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The Silent Films of Lupe Vélez

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Maria Guadalupe Vélez de Villalobos, named after Our Lady of Guadalupe, an important icon of Mexican religiosity, ironically, became one of the most exoticized Latin temptresses of Classical Hollywood cinema during the 1940s. Vélez was born in San Luis Potosí, Mexico and while some authors allege that she was born on July 18 1908, others state the year 1909, whereas her death certificate records her birthday as taking place in 1910 (Corona Vázquez 5, 9, 93; Rodríguez 65; Parish 592; Ríos-Bustamante 179). This is not the only ambiguity that follows her life story since her suicide in 1944, which has also become somewhat of a myth.¹

Today, Vélez is remembered as a Mexicana that broke into Hollywood during the silent era, only to later become one of the most hyper-sexualized Latinas in United States film history. I began to research Vélez because I wanted to learn more about what writers seemed to be avoiding and it is for this reason that I discuss her silent film history from the perspective of a film archivist. I hope that my research can perhaps begin to unravel why the silent period of her career has so often been left in the dark.

For a little over a year I have been searching for film prints starring Vélez during the silent period of her career, which spanned from 1927 to 1929. What has now become somewhat of an obsession involves locating and examining the physical state of all existing prints from her silent filmography (as held in major film archives in the United States). My research on Vélez is a case study that has uncovered the growing cultural concerns that surround the preservation of film – and film history – in the United States. Film history is at risk of silently disappearing in film archives that typically face inadequate funding, cannot adequately process collections at the rate of acquisition, or are too often concerned in preserving popular films in mainstream Anglo culture. Not to mention that archivists must confront the growing challenge of digital archiving as the proliferation of new media demands it. These and many other issues nearly overshadow the fact that very few archives in the United States can boast having comprehensive guides to Asian American, Chicana/o, or African American film collections in a country that has often been labeled a “melting pot” and “multicultural.”

¹ For a discussion on Vélez’s notorious suicide, see Kenneth Anger’s *Hollywood Babylon* and Andy Warhol’s *Lupe* (1966).

Film history from the perspective of “others” will be the first to disappear if we do not begin to reassess the significance of our shared memory in archival institutions that preserve our cultural patrimony.

Lupe Vélez’s silent film career began in 1927 and ended with the film industry’s transition to sound in 1929. The number of films duplicated from an original negative for distribution was highly dependent on the popularity of a film and its overall demand by theater venues and audiences. A film has a greater chance of surviving today if it was popular when it was first released. The manner in which a print was handled and run through projectors would have also greatly affected its survival. Sprocket damage or tears might lead to the cutting of frames or scenes that might then distort the original running time of the film. Physical damage is one example of how film prints can chronicle their own histories. Today, it is estimated that only twenty percent of all silent film prints exist (Usai 10). Fortunately, only one of Vélez’s silent films is presumed lost.

Vélez appeared in a total of eight silent films – six features and two shorts. Three of the features were produced as both sound and silent films.² A total of seventeen film prints varying in titles from her silent filmography are officially known to exist in archives all over the world according to the International Federation of Film Archives’ (FIAF) *Treasures from the Film Archives* database.

In 1927, working under Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Hal Roach, Vélez appeared in the comedy shorts, *What Women Did for Me* (James Parrot, 1927) and *Sailors, Beware!* (Hal Yates, 1927). *What Women Did for Me* is the only film that I have been unable to locate as of now. However, there is the possibility that it may simply be unidentified in an archive, or perhaps sitting in someone’s basement. Five prints of the film *Sailors, Beware!* can be found in different archives all over the world. Yet, this does not mean they are in good condition or that they can even be viewed. In one case, at one of the archives I visited the print was so heavily shrunken (1.2 percent) that it could not be viewed on a flatbed film viewer. Therefore, it had to be carefully wound by hand in order to examine individual frames; the action could not be viewed at all. The sixteen millimeter print is 305 feet, or eight minutes and twenty-eight seconds long (at 24 frames per second), while the original running time of the film is twenty minutes.

² In 1928 it was reported in the Los Angeles based newspaper, *La Opinion* that Vélez appeared in a piece titled *Como Viven Las Estrellas*. It is likely that *Como Viven Las Estrellas* is the Spanish translation for the short documentary *Hollywood Snapshots #11* (1929), which I do not take into account in this case study.

This particular print of *Sailors, Beware!* is in Spanish and titled, *Travesería Accidentada*. Curiously, all of the scenes with Vélez were cut out from the print. Due to the poor physical state in which the print is in it is unlikely that the archive will allow it to be viewed by other researchers. This print is also an unlikely candidate for preservation. Since this title exists in a better condition at other archives and it is available on video – *in English* – it is not likely to be a top priority for preservation. There is no urgency to restore the Spanish language version of a film that is available in a better condition elsewhere, even though its very existence in a Spanish language version opens new areas of discussion during this period in film history. For instance, the significance and viability of multi-language films during the silent era and as distributed in the United States. The inaccessibility of prints such as this one makes potential areas of scholarship extremely difficult to research and, even worse, marginalizes and makes irrelevant such scholarship.

A year later, in 1927, Vélez starred in *The Gaucho* (F. Richard Jones/Douglas Fairbanks, 1928) with Douglas Fairbanks and soon after in *Stand and Deliver* (Donald Crisp, 1928) with Rod la Roque. Her last official silent picture was alongside Lon Chaney in *Where East is East* (Tod Browning, 1929). The institution that holds the only copy of the film worldwide preserved the thirty-five millimeter nitrate film print in the 1970s. Lon Chaney's role in the film was perhaps the primary factor that led its curator at the time to seek its preservation. The same can be said for other films at other institutions: Laurel and Hardy star in *Sailors, Beware!*; in *The Gaucho*, Douglas Fairbanks is the main protagonist as well as the director; and lastly, *Lady of the Pavements* (D.W. Griffith, 1929) was directed by David W. Griffith. The survival of Vélez's silent films has been driven by the stature of their directors and other actors. Lupe Vélez's own status would not gain a great deal of recognition in popular culture until the sound era with the Mexican Spitfire series.

The films, *Lady of the Pavements*, *Wolf Song* (Victor Fleming, 1929), and *Tiger Rose* (George Fitzmaurice, 1929) were publicized in the Spanish language media primarily as talkies. Nevertheless, these films were also produced as silent pictures in order to market them to theaters that had not yet converted to sound. In the summer of 2006 I discovered the picture element for the sound version of *Tiger Rose*. I further managed to locate all six Vitaphone discs at another film archive. The *Treasures from the Film Archive* database did not list the film as existing in any FIAF archive, and I assumed it to be lost, fortunately, this was not the case at all. However, the discovery of these elements is not

nearly half the battle. I am presently advocating for the restoration of *Tiger Rose*, but funding is a major issue. Procedures for a restoration ensure that editorial, technical and intellectual practices restore the artifact to its “original” state. The restoration would be an expensive one.

The best existing film element for *Tiger Rose* is a sixteen millimeter positive print that would be blown up to a thirty-five millimeter negative from which a positive print would be made for access. The Vitaphone discs would have to be recorded and digitally re-mastered, and printed to a track negative, before both the soundtrack and image are combined into an access print. Such a restoration could cost up to US \$40,000-60,000. Moreover, if the silent version of the film were to be restored, research regarding the differences between the silent and sound versions – including locating and comparing production scripts – would be necessary.

Funding sources inevitably play a critical role in what archives are able to do with film collections. In the United States, many film archives depend on funding from organizations such as the National Film Preservation Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and from private sources of funding. In contrast, film archives in other parts of the world tend to be subsidized by the state; private funding is not a traditional form of financial support. Thus, differences in global film preservation procedures have much to do with the varying levels of financial support, national endorsement, and bureaucracy. Other global considerations, such as hot and cold climates, also play a significant role in the survival of films. Due to their chemical make-up, films will potentially live longer in cool and dry environments and decompose more rapidly in hot and humid climates. A film archive in Thailand, for example, will likely face more challenges in maintaining its film collections due to its hot and humid climate and the amount of financial resources it has at its disposal. Therefore, even though copies of any number of films may exist in archives in other countries, they may be in poor condition, decomposing at an accelerated rate, and cannot be relied upon to be adequately preserved.

Aside from entertaining us, films are artifacts that allow us to tangibly trace, revisit, and re-exhibit our cultural heritage. For this reason, it is critical to understand the significance of film preservation and the role it plays in allowing us to have access to moving image history through the traditional film formats, as well as any future technological evolution of these films in digital formats. In the case of Lupe Vélez, the survival rate of the films she appeared in is proportionately quite good. Yet, the films

she appeared in continue to exist due to their popularity during the silent era, and their status as such is linked primarily to the Hollywood stars she appeared alongside, the directors, and even the production companies. This is not to say that Lupe Vélez's films exist only for this reason, but it is perhaps the most valid theory. Having access to these films continues to be a tremendous challenge, even for those such as myself who have enjoyed a privileged manner of access. If films starring Latinos, and other people of color, continue to be preserved merely by chance, how many are likely to survive for future generations who seek to trace their cultural history on film?

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