated in the images of Virgin of Guadalupe and La Malinche and that the narrative must be rewritten in a more eclectic and personal way.⁵ If she, as a woman living in the early decades of post-Revolutionary Mexico, cannot directly confront and break the power of the State, she will undermine it through language. It is her refusal to become an icon or a standardized symbol of the feminine that makes her both a subversive figure and an appealing one, for by taking this stance she encourages us to question the portrayal of female characters in other texts and recognize that they are, like her, constructs built through art and artifice. Mastretta accomplishes this by giving her narrator the knowledge and perspective of a woman who could be our contemporary, without breaking the narrative illusion that we are reading about the past. As Madan Sarup explains with reference to the postmodern mindset, "It is now widely held that the autonomous subject has been dispersed into a range of plural, polymorphous subject-positions inscribed within language. Instead of a coercive totality and totalizing politics, postmodernity stresses a pluralistic and open democracy" (130). This is the frame of reference Mastretta adopts for her character, allowing us to re-read Mexico's past through a more contemporary lens, while at the same time suggesting that Mexican women of the 1930s and 1940s may not have been as unidimensional as represented in literature and film of that era.

In order to appreciate the radical shift in thinking represented by Cati's struggle with self-representation in the text, it is useful to compare *Arráncame la vida* to earlier representations of femininity in Mexico. In particular, we should look at the images of womanhood from classic films of the 1940s because they are so

strikingly and so permanently etched in the minds of the Mexican people.⁶ It is significant that Mastretta has chosen to situate her novel during this same time period, when international stars like Dolores del Río set the standards of beauty and femininity for the nation. By returning to this era, Mastretta reframes it and casts it in a new light, drawing our gaze away from the faces on the screen and focusing it instead on the lives of ordinary women, like Cati, who sat quietly in the audience looking for the ways in which those faces and those films intersected with their own experience as women. Cati's fictional relationships with real-life film actors and cabaret performers reinforce the notion that movies and life are entwined in the novel. Cati goes to films, she has opinions about them, and at times she even patterns her behavior after roles she has seen portrayed on the silver screen. While it would be an oversimplification and misrepresentation to read *Arráncame la vida* as a work influenced in any direct way by Mexico's Golden Age of cinema, as a historical work set in the 1940s in Mexico, it cannot avoid entering into a dialogue with the images of women from that period.

The decision to discuss Mastretta's novel in relation to filmic rather than literary images is based on a number of considerations. In addition to the fact that film is addressed in the novel as a direct influence on Cati's perception of herself and the world around her, the novel in Mexico in the 1930s and 1940s is clearly a masculine genre produced by, aimed at, and concerned with males rather than females. When female characters do appear, they generally occupy a very minor role. As Jean Franco has observed, "the Revolution with its promise of social transformation encouraged a Messianic spirit that transformed mere human beings into supermen and constituted a discourse that associated virility with social transformation in a way that marginalized women at the very moment when they were, supposedly, liberated" (102). During the 1930s and 1940s, "official ideology would once again turn to the idealized patriarchal family which the mass media and cinema were now able to represent and transmit to a population that literature had never reached" (Franco xx). For this reason, "national identity could not but be a problematic terrain for women novelists.... How could they plot themselves into a narrative without becoming masculine or attempting to speak from the devalued position, the space of the marginalized and the ethnic, which was not the space of writing at all?" (Franco 132). While writers like Elena Garro and Rosario Castellanos made important contributions to the field of women's writing in Mexico in the 1960s, Franco concludes that these "women's attempts to plot themselves as protagonists in the national novel become a recognition of the fact that they are not in the plot at all but definitely somewhere else" (146). I do not wish to suggest that Mastretta made the leap to a new type of writing

without the help of other women who charted the territory before her; however, in order to call attention to the marked difference between her work and classic images of femininity in Mexico, it is most useful to read her novel against the grain of popular films rather than literary texts from the same period. Naturally a literary work written by a woman in the 1980s will differ markedly in tone from films made by men in the 1940s, but the fact that Mastretta chooses to situate her work in a time period when women were systematically being excluded from the creation of a national identity in Mexico clearly links the novel to that tradition and speaks to the need to reconfigure the past in way that does not reduce women to stereotypes.

Two films are especially pertinent to the discussion of Mastretta's novel, since they also construct the feminine in terms of art and artifice. Julio Bracho's 1944 melodrama, *Crepúsculo* [*Twilight*], stars Gloria Marín as the breathtakingly beautiful femme fatale, Lucía. It stands in direct opposition to *María Candelaria*, the 1943 masterpiece by El Indio Fernández, featuring Dolores del Río in the title role as an equally stunning but much more virginal Indian peasant girl. Because both actresses clearly personify the ideal of feminine beauty, it is perhaps not coincidental that the plot of each movie revolves around the transformation of the central character into an actual work of art: María Candelaria is immortalized in a painting and Lucía is carved in stone. The master artist in each case insists that the women pose nude, because "solamente sin ropa" ["only without clothes"] can they show how beautiful they are. The reaction of each character to this artistic requirement, of course, immediately signals to the audience the type of woman she is. Whereas María Candelaria flees in horror at the idea of removing her clothes in public, Lucía clearly enjoys exposing her body to a group of men. She reclines in a provocative pose on an elevated platform as the camera slowly pans over her body and face, emphasizing not only her beauty but also the pleasure she gets from knowing that she has the power to attract and hold the male gaze. In her influential essay on gendered ways of looking in Hollywood films, Laura Mulvey notes that male characters control what the spectator sees, "transferring it behind the screen to neutralize the extra-diegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle. This is made possible through processes set in motion structuring the film around a main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify" (20). This phenomenon explains why both Lucía and María Candelaria never move beyond the function of erotic object, even when they appear on the surface to be the protagonists of the films.

The spectator's perception of difference between the two women is eventually undermined by the fact that the artist still manages to produce a nude María

Candelaria in the painting, despite her refusal to pose. In order to save the work of art on which he hopes to build an international reputation as an artist, he paints the body of another woman below the face of María Candelaria. For those who see the painting, there is no difference between the body on the canvas and the body of the real woman. Her claim, “No he hecho nada malo” [“I haven’t done anything wrong”], is not enough to save her from condemnation as a whore, for the villagers see the painting as proof of what she is. María Candelaria as a work of art stands in for María Candelaria the woman, imposing the artificially constructed image of whore over her less powerful and less authoritative self-image as virgin. With Lucía in *Crepúsculo*, there is less ambiguity about her character; nevertheless, one basic technique remains the same in both films: the statue of Lucía functions in much the same way the painting of María Candelaria did, as a substitute for the flesh and blood woman when male characters find themselves unable to control her. For example, when Alejandro discovers that during his extended absence from Mexico, Lucía has married his best friend, he is angry and avoids contact with her. At the same time, however, he seeks out and buys the statue of her because he cannot possess the real woman. Although he pretends he no longer cares for her, Lucía realizes that he still loves her when she sees the statue in his home. Leaning toward him to give him a passionate kiss, she glances over his shoulder at the statue and whispers, “Es increíble que me tengas aquí, como cosa tuya” [“It’s incredible that you have me here, like a thing that belongs to you”]. By referring to the statue as herself (“you have *me* here”: emphasis mine) and to herself as a thing rather than a person (“a *thing* that belongs to you”: emphasis mine), Lucía acknowledges the power of the work of art not only to stand in for her but actually to become her. More complacent than María Candelaria, she does not question the ability of a single constructed image to capture and contain her identity as a woman nor question the authority of the male gaze that has transformed her into an inanimate object.

Given the time frame in which these films were created, it is not unusual that we find stereotyped images and unidimensional representations of femininity. The transformation of female stars (Marín and del Río) into artistic creations (Lucía and María Candelaria) was simply what directors like Bracho and Fernández were expected to do, and their decision to incorporate this same creative process into the plot of their films, transforming the female characters into actual works of art, is not surprising in this context. But, it is significant that due to the high prestige in which films of Mexico’s Golden Age are held in Mexico today, these visions of femininity continue to influence the thinking of so many people. One study shows that more than 20% of contemporary Mexicans regard *María Candelaria* as

the single most important Mexican film to date, and Dolores del Río was named by more than 20% of those polled as their favorite female actor (García Canclini 60, 66). This preference is not limited to those who saw the film when it was first released in the theater, since people 25 years and younger are very familiar with the classics of Mexican cinema through television, “que exhibe este tipo de filmes de manera más o menos regular y accesible” [“which shows these kinds of films on a regular basis”] (García Canclini 61). Almost 80% of the public that was polled stated that they regarded Mexican films from the 1940s to be superior to those done after 1960 (García Canclini 64), and over 95% stated that they have seen or would see these films more than one time. While no doubt some of the admiration Mexicans feel for classic cinema is due to the artistic achievements and talents of outstanding directors, actors, and others in the film industry, it is clear that Mexicans also turn to cinema from this period in search of a national identity. According to the distinguished critic, Carlos Monsiváis, “Para su público, los ‘mitos’ del cine nacional son puentes de entendimiento, rostros y figuras privilegiadas que asumen la biografía colectiva, encarnaciones de experiencias pasadas y presentes” [“For their public, the ‘myths’ of national cinema are bridges of understanding, privileged faces and figures that take on a collective biography, incarnations of past and present experiences”] (39). Patricia Vega, a well-known movie critic for the newspaper *La Jornada*, notes with irony: “¿[C]uándo los indígenas van a ser como Pedro Armendariz y como María Félix? Por Dios, ¡nunca! Hemos imaginado un país que no somos” [“when are indigenous peoples going to look like Pedro Armendariz and María Félix? My God, never! We have imagined a country that we are not”] (66). Nevertheless, she states, “Todas estas películas me siguen gustando” [“I still like all of these films”] (66).

Even when they are seen with a critical distance, the impact that classic films like *María Candelaria* and *Crepúsculo* have had on Mexican viewers cannot be underestimated. While few people would confuse the female characters from these films with women in real life, the way in which the characters are portrayed nevertheless shapes our ideas about femininity and creates expectations about the way femininity should or can be presented through visual images or words. The fact that the female characters in these films are nothing more than artistic constructs is carefully concealed through the classic narrative structures and traditional shot formations, which derive, as Kaja Silverman puts it, “from the imperative that the camera deny its own existence as much as possible, fostering the illusion that what is shown has an autonomous existence, independent of any technological interference, or any coercive gaze” (201-202). The relationship between reality and art is explicitly addressed by the painter in *María Candelaria*, for example,

when he tells the journalists who have come to interview him, “Yo no pinto temas. Pinto la vida, lo que veo, México” [“I don’t paint themes. I paint life, what I see, Mexico”]. At the same time, the irony that he has painted a María Candelaria who does not exist, whom he did not see at all but, rather, has invented is carefully ignored, and the film comes to a dramatic conclusion without acknowledging the contradiction inherent in his opening statement. These strategies encourage a monologic reading of the film due to their authoritative silencing of contesting voices and their insistence on closure. They generally work to produce an overall effect of realism, despite obvious inconsistencies between the real-life experiences of the spectators and situations portrayed on the screen.

Modern spectators who have been exposed to feminist theory will immediately see how films like *María Candelaria* and *Creptúsculo* reflect what Molly Haskell calls “The Big Lie” of patriarchy, that women are inferior to men and should occupy a secondary place in culture. The films inscribe voyeurism into the text through the role of the male artist whose job it is to look at the female characters, and they encourage spectators to identify with the voyeuristic gaze by presenting the women as works of art. This situation reflects the films’ conformity to patriarchal logic, in which the female spectator can access the films’ meaning only through the controlling male gaze. Laurie Shrage asks with regard to classical Hollywood narratives, “if all knowledge and seeing is structured by culture and language, and culture and language are male, and furthermore ‘women’ are the products of culture and language, then how is feminist knowledge and seeing possible?” (142). Shrage argues against this paradox, because “A contextual analysis of film should render visible the relativity and ambiguity of meaning in art: the plurality of perspectives from which a work can be viewed” (141). As a moviegoer in Mexico in the 1930s and 1940s, Cati does not have access to sophisticated theories about female spectatorship and subjectivity, but she shows us through her actions and her words that she sees films for what they are, a kind of national mythmaking that promotes a distorted view of women. She lays claim to a female gaze, perhaps not in psychoanalytic terms such as those advanced by Mulvey, Gledhill, Doane, and others, but by offering a contextual analysis of popular films in relationship to her own life.⁷

As narrator of the novel, Cati is a creator of images, a maker of meaning and, in a broader sense, the scriptwriter, director, and principal actor involved in the production of her own life story. One basic difference is immediately apparent, however, when we compare her to the creators of meaning in the films: unlike the male artists, Cati is involved with self-representation in her narrative, which makes her simultaneously the creator and the created object. The interplay between these

two roles and the ironic distance that Cati maintains in the framing of her story make us aware that we are facing a construct rather than with a unidimensional and monolithic image which is meant to stand in for reality. For Cati, the gap between language and reality, between images and the people or things they represent, is crucial and must not be covered up by traditional discursive practices, for it is only by pointing out the holes in the system can the entire network of beliefs start to be unraveled. Informed by poststructuralist, postmodernist theories about language, meaning, and the mechanisms of production which go into the creation of a work of art, *Arráncame la vida* effectively turns classic images of femininity on their head, while at the same time it enters into a dialogue with those images by situating itself in Mexico of the 1930s and 1940s, when so many of those images became solidified and immortalized in film.⁸

In contrast to Mastretta's novel, *Crepúsculo* and *María Candelaria* rely on the authority of a male narrator who, in a voice-over, frames the story of the central female characters. María Candelaria, who has been stoned to death by the time the film ends, is unable to speak for herself, so it is left to the famous painter to bring her story to life. Ironically, he is not only the hand who immortalized her as a work of art but also the one who put in motion the situation that led to her death. By telling the story, he hopes to give greater meaning to his painting so the viewers will understand its significance; thus, he once again displaces María Candelaria in the film as a flesh and blood woman and substitutes, instead, an artistic rendering of her as the subject of his discourse. In his mind, María Candelaria is and will always remain a symbolic figure more than a real person; as he tells the village priest, "ella es para mí la esencia de la belleza mexicana" ["she is for me the essence of Mexican beauty"]. María Candelaria's neighbors mistake the painting for reality, just as the painter hoped they would, but he is disappointed in their inability to put aside provincial attitudes and find beauty in the naked human form. The fact that the body they see is not María Candelaria's but, rather, a pastiche of female body parts is irrelevant to him. It is also irrelevant to him that the story he narrates does not belong to María Candelaria either but is, instead, a reconstructed version of her life told by a man who scarcely knew her. *Crepúsculo* makes an even stronger statement about the silencing of the female voice, for although Lucía and her rival, Cristina, are the only ones alive at the end of the film, they stand mute as a voice-over by the dead Alejandro repeats sentences that have lodged in their memories forever. The incongruity engendered by this framing device is never addressed in the film: how *can* a story be narrated in flashback form by a character who dies before the story ends? Sweeping logic aside in the name of melodrama, *Crepúsculo* ends with close-ups of the faces of the silent females as the male narrator's voice

plays over and over in their heads. Clearly, the film implies, they are incapable of putting their own experience into words.

Brian Henderson notes that voice-over is sometimes used at the beginning of a film to introduce a flashback or at the end to act as a bridge between the past and present. It is also a handy narrative device to tie up loose pieces of the storyline, eliminating the need for dramatization of events that could distract spectators from the rest of the film. However, in *Crepúsculo* and *María Candelaria* the male voices that supply the voice-overs are not what Henderson calls “puppet narrators,” or relatively minor characters whose only function in the film is to narrate and who play no important role in the development of the story. They are males who have a direct influence on the female characters’ destinies and who are aware of the power they have over the women. More importantly, their voices silence the women in the films, so that men end up speaking for women with great authority but no real understanding. The non-diegetic voice that opens and closes the film emanates from an unidentified space outside the storyline, much like the voice-of-God approach of narrators in documentary films. This strategy disguises the fact that it is still a character-bound narration, limited to what the narrator (as a character in the film) knows. It appears more objective because we are no longer focusing on the person who speaks, but on the image created by his words. Furthermore, the voice-over functions as a “double-telling” strategy, a summary of information already presented in the plot but reframed from the perspective of one who can add a new level of meaning to what spectators have seen. In this way, the narrator’s version of the story becomes the definitive one, especially in light of the fact that the female’s voice has been silenced by the film’s conclusion.

Catalina, on the other hand, takes the narrative reins on the first page of Mastretta’s novel and refuses to surrender them until she brings her story to an end. As in the classic melodramas she loves, Cati narrates her story in flashback form. She speaks from the perspective of an adult woman, a young widow who appropriately enough returns to the year of her marriage as the starting point of her tale; however, contrary to the conventions of melodrama which stress romance and idealization of marriage as every woman’s ultimate goal, she immediately undermines the importance of this event in her life by stating, “Ese año pasaron muchas cosas en este país. Entre otras, Andrés y yo nos casamos” [“That year a lot of things happened in this country. Among other things, Andrés and I got married”] (9). By speaking of her wedding as just one of many other things that happened, she indicates at once that she is approaching her task as narrator with a certain ironic distance. Cati also functions as a diegetic narrator, a character who is aware of her function as storyteller within the text. In her case, she makes no

effort to appear neutral and objective but, instead, teases her readers by reminding them that she has the power to give or withhold information that will shape the narration. By identifying Cati as the character responsible for telling the story, Mastretta claims agency for her protagonist, who at the beginning of the novel is an uneducated fifteen-year-old girl. This, alone, is a departure from convention in Mexican historical fiction, in the sense that young women very rarely dominate the narrative. At the same time, Mastretta focalizes the novel through the point of view of the mature Cati, who is able to look back at her youth with an experienced eye. Cati is both the narrating subject and the subject of narration and, while these positions are not coterminous, they are unified on the structural level by the consistent use of the first-person pronoun (*yo*) in reference to her character, thus giving the novel a quasi-autobiographical tone. In this sense, although it is a character-bound narration restricted to what Cati knows about the subject she narrates, the limitations of her discourse are of minor importance given the fact that she is talking about herself, the subject she knows best. She draws readers into the text by offering up carefully chosen intimate details of her life and withholding others, while teasing her readers with the possibility that she will eventually tell all.

Cati exercises her agency as narrator in particular when she discusses her sexual experience, or when there is the strongest danger of her becoming an erotic object in the text. For example, she refuses to dramatize the loss of her virginity before marriage, simply saying, “Tenía quince años y muchas ganas de que me pasaran cosas” [“I was fifteen years old and really eager for things to happen to me”] (11). She delivers the news to her parents through a short note in which she emphasizes the journey she has undertaken with her lover, not the sexual or romantic motives normally associated with elopement: “Queridos papás, no se preocupen, fui a conocer el mar” [“Dear parents, don’t worry, I went to see the ocean”] (11). The ease with which Cati dismisses the importance of virginity stands in strong contrast to the traditional view that virginity must be maintained at all costs until marriage. At the same time, her parents’ reaction to this turn of events suggests that the appearance of virginity is not the same as the actual state of virginity. As Cati says, “Mis padres me recibieron de regreso sin preguntas ni comentarios. No estaban muy seguros de su futuro y tenían seis hijos, así que se dedicaron a festejar que el mar fuera tan hermoso y el general tan amable que se molestó en llevarme a verlo” [“My parents met my return without questions or comments. They weren’t very sure about their future and they had six children, so they decided to be happy that the ocean was so pretty and the general so nice that he bothered to take me to see it”] (12).

In strong contrast to the melodramatic conventions surrounding the image of the fallen woman in Mexican Golden Age cinema, where even the suspicion of premarital sex could have tragic consequences, in Cati's narration it makes no difference at all. Instead, she highlights the hypocrisy behind moral conventions that define women in Mexico, an idea that will become one of the novel's recurring themes. Furthermore, Cati challenges the traditional view that women do not like sex, claiming sexual pleasure as her natural right. Although fallen women in Golden Age films engaged in sexual practices, they were not supposed to enjoy them; at most, they might feel the thrill of attracting the male gaze, but viewers understood that it was only a way of satisfying the woman's enormous ego, not her sexual desires. Cati, in contrast, admits bluntly, "me gustó" ["I liked it"] (11). As narrator, Catalina chooses salty, sexually charged language, words that are not ladylike and infused with romantic clichés but, rather, that tread boldly into the territory claimed by males as their own. Whereas the male narrators of *María Candelaria* and *Crepúsculo* rely heavily on flowery language to describe the "amor perfecto" ["perfect love"] and "obsesión enfermiza" ["sickly obsession"] that they feel for the women in question, Catalina does not hesitate to talk about sex. Unlike the narrators of the films, she discusses her erotic encounters in the most direct and vulgar words she knows as a way of stripping them of the mystique they have acquired in traditional melodrama. In works like *Crepúsculo*, for example, women are sexualized but they are not sexual beings; love is passionate, but it is not overtly erotic; men feel desire, but women can only inspire it. *María Candelaria* is separated from her husband before they can do more than clasp hands and look adoring at each other. Catalina, in contrast, openly embraces her sexuality as a means of achieving erotic pleasure, and as a means of leveling the playing field and meeting men on their own turf.

For Cati, experiencing sexual pleasure is only the first step toward gaining agency. She also wants to understand her body and take charge of her sexual experience. When Andrés criticizes her for "not feeling anything," she tells him, "sí siento, pero el final no lo entiendo" ["Yes, I do feel something, but I don't understand the ending"] (11). Andrés defines sexual pleasure in terms of orgasm, a phallogocentric idea that assumes feminine pleasure will mirror his own. His wife's inability to "feel" suggests to him that she is somehow defective: "pues el final es lo que importa... ¡ay, estas viejas! ¿Cuándo aprenderán?" ["well the ending is the part that matters... oh, these women! When will they learn?"] (11). When Cati asks him why he doesn't teach her how to reach an orgasm, he closes the subject by saying, "Eso no se enseña, se aprende" ["That isn't something you teach, it's something you learn to do"] (11). Such a forthright discussion of sex, along with

the implicit demand that a woman has the right to feel as much pleasure as a man during the act, is surprising when placed in the mouth of a fifteen-year-old girl from a provincial town in Mexico in the 1920s. It dismantles the stereotype of the sheltered virgin and the virile macho, and suggests that men are not as knowledgeable as they pretend to be about women's sexuality. Cati takes matters into her own hands, literally, when she visits a gypsy woman who disrobes and shows her where to find her clitoris; contradicting Andrés' words and reframing them in feminine terms the woman explains, "Todo lo importante estaba ahí, por ahí se miraba, por ahí se oía, por ahí se pensaba. Ahí estaba todo" ["Everything important was there, that's where you looked from, that's where you heard from, that's where you thought from. Everything was there"] (13). Cati begins to masturbate at home so frequently that she is in a constant state of delirium and sexual fever. Her mother, falling back on romantic clichés about women and tragic love affairs, assumes she is like "la dama de las camelias" ["the lady of the camellias"] and is dying of tuberculosis. This misreading casts the episode in a comic light, but also underscores the dichotomy between reality and appearances in Catalina's family. Cati's encounter with the gypsy woman teaches her not only about sex, but also about the importance of dissembling. She learns that Andrés is not the authority he pretends to be, and that it can work to a woman's advantage to keep her knowledge secret. This discovery helps her develop a narrative strategy that tells two stories at the same time: there is what Cati knows, and what other characters think she knows. Readers have access to both levels of narration, whereas characters like Andrés and Cati's parents do not. It is precisely in these fissures where the complexity of the narrative unfolds. The invisible cultural codes that shape the thinking of other characters cause them to underestimate her throughout the narrative, while Cati's confessions to her readers encode an alternative referent system into the text and let them know that she is not as complacent or simple as others make her out to be.

In keeping with the dominant ideology of the times, marriage offers a mantle of respectability that Andrés assumes will please Cati. He sees his proposal as generous, one designed to lift her out of the role of fallen woman and elevate her to the socially accepted position of wife. She, however, sees it as a threat to her independence: "Ni siquiera me has preguntado si me quiero casar contigo.... ¿Quién te crees?" ["You haven't even asked me if I want to marry you.... Who do you think you are?"] (15). Cati undermines the importance of a wedding by focusing on the dreary routine that follows marriage. She confides to her readers, "Siempre me río en las bodas. Sé que tanta faramalla acabará en el cansancio de todos los días durmiendo y amaneciendo con la misma barriga junto" ["I always laugh at weddings. I know

that so much fanfare will end up with the boring routine of sleeping together every night and waking up with the same bellies pressed together” (14). She also rejects the idea that she needs a man’s protection and that a woman belongs to her husband. When he tells her she must now sign her name with his surname and use the possessive “de” [“belonging to”], she counters, “¿Tú pusiste de Guzmán?” [“Did you put belonging to Guzmán?”] (16). Andrés clarifies the concept, saying, “No, m’ija, porque así no es la cosa. Yo te protejo a ti, no tú a mí. Tú pasas a ser de mi familia, pasas a ser mía” [“No, my child, because that’s not how it works. I protect you, you don’t protect me. You now belong to my family, you belong to me”] (16). Cati’s questioning response, “¿Tuya?” [“Belonging to you?”], stands in strong contrast to dialogues in Golden Age films like *Crepúsculo* and *María Candelaria*, where the man’s claim to the woman he loves goes unchallenged. Cati describes her wedding as a brief civil ceremony, dominated by a gruff and harried groom who has no time for pleasantries. He cuts short the vows, telling the judge, “La acepto, prometo las deferencias que el fuerte debe al débil y todas esas cosas, así que puedes ahorrarte la lectura. ¿Dónde te firmamos?” [“I take her as my wife, I promise to show her the deference that the strong are supposed to show the weak and all that stuff, so you don’t have to read any more. Where do we sign?”] (15). To describe her wedding, Cati borrows traditional imagery from romantic fiction, but only to stress all of the things that did not happen: “Me hubieran gustado mis hermanas de damas color de rosa, bobas y sentimentales, con los cuerpos forrados de organza y encaje. Mi papá de negro y mi madre de largo. Me hubiera gustado un vestido con las mangas amplias y el cuello alto, con la cola extendida por todos los escalones hasta el altar” [“I would have liked to see my sisters as bridesmaids dressed in pink, silly and sentimental, with their bodies wrapped in organza and lace. My dad in black and my mother in a long dress. I would have liked a dress with wide sleeves and a high neck, with the train spreading out on all the steps up to the altar”] (14). Ultimately, she dismisses romantic illusions as nothing but pretty turns of phrase, for she quickly adds, “Eso no me hubiera cambiado la vida, pero podría jugar con el recuerdo como juegan otros” [“It wouldn’t have changed my life, but I could play with memory like everyone else does”] (14).

Cati next challenges the convention that good mothers are asexual beings and that motherhood is woman’s most rewarding role. For example, she frames the news that she is pregnant with the comment, “Todo el tiempo estuve pensando en lo terrible que resultaría ser mamá” [“All the time I was thinking how terrible it would be to be a mother”] (29), and by telling the story of her pregnancy intertwined with the story of how she committed adultery: “Pablo se encargó de quitarme las ansias esos tres últimos meses de embarazo, y yo me encargué de

quitarle la virginidad que todavía no dejaba en ningún burdel. Eso fue lo único bueno que tuvo mi embarazo de Verania” [“Pablo devoted himself to getting rid of my sexual frustration the last three months of my pregnancy, and I devoted myself to taking his virginity which he hadn’t lost yet in some brothel. That was the only good thing about my pregnancy with Verania”] (32). As she tells the story of her pregnancy, she evokes the two traditional images of Mexican womanhood, the mother and the whore, but she stresses in her narrative that she occupies both simultaneously, thus contesting the patriarchal ideology that informed so much of Golden Age cinema. In public, she plays the role of proper wife, mother, and society matron with perfect ease whenever she is called upon to do so, but she confesses to her readers that she deceives her husband whenever the mood strikes. Andrés sums up his position, which is essentially one of hypocrisy and artifice, when he tells her, “Yo no tengo por qué disimular, yo soy un señor, tú eres una mujer y las mujeres cuando andan de cabras locas queriéndose coger a todo el que les pone a temblar el ombligo se llaman putas” [“I don’t have to pretend, I’m a man, you are a woman, and when women go around like wild animals wanting to fuck everyone who makes their belly buttons tremble they are called whores”] (75). Cati follows his advice to keep up false appearances, taking refuge in her role as mother whenever suspicions arise about her sexual liaisons. For example, she tells her readers on one occasion, “Cuatro noches pasé en el cuarto de Carlos, escapándome cuando Andrés se dormía, pretextando el catarro de Checo y la conversada con Lili hasta muy tarde” [“I spent four nights in Carlos’ room, sneaking out when Andrés went to sleep, using as a pretext Checo’s cold or a late night conversation with Lili”] (157). For Cati, there is nothing inconsistent in her behavior, because motherhood is only a small part of her identity as a woman.

Whereas characters like Chofi, the wife of the President, uphold patriarchal values and mouth tired phrases such as “es muy noble la maternidad” [“motherhood is very noble”] (96), Cati expresses ideas that go against the grain of Mexican stereotypes. She undermines Chofi’s pronouncement by saying, “Qué milagro de la vida ni qué la fregada. Hubieras visto como lloré y odié mi panza de seis meses de Verania cuando se llenó de nísperos el árbol del jardín y no pude subirme a bajarlos” [“What bullshit this miracle of life stuff. You should have seen how I cried and hated my 6-month belly when I was pregnant with Verania and the tree in the garden was full of loquats and I couldn’t climb up to get any”] (95). Cati rejects the honored role of mother that the nation is anxious to cast her in, because, as she puts it, “mi amor por los hijos de Andrés era un invento ... cómo podría decirse que los quería si ni siquiera me daba orgullo ser madre de los que parí” [“my love for Andrés’ children was a farce ... how could I say that I loved

them if I couldn't even feel proud about being the mother of those I gave birth to"] (203). By offering a countervoice to Chofi's official discourse, Cati shows that the experience of women cannot be boiled down to a single tired phrase.

When Andrés becomes Governor of the State of Puebla in the 1940s, Cati is expected to play an important role in preserving traditional family values while the nation around her is experiencing rapid and dramatic change. Hershfield points out, "The Revolution and the continuing growth of industrialization and urbanization led to changes in the Mexican family, bringing women out of the home and church, where they had remained isolated from political concerns" (28-29). But, under postrevolutionary presidents like Cárdenas and Ávila Camacho, women's involvement in political issues was clearly limited to the sidelines: "The problem for postrevolutionary discourse was to construct a female identity that would encompass the myth of the Revolution, which promoted social equality; support women entering the work force; and still fall within the defining border of patriarchy, which demanded the perpetuation of inequality and socially sanctioned forms of sexual subjugation" (Hershfield 29). Cati joins the ranks of thousands of Mexican women who gave money and jewels to help the country repay its reparations debt after the nationalization of the oil industry,⁹ but Andrés supplies her with a prop, boxes of jewels belonging to other people, and encourages her to play the part of Revolutionary heroine: "Llévaselas y dile que te estás desprendiendo del patrimonio de tus hijas" ["Take these and say that you are giving up the inheritance of your daughters"] (54). She understands at once what is required, but she has difficulty following the script when she sees the other women who are there: "Había campesinas que llevaban pollos y mujeres que se acercaban a la mesa en el escenario a entregar sus alcancías de marranito llenas de quintos. Hasta unas señoras gringas hablaron en contra de las compañías petroleras y cedieron públicamente miles de pesos" ["There were peasant women who carried chickens and women who went up to the table on the stage to hand over their piggy banks full of nickels. Some gringas were even talking against the oil companies and they publicly turned over thousands of pesos"] (54). Cati, accompanied by her own child and several of Andrés' daughters by other women, plays the role of Mexican matriarch to perfection but she cannot resist the temptation to add her own touches to the drama: "las niñas y yo subimos hasta la mesa con nuestras cajitas, las entregamos a la señora poniendo cara de heroínas. Para completar el espectáculo, yo a la mera hora me conmoví de verdad y dejé también las perlas que llevaba puestas" ["the girls and I went up to the table with our boxes, we handed them over to the lady putting on our most heroic faces. To make the spectacle complete, I at the last moment got carried away by emotion and I also gave them

the pearls I was wearing”] (54). Andrés scolds her for her unnecessary generosity, but Cati is pleased because she has learned that she can be an active participant in events rather than play a secondary role in someone else’s drama.

Many people around Cati see her as an object, not as a subject in her own right, an attitude that harks back to the treatment of female characters in films such as *María Candelaria* and *Crepúsculo*. But, whereas the male narrators of those films asserted that it was natural and romantic to portray beautiful women as static works of art, Cati recognizes it as an inability to see the person inside the body: “Para mucha gente yo era parte de la decoración, alguien a quien se le corren las atenciones que habría que tener con un mueble si de repente se sentara a la mesa y sonriera” [“For many people I was a part of the decorations, someone who was owed the same kind of attention that you would give to a piece of furniture if it suddenly sat down at the table and smiled”] (56). She gains a sense of agency by showing them what they want to see, but by reminding herself (and us) that it is only a role she is playing: “me aguantaba para no correrme el rimel y de remate parecer bruja. Porque así no era la cosa—diría Andrés. La cosa era ser bonita, dulce, impecable” [“I held back tears so that my mascara wouldn’t run and on top of everything else I would look like a witch. Because that’s not how it goes—Andrés would say. The way it goes is you’re pretty, sweet, impeccable”] (56). Andrés’ insistence on writing the script for Cati is a constant source of irritation for her, but like any consummate actor, she knows she can add depth to her performance by keeping some of her feelings under wraps. The distance between what she says and what she feels grows wider as the novel progresses, and irony becomes her principal narrative tool as she records the disjunction between her authentic sense of self and her invented character. Although she despises the role that women are expected to play in her social circle, she knows that she cannot publicly flaunt convention without some kind of punishment. Thus, she does what is expected, but she also makes sure that her readers know it is only a pose: “Prefería oír la plática de los hombres, pero no era correcto. Siempre las cenas se dividían así, de un lado los hombres y en el otro nosotras hablando de partos, sirvientas y peinados. El maravilloso mundo de la mujer, llamaba Andrés a eso” [“I preferred to hear the men talking, but that wasn’t right. Always at dinner parties, people were divided this way, with men on one side and on the other we would talk about giving birth, servants and hairdos. The wonderful world of women, Andrés used to call this”] (61). As Cati grows older and wiser, she finds that it is usually in her best interest to behave “como si fuera la tonta que parecía” [“as if I were the dumbbell I appeared to be”] (101). But, because readers have access to her private thoughts, we know she is anything but “tonta.”

Cati begins to improvise with different props, settings, costumes, and poses, modeling her behavior after stars of the 1940s. For example, after she notices that her husband's political rival treats her "como si yo fuera Dolores del Río" ["as if I were Dolores del Río"] (83), she begins to wear fur coats to enhance her glamorous image, even though she knows fur coats are not needed in Mexico's warm climate: "me puse un abrigo de zorro ... y me sentía artista de Hollywood" ["I put on a fox coat ... and I felt like a Hollywood star"] (113). Her home becomes a set for the drama she is acting out every day: "era como si siempre estuviera a punto de abrirse el telón" ["it was if the curtain was always ready to go up"] (105), and she associates with popular entertainers such as Toña la Negra, Agustín Lara, Pedro Vargas, and El Charro Blanco who all, at one time or another, perform at her home for her guests. She enjoys a friendship with movie star Andrea Palma, who gives her advice about men, diets, and beauty routines. The overlap between cinema and ordinary life is reinforced in the novel by Cati's awareness that she is modeling herself after screen personalities, as when she poses "recargada contra la pared como una piruja, sintiéndome Andrea Palma en *La mujer del puerto*" ["leaning against the wall like a hooker, feeling like Andrea Palma in *The Woman of the Port*"] (115). It is significant that Cati does not identify with the character in the film but rather with the female star who plays the role, since this is one of the strategies she uses throughout her lifetime to escape the confines of stereotypes. Although she is about to commit adultery, she does not feel like a prostitute but, instead, like a woman pretending to be a prostitute. The difference between the two positions reinforces one of the major themes of the novel, that there is a huge gap between reality and appearance, and what we see may not always be what we think it is.

Everything leading up to the final chapter of the novel is preparation for Cati's greatest role, that of widow. Upon her husband's death, another woman tells Cati, "Me da gusto por ti. La viudez es el estado ideal de la mujer. Se pone al difunto en un altar, se honra su memoria cada vez que sea necesario y se dedica uno a hacer todo lo que no pudo hacer con él en vida" ["I'm happy for you. Widowhood is the ideal state for women. You put the dead man on an altar, you honor his memory whenever you have to, and then you go about doing everything that you weren't able to do when he was alive"] (220-221). Exchanges such as these, which highlight the discrepancy between reality and artifice in the novel, allow us to read Andrés' death in two different ways. While it is possible that he died of natural causes, it is just as likely that Cati poisoned him with an herbal tea. An old wives' tale suggests that the tea has curative powers, but if taken in excess may lead to death. Andrés, however, rejects this idea as feminine nonsense and tells Cati to bring the doctor to confirm that the tea is harmless: "llámalo de testigo

no vayan a decir que me envenenaste” [“call him as a witness so people won’t go around saying you poisoned me”] (214). When Andrés dies shortly afterward, no one suspects Cati, although we know from an earlier conversation that when someone dies from the tea, “los doctores nunca creyeron que hubiera sido por eso. Que se le paró el corazón” [“doctors never think it was because of that. They think the heart stopped”] (192). As has been the case throughout the novel, male discourse propped up by patriarchal authority creates an official version of events, but female discourse, whispered behind closed doors and conveyed to the reader through interior monologue, offers a countervoice to those events. Cati contemplates what is required of a widow and decides on a black dress, although she would have preferred to dress in red: “con ese vestido aguantaría mucho más fácil todo el teatro que me falta” [“with that dress I would have been able to stand much better the whole theatrical role required of me”] (223). While Cati responds inwardly to the situation with biting satire and sharp quips, on the surface she does what is expected: “sólo sonreí haciendo una mueca de pena, como de que agradecía las atenciones aunque la tristeza no me dejaba expresarlo en palabras” [“I just smiled with a little grimace, as if I were grateful for the kindness but my sadness didn’t let me express it in words”] (224). She falls back into her public role for the last time, standing next to her children like the symbol of Mexican motherhood, “Como si hubiéramos ensayado la película de la familia unida por la pena” [“As if we were rehearsing the film about the family united by grief”] (226). When she finds she can produce no tears for her husband, she remembers how he murdered the man she really loved, a man she was never able to mourn in public, and “entonces, como era correcto en una viuda, lloré más que mis hijos” [“then, as was proper for a widow, I cried more than my children”] (226). The ultimate revenge for Cati is to play the role designed for her by her husband and society, but to use it to validate and vindicate her adulterous behavior. In this way, she manages to consolidate the stereotypical roles of virgin/mother and whore in one being, without allowing any of them to define her character.

Unlike María Candelaria and Lucía in *Crepúsculo*, Cati, as a character, does not become frozen into a single, unified icon of femininity. And unlike the male narrators in the films, Cati tells her own life story in her own words. In the telling of the tale, she does not offer us the illusion of closure or the hope of possessing a finished product with a singular fixed meaning. Mastretta’s revisionist picture of Mexico in the 1930s and 1940s rubs against the grain of the cinematic discourse of Golden Age films and, through the creation of an independent female narrator who claims the role of creator of meaning rather than created product for audience consumption, she recovers a space in which Mexican women contribute

to national identity in a multiplicity of new forms. Andrés' final recognition that "cabem muchas mujeres en el cuerpo" ["a lot of different women fit inside your body"], is perhaps Cati's greatest accomplishment, for he acknowledges the artifice behind the creation of the images she has projected to him and to the world. Artifice has not only been her strategy for survival in life, but has become a tool for shaping herself into a work of art, since her refusal to symbolize a fixed idea of womanhood is precisely what defines her character. By slipping from one role to another and playing them all with equal ease, Cati reveals them to be nothing more than empty constructs and challenges us to see the creative process behind them rather than the finished product held up for our consumption. In this way, she undermines the power of any image, visual or written, to stand in and speak for women, and subverts the very premise on which films like *María Candelaria* and *Crepúsculo* have been built.

Notes

¹ Mastretta is married to Héctor Aguilar Camín, the director of *Nexos*, Mexico's most prestigious literary magazine. He is considered to be among the most outstanding of the pro-Salinas intellectuals and is known in some circles as Mexico's "cultural czar" (García 66). Although *Arráncame la vida* has sold more than 250,000 copies in more than twenty editions in Mexico, reviews have been very mixed. Braulio Peralta and Aralia López González, for example, praise it for its treatment of female characters, while Martha Robles in her two volume book, *La sombra fugitiva: Escritoras en la cultural nacional* (1989), dismisses it as a novel that lacks surprise, poetry, original character, and situation. She faults it for being too linear in its presentation of plot (323).

² See Anderson, "Displacement: Strategies of Transformation in *Arráncame la vida*, by Angeles Mastretta"; Cragolino, "Jugando con el melodrama: Género literario y mirada femenina en *Arráncame la vida* de Angeles Mastretta"; Bailey, "El uso de silencios en *Arráncame la vida* por Angeles Mastretta"; García, *Broken Bars: New Perspectives from Mexican Women Writers*; Gold, "*Arráncame la vida*: Textual Complicity and the Boundaries of Rebellion"; León, "La historia oficial frente al discurso de la ficción femenina en *Arráncame la vida* de Angeles Mastretta"; and Schaefer, *Textured Lives: Women, Art and Representation in Modern Mexico*.

³ Debra Castillo presents an excellent overview of traditional representations of femininity in Spanish American literature in the introduction to her book *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Literary Criticism*. The virgin/whore dichotomy has been the most prevalent one since Colonial times and has been used to contain femininity in ways that are consistent with patriarchal values.

⁴ I identify Cati as the creator in the text because she plays the same diegetic role as the male artists in *Crepúsculo* and *María Candelaria*. Like Cati, they are fictional characters who claim to represent the female protagonist through an art form (sculpting, painting). In Cati's case, she constructs a public image of herself through a kind of performance art (acting, role-playing) that stands in strong contrast to her voice as narrator. Whereas Cati wants other characters in the novel to believe what they are seeing is real, she is careful to make sure her readers know she is pretending to be something she is not. Through the use of ironic distance, Cati manages to

occupy the central role of narrator and at the same time the fictional roles she creates for herself. Mastretta is, of course, the true creator of the text, just as Fernández and Bracho are the *auteurs* of the films, but since all three texts function on a meta-level of art within art, it makes sense to discuss the characters in their role as creators.

⁵ According to Joanne Hershfield in *Mexican Cinema, Mexican Woman: 1940-1950*, “Since the Spanish conquest of Mexico in the sixteenth century, the archetypal polarity of virgin/whore has been represented by La Malinche, the mistress of Cortés who became the symbol of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, and the Virgin of Guadalupe, an apparition of the Virgin Mary who appeared to a poor Indian man a few years after the conquest” (10). Although Octavio Paz was not the first to write about the Malinche/Guadalupe paradigm, his highly influential *El laberinto de la soledad* [*The Labyrinth of Solitude*] from 1950 permanently inscribed these two images of Mexican womanhood into the psyche of the nation. Ana López’s work on the cultural specificity of Mexican melodrama has been instrumental in contesting some of Paz’s ideas about gender: see “Tears and Desire: Women and Melodrama in the ‘Old’ Mexican Cinema.”

⁶ A very important exhibition titled “Revisión del cine mexicano” was staged by the Instituto Mexicano del Cine and the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes at the Palacio de Bellas Artes from December 1990 to February 1991, in which Mexican films were shown, examined, discussed, and studied by a wide body of critics. The prestigious journal, *Artes de México*, devoted a special edition to this topic in winter 1990, and Nestor García Canclini’s comprehensive study of cinema and television in Mexico used information gathered from questionnaires filled out by people who had attended the exhibit. It is clear from the facts gathered by García Canclini, by the public’s reception of the exhibition, and the heavy sales of the journal addressing this theme that Mexican cinema from the 1940s continues to hold a fascination over not only the critics but the public at large. It is significant that a photograph of Dolores del Río in the role of María Candelaria appears on the cover of *Artes de México*’s special number, confirming the power of this image to represent femininity for many people.

⁷ Whether it is possible or not for female spectators to control the gaze is a hotly contested point among film theorists. In addition to Mulvey’s article, see Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s*; Gledhill, “Rethinking Genre”; Fischer, *Shot/Counter-shot: Film Tradition and Women’s Cinema*; Williams, *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*; and Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*. Feminist critics agree in general that the gaze is a site of contention or struggle. We can extend this notion to the control of narrative voice in Mastretta’s novel and in *María Candelaria* and *Crepúsculo*, since the narrators determine what we see or understand in the texts.

⁸ Mastretta uses colloquial language in the novel, but it is far from transparent. She calls attention to the gaps in meaning between what is said and what is understood, or what is said and what is meant, by showing that linguistic signs are slippery and indeterminate. As Ferdinand de Saussure argued, the relationship between signifiers and the signified is arbitrary and can be understood in different ways. This idea is illustrated in the novel in the many conversations Cati has with Andrés, his powerful friends, her parents, and any other character who underestimates her intelligence and nerve. For example, when Andrés asks Cati what harm it could do to drink the herbal tea she offers him, she answers, “nada” [“none”] (205). In context, it is quite probable that Cati knows the tea will kill him and her answer means that his death will not hurt her (because she has come to hate him). Andrés, however, thinks she means that the tea is harmless. Both possibilities are inscribed into the text, giving Cati’s simple word at least two different and contradictory meanings. On another level, Saussure’s theory that the signified is not the same as the referent, or the object in reality, illustrates perfectly the narrative technique used by Cati to

highlight the difference between the fictional character she consciously creates for consumption by others in the text, and the real person she knows herself to be (within the fictional world of the novel). Her references to films of the Golden Age, along with real historical events and real people, demands a level of cultural competence from her readers, which in turn allows for a deconstruction of literary and filmic conventions associated with reading and viewing texts produced in that time period. This idea resembles Barthes' ideas about the plurality of textual analysis, and the importance of the reader's "textual competence" in order to negotiate the field of multiple signifiers that resist absolute closure.

⁹The scene narrated by Cati is based on fact and is an excellent example of the way Mastretta mixes history and fiction in the novel. In 1938, President Cárdenas expropriated all foreign-owned oil businesses in Mexico as part of a plan to nationalize the industry. The U.S. believed Mexico was not offering enough compensation, and relations were strained between the two nations until 1941, when newly elected President Manuel Ávila Camacho (called Rodolfo in the novel) agreed to a debt repayment plan. The rising wave of nationalism in Mexico produced public spectacles such as the one described by Cati here.

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