

Types of stardom during the Franco regime: some dominant formulas

Vicente J. Benet

ABSTRACT

This article proposes a methodology for studying the phenomenon of film stardom during Francoism from a historical perspective. Starting with the idea that the Spanish phenomenon, in spite of the context of dictatorship, cannot be understood outside of transnational tendencies in the configuration of the industry, we offer three fundamental models. The first can be defined as the hybridization of cinema with other forms of popular entertainment, particularly those from song and variety shows, in the consolidation of sound film. The iconography developed by these figures combines features from different forms of entertainment, and it would continue during the dictatorship in the *españolada* genre or in films starring singers. The second is a consolidated industrial model, the company Cifesa being the crucial representative here, where stars were the fundamental mainstay of company policy. In this way, stars become an object of experimentation in various narrative genres and also in iconographic terms, in order to constantly renew and innovate their image in the eyes of the public. The third model refers to figures with a powerful, unmalleable iconographic appearance that would characterize film productions just after the fall of the big studios in the 1950s. The cohesive strength this brings to the project requires the maximum expression of its iconic value and its eroticism. To illustrate each of these models, we offer three case studies which examine in greater detail the careers of Imperio Argentina, Amparo Rivelles and Sara Montiel, each being the highest representative of one of the proposed models.

KEYWORDS

Film stars, Spanish cinema during the Francoism, Imperio Argentina, Amparo Rivelles, Sara Montiel.

Some brief methodological issues

Any study of the characteristics of stardom during Francoism must start by examining the ways in which the industry, the film style and the reception given to movies all form part of this historical context. However, in cinema, national contexts are always affected by transnational trends and by the influence of the most powerful cinema industries, mainly Hollywood. In addition, the public's relationship with the stars is more complex than the relationship created by specific social, economic or political issues. Stars penetrate the social fabric, the mentalities and the everyday lives of people to transcend both the films in which they appear and the specific social contexts. In fact, as studies on film reception have revealed for decades, they take on a deeper dimension. They define such things as types of sociability and relationships between subjects, models of understanding reality and patterns of behaviour in life. Thus, they grow in the indeterminate space of cultural memory, which expands the limits of cinema as a social, aesthetic or economic phenomenon (KUHN, 2002: 5).

When one considers, for example, the success of *Locura de amor* (Juan de Orduña, 1948), the most widely-seen Spanish film of the 1940s, it is clear that an explanation based on the public's apparent communion with the ideological values reflected in the film would be clearly insufficient. Thousands of people did not fill the largest cinemas in Spain's cities for weeks simply to receive Franco's historical indoctrination. Nor did an instant star, Aurora Bautista, emerge from it in order to awaken the values of the totalitarian state through her physical body and her character. There are elements that seem more plausible to help us find the reasons that drove the public *en masse* to go out and see this film. Very briefly, as far as cinematic style is concerned, the film skillfully combined various classic genre formulas (melodrama, prestige film, historical drama, swashbuckling movies, etc.) to pique the interest of a heterogeneous audience. It also had an unusual production packaging for the Spanish cinema of those years. But in addition to all this, the film offered a kind of story that aroused the interest of female audiences more than any other. Subjugated by the oppressive daily lives that they endured during the dictatorship, women saw in these strong protagonists who became agents of history (LABANYI, 2002) a compensatory sublimation in cinemas of the scarce social projection of their lives. Aurora Bautista's body, her performing technique and her gestures all managed to channel these tensions consistently. In this way, we can understand, in part, the success of this cycle of films in which Francoist stardom was crystallized in a particularly effective

way. The great star of the decade, Amparo Rivelles, would end up playing a varied range of characters in line with *Locura de amor*, such as *La duquesa de Benamejí* (Luis Lucia, 1949), *La leona de Castilla* (Juan de Orduña, 1951) and *Alba de América* (Juan de Orduña, 1951). Needless to say, Aurora Bautista also continued with the career that launched her to fame with two other great Cifesa productions: *Pequeñeces* (Juan de Orduña, 1950) and *Agustina de Aragón* (Juan de Orduña, 1950). As we can see, the bolstering of the initial phase of the Franco regime by two of the most important movie stars was consolidated by means of a formula that became effectively exhausted in just three years, but which left an unforgettable impact on the cultural memory of Spanish cinema.

Another aspect worth bearing in mind: the totalitarian regime coincided in time with the zenith of classical cinema. During this period, and with the studio system in Hollywood as its greatest exponent, the production of stars was planned according to a compartmentalized, specialized production model. Usually, both its imaginary construction and its adaptation to the various types of characters were rehearsed by following different generic formulas that were adapted to a model that had proven to be effective for audiences. Stars of classical cinema were therefore defined by their malleability, searching for a constant renovation of their image. The experimentation I am talking about involved altering their photogenic characteristics, switching between genres, and different ways of understanding their presence on screen in terms of make-up, costumes, hairstyle, etc. It meant enriching and constantly renewing their image, even though their work in narrative formulas that had proved effective among audiences was also exploited to the full. Differences aside, Cifesa carried out this policy of managing its stars in a constant balance between archetype and renovation (FANÉS, 1989: 193).

Aside from that specific moment of overlapping between a stylistic model and a type of organization of the industry that is characteristic of classical cinema, we must examine the temporal thresholds that frame the classical period, since they help us to understand other stardom construction formulas, at the same time as they coexist with the classical one. Focusing on Spain, the process prior to this industrial configuration during the 1930s and the period after Cifesa's decline as a major producer in the 1950s enable us to understand the emergence of complementary models.

A proposal of periodization and three stardom construction formulas

Francoism possessed a unique feature. It survived the collapse of fascism after the Second World War, and it also survived the end of the classical model and the monopoly of the great Hollywood studios that took place in the late 1940s. It was able to adapt to the new political situation of the Cold War, breaking its isolation and gradually incorporating the country into the international scene in the 1950s. This led to co-productions, foreign stars for whom Spain was a party, prizes at international festivals and even the export of a few Spanish stars to Latin America, especially at the peak of Suevia Films and the expansive policies of Cesáreo González. Due to the survival of the Franco regime, therefore, talking about the stars during the Franco dictatorship forces us to reflect on the profound transformations that took place in the industry and cinematic style for four decades.

Given the complexity of this process, my proposal is to offer a simplified method that highlights three star construction formulas in the cinema of Francoism that should not be conceived as stagnant compartments. Rather, they are alternative models which, as I said earlier, can coexist and respond to the transnational trends of the cinematographic industry and style. However, the prevalence of each of these models can be linked with different moments in the development of film production. In addition, the approach of these formulas gives us the opportunity to reflect on the way in which the film industry, in turn, fits into the general historical context.

The first model for the configuration of stars arises from what we might call *hybridization formulas*. In our country, this is identified primarily with the earliest industrial cinema that appeared after the incorporation of sound. It corresponds in its origin with the stars that emerged during the Republican age, and around the first production companies to be conceived as studios, that is to say, with a modern, industrial vision: Cifesa and Filmófono. The stars that correspond to these hybridization formulas are derived mainly from forms of popular entertainment, and especially from song. They link their on-screen image to their success on the stage, though the characters they play are often distanced from the folk or *copla* stereotype. The emblematic star of this formula is Imperio Argentina. She was the most important figure of the 1930s, especially after the success of *Nobleza baturra* (Florián Rey, 1935) and *Morena Clara* (Florián Rey 1936). Without a doubt, her attributes as a star possess concomitances during Francoism with other

figures like Concha Piquer, Estrellita Castro and, later on, Lola Flores, Carmen Sevilla, Juanita Reina and child stars such as Joselito or Marisol. The idea of hybridization is marked by the dual artistic projection of stardom in the cinema and on stage. Conditioned by this duality, the construction of this type of stars is associated within cinema to a more restricted generic and iconographic repertoire: musical comedy, melodrama or *españolada*.

The second model is based on *mutation and experimentation formulas*. It corresponds to the mature phase of classical Spanish cinema, and mainly to Cifesa productions during the 1940s. The star policy was fundamental to the way the Valencian company conceived this business. By attempting to mirror the American production model, Cifesa offered a compartmentalized conception of genres (in which comedy in all its different variants was predominant) as a place for trying out and establishing its star projects. This model involved (as it did in Hollywood) not only promotional work that sought to expand the prominence and influence of the stars beyond the screen (and especially in illustrated magazines and social events), it also implied a constant negotiation of its image with the audience, by adapting it to different formats and establishing patterns of transformation to expand the register of expectations. In short, it was a question of creating consistent but also malleable figures, which were open to constant renewal. The paradigmatic case for this formula is Amparo Rivelles. Her career represents, as we shall see, an emblematic example of the way in which Cifesa functioned as a studio. In any event, this type of treatment can be extended to other important figures of the period, including Conchita Montenegro, Luchy Soto, Ana Mariscal, Maruchi Fresno and Alfredo Mayo.

The third case is that of *stable iconic formulas*. In this example, the star's iconic features take precedence over the variety of roles or generic models to which the actor can adapt, and rely fundamentally on the consistency of the body and its photogenic qualities. A typical model following the decline of the studio system, it can be noted in productions conceived as specific projects in which the figure of the star represents the cohesive agent of the production. The success or failure of each cinematographic project hinges on the magnetism of the star and the way he or she operates. The central importance of the physical body in this model brings to mind a typology of stars that flourished during the 1950s (for example, Ava Gardner, Sophia Loren and Marilyn Monroe), who were characterized by their photogenic power, their exuberant appearance and a more explicit eroticism, as Edgar Morin notes (2015: 30). In

this respect, the emblematic example in the Spanish cinema under the Franco regime was the emergence of Sara Montiel, who went from being a malleable figure under Cifesa during the 1940s to the undisputed iconic star of the 1950s after *El último cuplé* (Juan de Orduña, 1957). A panoply of Latin American actresses such as María Félix, Silvia Pinal and Analía Gadé also formed part of this trend in their adaptation to Spanish cinema.

Hybridization formulas

By the mid-1930s, sound cinema had become consolidated on an international scale, along with the exponential growth of the record industry and radio from the 1920s onwards. Together with this, in the 1910s, variety shows and musicals in theaters began to experience an unprecedented growth. Popular music expanded from singing cafes, dance and variety halls to the big theaters. The power of this new aural landscape and of a solid entertainment industry explains to some extent why sound cinema became so rapidly established. The big names in the world of song adapted to this new medium, which they found redoubled their impact. In a way, they had already been creating, on stage, certain features that would be essential for the movie star. On the one hand, there was the imaginary dimension, an iconography that was developed through stage presence, costumes and make-up, gestures, kinesics and the interpretive technique that each song required, while on the other there was the narrative dimension that was linked to the organization of the show, the concept that articulated the sequence of songs, the stories told by their lyrics and the actual staging. The different musical styles such as *cuplé*, *copla* and tango became genres in themselves which defined a range of expectations for the public, both in the image of the artist and in the way they were staged. Based on all these conventions, the transformation of the leading figures of song into movie stars was a logical consequence.

The process also involved tensions deriving from the two great forces that define the modern-day cultural industries. On one hand, audiences recognized a linkage between these stars and traditions that they recognized as their own—in other words, national motifs. This aspect served to identify the star with cultural values and autochthonous physical features. This phenomenon had already begun in the period of silent films, when names such as Raquel Meller, Concha Piquer and Imperio Argentina made their entrances into cinema (GARCÍA CARRIÓN, 2016: 123 et seq.). The other aspect, which complements the previous one, is that these autochthonous

features had to appear suitably modernized, comprehensible and shared by a transnational public. Sometimes the hybrid star would even completely renounce national traits, to be inspired by purely filmic points of reference. Concha Piquer's appearance in the first scene of *El negro que tenía el alma blanca* (Benito Perojo, 1927) imitates the construction of a Chaplinesque gamine, far removed from the artist's on-stage persona.

Imperio Argentina, paradigmatically, engages this dual facet. Her success in Spain as a singer of *coplas* and songs from the Argentine and Spanish folk traditions in the 1920s generated coverage of her performances in magazines and promotional brochures in which her national features were under constant discussion. In one of the earliest pamphlets on cinematographic stars of sound cinema in Spain, she is described as follows:

'The bride of Spain, the beautiful girl into which the most outstanding characteristics of the race are condensed, with her huge black, Moorish eyes, her golden skin, small and graceful, vibrant and passionate, was born in Buenos Aires in 1908, to Spanish parents [and] ... was presented to audiences as a Spanish artiste—Spanish, in the end, is her blood and her soul and her feeling' (pamphlet *Las estrellas del cine*, 1930)

However, Imperio Argentina's consolidation as a cinema star had to assimilate a more cosmopolitan iconography, which was mainly achieved through her work in Joinville in the first sound films. This phase led to the emergence of a photographic and promotional repertoire that presented the star stripped of her folk costumes and dressed in the sophisticated wardrobe of a modern, fashionable woman. The roles she played in her Joinville films, including *El amor solfeando* (Armand Guerra and Robert Florey, 1930) and *Su noche de bodas* (Louis Mercanton, 1931) (Photo 1), as well as her films with Carlos Gardel, transported her into an urban, cosmopolitan and transnational imaginary that would enable her to redirect her career a little later, on her return to Spain. Of course, *Morena Clara*, Imperio Argentina's best-known film, begins with an *españolada* and ends by deploying resources that link her with international trends of musical cinema performance (CAMPORESI, 2016: 25). Just think, for example, of the dance scene for the party of *cruces de mayo*, where the *bailaoras* are filmed from a great height, reminiscent of the kaleidoscopic effects of Busby Berkeley (Photo 2). But even the visual evocation of the star is developed along these lines, combining the usual Andalusian dress (Photo 3) with more modern, fashionable clothes (Photo 4).



Photo 1. *Su noche de bodas* (Louis Mercanton, 1931)

Imperio Argentina's screen image was given a fresh adaptation within a folkloric, exotic context in the films made in Nazi Germany by Hispano Film Produktion, such as *Carmen la de Triana* (1938) and *La canción de Aixa* (1939), both directed by Florián Rey. The star's absolute centrality to these films was enhanced by her photogenic presentation, with special emphasis placed on her treatment as a glamour icon. *Carmen la de Triana* represented the adaptation of the folkloric musical to a few evocative, kitsch aesthetic canons that sought to dignify a genre which had originated on the popular music stage. To some extent, this approach was echoed by some of the later Francoist films, such as *La Dolores* (Florián Rey, 1940), starring Concha Piquer. But the attempt to turn the *españolada* genre into some kind of prestige film proved ephemeral. After the end of the war, Imperio Argentina, who was already over 30, played different roles that combined the uncertain form of the prestigious film (as in *Goyescas*, by Benito Perojo, 1942) with that of exoticism (*Bambú*, José Luis Sáenz de Heredia, 1945), but her cinematographic career had begun to decline. However, her tours as a singer in Latin America continued to bring her success.

Experimentation and mutation formulas

After the war, Cifesa reorganized its structure to mirror the patterns of the American studios: the search for mass production, defining projects around generic formulas (with comedy being dominant) and establishing a star policy, which was duly promoted in illustrated magazines and, of course, through activities such as premieres, releases and social events. The company sought to incorporate the most outstanding actresses into its signature and to establish their careers according to a process of renovation that would offer versions of formulas that had already proven successful.

The most representative example is Amparo Rivelles. The daughter of renowned actors, she made her first film *Mari Juana* (Armando Vidal, 1941) at the age of 16. Almost immediately after that she moved to Cifesa, which took her from the traditional, *costumbrismo* dramas of *Alma de Dios* (Ignacio F. Iquino, 1941) and *Malvaloca* (Luis Marquina, 1942) to the crazy comedy of *Los ladrones somos gente honrada* (Ignacio F. Iquino, 1942). Because of the ductile nature of the actress and her photogenic qualities, Cifesa made her its most important investment in 1942 by offering her an exclusive contract of 10,000 pesetas a week, whether she worked or not, in addition to giving her the power to choose her director and leading man (statement by Rivelles in FANÉS, 1989: 194). These conditions

show a new conception of the movie business in which investment in stars becomes an essential part of the image and development of the company.

Since Cifesa was committed to comedy as the most profitable genre of the postwar period and the closest form to Hollywood benchmarks that audiences preferred, the company decided to experiment with their main star along these lines. In *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* (Rafael Gil, 1943), based on Jardiel Poncela, they created a comedic plot combined with elements of fantasy that seemed particularly suitable for demonstrating the actress' versatility. The photogenic nature of the star served to drive and hold together a plot that was sometimes disconcerting for audiences (Photo 5). That same year she was subjected to another test of the formula when she was cast alongside Alfredo Mayo, with whom she had starred in *Malvaloca* and another melodrama: *Un caballero famoso* (José Buchs, 1943). In this example, the pair (who were also subject to critiques of their alleged romance in the illustrated magazines) were transported into the uncharted territory of the screwball comedy in *Deliciosamente tontos* (Juan de Orduña, 1943). The film presented audiences with cosmopolitan environments, sophisticated characters and a plot that was based on misunderstandings. Most of the film takes place on a transatlantic liner, with its elegant dances, romantic nights and music that evocatively mixed Cuban rhythms with modern jazz forms. It is also interesting to note what this film meant as a process of experimentation with the male star. Alfredo Mayo had only recently come to fame by portraying heroic military characters. Identified as the ultimate example of virility and gallantry, in this film the producer attempted to give him a new register which, incidentally, would not be repeated for a long time. They attempted to present him as a refined and at the same time crazy character that clearly had Cary Grant as its model. The result was not very convincing in Mayo's case, though it was for Amparo Rivelles (Photo 6).

The culmination of Amparo Rivelles' first phase with Cifesa was *El clavo* (Rafael Gil, 1944). In this example, she appeared in a grand costume melodrama combined with a crime plot that was based on a story by Pedro Antonio de Alarcón. She had previously made a costume film with *Un caballero famoso*, but *El clavo* was without any doubt a new process of experimentation and renovation of the image of the star, leading her into a romantic drama that was very different from her previous films. Her character, imbued with duplicity and mystery, was based on a highly sophisticated photogenic treatment by Alfredo Fraile (Photo 7). The film was a great success, and to some to focus on melodramas and costume dramas, and to gradually

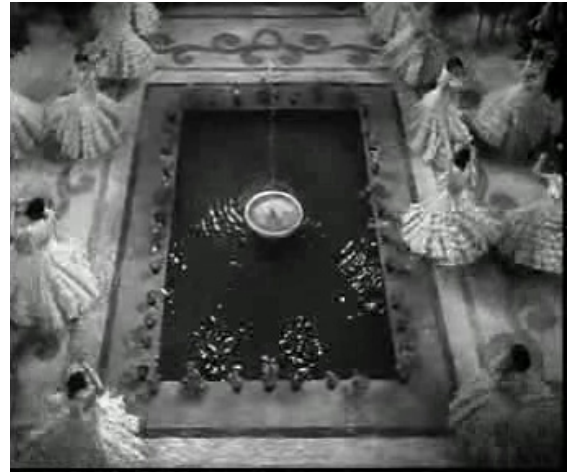


Photo 2. *Morena Clara* (Florián Rey, 1936)



Photo 3. *Morena Clara* (Florián Rey, 1936)



Photo 4. *Morena Clara* (Florián Rey, 1936)



Photo 5. *Eloisa está debajo de un almendro* (Rafael Gil, 1943)



Photo 6. *Deliciosamente tontos* (Juan de Orduña, 1943)



Photo 7. *El clavo* (Rafael Gil, 1944)

extent it determined the future of Amparo Rivelles, who began move away from comedy, which had been fundamental for her initial promotion. There is one more factor: *El clavo* coincided with Cifesa's serious financial crisis which lasted throughout 1945 and 1946, and which caused the Valencian company to radically restructure its production system (FANÉS, 1989: 223 et seq.). Meanwhile, Amparo Rivelles appeared in films by other producers (including the rival company Suevia Films) which exploited her success in romantic costume drama: *Eugenia de Montijo* (José López Rubio, 1944), *Espronceda* (Fernando Alonso Casares, 1945), *La fe* (Rafael Gil, 1947) and *Fuenteovejuna* (Antonio Román, 1947).

Amparo Rivelles' return to Cifesa occurred after the production company had overcome its crisis and in the wake of the success of her historical dramas, as we have seen. But Cifesa was no longer a studio that followed the line that stars had to be subjected to constant tests and renovations. Opting for the safest route, they type-cast Amparo Rivelles in historical dramatic roles until her iconic stagnation, as in her special collaboration in *Alba de América* (Photo 8). A few years after Cifesa's second and definitive crisis in 1952, Amparo Rivelles left Spain to continue her career as an actress—with very different characteristics—in Mexico.

Static iconic formulas

The decline of the studio system in 1948 did not only affect Hollywood. From the early 1950s onwards, the big companies that had been created for the mass production of films adapted to generic models and linked to a production design and a repertoire of stars that configured each company's signature, all began to disappear. This heralded the dawn of the modern mode of production (BORDWELL, STAIGER and THOMPSON, 1985: 330 et seq.), in which work is organized around each specific project. Each film, therefore, had to gather together technical, artistic and production teams all planned *ad hoc*, and thus the star came to play a fundamental role as a cohesive production element and a device for audiences. The rise of the casting agencies in those years and the fact that they became the fundamental element that helps us to understand the development and the iconography of stars is the logical consequence of this process. As a result, the stars maintained a less malleable, more conservative iconographic coherence than the one produced by the studio system. If a formula worked, the possibilities of typecasting increased. We saw earlier that Edgar Morin spoke of stars experiencing a rebirth during these years. In Spain, the most representative figure was undoubtedly Sara

Montiel, following her appearance in *El último cuplé* (Juan de Orduña, 1957).

Sara Montiel had, since the mid-1940s, been a malleable Cifesa starlet who had proven her worth in iconographies and roles of many different characteristics, as we can see from some of the films already mentioned, such as *Bambú*, *Pequeñeces* and *Locura de amor*. Later on she moved to America, where she made some impact in Hollywood as an incipient Hispanic star. At the age of 28, she was persuaded by Juan de Orduña to embark on a project that sought to echo the success of certain successful films set in the Belle Époque, in which music was combined with the splendor of the color techniques that were emerging at that time. The most notable examples were films such as *Lola Montès* (Max Ophüls, 1955), *French Cancan* (Jean Renoir, 1954) and *Moulin Rouge* (John Huston, 1952). The camera operator José F. Aguayo used a bright color range in Eastmancolor to exploit both Sara Montiel's photogenic qualities and the idealized recreation of the era with a particular brilliance.

The central element of the film was the star's body, which ceased to be a mere vehicle for the character to become an iconic vector that drew in the gaze of the audiences, in an iconic condensing that mainly occurred in the musical numbers. In this respect, Sara Montiel's performance in the film established a path which, to some extent, is independent from the story, independent to the extent that, rather than seeking any dependence on the incidents of the character, it is modulated as a path that grows in intensity in the strictly imaginary field. The dresses, the make-up and the complexity of the treatment of the body in the scenic area become more sophisticated, from the Vaudevillesque frames at the beginning (Photo 9) to the theatrical halls and luxurious settings in the central part of the film (Photo 10). This movement, in addition, covers up the erotic and provocative dimension of the singer's body, moving towards an increasingly hypertrophied elaboration of stereotypes that reach their peak in the performance of 'La Madelon' in Paris. The versatility of the *cuplé* leads, in the second part of the film (in which the love story with the bullfighter is developed), to a recovery of the imaginary of the *españolada* and of the songs of a more flamenco tone and, paradoxically, to a certain de-erotization of the star, to turn her into a grieving melodramatic heroine. Perhaps the culmination of this iconicity is the performance of 'El relicario'. In mourning after the death of the bullfighter, adorned with a hair comb and a mantilla, the iconography of the singer María Luján is beginning to turn black, just like the fate that awaits her (Photo 11).



Photo 8. *Alba de América* (Juan de Orduña, 1951)

Another element that was also crucial to this process has to do with a physical element that has not yet been mentioned: the voice. In her memoirs, Sara Montiel claims that initially she was going to be dubbed for the songs, but the singer chosen to do the dubbing refused to work unless she was paid in advance. And so Juan de Orduña was finally forced to agree to the idea that Sara Montiel would sing the songs herself. The film thus became a resounding success that was not limited to the cinema, it also led to the sale of recordings of her songs (MONTIEL and VÍLLORA, 2000: 243-251). Obviously, the public realized she was not a great, conventional singer, but her warmth, her eroticism and the evocative way she modulated her voice have all proved to be crucial to our understanding of the film's success. These features also help to explain her role as a star in different fields of the entertainment industry that Sara Montiel established from then on. The most-seen Spanish film of the 1950s, *El último cuplé* was a phenomenon that brought about a revival of the musical genre until the early 1960s, and which was reflected in a series of films with clear narrative and iconographic echoes, almost all of which were focused on an idealized, nostalgic vision of the past in which the songs of the *cuplé*, revue shows and the *zarzuela* were central features. Some of the most outstanding of these films are *La violetera* (Luis César Amadori, 1958), again starring Sara Montiel, and *Charlestón* (Tulio Demicheli, 1959), featuring the Mexican actress Silvia Pinal.

As we can see, the three theoretical models I have proposed take place in different historical periods, though they sometimes coexist and overlap. In any case, the construction of cinematographic stars during the Franco regime shared the



Photo 9. *El último cuplé* (Juan de Orduña, 1957)



Photo 10. *El último cuplé* (Juan de Orduña, 1957)



Photo 11. *El último cuplé* (Juan de Orduña, 1957)

trends of international cinema, while adapting them to the specific characteristics of Spanish industry and society. Like many other fields of our cinema, it is one that has yet to be explored by future historians.

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VICENTE J. BENET

Vicente J. Benet is Professor of Film History at the Universitat Jaume I in Castellón, and for almost two decades was editor in chief of the journal *Archivos de la Filmoteca*. He is the author of various books, including *El cine español. Una historia cultural* (Paidós 2012),

and several articles in specialized journals. He has been a guest at international universities such as Cambridge, Chicago and the Sorbonne. Currently one of his research areas is the transition from silent to sound cinema in Ibero-American cinema.