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Eroticism in the Spanish Lyric Theater Scene in the Early Twentieth Century

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Eroticism in the Spanish Lyric Theater Scene in the Early Twentieth Century

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“During the nineteenth century up until 1931, Madrid experienced first an incipient struggle and then to the bitter end of two great ideological and political trends: a conservative, monarchist, cynical and hypocritical root staunch defender of law and order: its social basis is the bureaucracy and the civil service. Another rebel, renewing, mutinous and even scandalous root, formed by craftsmen, laborers, artisans and unemployed”.¹

“The short drama (always in imitation of the aristocrats of the Opera) has favored an intense sexual <cultura> among men of the bourgeoisie and treble, vicetreble, showgirls, <señoritas del conjunto> and all female personnel has increased with the expansion of the genre, a privilege evidently envied by those who looked excluded for economic reasons”.²

I. INTRODUCTION

Between 1895 and 1910 moral campaigns of the church and the authorities did not affect at all the theatrical consumption which was booming.³ The increase of anticlericalism had been based mainly on a series of political justifications: namely, the liberal politicians of the beginnings of the nineteenth century, mid-century progressives and Democrats of the “Sexenio Revolucionario” and of the Liberal Party at the turn of the century, represented by the figure of José Méndez Canalejas.⁴

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¹ ESTEBAN GONZALO, J.: *El Madrid de la república*, Ediciones Sílex, S.L., Madrid, 2000, p. 24.

² SALAÜN, S.: “El teatro español en la encrucijada”, In *Literatura modernista y tiempo del 98*, University of Santiago de Compostela, 2000, p. 102.

³ The Apollo Theater in Madrid made more than eight million tickets between 1900 and 1901. Moreover, keep in mind that the Apollo was one of the nineteen theaters in the capital and one of the eleven that were engaged in small forms in part or entirely.

⁴ AUBERT, P.: *Religión y sociedad en España siglos XIX y XX*, Ed.Casa de Velázquez, Madrid, 2002, p. 158.

The social anticlericalism came from movements claiming a radical change in the structure of society by the emancipation of the working classes. The press became the most powerful tool against the Church. In 1895, of a total number of one thousand seventy-eight newspapers, just two hundred and four were Catholic. The rest were liberal dailies with varying degrees of hostility towards the Church.⁵

The model of church-state relations, which favored political action as a form of presence of Catholics in society, was the basis for all those who thought it was tolerable the liberal way to understand and articulate the role of religion in public life and the inhibition of State in the field of consciousness.⁶ Antonio Maura worked for Spain to become a liberal state and invited to follow the example of Germany and the United Kingdom. Finally free the people from checks and audits of both Church and State, the commercial scene began to gain audience and adapt to market, and became the sole ruler of all time. The theater was consumed in high doses both in the capital city, Madrid, as in any other provincial town. The audience -excluding old people, children, much of the women and the vast majority of popular classes, consisted mostly of men of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie who almost daily attended the functions.

Satisfying sexual needs outside home was a fact admitted even by great personalities of the political, economic and cultural life. The commercial theater had consolidated a double moral and the bourgeoisie had appropriated the theater space. The theater and how it was perceived by the public changed dramatically in the nineteenth century and eventually commercial theaters overpowered 'official' theaters. However, despite this transformation, the Spanish theater retained its quality. For example, Julio Nombela, in 1880, refused to admit the belief commonly accepted that the Spanish theater was in decline, and still saw it as a reflection of society:

“The Spanish theater is not in decay, not even those who contribute to its downfall as poets and performers are in decay: what is in decline, both in the sphere of art as in other social spheres, is self-denial, the sense of duty, the desire for culture”.⁷

⁵ 186 newspapers were hostile to religion.

⁶ ROBLES MUÑOZ, C.: *Antonio Maura, un político liberal*, C.S.I.C., Madrid, 1995, pp. 65-66.

⁷ THATCHER, D.: *El teatro en la España del siglo XIX*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 491.

According to Juan José Montijano Ruíz the "sicaliptic" and "sicalipsis" words were used for the first time in the Madrid daily *El Liberal*, corresponding to April 25, 1902.⁸ In the fourth and last page this newspaper contained an advertisement that reads:

"Within a short time an exciting new publication will be for sale, 60 cents a book entitled LAS MUJERES GALANTES. This publication is highly sicaliptic. For a definition of the word, completely new, one must purchase the first book of LAS MUJERES GALANTES".⁹

The publication was nothing but a series of artistic etchings that contained naked women. Days later, on May 12, and in the same newspaper a new announcement regarding the publication reappeared, as Montijano Ruiz explains. Thus, the "sicaliptic", and "sicalipsis" terms emerged in the newspapers of the day and were spread by the theater with an average meaning between the relative innocence of the picaresque and the brazen effrontery of the pornographic.¹⁰

According to Juan Corominas the term sicaliptic was created in 1902, taking it from ancient Greek to describe a pornographic work. His *Brief Etymological Dictionary of the Spanish Language* (1961) reads:

"Sicaliptic <obscene>, 1902. Created to advertise a pornographic work, probably thought of a cpt. from gr. Sykon <vulva> and aleiptikós <used to rub or excite>. LEAD. Sicalipsis, formed with the corresponding abstract áleipsis".¹¹

Enrique Rivas, a correspondent for *El Heraldo de Madrid* pondered on the origin of the word "sicaliptic":

"Like all great inventions, the author of the word sicalipsis gave in to a moment of inspiration superior to every rule, and in spite of its rapid popularization, the writers still haven't told us where it comes from, although it is known where it is going and by which roads".¹²

Currently the term "sicalipsis" is described by the *Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy* as "sexual malice, erotic mischief".

The word "pornography" is obviously prior to "sicaliptic". Again José Corominas explains that the first word began to be used in Spain in 1880, and comes from the Greek pornógraphos, "the one describing prostitution" because it is a compound of porn, whore and grapho, "I describe".¹³

prostitution" because it is a compound of porn, whore and grapho, "I describe".¹³

From 1900 the invasion of scenic eroticism, of the varieties song and the cinema begin to contaminate the small forms from within. Obviously the aforementioned "sexual malice" already existed in the theater, especially in magazines where sexual connotations were present and were the main attraction for an audience eager to satisfy their carnal and primary appetites. It is not at all trivial to state that this last thought is the very essence of what the magazine turned into, a genre in which the erotic, the sexual, the double meaning of language, together with the extras or dancers acting on them constituted the most remarkable aspect of the performance.

*El Congreso Feminista*¹⁴ (1904), with a libretto by Celso Lucio López and music by Joaquín Valverde son; *El Arte de ser Bonita* (1905), with text by Antonio Paso Cano, Jiménez Prieto and López Laredo and music by Jerónimo Jiménez and Amadeo Vives, and *La Gatita Blanca* (1905), original by José Jackson Veyán and Jacinto Capella, with music by Amadeo Vives and Jerónimo Jiménez, were the forerunners of the genre. The frivolity of the staging, the curves and the calves of the treble singers, the couplets and other musical numbers that added spices giving a racy and risqué tone to these pieces were common features in all of them. As an example of this, the following couplet from *La Gatita Blanca*, one of the funniest numbers of Spanish popular opera, by the double meaning of the text:

"A very naughty kitty,
wanted me to play,
and made me so nervous
that I had to scratch him.
But so sweet,
the kitty turned,
that finally convinced
I played with him.
And I had a few games
the very rogue,
the scoundrel
I made myself a bump.
And when that swelling
was relieved,
with a few kittens
we got to play".¹⁵

Writers Ramos Carrión, Ricardo de la Vega, Thomas Luceño, Carlos Arniches, Sinesio Delgado and

⁸ MONTIJANO RUIZ, J. J.: *Historia del teatro olvidado: la revista (1864-2009)*, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Granada, 2009, p. 119.

⁹ *El Liberal*, 25 April 1902.

¹⁰ RUIZ MORCUERDE, F.: "Sicalíptico y sicalipsis", in *Revista de Filología Española* Madrid, volume VI, 1919, p. 394.

¹¹ MUÑOZ LORENTE, G.: *Glosario panhispánico del amor y el sexo*, Ed. La Torre, Madrid, 2008, p. 74.

¹² *El Heraldo de Madrid*, 17 november 1906.

¹³ FELIPE LEAL, J.F.: *El cine y la pornografía*, Juan Pablos Editor, S.A., México, 2011, p. 15.

¹⁴ On Wednesday May 18, 1904 Judge 3rd instruction from Mexico City ordered the suspension of the operetta and prevented the company of el Teatro Principal to refrain from premieres of other works by Spanish authors in this city.

¹⁵ JACKSON VEYAN, J Y CAPELLA, J.: *La Gatita Blanca*, Tipografía Universal, Madrid, 1906, p. 6.

LopezSilva and the composers Chueca, Valverde, Lleó and Chapí were the authors of this initial stage that would end up being called "white magazine".¹⁶

The development of sicalipsis would not have been possible without the social rise of the middle classes and their alliance with the popular ones allowing the emergence and profitability of new shows, while old shows went into sharp decline. Thus the upper classes, accustomed to impose their taste for decades, were appalled by the emergence of a new kind of theater equipped with a moral vulgarity that neither they shared nor accepted. For example, the Teatro Real closed in 1925¹⁷ and was by no means, the first of the municipal theaters in the provinces forced to close the opera and serious versed drama performances for lack of an audience. Sometimes the theaters opened to make performances with as little aristocratic roots as the cinematography:

"Despite the condemnation of moralists, then, the more or less obvious eroticism of sicalipsis is a success; even if it is just one more of the deals greedy businessmen turn to, who also with no objections include in a program popular song concerts, or very soon, things like films. The formula of the vaudeville exemplifies this new spirit of pursuit of profit; in fact, it lacks internal structure and interlocking; but it is made of short numbers quickly mixing a variety of units with almost no time for the audience to fatigue with its diversified and adapted to all tastes offer. A purely popular demand is therefore adopted. That where the possibilities of expanding the benefits point to".¹⁸

The fact that this kind of theater would have an impact on both the social and intellectual life forced, from 1910, to strict monitoring by the authorities, always fearful of collective power that held the scene. The church attacked all kind of theater where "hot" meat prevailed. Also politicians and intellectuals as Maeztu or Unamuno entered the scene because they did not want to leave the monopoly on morality to the right wing.

It is easy to find numerous examples in the press of the time of bans and censorship of all kinds of sketches, pleasant jokes, or sicaliptic operettas by governors or other competent authorities. Despite the passage of time these situations occurred again. For example, on February 2, 1920 there were a series of angry protests in the Arriaga theater because of the representation of the erotic comedy entitled *Las Corsarias* - libretto by Enrique Paradas and Joaquín Jiménez and music by the maestro Francisco Alonso, with what the civil governor was forced to withdraw the

work of the theater scene.¹⁹ *La Gaceta del Norte* began a personal crusade against indecency on stage. In the pages of the mentioned newspaper one could read:

"Immorality, indecency, wherever they are, and in the theater more than anywhere else, are the determining cause of the degradation, the sentimentality, the idiocy of race".²⁰

The chronicler of *El Heraldo de Madrid* Fernando Porset wrote an article entitled "Morality in the theater", in which he asserted that gradually ethics and decency was gone from the stage. Authors were responsible for favoring the management company cashbox and not the good art. According Porset, refined and instructive work had given way to the peep and suggestive genre and theater walked without any fixed direction. This new and cheerful genre then renamed sicaliptic had begun to cultivate in the Comic theater first with *El Arte de ser Bonita*, and later with *La Gatita Blanca*. Then the *Eslava* theater became the bastion of sicalipsis, offering all kinds of delicacies with suggestive scenic treble singers cheering the show with their almost naked parades and suggestive, mischievous situations attended by the astonished spectators.

Although Porset believed that many works that premiered were filled with mustard and pepper-able to sicken the strongest stomachs-, but empty of salt; however, the correspondent of the Madrid newspaper acknowledged that not all the pieces of this kind were of a very poor quality. Titles of great artistic value could also be found in this theatrical variety:

"I shall not deny that there are works to which the name sicaliptic applies that are worthy of appreciation, for their wit and the skill with which lurid affairs are treated, with no rude jokes and some tacky details and situations; proof of them are *La Corte del Faraón*, *La república del amor* and some others; but there are so few!...Because the ones that usually abound are those riddled with profanity and obscenities, without any morality or wit".²¹

The growing immorality of certain shows led to the creation of a Junta de Damas in Burgos to put remedy and correct the theatrical performances. Women of the Spanish city, inspired by the Jesuits, welcomed texts by liberal writers hiding the truth:

"Unamuno lambasting *La Carne Flaca* and we do not remember which other work and, in general, all the pornographic genre. Ramiro de Maeztu censored pornography and regretted that anything useful could be done against it in Spain, for taking the initiative the priesthood for political purposes".²²

¹⁶ LABRADOR BEN, J.M.: *Teatro frívolo y teatro selecto*, Editorial CSIC-CSIC PRESS, Madrid, 2005, p. 22.

¹⁷ *La Bohème* was the last opera that was performed in the Teatro Real.

¹⁸ VERDÚ MACIÀ, V et al: *Fiesta, juego y ocio en la historia*, Ed. University of Salamanca, 2003, p. 369.

¹⁹ DOUGHERTY, D Y FRANCISCA VILCHES, M.: *La escena madrileña entre 1918 y 192*, Editorial Fundamentos, Madrid, 1990, p. 21.

²⁰ *La Gaceta del Norte*, January 31, 1920.

²¹ *El Heraldo de Madrid*, December 24, 1910.

²² *El País*, July 1, 1909.

Parmeno, correspondent for *El País* claimed that the authors of postcards and pornographic books proliferated and could not quite explain why they were not more harshly prosecuted and punished. Parmeno even considers some treble singers as "whores in night attire":

"And Jane Doe, who is a great lady, or a known soprano, or a popular waitress appears as she was born, with just a ribbon, or with a bow in the hair, which is what usually constitutes the famous night suit".²³

He also criticizes the old rakes and young student gatherings because such characters are the ones that bewitch both of them: "Sicaliptic pictures, gentlemen- they quietly say, Sicalipsis Verdá. What is called *d'après nature*"²⁴

Francisco Flores García compared the eroticism and pornography terms in an article entitled *La sicalipsis*, in the "Cosas del teatro" section of the newspaper *El Heraldo de Madrid*. This author blamed the atmosphere of hypocrisy in which theatrical boundaries usually were handled:

"Even the language is becoming hypocritical. Theft is called irregularity; meanness is called impropriety; pornography is called eroticism, and so on.
(...)

For example: the competent authority takes action against a shockingly pornographic stage work, and then the injured party turns up saying that it is slightly suggestive, mischievous ... and invoke freedom to indulge in immoral debauchery".²⁵

Flores García revealed that freedom of thought could not be the pretext for launching from a stage all the blasphemies and obscenities against decency, morality and good taste. In addition, as an example of this he named a number of theaters in different countries where the authorities had prohibited such performances and were shutting down theaters in which this kind of shows were staged. The writer is a bit more benign with comedians, being mere workers who just obeyed the orders coming from their employer:

"It seems an atrocity to imprison all Company personnel. Comedians perform works given by their employer, and therefore they are not responsible for their content; but let us think: how would these works be when the authorities took so violent an action?"²⁶

Enrique Rivas, a reporter for *El Heraldo de Madrid*, pondered on the sicaliptic audience and the distribution of such genre on the Madrid stage. To this reporter, the audience who came to these events was essentially masculine and of a trivial nature. Also he

alleged that the claque had control of the seats and a great influence on the good reception or failures of the functions. In any case, Rivas was of the opinion that women should attend more frequently to this kind of events, as they were the only true sicalipsis:

"Taken to the theater by the hours, the sicalipsis has done many good things and many bad things too. For the moment it has created a sicaliptic audience, of a peculiar and unmistakable physiognomy, formed by young people who are honorary old men and old men who do not want to retire.
(...)

La Menegilda created by Felipe Pérez has deceased at the hands of sicalipsis; it has been necessary an entire genre to kill a single type; but *El Arte de ser Bonita* has by now displaced *La Gran Vía*.
(...)

In the gallery the popular audiences squeeze, laughing out loud the worst atrocities or acclaims as a supreme pleasure, the very well-known choruses.
(...)

The claque has a great number of spontaneous subjects. In the boxes there seems to be a truly sicaliptic audience; at least, the chosen ones. There is always an excessive quota of seats, and there is a seated row and one standing and one perched on chairs. When the applause time arrives, with the childishness of viewers who aspire to be seen by the tiple, all raise their hands to clap and every box recalls the candid pictures where the damned souls rise, in flames, their hands to the Highest. The less observant may notice that the audience is mainly male, with the lack of the greatest charm in the public. This is a half theatrical eroticism, where the orchestra and the battery put a fence between sicaliptics, as women are withdrawn".²⁷

The rapid spread of the sicaliptic genre provoked a fierce competition between employers. This situation led to a deterioration of the literary quality of the performed works. It was too expensive to make a good script and a demanding staging when nudity and couplets filled entire rooms quarterly, making it easy for the companies to obtain huge profits.

Montijano Ruiz in his dissertation *Historia del Teatro Olvidado: La Revista (1864-2009)* subdivided the sicaliptic magazine in two, as mischievous magazine and rude magazine. The second type, as this researcher explains, possessed all kinds of obscenities, jokes, and profanities to a high degree. One example of this type of magazine is *La Alegre Trompetería* (1907) by Antonio Paso and Vicente Lleó. These authors carried us to a club of the same name where customers gathered to talk about their conquests. There the performance of

²³ *El Heraldo de Madrid*, May 27, 1909.

²⁴ Ditto.

²⁵ *El Heraldo de Madrid*, September 18, 1912.

²⁶ Ditto.

²⁷ *El Heraldo de Madrid*, November 17, 1906.

thevedette Dora Paris delighted the audience by singing a famous couplet with the following lyrics:

I have a garden at home
That is really, really nice;
But no one wants to water it
And it's withered, so dried up;
And although I am no gardener
And I get tired of work,
At night though unwillingly,
I have to water it.
And at bedtime
and when I'm up,
I fill with water
the sprinkler;
and with very
gatheredskirts
I keep watering
it thus.
Now these rocks,
Then this slope
and a couple of squirts
to the vine.
But it annoys me
to have to water it,
because I just end up wet
and I have to change .
(One act. 2nd Tableau. Scene IX).²⁸

The couplet was linked to the popular song because it was made of short duration units and therefore was ideal for memory retention. The simple vocal registers by which it moved, allowed an easy reproduction and its transmission in oral circuits. The text used to be clear, direct and pronounced with crystal diction. As for the message it was of an erotic cut, although the couplet singer constantly played with gestures and vocal nuances to compensate the shortcomings of the text and to overcome censorship:

"The popular singer could have, in fact, a mediocre voice in the vocal register, but always had to know how to sing a song neatly. The recurrence to messages of hinted pornography, as in examples from the British Music-Hall, that sought to evade censorship playing with double meanings, with the speech that emphasized this or that word, or gestures, to create a whole erotic metalanguage there, where apparently there was an insignificant and morally anodyne text".²⁹

The Género Chico was responsible for the rise of singers to media stars. The couplet and variety shows

also emphasized the image of woman-star as a means to promote a commercial product.³⁰

The physical beauty of some singers was also used for some daring scenes. The sicalipsis, which until the late nineteenth century had been moderate, increased its boldness in the beginnings of the twentieth century. The woman dressed in men's attire was a constant in the representations of zarzuela, especially the chorus, being an attractive hook for the male audience.³¹

The profile of the popular singer was also changing as First World War approached. Plump singers were gradually supplanted by another more stylish and elegant class of popular singers. Also, this type of singer had greater academic instruction and incorporated their new "likes" in the couplet which became more subtle and refined. With the evolution of the couplet the singers also varied their relationship with the public and long ago open structures, in which the audience participated by singing and playing the chorus couplet in a hot environment, adapting to the moral universe of the popular classes- were modified by a closed model structure in which the public could no longer take action and where excitement was achieved by emphasizing the passivity of the spectator with the couplet-show, with more exaggerated gestures and staging.³² An example of this second type was the couplet Flor de Té that premiered in 1914 and popularized the famous popular singer Raquel Meller putting it on stage at the Olympia theater in Paris and in New York, where the performance ran for eight months, earning two hundred thousand dollars for that tour.³³

In the early twentieth century the first sicaliptic magazines appeared in Madrid and Barcelona. In Madrid the magazine *La Pulgabegan* its publication in August 1901. In 1903, the *Rojo y Verde* and *Piripitipi* weeklies emerged in Barcelona, while the weekly *Chicharito* appeared in 1904.

One of the first most successful erotic magazines appeared in Barcelona in January 1904 with the title *Sicalíptico*. It is necessary to add that sicaliptic and political journals had already appeared in the nineteenth century, such as *La Tracain Valencia* which for more than forty years kept its satirical and grumble vein, suffering intermittent suspensions due to its critical aggressiveness.

Between 1920 and 1930 this literature proliferated, especially in Madrid and Barcelona. For example, during the twenties titles like *Flirt Guasa Viva*,

³⁰ HERREROS, ISABELO.: *La conquista del cuerpo*, Ed. Planeta, Barcelona, 2012, p. 24.

³¹ SWISLOCKI, M Y VALLADARES, M.: *Estrenado con gran aplauso. Teatro español 1844-1936*, Ed. Iberoamericana, 2008, p. 220.

³² VERDÚ MACIÀ, V et al: *Fiesta, juego y ocio en la historia*, Op. Cit., p. 370.

³³ SLIDE, A.: *The encyclopedia of vaudeville*, University Press of Mississippi, 2012, p. 344.

²⁸ MONTIJANO RUIZ, J, J.: *Historia del teatro olvidado: la revista (1864-2009)*, Op. Cit., p. 131.

²⁹ VERDÚ MACIÀ, V et al: *Fiesta, juego y ocio en la historia*, Op. Cit., p. 370.

La Vida, Muchas Gracias, Cosquillas and Varieté emerge in the capital of Spain. In Barcelona, meanwhile, Color magazine is born. In the thirties the number of publications in this genre increased in Madrid with titles like La Guindilla, El Gorro Frigio, Ba-ta-klan and Miss, all of them in 1931 or Gaceta Galante and Chicin 1932. Whereas in Catalonia sicaliptic magazines were direct, critical, sarcastic and sharp, in Madrid existed a more casual and less satirical elegant press.

As for the cinema, it is necessary to add that the existence of a rich Spanish pornographic production during the twenties has been confirmed. Three old porn movie tapes, - El confesor, Consultorio de señoras and El ministro-, were discovered by producer José Luis Pado and critic Sigfrid Monleón and restored by the "Filmoteca de la Generalitat Valenciana". These three films shot in Barcelona by Royal Films between 1920 and 1926, were exhibited in private sessions at the court of King Alfonso XIII.³⁴

14. SWISLOCKI, M Y VALLADARES, M.: Estrenado con gran aplauso. Teatro español 1844-1936, Editorial Iberoamericana, 2008.
15. THATCHER, D.: El teatro en la España del siglo XIX, Cambridge University Press, 1996.
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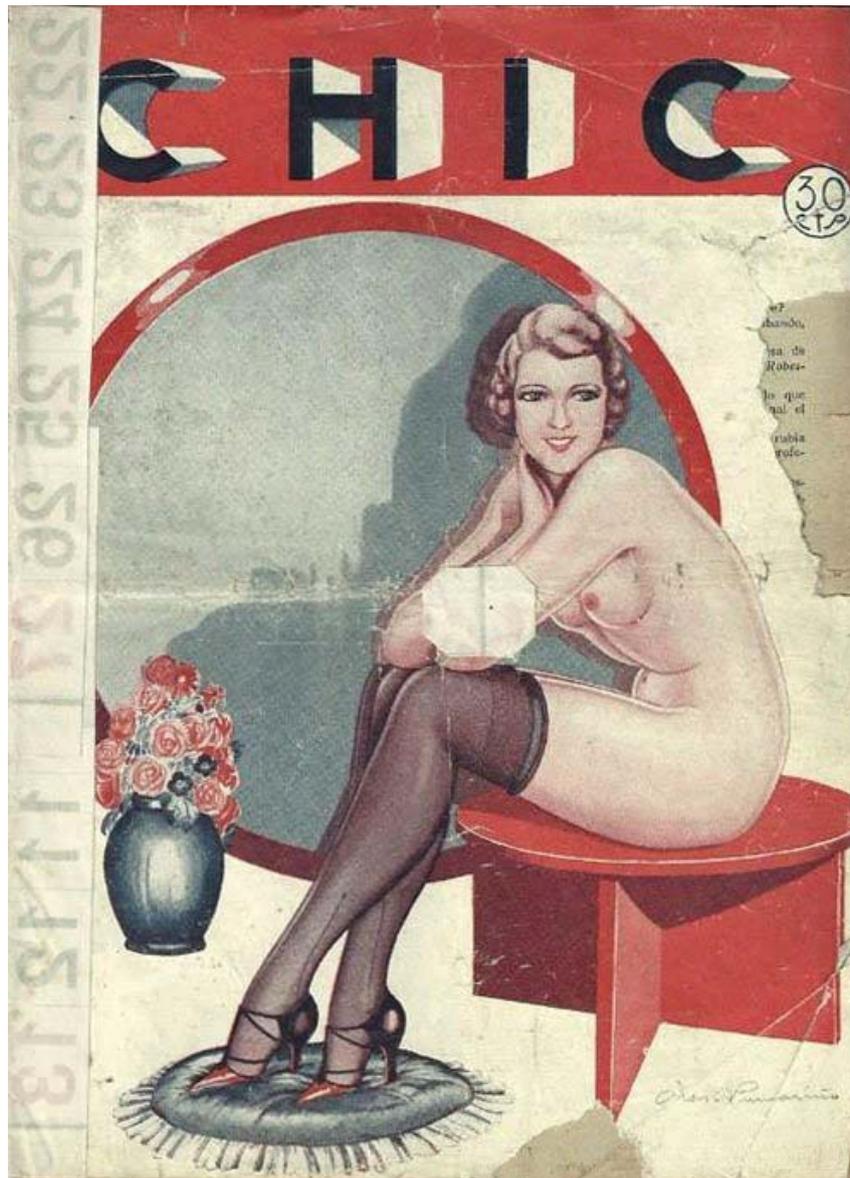
Press:

1. El Heraldo de Madrid, December 24, 1910.
2. El Heraldo de Madrid, May 27, 1909.
3. El Heraldo de Madrid, September 18, 1912.
4. El Heraldo de Madrid, November 17, 1906.
5. El Liberal, April 25, 1902.
6. El País, July 1, 1909.
7. La Gaceta del Norte, January 31, 1920.

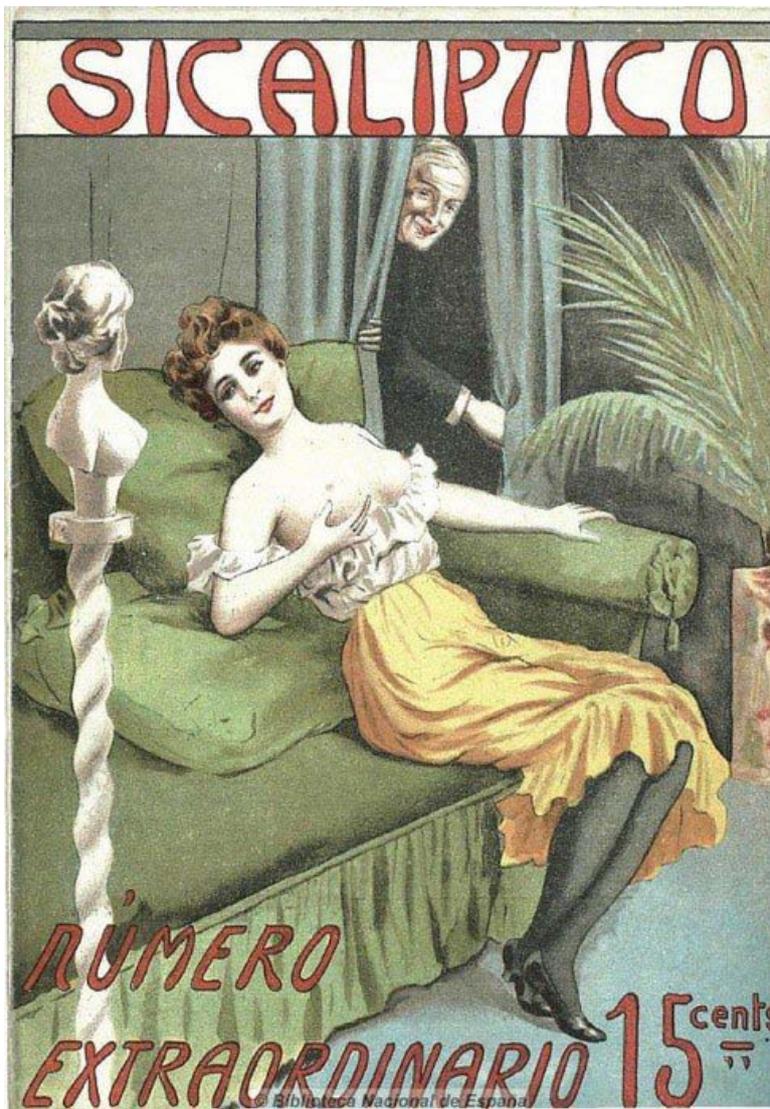
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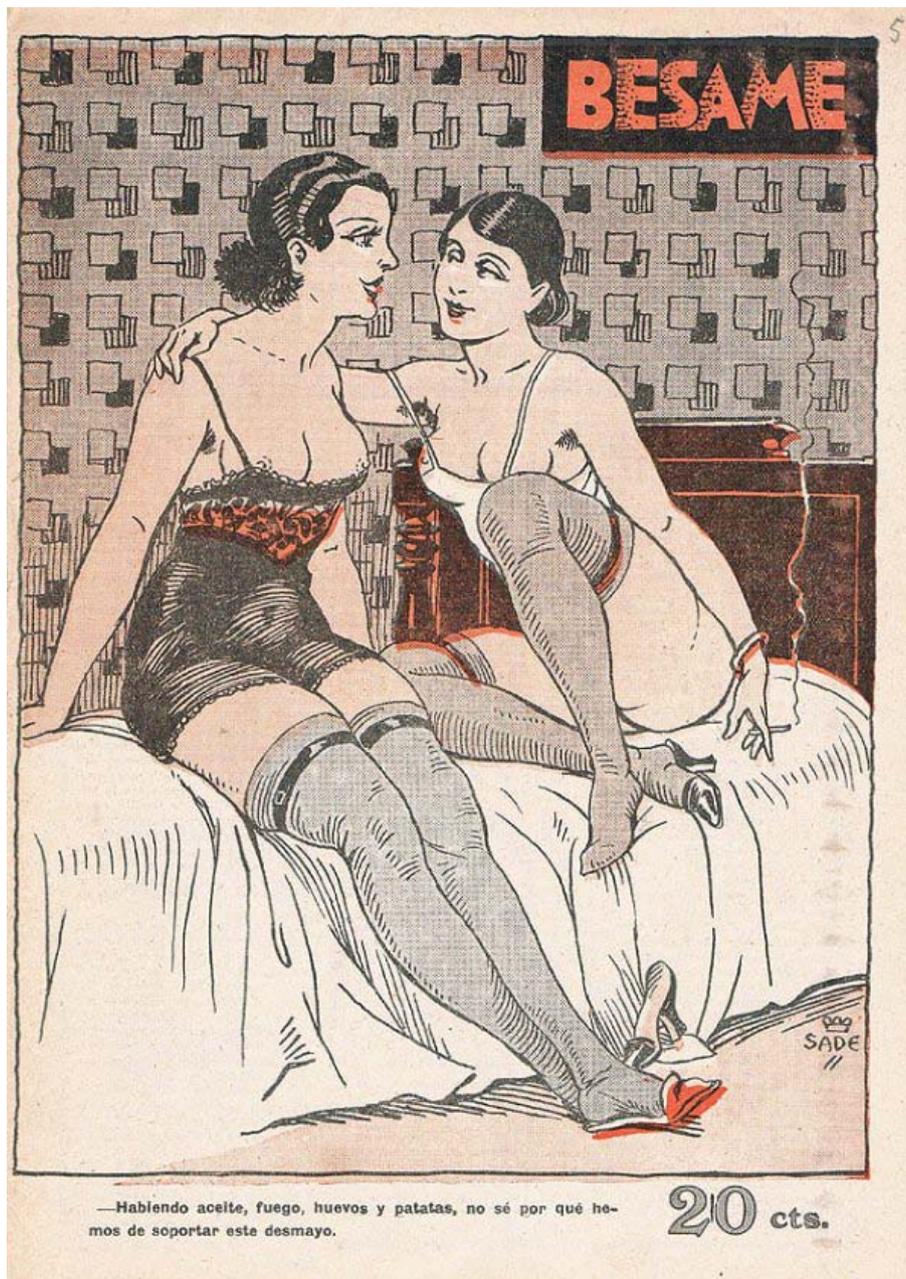
³⁴ FELIPE LEAL, J. F.: *El cine y la pornografía*, Op. Cit., p. 62.



Number 6 of the CatalanChic magazine October 20, 1932.



Cover of issue 20 of the Sicalipticomagazine corresponding to May 21, 1904. It was an extraordinary number 5 cents more expensive than the usual price of the magazine.



Magazine cover corresponding to number 5 of the Valencian *Bésame* 1932 publication.