

Introduction to Mexican Cinema
by
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For most of the 20th century, when cinema showed us Mexico, it was seen in the black and white glow of a hot, tropical sun shining on the neat tile roofs of a charming village of rustic casitas. There, a handsome, mustachioed and dashing *charro* in a wide-brimmed hat and embroidered bolero vest strums a guitar as he serenades a lovely, sultry *señorita* leaning on a wrought-iron balcony, wrapped in a rebozo with flowers in her hair and coquettishly batting her dark eyes. Huge agaves dot the fertile mountainsides beneath a sky of fluffy clouds as a singing and dancing chorus of Mexican peasants drink and eat in cantinas as mariachis play, then gallop off on horseback to idyllic haciendas where they work in starched costumes as the wise and kindly *patrones* look on from their formal parlors. This was the world that the most successful genre of Mexican cinema during the mid-20th century, the *comedia ranchera*, created. It was a psychological tonic for the exhausted factory workers who had fled the dire poverty of sun-baked Mexican deserts, damp and cold highlands or the malarial coast to work in gritty, ugly and crime-ridden cities. It was the escape of choice for the millions displaced from the length and breadth of the country. The peasantry during and after the Revolution of 1910 – 1920 fell from the frying pan of dictatorship into a revolutionary fire caused by internecine feuds between the caudillos engaged in bloody warfare. Whether it was the cause of secular Revolution against a corrupt dictator, in defense of Catholicism against an atheist state, or to create a Marxist utopia by pulling society up by its roots, the result was always the same. The people, fleeing to cities or to work the fields in the southwestern United States, went to the movies to remember a Mexico that they had never known because it had never existed. That was the genius of the cinema for these people: to create a reassuring world of a generous and protective *patrón* who cares for a happy, well-fed *peón*. And by going the movies, they could forget for a couple of hours the unbearable wrench and disillusionment that the modern world had wrought upon the Mexican people: be it corrupt local officials extorting local villagers, punitive incursions of the US Army pursuing the followers of Pancho Villa or Texas Rangers waging racial war against farm workers in the border states. These flickering

images would bring them back into an Edenic paradise. As so presciently observed, nearly thirty years before the first *comedia ranchera* was released, by Luis G. Urbina who wrote on December 9, 1906 in *El Mundo Ilustrado*, "They go to...cinema because it fills them with a pacifying, child-like innocence, and later upon returning to their bare and melancholy abode, their fantasy, like an Aladdin's lamp, continues decorating with ephemeral delights the sadnesses of their existence" (Meyer 35).

Emilio García Riera's exhaustive study of the history of Mexican Cinema, *Historia documental del cine mexicano*, attempts, as any competent cultural study should, to place various films in their social and political contexts with an emphasis on their expressions of hegemonic ideas of the dominant culture, or, conversely, as a reaction to them. His analysis offers up an extra and very interesting political aspect, couching the films of each six-year term or *sexenio* of the Mexican presidency as an unique expression of that individual personality of the man in power: "en orden a referir el análisis del tema a un contexto social y político - que a la idea muy discutible de que las características específicas de cada sexenio presidencial hayan sido directamente reflejadas por el cine nacional" (García Riera I:7).

Carl J. Mora in *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society 1896 - 1988* sets the stage of his history by positing the importance of the historical dialectic between so-called "leftist," or "ideological" cinema in contradistinction to "commercial" Mexican and Hollywood cinema as well as the great divide between the Hollywood model and those models in Latin America that have been influenced, either by imitation or rejection, of these models. These conflicting forces will become very relevant to our consideration of the corrido or traditional Mexican ballad and its relationship and influence on film. He also notes the vast gulf between the two neighboring cultures of the United States and Mexico - a gulf that since the time of the writing of his book may now be diminishing or evolving on a daily basis as the Latin American (especially Mexican) population continues to exert an increasing cultural, economic and political force north of the Rio Grande. But his most interesting point is that he argues that during what was considered the apogee of commercial Mexican cinema, the 1930's-1960's, Mexico, due to its dominance in the Spanish-language cinema on the world's stage, exerted a cultural imperialism analogous to (if not equal in scope to) Hollywood production. He notes,

Mexican films served as a conduit for a complex of ideas and influences: Mexican music, slang, performers, and folklore were popularized throughout the Hispanic world; on another level, the ideology and social view of the Mexican bourgeoisie were disseminated throughout Latin American society. In other words, Mexican cinema has practiced "cultural imperialism" just as Hollywood is so often accused of doing.

(Mora 3)

García Riera notes that due to the lack of preserved and available copies of Mexican silent films, an analysis of the silent era is virtually impossible. Therefore, he glosses over the period and begins his study with the advent of sound motion pictures. Unlike García Riera, Mora spends considerable time on the period of silent films that began in the waning years of the 19th century during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, using as his main source material information gleaned by Luis Reyes de la Maza in an article entitled "Salón Rojo (programas y crónicas del cine mudo en México)" derived primarily from newspaper accounts.

Though preceded by Thomas Edison's kinetoscope in 1895, it wasn't until the Lumière Brothers brought their projection equipment to Mexico City in 1896 that motion pictures became a sensation with crowds lining up to see brief shots of trains, military processions, coronations, acrobats and clowns. After that, the public would exhibit a voracious interest in motion pictures that was most notable, as with audiences worldwide, for its increasing demands for novelty, innovation and spectacle. In 1898, the first Mexican filmmaker, Salvador Toscano Barragán shot a one-reel fiction film, *Don Juan Tenorio*, and by 1900 a substantial public attended the cinema supporting several theatres in the capital. That year also marked the premiere in Mexico City of the first "full length" three-reel feature film, *The Passion of Jesus Christ*, a French import. Enrique Rosas set up his own theatre in competition with Toscano, both having not only projection equipment, but also cameras and editing equipment that they were using to shoot and produce their own films; primarily documentary-style programs featuring funerals of local luminaries, natural disasters in Mexico, snippets of bullfights, boxing events and even a newsreel-style shorts on the state visits throughout the country by Porfirio Díaz. The Mexican public flocked to see these events that not only entertained

them but also gave them a glimpse of their own country for the first time. These established the format for the newsreels that would last until the 1970's - a critical tool for the dissemination of news as well as ideology to the Mexican public. The cultural impact of being able to see events from far off lands had lasting effects on the Mexican public as elsewhere in the world, not only bringing to the mass of people a vision of distant lands and historical events, but creating an appetite, or perhaps more along the lines of an addictive compulsion, for the kind of informational and entertainment satisfaction that continues to this day.

During the twilight of the Porfiriato, documentary cinema techniques became a tool enthusiastically embraced to advance the propagandistic aims of the dictatorship, with the Ministry of Public Education financing films to record the trip of Díaz to inaugurate the opening of a railroad line between Mexico City and the port of Manzanillo or touring the Yucatán. Other such documentaries would continue until the downfall of the Díaz regime when newsreels of revolutionary forces replaced them. However, the master of cinematic propaganda, in fact the political leader who was the first major figure on the world's stage to understand the power of this new media to advance his cause, was the Revolutionary leader of the División del Norte, Francisco "Pancho" Villa. Villa worked in conjunction with Hollywood film crews who traveled by train to film battles (some real, some staged) and brought back footage of the maneuvers of his army and of the Punitive Expedition of the US Army led by General Pershing. Hollywood and the North American audiences were fascinated by the exotic Mexican locale and the charismatic Pancho Villa. Villa's canny manipulation of film coupled with his positive press coverage provided by the Hearst media empire, whose Mexican properties he took great pains to protect, helped to make him the figure of popular legend and imagination that continues to this day. Due to this, he is, arguably, the most famous Mexican that has ever lived and his fame has not significantly diminished nearly a hundred years after his death.

Hollywood was not the only cinematic powerhouse interested in Mexico. Sergei Eisenstein, the brilliant Russian filmmaker, prompted by the stories of John Reed (the North American journalist well-known for his leftist sympathies and press dispatches during the Russian and Mexican revolutions) saw in Mexico a socialist promised land

and shot extraordinary footage that, though it never came together as a film under his aegis, became a monument to his cinematic genius and was finally cut together by his biographer, Marie Seton, years after his death. As García Riera notes, "Pero la labor de Eisenstein en México permitió a varios cineastas mexicanos más o menos solidarizados con la corriente populista imaginar un estilo que se caracterizaría por el preciosismo fotográfico (valorización de nubes y magueyes) y rendiría tributo, gratuitamente, a un hieratismo por el que se pretendería llegar a la esencia de lo nacional" (García Riera 19). This exaggerated, romantic concept of Mexico and lyric Mexican mise-en-scène would readily translate into the setting for the *comedia ranchera*, the most unique and successful of all Mexican film styles during the mid-twentieth century.

In his introduction to *Cine Mexicano: Posters From the Golden Age 1936 - 1956* by Rogelio Agrasánchez, Jr., Dr. Charles Ramírez Berg posits the beginning of the Golden Age of Mexican cinema with the release of *Allá en el Rancho Grande* in 1936, the first *comedia ranchera* (Agrasánchez 10). Though this beginning point is little disputed, of more interest is Dr. Ramírez Berg's observation on the coalescing of the Mexican national mode of production:

Along with *¡Vámonos con Pancho Villa!* (*Let's Go with Pancho Villa*) - which, though made before *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, was released afterwards - it established the modern Mexican mode of film production, including state involvement through guaranteed funding, a burgeoning star system, and a developing distribution and exhibition network. Finally, the profits from this first Spanish-language blockbuster gave Mexican cinema something that it hadn't had since the documentary era: financial stability. With all of this in place, Mexican cinema became a streamlined, well-organized industry. Its film production would jump from 25 in 1936 to 38 in the following year (more than half the movies adhering to the *comedia ranchera* [rural comedy] formula of *Allá en el Rancho Grande*.) As an industry, Mexican cinema was established and financially stable; as an art form, filmmaking was entering an unprecedented classical era. (Agrasánchez 10)

This concept of what André Bazin referred to as "the genius of the system," and its subsequent stability would ultimately prove the undoing of the very system it nurtured, as the industrial production process became ossified and incapable of innovation. As the mode of production became moribund, established producers, directors, actors, writers and cinematographers were loath to relinquish power and allow new players into the tightly controlled guild, stifling young, creative talent and their projects and promoting hackneyed and formulaic movies. The system of financing favored this old boy's club and made it virtually impossible for independents to secure credit or distribution, and the profits themselves were not reinvested into maintaining and modernizing the studios. Due to these factors, Mexican Cinema basically collapsed. However, for several decades the system created a mechanism for creativity that managed to ascend an unrivaled pinnacle in the Spanish-speaking world until this decline during the mid-1950's. What the Mexican film industry exhibited was that art and Mammon could both be served. It is critical to note that we must view the term of *comedia ranchera* with the gimlet eye we use in our perception of Broadway "musical comedy." These were not all comedies in any sense of the word, and at the unlikely juncture of sentimental nostalgia and revolutionary discourse, as expressed in many films based on the corrido or Mexican popular ballad, the result could be very dark indeed. These are films that I would call representative of the *corrido/ranchera* genre. They were based on *corridos* but contain the nostalgic aura of the *comedia ranchera*. It was here that disillusionment with the promises of the Revolution and the reality of Mexican life was often expressed. In many of these films, we observe most clearly the clash of the diverse factions of Mexican society riven by centuries of unresolved cultural, class and gender disconnects and intersections — indigenous vs. Spanish, peasant farmer vs. landowner, factory worker vs. capitalist, religious vs. secular, folkloric vs. commercial — these elements all collided and simmered in the rich social heritage of indigenous and Spanish society that created Mexico.

In this study we will look at two *corrido/ranchera* films: *Juan Charrasqueado* and *Yo Maté a Rosita Alvarez*. *Juan Charrasqueado* is based on one of the so-called "movie corridos." A corrido is a popular folk ballad that morphed with the advent of sound recordings and radio into a more commercial type of song. *Juan Charrasqueado*

was composed in 1942, recorded by Las Hermanas Padilla in 1945 and became a runaway commercial hit before being made into a film in 1947. The plot deals with a lower-class ranch hand with a reputation as a drinker, carouser and gambler, who falls in love with the daughter of an upper-class family of landowners. Juan and María (she is aptly named for her virtuous qualities) run away together, he gets her pregnant, and, through treachery and deception, he is murdered just as he learns that she has had his son. *Yo Maté a Rosita Alviréz* offers a more interesting take on the subject of love gone astray. Originally, the corrido concerned folkloric social values reminiscent of the antique Spanish romances where the stain of dishonor can only be cleansed with blood. Rosita is a headstrong but innocent girl who defies her mother and insists on attending a dance. There, an older man wishes to dance with her, as she is the most beautiful girl in town. She spurns him publicly, and the insult to his manly honor causes him to shoot her dead. According to the song, she goes to Heaven, he goes to jail.

However, in a blatant reversal by the filmmakers, Rosita in the film is portrayed as a Jezebel arriving upon the scene of a happy village and wreaking havoc with her unbridled and unscrupulous feminine charms. This beautiful, evil and heartless woman comes to town with her widowed mother, and she immediately sets to work to break up a happy engagement between her cousin and her cousin's fiancé. Using her feminine wiles, she makes enemies of two life-long friends (one is the cousin's fiancé) both of whom she leads on with the prospect of sex, if not marriage, all the while conniving with an older, wealthy landowner to marry him after her young rivals have killed each other. She coldly states to her older wealthy suitor that after the young men are dead, she will be free to marry him. She also tells him point-blank not to expect her to be faithful to him. She goes to the dance in defiance of mother and fully knowing that it will probably provoke a deadly fight between the two young, jealous men who were once best friends. Unfortunately for her, after arriving at the dance, one of the young men shoots and kills her.

In both of these *corrido/ranchera* films, the men are shown to be hotheaded and/or greedy fools, often drunk and careening toward self-destruction. Surprisingly, considering the milieu of the *macho* tradition, the women are shown to be strong, independent and actively manipulating within the constraints of their subordinate role to

achieve what they can, be it a “good girl” pursuing her one true love in the case of *Juan Charrasqueado*, or an evil harlot instigating an outright betrayal in the case of *Yo Maté a Rosita Álvarez*. In the world of these films, a man’s honor is paramount, a woman’s worth is measured by her virtue or pretense to it, redemption is reserved for the afterlife, and the plots play themselves out amid gunplay, horsemanship, cockfights, barroom brawls and scenes of a pastoral, idealized Mexico of yesteryear.

The cinema is a captivating, if complex, route to the past. As a popular art, set in the economic, cultural and political spheres, film inevitably bears the birthmarks of its passage into light. As a technological art, crucially defined by its capacity for the automatic registration of sights and sounds, it is composed of pieces of the culture it represents. In order to recover the full discourse that films advance, therefore, the student of film must be at once a historian and an interpreter of art, able to shift constantly between the objective examination of the context of a film and the subjective immersion in the experience it offers. (Andrew 24)

The masses of people could see in these films a realization of that most common dream of all peoples: a clean, safe and prosperous place to live where justice and good will triumph over, not just evil, but tragic stupidity. The middle of the 20th century saw an enormous growth in the middle-class in most industrialized countries, and, even in Mexico where the growth of the bourgeoisie did not keep pace with its neighbor to the north, this ideal of a middle-class lifestyle became the hope of every working family. If the gains of the Revolution in Mexico were very hard for the typical citizen to see in concrete terms, if the films of the day showed an idyllic place far from reality, it should surprise no one that in their disillusionment the people would seek out a solace that only fantasy could provide.

It cannot be said that the *corrido/ranchera* films in any way mimicked the reality of the historical Mexico. However, I believe that it is reductive to say that these were merely expressions of the patriarchal hegemony whose end was to maintain the masses in a subservient status quo by reinforcing the worldview of the Porfiriato during the upheavals of Depression, World War II and complex industrial and social change. That the masses of people found spiritual nourishment from these simple tales of good and

evil, to me, seems undeniable. Whenever society is in flux, people look back to a so-called “Golden Age.” The entirety of Western civilization was set in motion by the concept of an Edenic paradise from which we were banished and to which we will always wish to return. The profundity of this metaphoric worldview in our culture cannot be underestimated. Especially during times of social upheaval, people look back to a better, simpler time. The Roman historian Tacitus, who documented the imperial convulsions of 1st century Rome, cast a longing eye toward the simple, idyllic life of the Germanic tribes. And his fellow Roman, Livy, decried the present and idealized the past in bleaker terms:

Fortunately in those days authority, both religious and secular, was still a guide to conduct and there was as yet no sign of our modern scepticism which interprets solemn compacts to suit its own convenience (Livy 3.20.5). Where would you find nowadays in a single individual that modesty, fairness and nobility of mind which in those days belonged to a whole people? (Livy 4.6.12)

The tradition continued in the monastic movement of the Middle Ages, where escaping the brutality of pre-modern Europe to an ordered life of prayer and study, became the retreat of thousands for hundreds of years. Even at the dawn of the 21st century, religious conservatives of all faiths jockey to end the cultural flux of the post-modern world by turning back the clock on everything from sexual mores to a rejection of science in favor of doctrine and divine revelations. The attractions of a simpler, moralistic society where men and women’s roles are strictly defined, good and evil are codified in law and practice, and all questions are resolved by a social, religious and governmental hegemonic system whose obligation is to preserve social order, have constituted the mirage of stability pursued by many cultures. To be able to enter a world for the price of a ticket where life’s verities are known, where the responsible master and the obedient servant know their place, where good is rewarded and evil is punished, was the tonic of choice for the Mexican audiences who flocked to see these films. To find drama, music, comedy and excitement all neatly packaged, presented and resolved within an hour or two is the reason why films have retained a universal appeal to audiences worldwide for more than a century. In many ways, these simple fictional films expressed

an unselfconscious truth about the society in a gripping world of machismo, misogyny, guns, brawls, alcoholism and adultery.