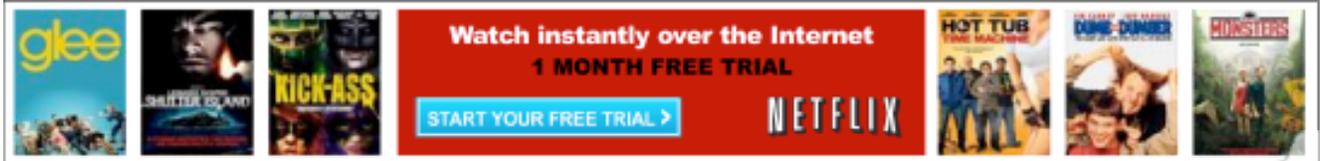


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CINE MEXPERIMENTAL CINEMA

Adolfo Best Maugard

Described by art historian Olivier Debroise as a lifelong aesthete and dandy, Adolfo Best Maugard belonged to a network of multi-disciplinary artists involved in literature, film, theater, painting, and music.¹² Best Maugard's painting was associated both with the figurative concerns of caricature, in sync with the work of Marius de Zayas and Miguel Covarrubias, and with the surrealist experimentation of Roberto Montenegro and Carlos Mérida. Although considered a minor figure in the history of Mexican painting, Best Maugard's influence on other artists was significant. Best Maugard served as secretary to the Minister of Education from 1921 to 1924, and would pen several books that placed arts education on a nationalistic base. With the publication of his text A Method for Creative Design¹³ [Método de dibujo] Best Maugard shaped the discourse of art theory in a way not unlike the contemporaneous publication of Wassily Kandinsky Concerning the Spiritual in Art

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Like his contemporaries Rosa and Miguel Covarrubias, Best Maugard had spent a considerable time mixing with various literary and artistic scenes in the United States. Perhaps because of his own interest in pursuing a film career, Best Maugard had considerable contact with the Hollywood industry in the early twenties. Most notably, he presented the unknown Dolores del Rio to actors Bert Lytell, Claire Windsor, and the film director Edwin Carewe, an introduction which led to del Rio's acting career in the United States. Best Maugard's short documentary project *Humanidad* (1934), a tribute to the work of public institutions (*Escuela Vocacional de la Beneficencia Pública, Escuela de Ciegos y Sordo-Modos* , etc.) clearly reveals Eisenstein's influence, utilizing an innovative cinematic language and dramatic camera angles towards the service of a collective goal. Scenes such as a wedding, a birth, and a trial were ably documented by the cinematographer Agustín Jiménez. Jiménez was the photography instructor at the *Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas* (ENAP) and worked for the magazines Forma and Excelsior . He also served as the cinematographer for films including Juan Bustillo Oro's *Dos Monjes* (1934) and Luis Buñuel's *Abismos de pasión* (1953). Jiménez's still photography is characterized by modernist techniques of defamiliarization--from striking extreme close ups of familiar objects and machine parts to his use of photomontage. The still frames and incomplete reel that survive from *Humanidad* suggest that the cinematography operated in a similar vein.

Best Maugard's only other film was the gritty feature-length drama called *La Mancha de sangre* (1937), for several decades understood as an anomaly in Mexican film history, much discussed but rarely seen until its rediscovery and restoration by *Filmoteca de la UNAM* several years ago. One roll of sound and the final image track remain missing. What has been rescued is enough to reconstruct

the sordid story, set within the eponymous fictional cabaret. The plot revolves around the romance between Camelia, a bargirl, and Guillermo, a provincial youth new to the big city. Camelia offers to care for the impoverished, unemployed man until he establishes himself. A transformation occurs under the tutelage of Camelia, as Guillermo trades in his overalls for a sharp gangster's suit. While the melodramatic plot might link this film less to the avant-garde of Best Maugard's artistic milieu than to contemporary *cabaretera* films--such as *Santa* (Antonio Moreno, 1931), the first Mexican film with sound, or *La mujer del puerto* (Arcady Boytler and Rafael Sevilla, 1933)--a number of structural and representational differences set the film apart. Film critic Arturo Garmendia has compared the sensibility of *La mancha de sangre* to the course style of G.W. Pabst and the films of Germany's *neue sachlichkeit*, a realist cinema of the urban experience.¹⁵ *La Mancha de Sangre* was filmed not only in the former Azteca Studio, but on location in various working-class neighborhoods of Mexico City. Based on the writing of Miguel Ruiz, the author of *El prisionero trece* (brought to the screen by Fernando de Fuentes), the film employed non-actors to "faithfully" capture the underworld on the screen "in an exact and rigorous" manner, according to René Capistrán Garza.¹⁶ In fact, Best Maugard discovered the film's protagonist, María Soledad García Corona, while she was dancing in a dress borrowed from a prostitute. He later renamed her Stella Inda. She went on to work in other notable Mexican films, including *La noche de los Mayas* (Chano Urueta, 1939) and *Los olvidados* (Luis Buñuel, 1950), and less notable ones like *Robot vs la momia Azteca* (Rafael Portillo, 1960), for which she choreographed the Pre-Columbian dance sequences.

During the years in which the film was presumed to be lost many exaggerated notions of its licentious content flourished.

One sequence in particular may have contributed to these fantasies. In a provocative scene, "el padrote" (played by the German emigré H.G. Batemberg) demands a little dance from one of the prostitutes during a late night gathering. The dance serves no function in the film's diegesis, and is meticulously composed, in contrast to the spontaneous quality of many of the other cabaret scenes. Set against a dark backdrop, with a dramatic chiaroscuro that recalls the compositions of surrealist photographers Man Ray and Brassai, a lone female figure stages an erotic unveiling. As the scene unfolds, a series of superimpositions layer the titillated facial expressions of the male and female onlookers over the body of the dancer. More reminiscent of European surrealism than the Mexican cabaret genre, the film as a whole remains a peculiar hybrid of melodrama and formal experimentation.

12. New York, 1926.

13. New York, 1977.

14. Arturo Garmendia, "La mancha de sangre: Un clásico recuperado," *Dicine* no. 63 (July-August 1995), pp. 13-16.

15. Quoted in Emilio García Riera, *Historia documental del cine mexicano* (Guadalajara, 1994), I, p. 288.

16. *The Eagle, The Jaguar, and the Serpent: Indian Art of the Americas* (New York, 1954), and *Indian Art of Mexico and Central America* (New York, 1957).

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