

Gabriel Figueroa

IN SEARCH OF “MEXICAN-NESS,” THE HALLMARKS OF AN AGE
1908-1997

A prestigious master of the movie camera, Gabriel Figueroa studied for a time at the National Conservatory of Music and the Academy of San Carlos. He cut short his studies to work as a still photographer in 1932 for the film *Revolución*. In 1933 he received a scholarship to study movie camera work in Hollywood with Gregg Toland. His first job as director of photography was on the film *Escándalo*, sharing the credit with Víctor Guerra. His first film as sole director of photography was *Allá en el Rancho Grande* shot in 1936.

To try to get across the genius of Figueroa's work, we must make reference to painting. There are a series of contrasts between photography and painting. In Figueroa's work, we cannot tell when painting becomes part of photography, just as it is difficult to tell when normal people, from real life, have come down off the screen or when they jumped onto it. Life, in the expression on a face, the portrayal of the Mexican people's ideal existence, with all its good qualities and its defects.

Nature in movement. Figueroa is the José María Velasco¹ of film; he does things in slow motion, well thought

¹ José María Velasco (1840-1912) was one of Mexico's most important landscape painters.



Gabriel Figueroa, third from the left.

out, without rushing, like in a small town. His shots of faces are more a complete narrative concept of the image than mere photography. Where have those faces of Mexico of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s gone? We seem to be losing them.

How can we talk about one talent without talking about others? It's almost impossible. These discoveries and encounters are not done by magic. They are the accumulation of an entire culture. We cannot explain a Gabriel

Figueroa without a Goya, a Diego Rivera, a Siqueiros or an Orozco. Neither could we think about him without other great talents of cinematography like Luis Buñuel, Fernando de Fuentes, Emilio “Indio” Fernández, Chano Urueta, Alejandro Galindo, John Houston, John Ford, etc.

Allá en el Rancho Grande was the first of a series of formula films that would be repeated ad nauseam. Gabriel Figueroa did not portray reality, but what people wanted reality to be like. Figueroa, like all men of his time, was seduced by that term conceived of by philosophers and formulated by literati: “Mexican-ness.” He could not escape the hallmark of his age, a hallmark sought also by Dr. Atl, Siqueiros, Octavio Paz, etc., and that Figueroa depicts in many of his films, like *The Pearl* and *Enamorada*. Both an able technician of photography and a penetrating



Esther Fernández, Tito Guízar and René Cardona in *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (1936).

psychologist, Figueroa was a master at shaping contradictory feelings. The contrasts he deals with are terrifying. Beautiful scenery may be followed by incredible desolation. It is an entire philosophy of fatality and entrapment with no way out. His scenes of cities of low buildings moving at a sickening pace toward ruin while Mexico sleeps, for example, are famous.

*A penetrating psychologist,
Figueroa was a master
at shaping contradictory feelings.*

In *Los olvidados*, directed by Luis Buñuel, terrific violence is simply random, a blind man lashing out at the empty air. His shots of the countryside present us with marvelous skies, agave plants, clouds and horses cantering into a sunset, getting lost on the horizon.²

When foreign directors wanted to film something Mexican, there was no question: they hired Gabriel Figueroa.

² Film expert Emilio García Riera notes that Figueroa “does a good job of photography [on *Los olvidados*] despite his surprise and chagrin at Buñuel’s refusal to use filters to capture the photographic gems that adorned the films of ‘Indio’ Fernández.” Emilio García Riera, *Historia documental del cine mexicano*, vol. 5, Universidad de Guadalajara-Jalisco State Government-Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía, 1993, pp. 186-187.



Allá en el Rancho Grande, Figueroa's first film as sole director of photography.

John Huston's *Under the Volcano* and Don Siegel's *Two Mules for Sister Sara* are only two examples.

His camera had such an impact on the characters created by directors Fernando de Fuentes, Alejandro Galindo or Luis Buñuel that shots from their movies are still remembered with nostalgia, like, for example, the famous image of María Félix walking next to Pedro Armendáriz' horse in shadow against a background of the sky and clouds on the clear horizon in the film *Enamorada*. Working with director "Indio" Fernández, Figueroa captured his best shots of tragic expressions, for example, in *The Pearl* and *María Candelaria*.

Gabriel Figueroa immortalized the most important faces of that period of Mexican film: Arturo de Córdova,

Dolores del Río, Carlos López Moctezuma, Pedro Infante, Emilio Fernández, Ma. Elena Márquez, Cantinflas, Jorge Negrete, Joaquín Pardavé and many others owe him a good part of their fame.

There has been nothing to equal him, not even anything close, in Mexican film since. Those takes seem to have caught "Mexican-ness" on film for an entire era, and even today, they continue to be repeated. Strong images that need no explanatory dialogue because they can stand on their own. Lighting that brought out the beauty of faces and landscape like nature herself.

Enrique Sevilla
Film critic

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY OF GABRIEL FIGUEROA

Director: Fernando de Fuentes

Vámonos con Pancho Villa, 1935
Las mujeres mandan, 1936
Allá en el Rancho Grande, 1936
Bajo el cielo de México, 1937
La casa del ogro, 1938
Papacito lindo, 1939
Allá en el trópico, 1940
El jefe máximo, 1940
Creó su Dios, 1940
La gallina clueca, 1941

Director: Alejandro Galindo

Refugio en Madrid, 1938
Mientras México duerme, 1938
Ni sangre ni arena, 1941
El rápido de las 9:15, 1941
Virgen de media noche, 1941

Director: Emilio Fernández

Flor Silvestre, 1943
María Candelaria (Xochimilco), 1943
Las abandonadas, 1944
Bugambilia, 1944
La perla, 1945
Duelo en las montañas, 1945
The Torch (*Del odio nació el amor*), 1945
Enamorada, 1946
Río escondido, 1947
Maclovia, 1948
Salón México, 1948
Pueblerina, 1948
La malquerida, 1949
Un día de vida, 1950
Victimas del pecado, 1950
Islas Mariás, 1950
Siempre tuya, 1950

La bienamada, 1951
El mar y tú, 1951
Cuando levanta la niebla, 1952
La rosa blanca, 1953
La rebelión de los colgados, 1954
La tierra del fuego se apaga, 1955
Una cita de amor, 1956

Director: Luis Buñuel

Los olvidados, 1950
El, 1952
Nazarín, 1958
Los ambiciosos, 1959
The Young One (*La joven*), 1960
El ángel exterminador, 1962
Simón del desierto, 1964

Director: Guillermo Hernández Gómez

La Adelita, 1937

Director: Roberto O'Quigley

Padre de más de cuatro, 1938

Director: Rolando Aguilar

Los millones del chaflán, 1938
Canción del milagro, 1939

Director: Gabriel Soria

La bestia negra, 1938

Director: Julio Bracho

¡Ay que tiempos Sr. Don Simón!, 1941
Historia de un gran amor, 1942
La virgen que forjó una Patria, 1942
Cantaclaro, 1945
Llévame en tus brazos, 1953
Canasta de cuentos mexicanos, 1955

Director: Miguel M. Delgado

El gendarme desconocido, 1941
Mi viuda alegre, 1941
Los tres mosqueteros, 1942
El circo, 1942
Un día con el diablo, 1945
El bombero atómico, 1950
El señor fotógrafo, 1952
Estafa de amor, 1954
La doncella de piedra, 1955
El bolero de Raquel, 1956
Carabina 30-30, 1958
Entrega inmediata, 1963
Cargamento prohibido, 1965
Viva Benito Canales, 1965
El asesino se embarca, 1966
Su excelencia, 1966
El profeta, 1970

Director: Gilberto Martínez Solares

La casa del rencor, 1941
Su última aventura, 1946

Director: René Cardona

El espectro de la novia, 1943
El as negro, 1943
La mujer sin cabeza, 1943

Source: Emilio García Riera, *Historia documental del cine mexicano*, vols. 5-10, Universidad de Guadalajara-Gobierno de Jalisco-CONACULTA-Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía, Guadalajara, 1993 and 1994.