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# CINE MEXPERIMENTAL CINEMA

## Across the Pacific

Miguel Covarrubias was a caricaturist, painter, archeologist, ethnographer, writer, curator, and collector of Pre-Columbian objects; in short, a polymath. What can be surmised of Covarrubias' ambitions in the realm of cinema derives from his work as a peripatetic ethnographic filmmaker and his proposed collaboration on an animated feature for Walt Disney. Miguel gained international fame while living in New York in the twenties, where he provided illustrations and caricatures for Vanity Fair, The New Yorker and numerous books and periodicals. There he mingled with Adolfo Best Maugard, Carlos Chávez, José Juan Tablada and other Mexican luminaries, both exiled and visiting. In New York Miguel met Rosa, an accomplished dancer on Broadway and darling of that city's cultural elite. Rosa shot still photographs and movie film as the two traveled widely, gathering information for Miguel's publications. Miguel and Rosa's interdisciplinary activities successfully integrate commercial projects, the popularization of anthropology and archeology, and more serious academic efforts. While researching his popular account of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, for example, Miguel moved seemingly with ease to the business world, producing an advertisement for the Container Corporation of America that featured his drawing of an indigenous woman of Oaxaca carrying one of the firm's boxes on her head.

The Covarrubias used motion picture film as a sort of ethnographer's notebook on their travels through southern Mexico, the Southwest of the United States, Bali, India, Japan, and Malaysia. These travels resulted in numerous articles and books, including Mexico South (1946), The Island of Bali (1937), and a three-volume survey of indigenous arts of the Americas<sup>17</sup> (which Miguel died before completing.)

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Shooting both performances and candid scenes of daily life, the footage functions as travelogue, anthropological record, home movies, and sketch pad for later studies, paintings and engravings. The Covarrubias held a particular interest in dance; Rosa was a professional modern dancer, and Miguel would later head the dance division of the *Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes* (INBA). Rosa's early modern dance performances reflect a somewhat indiscriminate integration of evolving theories of movement and gesture with orientalist motifs. Their films record dances of the South and Southeast Asian countries they visited on their 1930 honeymoon, as well as other performances of what appears to be an ethnographic exhibition of music and reenactments of religious rites. With the support of the Guggenheim Foundation they spent a year in Bali in 1932-33 to research the book *The Island of Bali*.<sup>18</sup> The films from this extended period of fieldwork document rituals, musical performances, and the daily lives of the Balinese.



Like Alvarez Bravo, Miguel studied the way the Tehuanas walked through the Oaxacan streets, and depicted certain poses in sketches and paintings. But his studies of movement and design elements derived from Pre-Cortesian, non-Western and "folk" cultures led to more than simply individual images. Miguel's mind was inclined to find synthesis, to seek patterns of influence, parallels and contrasts. The Covarrubias' film archive of regional dance styles was less of an end in and of itself than it was raw material for Miguel's anthropological projects. Although they may have shared this amateur film footage with friends, the only documented public screening was for members of the New York press, at a gala 1937 opening of Miguel's "Balinese inspired" couture at the department store Franklin Simon. Based on this encyclopedic knowledge of dance traditions he painted the series of six wall-sized maps entitled "Pageant of the Pacific" for the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition, and developed a dubious theory of trans-Pacific cultural contact.

In the light of these maps, the Covarrubias footage can be understood as a compilation of data on movement and traditions, to be integrated into Miguel's grand effort to make visible the geographic distribution of cultural traits. Covarrubias was not the first to propose such trans-Pacific contact prior to the European conquest of the Americas. Describing the ruins at Palenque, French photographer Desire Charnay detected foreign influences:

Any one who is acquainted with sacred Japanese architecture would be struck with the resemblance of this temple to a Japanese sanctuary. . . How is this to be explained? A theory might be started with respect to the probable Asiatic origin of the Toltec tribes; of the influence of a Japanese civilization, through the steady traffic they formerly carried on, on the north-west of America, as also by fortuitous immigrations resulting from shipwrecks. <sup>19</sup>



Of Miguel Covarrubias' speculations on Pre-Cortesian trans-Pacific contacts, one commentator noted that he "talked too much, knew too much, and felt too deeply" about the subject. <sup>20</sup> Regardless of his questionable conclusions, their filmed record of travels around the Pacific Rim reveal both the artist's sense of composition and the ethnographer's attention to detail. Following the imperial prerogatives of their generation, they are clearly shot with little regard for the subjects' consent or cooperation, and on occasion individuals rush out of the camera's field of view, or cover their faces for privacy. Many of these films capture spontaneous moments in crowds, staged performances of folk dances, and re-created rituals. Other rolls document street scenes, such as a rural fair in Oaxaca, and the excursion with a group of friends--Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo are visible briefly--to the floating gardens of Xochimilco.

The films of this first generation represent different strands within modernism, from the formalist exaltations of the machine age in Amero's 3-3-3, to the primitivist ruminations of Manuel Alvarez Bravo and Miguel Covarrubias. In contrast to their European contemporaries--Bauhaus, Constructivism, De Stijl--these efforts to create universal systems were balanced by a zealous interest in the particulars of the

national. The artists culled from the folk and the indigenous to create a visual culture that aspired to be populist, echoing the nationalist fervor of the times.

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17. (New York, 1937).

18. Désiré Charnay, *Ancient Cities of the New World, Being Travels and Explorations in Mexico and Central America from 1857-1882*, trans. J. Gonino and Helen S. Conant (London, 1887), pp. 249-250.

19. Quoted in Leo Deuel, *Conquistadors without Swords* (New York, 1967), p. 223.

20. "El cine independiente mexicano," in *Hojas de Cine* (Mexico City, 1988), II, p. 81.

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