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CINE MEXPERIMENTAL CINEMA

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Concursos de Cine Experimental

Sensing the creative bankruptcy of the industry and the need for a new energy, the *Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Producción Cinematográfica* announced the First *Concurso de Cine Experimental* in 1965. Despite the competition's title, most of the films are not especially experimental, but rather unconventional narratives that incorporate selected lessons learned from the French New Wave, Ingmar Bergman or John Cassavetes. Many of the films reveal a self-consciousness and reflexiveness about the camera and the frame not seen in Mexican cinema since *El espectador impertinente* (1932). Rubén Gámez employs a wonderful shot in which the camera tries to pan away from his actor, and the man obstinately relocates in order to remain in the frame. Conversely, in the film *Un alma pura* (Juan Ibañez, 1965) the persistent camera pursues the troubled protagonist at a time when the character wants to be left alone.

Other thematic, stylistic and cinematographic attributes distinguish the films of the *Concurso* from earlier Mexican cinema. Sergio Véjar's *Encuentro* (1965) makes dramatic use of a particularly violent and unstable hand-held camera.

Carlos Nakatani attempted convoluted temporal displacements in *Una proxima luna* (1965), perhaps influenced by *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (*Last Year in Marienbad*, Alain Resnais, 1961). Juan José Gurrola's *Tajimara* (1965) uses fluid camerawork shot while rollerskating, an unexpected narrative false-start, as well as stylish locations, such as the newly-inaugurated *Museo de Arte Moderno* (opened in 1964), which also appears in Ícaro Cisneros' *El día comenzó ayer* (1965).

Juan Ibañez breaks up his tale of tortured, incestuous romance with moments of



Tajimara (1965) by Juan José Gurrola



Tajimara (1965) by Juan José Gurrola

direct address, in which the actors speak to the camera, and further disrupts the film's disturbing narrative by casting the same actress, Arabella Arbenz, in the two leading female roles.

In spite of all this, Gámez's *La fórmula secreta* is the only non-narrative film of the group. A contemporary newspaper account proposed that the word "experimental" should be understood differently in Mexico:

La situación de la industria de nuestro cine influyó para modificar el criterio de lo "experimental." Es natural que tenga éste un sentido diferente del que tiene en otros países en cuya industria fílmica la calidad estética y los recursos económicos van de la mano; en las industrias de Japón, de Francia, de Italia, de Estados Unidos, de Suecia, de Inglaterra se *experimenta* en grandes producciones y al mismo tiempo se estimula la búsqueda por medios marginales o complementarios del cine comercial. Aquí, el *experimento* consistiría, más que nada, en configurar un nuevo rostro a ese cine mexicano tan deformado por las arrugas y los tics del envejecimiento.³¹

If "experimentation" simply meant reinvigorating the Mexican film industry, then the competition was unquestionably a success, and soon after the luckier (or more commercially viable) directors, like

Juan Ibáñez (*Los Caifanes*, 1966) were directing features within the commercial studios. None the less, in spite of the successes, many of the films were obviously flawed, and not different enough from their more professional counterparts. In *En este pueblo no hay ladrones*, Alberto Isaac attempted a bleak parody of the boredom of rural life, using an improbable cast of friends, bohemians and hangers-on, including Rocío Sagón,

Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Monsivais, and José Luis Cuevas. Others set their films within the more familiar circle of Mexico City intellectuals and artists, such as the hipster romance of José-Luis Ibáñez' *Las Dos Helenas*. The *concurso* was more of an anomaly than a turning point in the history of Mexican film. In spite of this brief opening, the structural problems that stifled independent film production remained unchallenged. The films were overwhelmingly literary in their inspirations, drawing on the work of writers such as Carlos Fuentes (*Un Alma Pura*), José Emilio Pacheco (*El Viento Distante*) and Gabriel García Márquez.

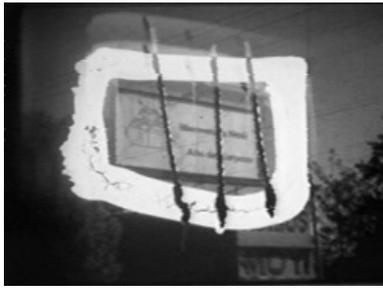
The films that participated in the first *Concurso* were all shot in 35mm, which implied a mode-of-production that was only slightly more streamlined than that



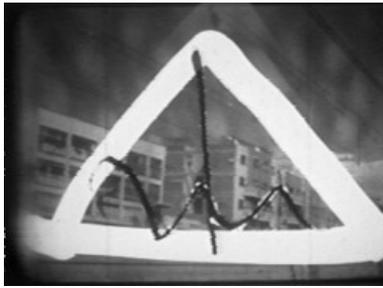
Vicente Rojo (1965) by Juan José Gurrola



Vicente Rojo (1965) by Juan José Gurrola



Vicente Rojo (1965) by Juan José Gurrola



Vicente Rojo (1965) by Juan José Gurrola



Vicente Rojo (1965) by Juan José Gurrola



of the ailing industry. Five or ten years later, during what might be thought of as the *Mexperimental Cinema's* Golden Age, filmmakers enjoyed unprecedented access and liberty, largely because they had freed themselves of these restrictions through smaller gauge filmstocks and less of an insistence on high-browed pedigree.



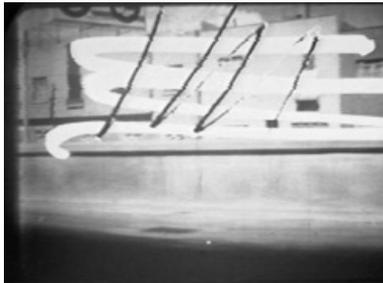
Vicente Rojo (1965) by Juan José Gurrola

Relative to the first, the second *Concurso* (1967) was a disappointment, so much so that two decades passed before the event was again attempted. Archibaldo Burns' *Juegos de mentiras*, based on Elena Garro's short story *El arbol*, is regarded as the only significant film to show at the 1967 competition. This tale of a servant's call on her former employer takes as its subject the vast gulf dividing the social classes. While the *concurso*s may be faulted on a number of counts, they undoubtedly produced several real revelations. Perhaps foremost was a man with years of experience as a newsreel cinematographer—Rubén Gámez—who created one Mexico's most accomplished film essays.



Vicente Rojo (1965) by Juan José Gurrola

A veteran of years of working on newsreels, advertisements and documentaries, and a graduate of the University of Southern California's film school, Gámez was already a skilled cinematographer with a singular film sense when, in the early sixties, he had his chance to direct his own projects. The first of these, the short *Magueyes* (1962), takes on the agave plant, an icon much invoked by both photographers and the nationalist cinema, especially by Emilio Fernández and in Eisenstein's Mexican footage.



Vicente Rojo (1965) by Juan José Gurrola

Through skillful editing and striking compositions Gámez makes the plants dance to the strains of Shostakovitch's *11th Symphony*. This irreverent treatment of national symbols and playful approach to formal experimentation return in *La fórmula secreta* (1965), awarded the festival's main prize in the first *Concurso*.



Vicente Rojo (1965) by Juan José Gurrola

The film is an irrational essay, unified only by the author's unique voice, full of surreal moments and provocative scenarios related to intellectual debates about the Mexican national character.

Gámez's apprenticeship in advertising clearly served him well, and many of the images—such as the hotdogs that crawl across the hood ornament of a Mercedes Benz—seem like nonsensical variations on the pop style of sixties commercials. Some of the tableaux are suggestive of cultural penetration from the north, such as the Mexican in a hospital bed receiving an intravenous transfusion of Coca-Cola.



Vicente Rojo (1965) by Juan José Gurrola

Throughout the film relies on a hyper-Mexican visual vocabulary of *charros*, the *Zócalo* and *campesinos* clad in white. Still other scenes frustrate attempts at rational



explanation, like the priests riding the carousel, or the slaughterhouse from which a man exits carrying a cow's carcass, which transforms into the corpse of a woman.

For decades leading Mexican intellectuals and philosophers, including Octavio Paz, Alfonso Reyes, Samuel Ramos, Antonio Caso, and many others have debated the nature of the national character, in terms that return invariably to stoicism, solitude, fatalism, masochism, violence and selfloathing.³² Gámez's meditation might be understood as a critique of this discourse, in that it takes these purportedly "Mexican" attributes and exaggerates them to the point of absurdity. Gámez relates the film to the supposed passivity of the Mexican people, for whom the film might serve as a wake-up call:

I wanted to denounce the people of Mexico. Not the government, nor the System; I wanted to criticize Mexican submissiveness. I filmed a man in one scene where I proceeded to hit him twice and bruise his face. The guy just stands there impassively; he doesn't even move. I wanted to denounce this to those shapeless masses who will continue to eat roots and grass--and yet survive. I wanted to reach the drowsy populace which tolerates the tyrannical governments of Mexico; to reach those who don't have a political conscience--or any kind of conscience at all.

[De alguna manera yo quería denunciar con ella al pueblo, no al gobierno ni al sistema, sino a nuestro pueblo "agachón": hay una escena en la que , filmando a un individuo, lo golpeo dos veces y lo hiego la cara, y el tipo se queda impávido, sin hacer nada. Eso quise denunciar, a la masa informe que va a seguir comiendo raíces y yerbas y va a seguir subsistiendo, un pueblo dormido que tolera estos gobiernos déspotas que tenemos, un pueblo dormido que no solo no tiene conciencia política sino que no tiene conciencia de nada.]

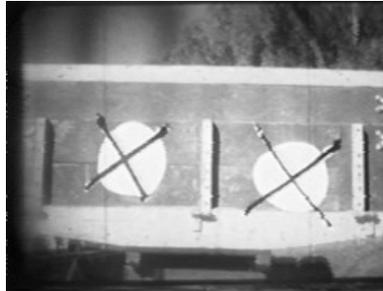
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Such scenes as a *charro* locked in his cage of melancholy and put on display on the *Zócalo* , the passive, prone peons strewn across the landscape like stones, or the lassoing of pedestrians, who topple stiffly, offering up no resistance, all anticipate in lyrical terms Roger Bartra's brilliant critique of the discourse of *lo Mexicano* .³⁴

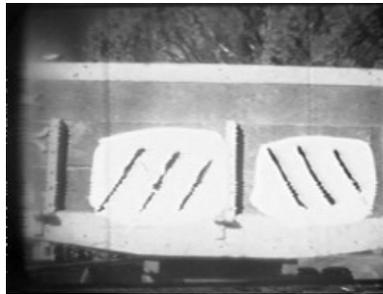
More recently, performance artists like Astrid Hadad and Guillermo Gómez-Peña have also amplified the signs of Catholic suffering and submissive insensibility to the point of absurdity,



Vicente Rojo (1965) by Juan José Gurrola



Vicente Rojo (1965) by Juan José Gurrola



Vicente Rojo (1965) by Juan José Gurrola

heirs to Gámez's broken *campesinos* .

The visual non-sequitors of *La fórmula secreta* were supplemented by a powerful poem by Juan Rulfo (reprinted below).

Rulfo's text speaks in the first person plural, a prayer of the famished and the defeated. Juxtaposed with the despair of the destitute peons is the visual excess of the Rococo jewelbox of a chapel at Santa María Tonantzintla, barren landscapes and the music of Vivaldi and Stravinsky. Unfortunately, in spite of the top honors at the *Concurso* , Gámez was not to make another film for more than another twenty-seven years, when he returned with another dense visual poem, *Tequila* (1991).

Other experiments came out of visual arts, especially in these times of confrontation and change. After the Second World War, the Mexican school of social realism, which had dominated the national arts scene since immediately after the Revolution, was seen as increasingly irrelevant by emerging cultural elites. *Los tres grandes* (Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco) were past their prime, and the second generation of muralists seemed content to reheat formulas that had become monotonous and inflexible. Simultaneously the initial growth of an art market shifted attention away from murals and toward easel painting and subject matters that aspired to universality. Ironically, Mexican nationalism was to prove more international than Mexican attempts to be international. Be that as it may, younger artists, loosely united by common interests and a dislike of Mexican muralism, grouped to print manifestos and organize exhibitions. The flamboyant young José Luis Cuevas emerged as something of a spokesman for this generation, thanks to his astringent attacks on the nationalist school. In statements like "The Cactus Curtain: Open Letter on Conformity in Mexican Art," Cuevas argued that the orthodoxy of social realism stifled creativity and bordered on fascism:

Hitler was wrong: if he had known the Mexican race with its dark skin, straight blue-black hair, almond eyes and labial speech, he would have changed his doctrine. The superior race was in Tenochtitlán and environs, and it was the indisputable possessor of absolute truth.

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PROPOSITOS:

DESACAR EL UNICO ARTE QUE ES SIGNIFICATIVO PARA NUESTROS CONTEMPORANOS. El Arte que se separa al hombre-individuo del hombre como integrante social. Nada tiene derecho a la indiferencia frente a la explotación social. MUCHO MENOS EL ARTISTA.

LOGAR por el arte un cometido activo, como ÚNICA POSTURA RESPONSABLE DEL ARTISTA FRENTE A SU TIEMPO.

ARNOLD BELKIN

FRANCISCO ICATZA



NUEVA PRESENCIA

el hombre en el arte de nuestro tiempo

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1. LLAMAMOS A TODOS LOS ARTISTAS

A los pintores, escultores, arquitectos, grabadores, artistas escénicos y cinematográficos, fotógrafos, escritores y músicos, porque su medio de expresión es la comunicación.

LLAMAMOS A LOS ESTUDIANTES DE ARTE,

de arquitectura, filosofía, leyes, ciencias políticas, economía, ingeniería, medicina, ciencias — a todos los que estudian — porque temen el futuro del mundo en sus manos.

LLAMAMOS A LOS PENSADORES Y A LOS EDUCADORES,

porque forman los mentes de nuestra generación.

LLAMAMOS A LOS PROFESIONISTAS

LLAMAMOS A TODAS LAS CLASES SOCIALES,

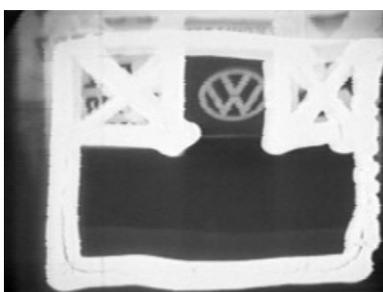
a los obreros, a los que trabajan la tierra, a los bondifrones, a los navegantes, a los pastores y a los empresarios, porque los más revolucionarios del mundo se hacen para dar sentido a este mundo. **¡NOS DIRIGIMOS A LOS HOMERES DE TODAS LAS NACIONES,** a los hombres de todas las razas y creencias, porque el arte es el único medio de comunicación que posee un lenguaje universal.

The rebels converged in several ephemeral groups like the *Interioristas* and the *Nueva Presencia*.³⁶ They rallied around influential statements like Selden Rodman's book *The Insiders*, which grew out of a disaffection with Abstract Expressionism and an interest in a return to figurative painting.³⁷ Their art found its champions in individuals like Juan García Ponce, Marta Traba, Miguel Salas Anzures (head of the Departamento de Artes Plásticas of INBA, 1957-61) and perhaps less directly, by sectors in the United States, through competitions such as the Esso Salon for Young Artists (funded by the Standard Oil affiliate).

This latter connection, with its neocolonial ramifications, is criticized forcefully in Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's Third Cinema tour-de-force, *La hora de los hornos* (1968). Recently critics have linked the promotion of alternatives to social realism, especially Abstract Expressionism, to U.S. foreign policy interests during the Cold War.³⁸ Through a complex set of circumstances, then, the new generation built on the incipient rebellion of Tamayo and the *informalistas* to shift the terms of artistic discourse in Mexico.

The theater director Juan José Gurrola made three short film portraits of outstanding artists of this new tendency: *Vicente Rojo*, *Alberto Gironella*, and *José Luis Cuevas* (all 1965).

Though a fustian narration by Juan García Ponce mars all three films, they are consistently inventive and bizarre, and the best, *Vicente Rojo*, certainly represents a high-point for Mexican documentary. *Rojo* is a thoroughly beat transmission on the "creative process," one which manages to superimpose the artist's visual vocabulary on the industrial scenery that surrounds him. A Spanish exile who had been living in Mexico since the late forties, Rojo was a graphic designer and an abstract painter who often worked with geometric forms and repeated patterns. Gurrola's film portrait illustrates how the urban development of the landscape is reflected in the textures and marks



Vicente Rojo (1965) by Juan José Gurrola



Vicente Rojo (1965) by Juan José Gurrola



José Luis Cuevas (all 1965) by Juan José Gurrola



of Rojo's canvases. Rojo scratched and drew directly onto the film, adding elements of his paintings onto the very forms and signs of urban space that inspire his abstractions. While the discourse of Abstract Expressionism in the U.S. had focused in part on painting's approaches to the sublime (via Marc Rothko, Barnett Newmann, etc.), what emerges in *Rojo* is a portrait of an artist expressing his anxieties and sense of wonder when encountering the modernist city.



José Luis Cuevas (all 1965) by Juan José Gurrola

If *Rojo* is outward-looking and concerned with public spaces, then *Gironella* is by comparison introverted and claustrophobic. Filmed entirely in the artist's time-worn home, it concentrates on a series of paintings which rework the 17th century Spanish master Diego Velázquez's portraits of decadent royalty. The film's use of distorting lenses to deform the painter's languid model evokes an atmosphere that is cloistered, stifling and hallucinatory. *Cuevas* is predictably the most histrionic, presenting the artist being carried away by masked doctors, imprisoned in a mental hospital, attacked by a sexually-frustrated cashier wielding scissors, and fatally crushed by a streetcar. The electronic music adds to the atmosphere of irrationality with percolating sounds and nonsense syllables. As suits the most ostentatious of artists, the handheld camera is reckless, panning frantically back and forth across his drawings and choosing wildly-skewed angles. In the voice-over Cuevas recalls the city of his childhood and the illness of his youth, while the ever-overblown Juan García Ponce links the artist to Goya, Rembrandt, Dostoyevsky and Kafka.



José Luis Cuevas (all 1965) by Juan José Gurrola

Seven years later Gurrola was to return to the world of art for another documentary, *Robarte el arte* (1972). Gurrola traveled with the painter Arnaldo Coen and artist/filmmaker Gelsen Gas to Kassel, [former West] Germany to crash the international art circus of Documenta 5 and to indulge in situationist high-jinks and girlwatching. Edited as a chance event, the film is a dense collage underscored and undermined by numerous texts, both written and spoken, and intercut with found images and appropriated sounds, including a bit of the soundtrack of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (Mike Nichols, 1966), headlines from the Mexican tabloid *¡Alarma!*, and the poetry of Gertrude Stein. Iconoclastic and self-important, Gurrola and his clan (Juan García Ponce, Juan Vicente Melo, Salvador Elizondo, and others) exemplify the inner circle of intellectuals of the *condesa*, an environment from which even stranger films would emerge.

31. "Sentido y balance del concurso," *El Gallo Ilustrado* no. 159 (11 July 1965), quoted in Emilio García Reira, *Historia documental de cine mexicano* (Guadalajara, 1994), p. 154.

32. Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad* (Mexico City, 1964); Jorge Segura Millan, *Diorama de los Mexicanos* (Mexico City, 1964); Aniceto Aramoni, *El mexicano ¿un ser aparte?* (Mexico City, 1984); Rogelio Díaz Guerrero, *Psicología del mexicano* (Mexico City, 1982); Jorge Portillo, *Fenomenología del relajo* (Mexico City, 1962); Alfonso

- /reyes, *La x en la frente* (Mexico City, 1952; and many other studies in a similar vein.
33. Rubén Gámez, "La fórmula secreta," *Artes de México*, no. 10 (Winter 1990), p. 42.
 34. Roger Bartra, *La jaula de la melancolía* (Mexico City, 1987).
 35. *Evergreen Review* vol. 2, no. 7 (Winter, 1959), p. 115.
 36. The best account of this complex history is probably Shifra Goldman, *Contemporary Mexican Painting in a Time of Change* (Albuquerque, 1995).
 37. *Baton Rouge*, 1960.
 38. Eva Cockroft, "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum*, vol. 12, no. 10 (June, 1974), pp. 39-41; and Max Kozloff, "American Painting during the Cold War," *Artforum* vol. 11, no. 9 (May 1973), pp. 43-54.

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