

# 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 Velasco<sup>1</sup> of film; he does things in slow motion, well thought

<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup> 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.