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CINE MEXPERIMENTAL CINEMA

El underground

The arrival of the sixties is heralded by signs of more independent film activity. The *Nuevo Cine* group was formed during a series of conferences in Cuba, attended by the likes of filmmakers Luis Alcoriza, writers such as Carlos Fuentes, and artists including José Luis Cuevas. A journal advocating a reawakening of Mexican cinema, also called *Nuevo Cine*, was launched in 1961. Involved on the editorial board of this short-lived journal--seven issues were published--were notable critics Emilio García Riera, José de la Colina, Jomí García Ascot, and Carlos Monsivaís. In the pages of this magazine, Salvador Elizondo surveyed the new and daring English "free cinema," as well as documentary experiments such as Lionel Rogosin's *On the Bowery* (1956) and the improvisational beatitudes of *Pull My Daisy* (Alfred Leslie and Robert Frank, 1959).²⁹ Nor were the group's efforts restricted to journalism and the organization of a burgeoning network of cine clubs. Their first production, which best represented the ambitions of the *Nuevo Cine* group, was Jomí García Ascot's *En el balcón vacío* (1961), a feature-length drama on the diasporic traumas of a young Spanish refugee living in Mexico.

Another major contribution to alternative film culture in the country was the opening of the *Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos* (CUEC) in 1963.

The first generation of students at the CUEC used film both as a medium for experimentation and, increasingly with the social confrontations of the late 1960s, as a weapon of a political movement.

Betraying the autobiographical concerns of its students, a recurrent figure in early CUEC productions is a young man from a comfortable family, dissatisfied with social conventions and sympathetic toward or involved in radical politics. *Lapso* (Leobardo López Areche, 1965) centers on an alienated youth who

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El Fin (1971) by Sergio García



wanders the city streets and bookstores, staring longingly at women's legs and camera shop windows. The lead of Federico Weingartshofer's *Quiza siempre si me muere* (1971) holes up in his room, mulling over the failure of the 1968 student movement and fantasizing about guerrilla actions in the city. Alfredo Joskowicz's *Crates* (1971) tells of the title character's renunciation of worldly goods in search of freedom and enlightenment.

The film opens with a forced entry of a television news crew into the home of the protagonist (played by fellow film student Leobardo López Aretche), who has made the unorthodox decision to give away all of his possessions. In a frantic, *faux-verite* style, the reporter quizzes relatives and neighbors, who pick through the LPs and books, all free for the taking. Following this frenetic introduction, the film's pace slows, as it follows Crates through the garbage dumps and alleyways of his new life. Though the film was scripted (by Joskowicz and López Aretche) certain scenes, such as one in which Crates distributes bread to passers-by on the street, were improvised with the unknowing participation of the pedestrians who walked into the frame.

The birth sequence is a direct echo of López Aretche's own son's birth, documented in the CUEC exercise, *Leobardo Barrabas: Parto sin Temor* (1969). Crates and his girlfriend, another dropout from the world of middle-class comforts, eventually settle in a cave, where they become a kind of Adam and Eve for the Aquarian Age, free from the corruptions of the material world.

In spite of the new film school, cine-clubs and emergent film culture, independent production in the early 1960s remained more of an aspiration than a reality. The studios remained closed to new talent and the unions hostile to outsiders. In 1963, when UNAM's *Cine Club de la Universidad Mexicano Independiente*,³⁰ there appears to be a cohesive expression of what had up to that point been a series of disparate productions. The program exhibited the work of neophyte filmmakers and those who had been active in the industry previously: Sergio Véjar, Adolfo Garnica, Archibaldo Burns, Antonio Reynoso, Alejandro Galindo, Rubén Gámez, García Ascot, and others. Many of these independent filmmakers were to gain prominence later as directors of commercial cinema.

The films of this and subsequent generations contrast with those of the Covarrubias, Best Maugard, the Alvarez Bravos and Emilio Amero. While the alternative cinema emerging from the Revolution looked to rural Mexico as a



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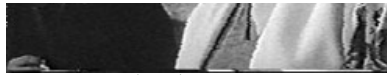
El brazo fuerte (1958) by Giovanni Korporaal



El brazo fuerte (1958) by Giovanni Korporaal



source of authenticity and formal beauty, the experiments of this later generation take a more cynical view. Much of what was inspiring, uncorrupted and genuine for the early generation had become part of what later experimental filmmakers felt compelled to rebel against. The *charro*, supreme symbol of the rural Mexican ideal for filmmakers of the "Golden Era," acts as a repressive force (along with a priest, a soldier and a bureaucrat) that breaks up the hippie idyll in Sergio García's *El Fin* (1971). Rural life is banal and numbing in Alberto Isaac's *En este pueblo no hay ladrones* (1965), brutal and short in Antonio Reynoso's *El despojo* (1960), foul and full of disillusion in Alfredo Joskowicz's *El cambio* (1971). Similarly, the utopian ambitions of a film like *Humanidad* (1937) seem naive and misguided next to Gámez's biting critique of *La fórmula secreta* (1965).



El brazo fuerte (1958) by Giovanni Korporaal



El brazo fuerte (1958) by Giovanni Korporaal

Consider, for example, the case of a political satire called *El brazo fuerte* (1958), made by Giovanni Korporaal. A European who, after studies at the *Centro de Cine Experimental* in Rome, relocated to Mexico City, he succeeded in making one of the few feature-length experimental films of that era. Based on Juan de la Cabada's short story, the film is a brutal treatment of the rise and fall of a rural *caudillo*. Shot in Eronguarícuaro, Michoacán, the setting is a familiar one, the archetypical Mexican *pueblo* seen in innumerable Alvarez Bravo photographs, with textured adobe walls and colonial churches set against a sky full of towering cumulus clouds. The residents, however, are an altogether different breed, with none of that grace and intuitive sense of beauty--"with a bit of happiness and charm" ["*un poco alegre y graciosa*"], to use Alvarez Bravo's felicitous phrase--that the photographer seeks out in his images. Instead, the inhabitants are presented as xenophobic dullards--easily duped, sycophantic by nature, and suspicious of outsiders and progress. When the villagers finally manage to topple the local despot through ridicule, he is immediately replaced by an identical tyrant.

Walter Reuter's wide angle lens and unusual camera placements add greatly to the film, as does the use of engravings, similar to the Leopoldo Méndez prints in *La rebelión de los colgados* (Emilio Fernández and Alfredo B. Crevenna, 1954). But while the Chiapaneco Indians in the latter film suffer extreme exploitation in pre-Revolutionary Mexico, Korporaal's contemporary villagers seem to get precisely the kind of corrupt *cacique* they deserve. The criticism of Mexico's political reality did not go unnoticed. As Adolfus Mekas chronicles in his 1959 text "A Film Between Two Mafias" (reprinted

below) the film was denied the censor's stamp of approval, and hence remained virtually unseen until 1974.

Understandably embittered by the experience, Korporaal never made another experimental film, but remained in

Mexico and directed many documentaries. As the silencing of Korporaal suggests, filmmakers of the late fifties and early sixties may have had a critical, iconoclastic spirit, but were hard-pressed to find venues for that rebellion.

Ten years later these outlets were plentiful. The *Concursos* of 1965 and 1967 marked the beginning of that opening.

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29. Salvador Elizondo, "Cine Experimental," *Nuevo Cine 3* (August, 1961), pp. 4-9.
30. Dirección General de Difusión Cultural, Sección de Actividades Cinematográficas, *Anuario 1963* (Mexico City, 1963), n.p.

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