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CINE MEXPERIMENTAL CINEMA

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Shady Origins

A self-conscious vanguard of Mexican artists who experiment with film emerges soon after (and informed by) their European equivalent. Emilio Amero, Adolfo Best Maugard, Marius de Zayas, Manuel and Lola Alvarez Bravo, and Miguel and Rosa Covarrubias are all artists who participated in the post-Revolutionary project of formal exploration that constituted the Mexican cultural renaissance. Better known for their work in other media--painting, printmaking or photography--these artists also made use of film as another opportunity for experimentation. In sync with their other projects, these films reflect interests in rural life and folk culture as the source of an *ür*-Mexican essence. They also fetishize machinery and technology as harbingers of a better future. Industrialization promised the means to achieve a prosperous new society, while remaining rooted in the values of the *campesino* and the indigenous past. Through this fusion, Mexico might achieve material affluence while avoiding what was widely perceived as the spiritual bankruptcy of its northern neighbor.

These utopian aspirations, and the faith in film as an effective tool of social transformation can be linked to the presence of foreign filmmakers working in Mexico during the thirties. Paul Strand, for instance, at the behest of Carlos Chávez made *Redes for the Secretaria de Educación Pública* with Fred Zinnemann and Henwar Rodakiewicz. Filmed in the coastal town of Alvarado, Veracruz, using mostly non-professional actors, the film contrasts the fishermen's struggle for survival with the greed of capitalists and politicians. Yet apart from the cast, the Mexican participation was minimal: Augustine Velásquez Chávez contributed to the script and Silvestre Revueltas composed a powerful score.⁵ Sergei



Adolfo Best Maugard



Eisenstein's ill-fated Mexican film, *Que Viva México!*, involved more significant local participation. Adolfo Best Maugard, later a filmmaker in his own right, worked as Eisenstein's consultant on all things Mexican, and the Soviets mingled extensively with the cultural elites of Mexico City. "Modern cinema is *Viva México!*, a new achievement of a new technique, a more amazing technique than that of *Potemkin*," Best Maugard gushed about the experience.⁶ Though the project ended in acrimony, the camerawork of Eduard Tissé did much to define the visual style of the classic period of Mexican film.⁷



Que Viva México! by Sergei Eisenstein



Que Viva México! by Sergei Eisenstein



Que Viva México! by Sergei Eisenstein

The early years of sound cinema in Mexico were also a time that allowed for experimentation within the commercial industry. Juan Bustillo Oro's debut effort, *Dos Monjes* (1934), represents perhaps the paramount example of this. Narrating a love triangle involving two monks, Fray Servando and Fray Javier, the film weaves together a story from the conflicting points of views of the two rivals. As Fray Javier gradually goes mad, those parts of the film told from his perspective take on the trappings of German Expressionism, including exaggerated make-up, skewed angles, deep shadows and a crooked, distorted sense of space. Masterfully photographed by Agustín Jiménez, the film was a belated effort to incorporate the styles of a European vanguard into Mexican commercial film.⁸ Some of Bustillo Oro's subsequent efforts, such *El misterio del rostro pálido* (1935), and *El hombre sin rostro* (1950), also exhibited expressionistic influences. Another curious experiment of the era is a comical short entitled *El espectador impertinente* (Arcady Boytler and Raphael Sevilla, 1932), an eccentric hybrid of theater and film. The humor of the film's performance is derived from the rapid-fire repartee between an actress on the screen and a live actor, impersonating an unruly member of the audience, who interacts with the movie from his seat, in a manner reminiscent of the avant-garde Soviet "Factory of the Eccentric Actor" (led by Sergei Yutkevich, Grigori Kozintsev, and Leonid Trauberg) in the 1920s. The heckler, played by Boytler himself, later appears on the screen as part of the film, and eventually wins over the young woman who he had been harassing earlier.



Dos Monjes (1934) by Juan Bustillo Oro

Predictably, however, most experimentation took place on a smaller scale, the personal projects of individuals deeply involved in other aesthetic explorations. The printer and photographer Emilio Amero made three shorts, today known only from

descriptive texts. In a letter to Manuel Rodríguez Lozano, Antonieta Rivas Mercado describes a visit to the New York studio of Amero, who "had made a movie entirely of machines" ["ha hecho una película de maquinas, purísima."] ⁹ A more detailed description by Carlos Mérida (reprinted below), for whom Amero had worked as an apprentice, gives scene by scene accounts of three films, *Desolación* (based on a text by Federico García Lorca) 3-3-3 (made with Gilberto Owen), and *Río sin tacto*, all realized during Amero's long sojourn in the United States. Marius de Zayas was another figure of the Mexican avant-garde who lived a self-imposed exile in New York. A caricaturist, critic and crucial figure in the reevaluation of so-called "primitive arts" and the trans-Atlantic crossing of cubism from Paris to New York (via Alfred Stieglitz's 291 Gallery and Camerawork), de Zayas later made documentary films about sports, cubism, and dance. The *Filmoteca de la UNAM* is now restoring these recently rediscovered shorts. The still photographer Lola Alvarez Bravo also experimented with motion pictures. Her forays into film include a roll of footage of Frida Kahlo (who sat for numerous portraits by Lola) along with a young female actress or companion, and a boy who represents the son that Kahlo never had. Shot in 1951 in Frida's Coyoacán home, these were presumably tests from a project never completed.

Lola's husband Manuel Alvarez Bravo also tried his hand at filmmaking. He recalls that Carlos Chávez made the gift of several cans of motion picture film.

He purchased a 35mm spring-wound motion picture camera from Eduard Tissé, Eisenstein's cinematographer, and took this camera to Tehuantepec in 1934 to film the local Indian women.

There were very charming things, like the way they would walk when they went to market. They didn't carry anything in their hands, but rather when they bought a box of cigarettes and matches they'd put them on their heads and walk that way . . . And this gave the movement another quality. This was an essay I did to try out the camera I had just purchased, and I thought the picturesque was an important aspect, though in a certain sense a bit superficial, which is to say that in the end one needs to find something else. To find parallels, contrasts. So I started to take shots in the textile mills, with movement in the background, in the foreground, on one side, on the other, at the feet, etc., with movement on the screen, of how one can use movement on the screen. At the same time I wanted to complement these scenes, which were of work, with others

of the beauty of the women, the Tehuanas with ????? with flowers and with fruit (later I tried to repeat this with still photos and I couldn't, I don't know why), in short I shot a lot of scenes of this sort, I'd place the tripod in one spot to shoot the women behind me and they'd turn the corner or cross over to the other side of the street. I did other essays, also a bit capricious, in which a Tehuana would be walking and all of a sudden she'd disappear.

[Habian cosas muy graciosas, como por ejemplo la forma como caminaban cuando iban al mercado. No llevaban nada en los manos, entonces se compraban una cajetilla de cigarros y cerrillos, se lo ponían en la cabeza y así caminaban . . . Y todo ese movimiento le da otra dimension. Era un ensayo que hacia yo para probar la camara que acaba de comprar, pues pensaba yo que lo pintoresco era un aspecto importante, pero en cierto sentido un poco superficial, quiero decir que en el fondo de aquello se tenia que buscar otra cosa. Encontrar paralelos, contrastes. Entonces empecé a hacer fotografía en los telares con movimientos hacia el fondo, hacia adelante, hacia un lado, hacia el otro, a los pies, etcetera, en cosas del movimiento en la pantalla, de como puede usarse el movimiento en la pantalla. Al mismo tiempo quería complementar esas escenas, que eran de trabajo, con otras en donde resultara la belleza de las mujeres, las Tehuanas con jicalpestles con flores o con frutas (des pues lo quise repetir en fotografía fija y ya no pude, no sé por qué), en fin, muchas escenas así por el estilo tomaba, colocaban en el lugar el tripié para tomar a las mujeres que caminaban detrás de mi y daban la vuelta a la esquina, o al reves, que caminaban en la otra orilla. Hice otros ensayos, también un poquito caprichosos, iban caminando una tehuana de repente desaparecía. ¹⁰]

Apart from *Tehuantepec*, Manuel Alvarez Bravo attempted other film exercises, including *Los tigres de Coyoacán*, *La vida cotidiana de los perros*, *¿Cuánta será la oscuridad?* (with José Revueltas) and *El abonero* (with Juan de la Cabada). ¹¹ All of these film are now apparently lost. In addition to these personal projects, Alvarez Bravo shot a government propaganda short after the 1938 nationalization of petroleum industry, and was employed as a still photographer on many studio films.

5. Best Maugard's own account of the film is given in "Mexico into Cinema," *Theatre Arts Monthly*, XVI (November, 1932), pp. 926-933. He later published a

- denunciation of the unauthorized version (completed by Sol Lesser) in *Close Up*, (London) no. X (September 1933), pp. 256-257.
6. The most complete account of Eisenstein's Mexican fiasco remains Harry M. Geduld and Ronald Gottesman, eds. *Sergei Eisenstein and Upton Sinclair: The Making and Unmaking of Que Viva Mexico!* (Bloomington, IN, 1970). See also Jay Leyda and Zina Voynow, *Eisenstein at Work* (London, 1972); Inga Karetnikova and Leon Steinmetz, *Mexico According to Eisenstein* (Albuquerque, 1991); and Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in Cinema* (Bloomington, IN, 1969), pp. 19-73. For the influence of Eisenstein on Gabriel Figueroa and Emilio Fernández, see Charles Ramírez Berg, "Figueroa's Skies and Oblique Perspective," *The Spectator*, vol. 13, no. 1 (Fall, 1992), pp. 31-32.
 7. Magdalena Illoldi Rangel and Elmira López Ibañez. "La influencia de expresionismo alemán en Juan Bustillo Oro, cineaste mexicano," unpublished thesis, n.d.
 8. Antonieta Rivas Mercado, *Cartas a Manuel Rodríguez Lozano*, ed. by Isaac Rojas Rosillo (Mexico City, 1975), p. 98.
 9. Luis Roberto Vera, "Viajes a Tehuantepec: Entrevista a Manuel Alvarez Bravo," *Sábado* supplement to *Uno más uno* no. 625 (23 September 1989), p. 1.
 10. Susan Kismaric, *Manuel Alvarez Bravo* (New York, 1995), pp. 35-36.
 11. Olivier Debroye, *Figuras en el tropico, plasticas mexicanas 1920-1940* (Mexico City, 1983), p. 31.

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