

***Imagining la chica moderna: Women, Nation, and Visual Culture in Mexico: 1917 – 1940* by Joanne Hershfeld**

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Hershfeld, Joanne. *Imagining la chica moderna: Women, Nation, and Visual Culture in Mexico: 1917 – 1940*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008. 216 pages; 68 illustrations. \$79.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper.



The 1920s and 1930s in Mexico was a period in which the social, economic, and cultural landscape was shifting rapidly. Nowhere was this more apparent than in changing attitudes towards gender and sexuality. In *Imagining la chica moderna: Women, Nation, and Visual Culture in Mexico: 1917 – 1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), Joanne Hershfeld examines the diverse range of images of “the modern woman,”—“*la chica moderna*”—that began to appear in popular visual culture during this period. Through historically situated, semiotic readings of advertisements for fashion and household products, movies, postcards, tourist brochures, and newspaper photographs, Hershfeld succeeds in making visible the forces that shaped and shifted gender ideologies during Mexico’s postrevolutionary period. She concludes that, during this time, Mexican women became modern “not simply through a rhetoric of post revolutionary nationalism,” which, she admits, did imagine and grant new roles and opportunities for women, but also “through participation in transnational, gendered, commercial discourses of everyday life” (10). It was precisely at the intersection of these two dominant discourses—one domestic, the other transnational—that diverse images of *la chica moderna* began to appear, each in their own way urging or enticing Mexican women to experiment with modern femininity, either through new forms of patriotic citizenship or through capitalist consumption.

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Most studies of post revolutionary Mexico focus on government efforts to unify a divided country through the creation of a shared national identity. This shared sense of identity, founded upon a mythologized indigenous past and a shared sense of ownership in the revolution, was called *mexicanidad*. What these studies fail to consider, Hershfeld argues, is that the state-generated discourses of *mexicanidad* did not exist in vacuum; instead, they intersected constantly with the market and with those discourses attached to consumer products coming from Europe and the U.S. The arrival of these products—including Hollywood movies—was accompanied by advertising campaigns targeted to different sectors of the population. One important and growing sector at this time was middle-class women who, with the stability afforded by the postwar period, were enjoying greater independence and increased purchasing power.

Both the iconography and aesthetics of the visual material that accompanied consumer products circulated globally, often exposing Mexican women to forms of self-expression and identity formation quite different to those collective nationalist identities promoted by the state.

For example, images of fashionable women in advertisements for new styles from Paris and New York played a key role in the creation of *la chica moderna*, as did the fashion and lifestyles promoted in Hollywood films. Understanding fashion as both a discourse and a cultural practice, Hershfeld reminds her readers that, regardless of how fashion was advertised, the clothes women wore and, moreover, the way they wore them in everyday contexts granted them a more active role in defining their femininity. In addition, with the invention of synthetic fabrics and the introduction of technologies of mass production, fashion styles once only accessible to the rich became available to increasing numbers of women. Fashion, thus, also had a democratizing effect on identity construction.

At other times, the gender ideologies circulating in the market—such as its promotion of cults to domesticity and hygiene—conveniently coincided with the state's efforts to shape modern Mexican identities and to gender the post revolutionary experience. In both instances the home was demarcated as the “natural” space for women, and cleanliness and hygiene were equated with moral standing. This can be seen in images of *la chica moderna* that were used to sell labor-saving devices and household cleansing and beauty products. Despite her bobbed hair and short skirts, the ways in which *la chica moderna* occupied the gendered space of the home or the marketplace still defined her primary role as homemaker, mother, and wife. Therefore, while she was chic and seemingly new, in many instances *la chica moderna* was simply a refashioning of more traditional models of nineteenth-century femininity set within the context of a modern and more technologically advanced world. Likewise, images of working women in newspapers or films also tended to replicate old understandings of gender. Nonetheless, the very fact that women were being represented in the work place at all challenged these same understandings. Visual culture made working women visible, which undermined the popularly held idea—central to the cult of domesticity—that the public sphere was male and entirely separate from the female domestic sphere. By picturing women at work, visual culture showed women not only partaking in paid labor and production but also in the process of feminizing the

workplace.

To counter the visual material produced primarily at the service of transnational consumer capitalism, Hershfeld examines in her final chapter the creation of the “modern domestic Other,” an alternative *chica moderna* constructed by both the state and domestic businesses to promote “Mexico” and Mexican products to markets both at home and abroad. These new, exotic feminine types—such as the Tehuana or the China Poblana—were really stylized and updated versions of 19th century representations (many of them imagined by foreign pens) of indigenous women and popular types. They wore traditional dress and were staged in exotic or picturesque settings. Not only was she used to sell a range of products from alcohol to toothpaste, but the domestic exotic also tended to dominate tourist publicity and postcards and even inspired nationalist fashion trends for Mexico’s cosmopolitan elite.

Hershfeld concludes that, when viewed together, the proliferation of images of *la chica moderna* during the 1920s and 1930s do not show us how real Mexican women lived in post revolutionary Mexico. Instead, they provide a map of how changing attitudes and social anxieties concerning modern femininity became embodied—literally fixed upon the body—in visual culture. Both prescriptive and liberating *la chica moderna* was an ideological construct. Nonetheless, she still modeled new ways of being in the world. As such, she created a productive space for individual women in their everyday lives to test traditional notions of femininity against modern ideals of independence and self-determination.

Imagining la chica moderna, a book rich with illustrations, carefully contextualized close readings of individual images, and clearly defined, theoretical language, is a wonderful addition to the growing canon of books on Latin American Cultural Studies. It will also be of great interest to scholars interested in gendering modernity, Mexicanists, Latin American and feminist historians, and a whole range of students of popular visual culture.

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