



## *Film and the Mexican Revolution*

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The Mexican Revolution, which broke out in 1910 just 15 years after the invention of the Lumière cinematograph, was among the world's first major conflicts to be captured on film. Although previous hostilities, such as the Spanish-American War (1898) and the Boer War (1899-1902), had attracted attention from early cameramen, the Mexican war of 1910-1917 was unprecedented both in the scale on which Mexican and foreign film operators followed, recorded, and exhibited the events of this vast, complex confrontation, and in the impact their footage had over a prolonged period on cinema audiences' comprehension of the military and social upheavals besetting their country. The image and memory of the revolution would also make a deep and lasting impression on subsequent fiction film output both in Mexico—which would turn out to be one of

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Photos on pages 58, 59, 60, 61 and 63, courtesy of the Old San Ildefonso College.

Latin America's leading film-producing nations— and abroad. Just as cinema is crucial to understanding how the Mexican Revolution was fought, lived, and subsequently incorporated into the popular imaginary, the revolution itself plays a key role in the comprehension of how cinema developed in Mexico. This essay will discuss a small selection of films on the revolution, with reference to the following topical and analytical categories: documentary representation, violence, caudillos, gender relations, mobility, photographic aesthetics, and the foreign gaze.<sup>1</sup>

Francisco I. Madero's 1910 insurrection against the authoritarian regime of General Porfirio Díaz and the ensuing battle, bloodshed, and political manoeuvring that plagued the country for the following decade inspired cameramen and film exhibitors like Jesús H. Abitia, Salvador Toscano, and the Alva brothers to travel the length and breadth of Mexico, filming the conflict's latest events and displaying them to audiences keen to gain a grip on their country's rapidly changing situation. Stirred variously by ideological and financial motives, these film entrepreneurs frequently travelled with and promoted the causes of the various revolutionary caudillos (most prominently Madero, Venustiano Carranza, and Álvaro Obregón, in the case of the Mexican cameramen, while Francisco Villa entered into an agreement with the Mutual Film Corporation that initially feted him as the hero of the revolution for U.S. film audiences). The popularity of such actuality films and the competition for audiences' attention encouraged filmmakers to elaborate increasingly long and complex narratives: the lost but recently-reconstructed *La toma de Ciudad Juárez y el viaje del héroe de la Revolución D. Francisco I. Madero* (The Taking of Ciudad Juárez and the Journey of Don Francisco I. Madero, Hero of the Revolution) (Salvador Toscano, 1911) is a key early example. Some filmmakers, most notably Salvador Toscano, recycled their actuality footage to create historical films narrating various years of recent history, often several hours long, thus establishing the Mexican Revolution as the scenario of some of world's first compilation documentaries. This genre would attain greater national and even international popularity with the later sound compilations *Memorias de un mexicano* (Memoirs of a Mexican) (Carmen Toscano, 1950) and *Epopéyas de la Revolución* (Epics of the Revolution) (Gustavo Carrero, 1963).

The revolutionary-era compilations continued to feature in cinema programs during the long post-revolutionary period of reconstruction and reconciliation in the 1920s, but they gradually faded from prominence as audiences turned to the escapism and visual allure of the by-then-hegemonic Hollywood industry. By the early 1930s, though, with the onset of the sound era, Mexican fictional film was able to enter into a critical engagement with the country's still-recent past. The three films of Fernando de Fuentes' revolutionary trilogy, *El prisionero trece* (Prisoner 13) (1933), *El compadre*

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Program for screening of the documentary *La decena trágica en Mexico* (Mexico's Tragic Ten Days), Salvador Toscano, 1913, Carmen Toscano Foundation.



Still from *La Adelita* (The Women Soldier/Campfollower), Guillermo Hernández Gómez, 1937. Televisa Foundation Collection.



Alfredo Zalce, *La soldadera* (Woman Soldier), engraving, 1946. Museo de la Estampa.

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*Mendoza* (Friend Mendoza) (1933) and *Vámonos con Pancho Villa* (Let's Go with Pancho Villa) (1935), are some of the most remarkable moving pictures made on the revolution, and together constitute a damning condemnation of the physical violence, psychological cruelty, and betrayal underlying social and personal relations during the 1910-1917 conflict. The three films are set, respectively, at a federal army barracks in Mexico City during the reactionary regime of Victoriano Huerta; in a rural hacienda whose owner juggles loyalties between the local Zapatista and government forces; and among a group of idealistic friends (the "Leones de San Pablo") who enlist with Pancho Villa's forces as they campaign throughout northern Mexico. All three are characterized by an overt politics of violence that structures the revolutionary period: that of an oppressive authoritarian state against its citizens in *El prisionero trece*, that of factional warfare in *El compadre Mendoza*, and between and among Villista and government forces in *Vámonos con Pancho Villa*. More prominent and powerful, though, is the psychological pain that the complex protagonists of these films inflict upon themselves and upon those they love, be it knowingly or otherwise, through defining acts of betrayal that renege on sacred bonds of family and *compadrazgo*.<sup>2</sup> The revolutionary trilogy, made at a painful juncture in Mexico's post-revolutionary reconciliation, signals the deep rifts that existed within what 1920s governments had dubbed the "revolutionary family," both during the revolution itself and in the early 1930s. Few films since have dealt so effectively with the interplay between the revolution's internal and external violence.

*Vámonos con Pancho Villa* is the only film of the trilogy to feature directly one of the caudillos of the revolution —quite fittingly, since it was Villa, far more than any other



José Clemente Orozco, *Campo de batalla* (Battlefield), lithographs. SOMAAP.



Raúl de Anda in still from *Vámonos con Pancho Villa* (Let's Go with Pancho Villa), Fernando de Fuentes, 1935. UNAM Filmoteque.



Still from *Chicogrande*, Felipe Cazals, 2010. Eniac Martínez. Creando Films.

military leader, whom cinema turned into the stuff of myth. While portrayals of Villa in Mexican and U.S. films during and soon after the revolution tended to epically lionize or demonize him, the Villa of De Fuentes's movie is all too human, sometimes compassionate but often aloof, making his own final act of betrayal all the more unbearable. As a whole host of later films on the caudillo reflect, Villa was also arguably the most complex, evocative, and ambiguous character of post-revolutionary historical narratives and popular imaginaries.

As the Mexican film industry and the post-revolutionary regime alike consolidated toward the late 1930s, the space for critical readings of national history closed down. *Flor silvestre* (Wild Flower) (Emilio Fernández, 1943) also deals with the trauma of the Mexican Revolution through the metaphorical lens of family and gender relations, but unlike the De Fuentes pictures of the early 1930s, Fernández's far more socially conservative film presents bonds of family, gender, and social class as solid structures that are reformed and expanded by the revolution, but ultimately remain largely unchanged. The film relates the story of José Luis (Pedro Armendáriz), the dashing young son of a hacienda-owner, who challenges the traditional social structures that shape his family life, firstly by joining the Maderista revolution and secondly by eloping with Esperanza, a lower-class, local woman. Finally, though, *Flor silvestre* is deeply ambiguous about the revolutionary process, as we see when José Luis's father is killed by marauding revolutionaries, and he sets out to avenge the murderers. The film's melodramatic narrative structure buttresses the sense of inevitability of underlying social, gender, and class relations, and the revolutionary backdrop is subsumed into a broader and more abstract nationalist discourse on social mobility, bravery, and honor.

A more politically challenging take on the part women played in the revolution is *La soldadera*



Silvia Pinal in *La soldadera* (The Woman Soldier), José Bolaños, 1966. UNAM Filmoteque.



Film frame from the editing script of *Los últimos treinta años de México* (The Last Thirty years of Mexico), Salvador Toscano, c. 1930. Carmen Toscano Foundation.

A more politically challenging take on the part women played in the revolution is *La soldadera* (The Woman Soldier/Campfollower) (José Bolaños, 1966), made at a time when Mexican film production was gaining some financial and ideological independence from the state, despite the continued pressure of censorship. *La soldadera* centers on the story of Lázara (Silvia Pinal), the bride of a federal soldier who is soon killed in battle against Villistas. Pinal's character, for want of any alternative, joins the contingent of women (*soldaderas*) accompanying the revolutionary troops on their campaigns.

The revolution here is incomprehensible, insurmountable, and brutal, but Lázara stoically accepts her lot in the sharply stratified gender relations of the revolutionary *bola*.<sup>3</sup> The film's visual style is highly fluid and mobile, reflecting the technological innovations of the era, and its narrative is punctuated throughout by the visual and aural motif of the train transporting the troops from one battle to another. Yet rather than being a romanticized emblem of physical mobility, national integration, and macho companionship, as in many previous films on the revolution, here the train serves as an ironic signifier of the chaos, aimlessness, and uprooting that war brings with it. Only the notion of home, of fixity and stability, drives Lázara, but it is an ideal that is repeatedly, cruelly, denied to her.

If *La soldadera* deconstructs the tropes of the railway and the *soldadera*, idealized in many previous films on the revolution, *Reed: México insurgente* (Reed: Insurgent Mexico) (Paul Leduc, 1970), another independent production of the era, tackles headlong the visual and historical nostalgia surrounding the cinematic representation of the revolution.

In Leduc's poetic reconstruction of the experiences of U.S. journalist John Reed, who reported on the Mexican Revolution whilst "embedded" with revolutionary troops, Alexis Grivas's carefully wrought photographic aesthetic mirrors the visual style of the now-distant actuality footage of the revolution, while the sepia hue in which the entire film is immersed makes evident, and thus implicitly critiques, any facile idealization of the past that cinematic representation might endorse. In tune with broader international currents of militant filmmaking, *Reed* celebrates political engagement and criticizes the pretence of journalistic and artistic distance or objectivity.

Another contemporary film, the Argentine documentary *México, la revolución congelada* (Mexico, the Frozen Revolution) (Raymundo Gleyzer, 1970), actively intervenes in what had by now become the filmic heritage of the revolution, appropriating documentary footage shot during the conflict itself, and turning it into the visual evidence of a revisionist, anti-imperialist reading of the revolution and its failures. Gleyzer was the latest in a long line of foreign filmmakers to find inspiration in the Mexican Revolution; and his militant documentary is far removed from Hollywood epics such as the ostensibly anti-revolutionary *Viva Zapata!* (Elia Kazan, 1952), or from trans-cultural spaghetti westerns such as *Giù la testa / Los héroes de Mesa Verde* (re-



Poster for *Viva Zapata!*, Elia Kazan, 1951.



Antonio Aguilar as Emiliano Zapata. *Emiliano Zapata*, Felipe Cazals, 1970. IMCINE.



Lobby card for *Epopéyas de la Revolución* (Epics of the Revolution), Gustavo Carrero, 1963. Carmen Toscano Foundation.

leased in English as *A Fistful of Dynamite*) (Sergio Leone, 1971). As much as being *about* the revolution, many such films have taken the Mexican conflict as a canvas onto which to project ready-formed cultural perceptions and ideological projects.

Mexican and foreign filmmakers alike have continued to this day to draw upon the narratives, the aesthetics and the mythology of the revolution, with recent titles including *Chicogrande* (Felipe Cazals, 2010) and *El atentado* (The Assassination Attempt) (Jorge Fons, 2010). This tendency sometimes monumentalizes, but often renews, contemporary imaginaries of this crucial and evocative period of Mexican history. Such constant challenges to and reworking of narratives about the past should be welcomed. **MM**

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This category structure, and the essay more broadly, draws partly on research conducted by Ángel Miquel, Álvaro Vázquez Mantecón, Eduardo de la Vega, Elisa Lozano, Hugo Lara, Carlos Flores Villela, Claudia Arroyo, Alicia Vargas, and Raúl Miranda, the section curators of the exhibition “Cinema and Revolution,” directed by Pablo Ortiz Monasterio and recently on display, under the auspices of the Mexican Film Institute (Imcine), at the Old College of San Ildefonso in Mexico City.

<sup>2</sup> *Compadrazgo* is the strong emotional bond of friendship established between the parents and godparents of a child. In Mexican politics, it refers to the particular Mexican brand of cronyism based initially on—but by no means limited to—these close relations. It extends to all relations that put personal loyalties and friendship at the center of political relationships. [Copy Editor’s Note.]

<sup>3</sup> *La bola* is the name still used in Mexico to refer to the masses of the poor who flocked to join the popular revolutionary armies. [Copy Editor’s Note.]



Pedro Armendáriz and other actors in a colorized still from *Pancho Villa Vuelve* (Pancho Villa Returns), Miguel Contreras Torres, 1949. Carmen Toscano Foundation.