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CINE MEXPERIMENTAL CINEMA

Intro

There is no doubt that the films of Mexico's "Golden Age" have made an indelible mark on the popular imagination throughout the Spanish-speaking world. ¹ But Mexico has also produced another cinema, one dubbed here with the neologism the *Mexperimental Cinema*. Distributed erratically, informally, or not at all, created less often by filmmakers than by visual artists, photographers, activists or amateurs, and frequently ignored by the film archives and retrospectives that define the cinematic output of the nation, the *Mexperimental Cinema* is largely one that has fallen between the cracks. The written history of the international avant-garde focuses predominantly on Western Europe and the United States, though from the silent era on artists were creating a vanguard cinema in other parts of the world. On the other hand, the history of Mexican cinema is that of feature-length narratives. ² The *Mexperimental Cinema* begins in the aftermath of the Revolution, as the movie camera becomes one more tool for the painters, photographers and intellectuals engaged in nationalistic and utopian projects. Later, it becomes a weapon for radicals who saw the Revolution's formulation of nationhood as part of the problem, yet another arm of an oppressive society. Broadly outlined, and without any claims of being exhaustive, this survey brings together work emerging from diverse sources, styles and modes of production--including the three experimental film competitions, leftist political polemics and the counter-cultural fantasies created by the student movement and hippie culture, as well as punk rants and partisan satires, video art and super-8 shorts. For the purposes of this project, "experimental cinema" is taken as an inclusive term, defined broadly enough to cover a variety of alternative filmmaking practices. The label makes reference to the avant-garde's various modes of address, via formal experimentation, reflexivity, and

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counter-cultural identification, as well as alternative modes of production and distribution. The work included in this series exhibits affinities to (and sometimes the influence of) the film experiments of European surrealists, the abstract animations of Man Ray, the so-called "New American Cinema," "Third Cinema" (especially Cuban cinema and Julio García Espinosa's call "For an Imperfect Cinema"³), the merry pranks of Ron Rice and Taylor Mead, and other oppositional film practices from Latin America, Europe, the United States and elsewhere.

These independent films exist in a complex dialectic relationship with the commercial film industry. These films are part of a larger oppositional, counterhegemonic practice. The filmmaker Rubén Gámez states: "I loathe traditional movies; I have nothing to do with them." ["No me gusta el cine tradicional, yo no tengo nada que ver con eso."]⁴ But key figures, such as Adolfo Garnica, Antonio Reynoso or Alfredo Gurrola, either had day-jobs in the commercial film studios or made films on the margins as a way of gaining access to the industry. Part of the aesthetic sensibility is borrowed from mainstream Mexican movies---seventies narcochurros in the case of Miguel Calderón, the flotsam and jetsam of television for Ximena Cuevas, or the style of such classical figures such as Emilio Fernández, Gabriel Figueroa and Sergei Eisenstein in the case of Rubén Gámez. These appropriations involve studied and sometimes affectionate tributes, and engage the spectators through the mechanisms of dismantled narratives, experimentation with structure, and the subversion of causality.

Occasionally, the commercial film industries, sensing their own paralysis, express interest in this work as a potential source of innovation and fresh talent. This was certainly the case in the sixties, a time when commercial Mexican cinema had deteriorated drastically. The technical polish, nationalist iconography and accomplished acting which had made Mexican film dominant throughout Latin America during the "Golden Age" were lost. It is significant that the three *Concursos de Cine Experimental* (Competitions of Experimental Cinema, held in 1965, 1967, 1988) were instigated not by renegade outsiders but rather by the *Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Producción Cinematográfica* (a professional group within the commercial film industry) as part of an effort to reinvigorate the moribund *fábrica de sueños*. More typically, however, these films are made independently of the commercial film industry by small groups of friends, typically individuals from a privileged cultural and intellectual elite,

working with a free weekend, a few rolls of film, and an idea. But others, like *Un Toque de Roc* (1988) by Sergio García, represent large collective efforts over a period of years. Circulating nontheatrically, these films have depended on a network of cineclubs, cultural centers, art galleries and sporadic festivals in order to reach their audience. Some never reached that public. Adolfo Best Maugard's *La Mancha de Sangre* (1937) went years without being screened, and its reputation grew ever more embellished. Victims of indifferent heirs, improper storage, and the disastrous 1982 fire at the *Cineteca Nacional*, many of these films are now lost. Perhaps some will later be located, restored, exhibited and evaluated. Although this text moves chronologically, we hope to offer less the semblance of a coherent movement but rather to chronicle selected players and experimenters who have survived despite a climate that was often hostile or indifferent. We further hope to suggest some of the possible connections between this experimental cinema and its commercial equivalent, the international avant-garde, and other Mexican arts and culture.

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1. For example, in Brazil, Mario Peixoto made the early experimental film *Limite* (1930).
 2. This is included in the anthology *Hojas de Cine* (Mexico City, 1988), vol. 3, pp. 63-78
 3. Rubén Gámez, "La fórmula secreta," *Artes de México nueva época*, vol. 10 (Winter 1990), p. 42.
 4. See the discussion of *Redes* in William Alexander, *Film on the Left* (Princeton, N.J., 1981), pp. 67-81.

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