

Seeing through *¡Que viva México!*: Eisenstein's Travels in Mexico

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Of the many illustrious foreign travellers who flocked to Mexico, allured by the cultural renaissance taking place in the aftermath of the 1910 revolution—André Breton, Tina Modotti, Edward Weston, amongst others—few have bequeathed as controversial a legacy as that left by Sergei Eisenstein. The Soviet filmmaker's arrival in Mexico on 9 December 1930 and his travels through the Republic over the course of a year, during which he filmed some 40 hours of material for his famously unfinished film *¡Que viva México!*, have become part of Mexican film-lore. Indeed Eisenstein is frequently invoked as an enduring influence—for better or for worse—on Mexican visual culture more generally.

In 1931, as Eisenstein was compiling his footage, in one of a series of articles published in the prestigious cultural magazine *El universal ilustrado*, playwright Adolfo Fernández Bustamante evaluated Eisenstein's impact on Mexican culture in the following terms:

Ha sido el 'pionero'; el descubridor cinematográfico de todas estas bellezas. Detrás de él vendrán todos los demás, nacionales y extranjeros. Quiera el destino que siquiera sepan aprovechar la lección del maestro ... que ha sabido seleccionar paisajes de embrujo ... (De los Reyes 1987, p. 114)

Hailed in 1931 as a filmmaker with a vision of Mexico worthy of emulation and by the intelligentsia as the father of Mexican cinema that was about to be born (De los Reyes 1987, p. 114), in time Eisenstein's reputation was reassessed, and his representation of indigenous peoples in particular called into question. In a chapter of *La aventura del cine mexicano* that focuses on the representation of the Indian in Mexican cinema originally published in 1968, critic Jorge Ayala Blanco homes in on Luis Alcoriza's *Tarahumara* (1965) as a watershed in national film history. As a film that focuses on the Indians who inhabit the north-eastern sierra of the same name 'en *Tarahumara* se evita sistemáticamente la tarjeta postal de lujo. Después de 30 años, el cine mexicano filmado en escenarios naturales empieza a liberarse del nefasto equívoco de herencia eisensteineana' (Ayala Blanco 1993, p. 153).

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These two evaluations of the Soviet filmmaker's legacy, albeit in rather bald terms, illuminate the problematic that I wish to explore in this essay: the question of seeing through Eisenstein's Mexican film. On the one hand, Fernández Bustamante exhorts his readers to see (Mexico) through Eisenstein's lens. Although he alludes to the filmic—Eisenstein is the 'descubridor cinematográfico de todas estas bellezas'—there is something transparent, 'see-through' even, about the director's take on Mexico. It is the landscapes themselves that are bewitching, rather than their filmic representation. On the other hand, the often acerbic Ayala Blanco—in, it has to be said, a rare moment of praise for a Mexican film—applauds Alcoriza for seeing through and getting beyond Eisenstein's picture-postcard optic to produce a corrective to the Soviet director's false image. Here, however, the precedence of referent over representation has vanished, and instead the film-image has metaphorically taken on material form in the shape of the glossy picture postcard, with all its connotations of the tourist fetish-object. Eisenstein and his film-fragment have become a kind of degree zero for how *not* to represent Mexico. Cast in the role of the archetypal cultural tourist, Eisenstein and his film have become shorthand for the clichéd, the stereotypical, and the reductive.

This essay takes the various notions of 'seeing through'—as in providing an optic on Mexico, getting beyond the picture postcard aesthetic, and the related idea of the materiality of the film image—as a springboard for a discussion of *¡Que viva México!*. In the first instance, I take a step back to approach 'seeing through' in terms of the critical and methodological paradigms that have been deployed to see through the myth of Eisenstein. I look at the work of Mexican scholars who have explored the intercultural dimension to Eisenstein's encounter with Mexico, locating his take on the country, its people, landscape, and history within post-revolutionary cultural politics. I then turn to the work of two US-based scholars who have read Eisenstein through postcolonial and gender theory. Whilst both these approaches have much to recommend them, I propose a reading that is to some extent against the grain. Engaging with the recent return to the real that currently preoccupies so much film and cultural theory, I want to suggest that reading against the grain involves reading the grain. Or, to put this differently, seeing through Eisenstein requires reflexive attention to the relationship between complex density of profilmic reality and the materiality of film as medium of representation.

Eisenstein's Itinerary

The circumstances of Eisenstein's travels to and around Mexico are well known; it is helpful, however, to cover this familiar ground, if briefly, to situate the analysis that follows. With a series of internationally renowned avant-garde films to his name—amongst them *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *October* (1927)—granted a sabbatical by the Soviet authorities, the director and his entourage undertook a working tour of Western Europe and United States. The US leg of the tour, however, did not work out as anticipated. Eisenstein's relationship with Paramount, to whom he was under contract, foundered in the face of difficulties when the Hollywood production

company declared the director's scripts too expensive to develop. Casting around for funding, and unwilling to leave without undertaking a further project prior to the programmed return to Moscow, Eisenstein obtained funds of some US\$25,000 from the radical writer Upton Sinclair and his wealthy wife Mary Craig Sinclair to make a film about Mexico. To be called *¡Que viva México!*, the film was famously not finished in Eisenstein's lifetime.

The circumstances of the Mexican stay are well documented; what is more, the unfinished film has also attracted considerable critical comment. Nevertheless, critics have been unable to agree on how to classify the film: is *¡Que viva México!* a narrative or documentary film, a treatise on film form, or is it a type of ethnography? Although these classificatory terms have their limitations—not least because they set up false oppositions between say, narrative and documentary, or theory and practice—they are useful in so far as viewing *¡Que viva México!* can prove a bewildering experience. The crux of the matter and a major factor in the film's problematic status is that we can really only gain access to Eisenstein's Mexican film from two main sources: as it is sketched out in the script and through the multiple films that were derived from material the director and his team filmed on their travels and sent back to the US for processing.¹ From these sources, we know that *¡Que viva México!* was to consist of a prologue focusing on the cult of death in the pre-Hispanic past, followed by four novellas—'Sandunga', 'Fiesta', 'Maguey', 'Soldadera'—and an epilogue devoted to the day of the dead. Of the four, 'Soldadera' was not filmed; on Sinclair's instructions, shooting was halted for the project had overrun both its budget and proposed duration. Each of the four novellas corresponded to different elements of Eisenstein's concept of the Mexican 'experience' of history, from the pre-Columbian 'primitive', through the feudal and Catholic colonial period, to the revolutionary and the modern, combining different orders of representation across the four novellas. Filming required extensive travel by road, automobile, plane, donkey, and on foot throughout the south of the Republic, to Taxco, Oaxaca, Acapulco, Tehuantepec, to locations in the Yucatán Peninsula including the colonial city of Mérida and the Mayan ruins at Chichen Itzá. En route, Eisenstein and his travelling companions encountered and recorded the rituals and customs of everyday life—from religious ceremonies to bullfights—and also came into contact with some of the cultures that made up the 'many Mexicos' of the country's complex ethnic mosaic.²

Filming in the Contact Zone

For Fernández Bustamante, writing in 1931, Eisenstein was a pioneer, a denomination that has, without doubt, passed into the master narrative of this national cinema (quoted in De los Reyes 1987, p. 114). This narrative traces a genealogy of influence from Eisenstein through to the so-called 'classic style' of the Emilio Fernández/Gabriel Figueroa partnership, echoes of which can be heard in, for example, the work of John Mraz (2003, p. 4) who, writing of 1940s film culture, states: 'films fed eagerly into the enticements of exoticism, and the cinematography of Gabriel Figueroa—influenced

by the Eisensteinian excesses of *¡Que viva México!*—was replete with women wrapped in *rebozos* (traditional shawls), alongside stoic *campesinos* (peasants) who appear to rise out of the maguey cactus below and descend from the billowing clouds above.

In recent critical work, however, film historians have convincingly established that, in the case of Eisenstein and Mexico, influence was in fact a process of intercultural exchange implying a more dynamic relationship between the visitor and host. In turn, and of equal importance, the vibrant cultural renaissance of the post-revolutionary period made its mark on the Soviet filmmaker, as it did on the other foreign visitors who flocked to Mexico at this point.³ Eisenstein enjoyed the support and friendship of some of the country's leading artists and intellectuals, including Diego Rivera (whom he had met during the latter's stay in the Soviet Union), David Álfaro Siqueiros, Adolfo Best Maugard, Jean Charlot, Gabriel Fernández Ledesma, Carlos Mérida, Pablo O'Higgins, and Fernando Leal. And, as Eduardo de la Vega has demonstrated in his aptly titled book on *¡Qué viva México!, Del muro a la pantalla* (1997), the state-sponsored muralist movement made a special impact on Eisenstein. The latter even conceived of his film as a 'cinematic mural' and intended to dedicate sections of his film to a different Mexican artist: the prologue to Siquieros; 'Sandunga' to Charlot; 'Maguey' to Rivera; and 'Soldadera' to Orozco.

Feted by the cultural elite, the Soviet's dealings with Mexican officialdom were, however, at times less than harmonious and, in this sense, the influence that the Mexican context asserted on the director, whilst largely positive, also had decidedly authoritarian hues. At one point early on in the sojourn, Eisenstein and his team were arrested, accused of being agents of international communism and of portraying the Mexican working classes in ways that were 'altamente denigrantes para el país' (De los Reyes 1987, p. 103). Once this contretemps was resolved and permission to film had been granted, the Mexican authorities kept a watchful eye on the development of the project. Keen to ensure that Eisenstein neither fell under the spell of stereotypical clichés, nor cast too critical a gaze on the social inequities that were, despite the revolution, still rife, Adolfo Best Maugard and Gabriel Fernández Ledesma were appointed as official guides working for the Secretaría de Educación. In this capacity, their role was to ensure that 'no haya mixtificaciones, de que se usen las cosas auténticas, de que no aparezcan en esta película los charros de guardarropía a que nos tiene acostumbrados el cine americano' (De los Reyes 1987, p. 110).

There is, however, more than a little irony in the fact that these official minders were charged with the duty of steering the Soviet visitors away from clichéd images of Mexico. This is because Eisenstein's stay in Mexico coincided with a cultural moment in which a series of stereotypes—albeit officially sanctioned stereotypes—were coalescing around the definition of *lo mexicano* and taking root in the popular imagination. Steered away from one form of stereotype, namely the Mexican cowboy *à la* Hollywood, Eisenstein nevertheless both gravitated and was guided towards another stereotype that was increasingly taking on national associations, namely the Indian.

Ricardo Pérez Montfort offers a detailed survey of the development of such stereotypes in the period 1920–40 in his excellent study (1994) of cultural nationalism *Estampas de nacionalismo popular mexicano*. In particular, he highlights the way in which the architects of cultural nationalism—including government officials, archaeologists, artists, filmmakers, and anthropologists—looked to the popular masses in search of unifying symbols of nationhood. And in so doing, ‘se toparon de frente con que “lo mexicano” era imposible de entender sin contemplar que gran parte de los que formaba aquella masa popular—“esencia de la nación mexicana”—era “indígena” o “india”’ (Pérez Montfort 1994, p. 161).

It must be emphasized that this process, whereby indigenous culture became hitched to constructions of national self-definition, was not a new, post-revolutionary phenomenon. Nor was it confined to post-independence constructions of a specifically national identity, although Stacie Widdiefield (1996) has observed nineteenth-century nation-builders increasingly looked to the country’s pre-Columbian past—particularly figures of indigenous nobility—as a site of origin. Nevertheless, as Enrique Florescano (1993) demonstrates, from as early as the seventeenth century on, the elite of what would become Mexico started to claim the indigenous past as ‘self’, in the process of fashioning a Creole self, distinct from Spanish peninsular identity. However, if the Indian as a cipher for a proto-national identity was already in evidence in the seventeenth century, the debates around the significance of this figure for collective identity intensified significantly in the post-revolutionary era.

In a complex essay, ‘Racism, Revolution, and *Indigenismo*’, Alan Knight (1990) brings to light a fundamental paradox about post-revolutionary *indigenismo* and its relationship to the concept of *mestizaje*. The paradox turns on the fact that while *indigenismo* emerged from the Revolution as a crucial and nation-defining cultural concept, the Revolution itself was not fought in the name of race. Instead, the conflict was couched in terms of class. ‘The Revolution that began in 1910 could be fought and was fought on the basis of considerable Indian participation . . . but in the absence of any self-consciously Indian project’ (Knight 1990, p. 75). *Indigenismo* was, therefore, as it had been in the preceding centuries, an elite discourse deployed in the name of a nation-state struggling to consolidate and legitimate its identity. Born with the conquest, the Indian as a generic concept ‘remained part of Spanish rather than Indian usage. It defined those who were not Spanish or *mestizo* and it lumped together the wide range of Indian groups, languages, and communities’ (1990, p. 76). In the immediate post-revolutionary period, the state set out to promote and foster a sense of identity that overcame such time-honoured binaries in which ‘the old Indian/European thesis/antithesis [would give] rise to a higher synthesis, the *mestizo*, who was neither Indian nor European, but quintessentially Mexican’ (Knight 1990, p. 85). In the final analysis, *indigenismo* was not really about incorporating a complex, pluralistic notion of the multiple indigenous ethnicities within national culture. Rather, as David Brading (1988, p. 85) puts it in powerfully blunt terms: ‘The ultimate and paradoxical aim of official *indigenismo* in Mexico was thus to liberate the country

from the deadweight of its native past or, to put the case more clearly, finally to destroy the native culture that had emerged during the colonial period. *Indigenismo* was therefore a means to an end. That end was cultural *mestizaje*.⁷

Influenced by the state-sponsored renaissance in the visual arts, which in turn mediated and promoted official *indigenista* discourses, Eisenstein's film similarly bears the imprint of the social and cultural trends of its context of making. Of all the sections of *¡Que viva México!*, arguably the prologue and 'Sandunga' are the most redolent of such cultural discourses. The iconic montage sequence of the prologue, in which contemporary indigenous people pose for the camera against the remains of ancient pyramids, points to their status as the living 'descendants' of the Pre-Columbian societies, the original architects of these artefacts. In the 'tropical paradise' of matriarchal Tehuantepec that is the focus of 'Sandunga', the indigenous other is an overtly gendered construct, populated by exotic, bare-breasted women. Yet, within the terms of the period, there was nothing particularly pioneering in the visit to this 'tropical paradise' (Figure 1). Rather, Eisenstein and his team, far from travellers off the beaten track, were simply following a well-trodden path:

The women of Tehuantepec held mythic status among postrevolutionary *indigenistas* who idealized Mexico's cultural past. A popular narrative tells how the women of Tehuantepec maintained their traditional matriarchal social structure in which women held primary economic and political positions. In other words, according to myth, they represented a past that had escaped European rule, thereby sustaining a 'true,' uncorrupted Mexican society. The past was alive on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and it was brought to urban Mexico after the revolution when it became fashionable for women to wear Tehuana clothing. (Lindauer 1999, p. 126)



Figure 1 *¡Que viva México!* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1929). Source: Mosfilm/BFI stills.

If there was nothing especially innovative about either Eisenstein's itinerary, his choice of subject, or indeed the visual idiom in which he represented this subject, what, then, is at stake in Eisenstein's denomination by Bustamante and the contemporary intellectual elite as the 'father' and pioneer of Mexican cinematography? In a nutshell, as Mexican film scholars have firmly established, Eisenstein's visit proved pivotal, not because he necessarily saw indigenous Mexico afresh or even differently from Mexican cultural producers. Rather, as an avant-garde auteur of international standing, whose vision converged conveniently with official policy, Eisenstein's unfinished film, disseminated in the form of stills published in magazines and the various productions based on his footage, confirmed to international audiences that Mexico was worthy of contemplation. And, in attesting to Mexico's status as aesthetic spectacle, *¡Que viva México!* came to form part of the international machinery of cultural diplomacy that served an important internal legitimizing function. Eisenstein's visit bestowed international prestige on Mexico and assured national cultural producers and audiences alike that the country's indigenous heritage—that 'buried and hidden part of . . . national being' (Bartra 2002, p. 5)—was indeed a sight to be acknowledged as self, and imagined as an integral part of that self.⁴

Exposing False Images

That Eisenstein was as influenced by currents in Mexican cultural politics as he was a defining influence on national cinematography is also acknowledged in critical approaches to Eisenstein put forward by two important scholars of the Mexican cinema, Laura Podalsky and Joanne Hershfield. Taking revisionist approaches to Eisenstein in another direction again, their work bears the hallmarks of the kinds of critical positions that have emerged in the Anglo-American academy over the last 30 years and, I suggest, are themselves currently coming under scrutiny. Drawing on cultural theory from the fields of ethnography and gender studies, both scholars concur that Eisenstein's vision of Mexico was fundamentally 'flawed'. By 'flawed' they imply that as a foreign filmmaker burdened with alien cultural baggage—notably the work of contemporary anthropologists with an interest in primitive societies, such as Lévy-Bruhl—the Soviet filmmaker invariably cast an exoticising gaze on Mexico. In a complex and important essay, Podalsky (1993) highlights the particular inflections of primitivism which subtend the cinematic gaze that Eisenstein cast on his indigenous subjects, pointing up the gendered dimension of this look, whereby the voluptuous and fecund female body in 'Sandunga' represents the womb of the Revolution. Similarly, Hershfield signals how sexual difference surfaces as a structuring device in *¡Que viva México!* and in Eisenstein's oeuvre more generally. Drawing on the director's own words, she describes 'Sandunga' as emphasizing 'the "primitive" epoch of Mexican history through the "primitive" nature of a young girl and boy, two creatures living almost like biological "particles" of a carefree tropical paradise before the discoveries of Columbus and the conquests of Cortés' (Hershfield 1998, p. 61). In short, the perceived primitive prism through which Eisenstein captured his

Mexican subjects, whereby the indigenous other becomes a cipher for modern society's loss of authenticity, leads both critics to similar conclusions: namely *¡Que viva México!* elides the complexities of the cultures that it seeks to represent. Or in the words of Podalsky and Hershfield in the closing sections of their essays:

In *Que viva México!* [Eisenstein] attempted to trace the development of civilization and, in so doing, moved away from what Clifford identifies as the 'ethnography of collage' and ultimately reduced rather than celebrated the aspects of Mexican culture which were incongruous to his model. (Podalsky 1993, p. 37)

Sergei Eisenstein's personal journey through Mexico might have been intended as a cinematic narrative depicting the Mexican people's role in the dialectic of history. However, in his search for personal meaning, Eisenstein charted a cinematic allegory of Mexican history as a single 'path through modernity,' collapsing the heterogeneity of indigenous and *mestizo* populations into an originary people, innocent in the tropical paradise of Tehuantepec. (Hershfield 1998, p. 66)

I do not wish necessarily to take issue with the analyses of either Podalsky or Hershfield. Through one prism of analysis, *¡Que viva México!* certainly reduces the indigenous other to the status of one-dimensional construct, a cipher that represents a sense of lost innocence and authenticity within an overarching teleological historiography. Furthermore, in 'Sandunga', the indigenous other is without doubt an overtly gendered construct with troubling implications when viewed critically from a feminist perspective. Nevertheless, I would suggest that at the beginning of the twenty-first century such a line of argument now presents us with an aporia beyond which it is necessary to move.

First, this critique of the representation of the indigenous other and the gender dynamics that undergird that representation are consonant with the historically determined and gendered ideologies of primitivism in circulation in both Europe and Mexico at the time of the making of *¡Que viva México!*. The convergence of European primitivist discourses with the deep-seated appropriation of the Indian as internal other in Mexican cultural history—a convergence that De los Reyes and Pérez Montfort establish with considerable eloquence—cannot be stressed strongly enough. A foreigner inspired by trends in Mexican cultural nationalism, the gaze that Eisenstein cast at the indigenous other was not so very different from that of his Mexican peers and was certainly in keeping with European and Latin American twentieth-century gender politics. In this sense, the prism through which Eisenstein saw Mexico was less 'flawed' than symptomatic of the cultural milieu of the age in which he lived. Second, if one of the major critiques of primitivism turns on its construction of the other by using time—of denying the 'primitive' other as coeval with the 'civilized' self—Hershfield, in particular, falls into the trap of reinforcing the ideology that she purports to critique in Eisenstein's film. By evoking pre-Hispanic societies as 'relatively advanced', by insisting on a progressive model of cultural evolution—'Historians of Mexico have noted the social and technical sophistication to which many pre-Columbian cultures had evolved before the invasion of the Spanish'

(1998, p. 62)—Hershfield does nothing to question the assumptions that underpin this teleological model.

In short, to critique Eisenstein's film on the grounds that it is reductive is probably an argument that still requires rehearsal. At the same time, such a critical gesture is resonant of what W. J. T. Mitchell, in a recent article on the visual culture phenomenon, calls the 'heady days when we were first discovering the male gaze or the feminine character of the image' (2002, p. 175). Those days are, however, well behind us. Nevertheless, as Mitchell also notes, 'there is an unfortunate tendency to slide back into reductive treatments of visual images as all-powerful forces and to engage in a kind of iconoclastic critique which imagines that the destruction or exposure of false images amounts to a political victory'. How though might it be possible to access a point beyond the aporias enshrined in an analysis of *¡Que viva México!* that are the logical consequence of what has also been called a 'negative aesthetics' (Pollock 1996, p. 285) approach—Eisenstein was reductive, therefore he was reductive?

In what follows, I suggest that we can profit by attending to a more complex understanding of the relationship between time, space, and bodies in this seminal film. If we shift the emphasis, bringing questions of temporality and spatiality, and thereby also the very materiality of film, into the equation, *¡Que viva México!* invites and rewards another kind of reading: a reading that allows the tensions between the body and the camera and teleological accounts of culture to come into focus and become more tangible.

Space, Time and the *Sarape*

Eisenstein resorted to a wealth of creative and cultural metaphors to denominate his Mexican film. He described it as a 'cinematographic mural', a 'film-symphony', a poem and perhaps most famously of all, a *sarape*. This traditional, brightly coloured, striped blanket was, as Eisenstein (1975, p. 251) explained in a letter to Sinclair, worn by Indians, *charros*, indeed, *all* Mexicans. Inspired as he was by the Mexican cultural renaissance that had gathered considerable momentum by the time of his visit, Eisenstein was no less in awe of what I would like to term the proto-filmic quality of Mexican social reality, articulated in a frequently cited passage from *Film Sense*:

So striped and violently contrasting are the cultures in Mexico running next to each other and at the same time being centuries away. No plot, no whole story could run through this serape without being false, artificial. And we took the contrasting independent adjacency of its violent colors as the motif for constructing our film: 6 episodes ... held together by the unity of the weave—a rhythmic and musical construction and an unrolling of the Mexican spirit. (Eisenstein 1975, p. 251)

In what sense, however, might Mexican social reality be conceived as 'proto-filmic'? The answer lies, I suggest, in an understanding of the politics of montage.

As is well known, Eisenstein's most important contribution to film theory and practice is the concept of montage.⁵ For theorists and practitioners of montage, meaning is generated in a film text less through the expressive performance of the

actors or *mise-en-scène* than through the process of splicing or editing shots together, often in unexpected or unconventional ways.⁶ The individual shot only acquired significance in relation to other shots within a sequence. In the process, the director-as-editor sought to achieve a disruptive, startling audio-visual narrative and in this way jolt the spectator out of mere aesthetic contemplation and into an awareness of the challenges and problems both in the diegesis and in the referential world beyond it. The aesthetics of montage were, then, based on a dialectical understanding of image and sound, on fragmentation, simultaneity, and discontinuity in which tensions and conflicts remained unresolved.

If, for Eisenstein, montage involved juxtapositions that were a product of editing and were designed to shock the viewer, he perceived those very same startling collocations in existence in Mexican social reality, yet without the need for the mediating presence of the camera lens and editing studio. It is in this sense, I suggest, that for Eisenstein, Mexican social reality had a proto-filmic quality that he articulates with reference to the analogy of the *sarape*. We should note that, to be sure, this formulation has a temporal dimension—‘so striped and violently contrasting are the cultures in Mexico running next to each other and at the same time being *centuries away*’. The image of the *sarape* is, however, overwhelmingly spatial—‘we took the contrasting independent *adjacence* of its violent colors as the motif for constructing our film’ (Eisenstein 1975, p. 251, emphasis added). And it is in the *sarape*’s spatiality that we can read *¡Que viva México!* against the grain, as a visual document that lays bare the tensions that underpin a baldly teleological approach to the representation of human subjects in this film.

In order to tease out the tensions that underpin the image of the film as *sarape*, it is helpful to return to the segment of Hershfield’s analysis devoted to ‘Sandunga’, in which she asserts:

Eisenstein again reduces a number of complex and relatively advanced societies to the realm of an isolated and rural aboriginal culture living in a mythical paradise. His representation of pre-Columbian Mexico evolved from the realm of an imaginary history that reduces the heterogeneity and complexity of pre-Columbian societies and ignores its local differences. His Indian ‘types’ childlike, ignorant, and sensual, meant to symbolize the mythical indigenous Mexican prototype, bear little relation to the diverse ethnic and linguistic groups living in Mexico in 1519 when the Spaniards arrived. (Hershfield 1998, p. 62)

In her haste to expose Eisenstein’s film as a false image, Hershfield’s analysis in fact effects a slippage between the film’s status as aesthetic spectacle on the one hand, and ethnographic document on the other. This slippage is all the more ironic given that Hershfield insists on categorizing Eisenstein’s film as ethnography. Indeed, the essay’s title is ‘Paradise Regained: Sergei Eisenstein’s *Que viva México!* as ethnography’, and from the outset she makes a forceful case for marking a shift away from the study of ‘the filmmaker-as-theorist’ toward the Mexican film as ‘ethnographic fieldwork’ (Hershfield 1998, p. 56). And yet, if *¡Que viva México!* is, as Hershfield claims, a form of ethnographic fieldwork, then obviously the Indian types that appear in the film

‘bear little relation to the diverse ethnic and linguistic groups living in Mexico in 1519 when the Spaniards arrived’ (Hershfield 1998, p. 62). To put it with comic-book starkness, Eisenstein’s Indian types do not, and indeed, cannot bear any relation to the diverse groups living in Mexico in 1519, because they are human subjects living in Mexico in 1931! In other words, Hershfield overlooks the materiality of film *tout court* and, importantly, the specific ramifications of the materiality of ethnographic film in particular.

When considering ethnographic film, one of the most important facets of this mode of film is arguably its status as a trace of contact between the filmmaker and the subject represented. Film documents this encounter in the realm of the real: if *¡Que viva México!* tells us anything about Mexico, it is that Eisenstein and his team really did travel to the south-west of the Republic, filming on location, or to put it in ethnographic terms, in the field, using real people rather than actors. Thus the characters in ‘Sandunga’ are at least playing themselves, if not being themselves. (And lest we doubt this fact, we can always consult the multitude of photographic images that also document this journey [Figure 2].) This is not, however, to make spurious claims for the documentary truth of ethnographic film. After all, ethnographic film’s status as ‘visible evidence’ and the underlying assumptions regarding its scientific truth and objectivity have faltered radically in the wake of broadly postmodernist, postcolonial, and feminist critiques of such concepts. Nevertheless, as recent work

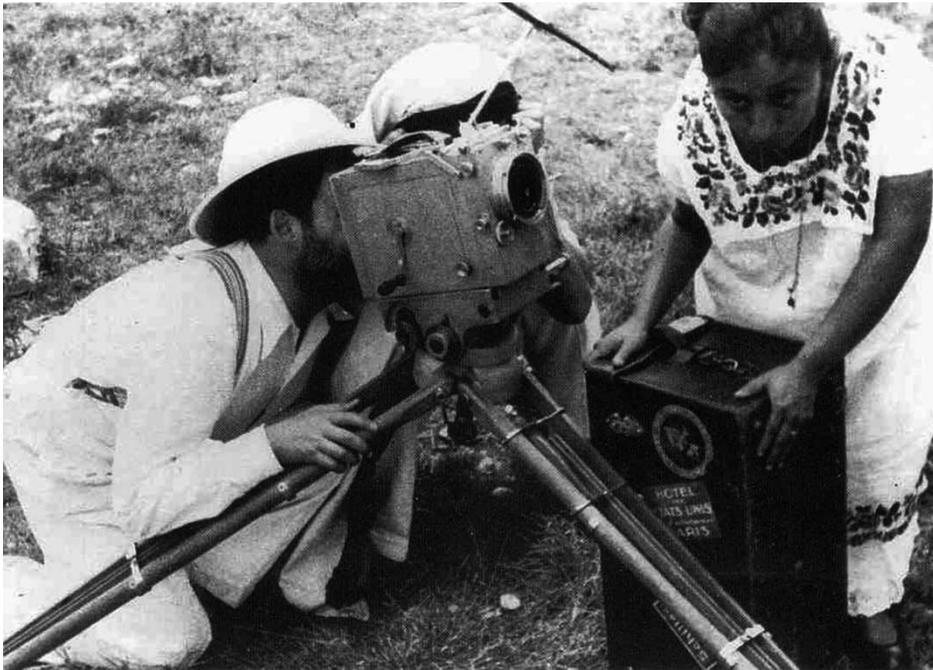


Figure 2 Filming *¡Que viva México!*. Source: The Lilly Library, University of Indiana.

on cinematic realism, such as the essays that comprise Ivone Margulies's *Rites of Realism* (2003) attests, the filmmaking process and the filmed event have erupted powerfully back onto the critical agenda.⁷

If we read *¡Que viva México!* materially, then, as the trace of contact between the body and the camera and, in turn, through the metaphor of the *sarape*, two salient points emerge. On the one hand, as both Hershfield and Podalsky have established, Eisenstein's film certainly enshrines a teleological narrative of progressive time. The notes to the film, coupled with the film itself in the form of Alexandrov's 1979 version, reveal a narrative that unfolds in chronological order from an imagined premodern point of origin in matriarchal Tehuantepec, to the post-revolutionary, contemporary society of the epilogue. The narrative logic is consistent with the ethnographic model that James Clifford (1987) termed the 'salvage paradigm', that constructs the other as 'in touch' with nature and as occupying another time, just prior to modern time and therefore 'backwards'. And as Catherine Russell (1999, p. 5) observes, if the salvage paradigm is a denial of coevalness, this denial is 'especially true of film, which feeds on photographic properties of preservation, fixing its referents in the prior time of shooting. In the cinema, the pastoral allegory becomes exaggerated by the role of technology in the act of representation, further splitting the "modern" from "the premodern"'.

On the other hand, however, this linear, progressive narrative is disrupted when we take into account the trace of contact between filmmaker and the 'primitive', 'premodern' subjects of matriarchal Tehuantepec within the overall structure of the film. The narrative logic of the film places them in a time before the present; the material logic of the film, however, places them spatially in the same time zone. That is, the terms of this disruption to temporality are fundamentally spatial, or to put it otherwise, conflicting temporalities exist and collide within the same space. If the narrative logic of *¡Que viva México!* unfolds temporally from the primitive, premodern, to the contemporary, modern Mexico, at the same time, the primitive, implicitly premodern other exists, like a stripe in the famous image of the *sarape* in the same space as that occupied by the post-revolutionary modern Mexico of the epilogue. In other words, a material reading of Eisenstein's film, an analysis that is attentive to the film's status as trace of contact, reveals how, ghost-like, the premodern always haunts the modern. In the contact between the body and the machine, technology also actually effaces the split between the modern and the premodern.

What, then, is at stake when we see 'Mexico' through Eisenstein's lens? Rather than approach *¡Que viva México!* as the work of the father of Mexican cinematography, or as the work of a man who cast an exoticizing gaze at the indigenous other steeped in early twentieth-century primitivist discourses, my point is therefore oriented elsewhere. Avoiding both laudatory and condemnatory approaches to Eisenstein, to read *¡Que viva México!* materially through the metaphor of the *sarape* is to grapple with a more complex understanding of the film's relationship to the particular historical configurations of culture and representation of its production. It is to point up the limitations of a purely teleological reading in which the film is made complicit with

official *indigenista* discourses in which the indigenous other exists in a time prior to the present of the nation. Instead it is to lay bare the different strata and modes of being that coexist within the space of the modern nation that are registered in *¡Que viva México!*, which resist the linear unfolding of filmic time. It is, furthermore, to suggest that there is another way of seeing through Eisenstein: by reading the grain of film, it becomes possible to read against the grain and reveal a trace of the potentially disruptive charge of montage.

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Notes

- [1] Rushes from the Soviet director's footage were sent back to the United States and according to De la Vega (1997, p. 41) incorporated into the following films: *Thunder Over Mexico* (Donn Hayes, Carl Himm, and Harry Chandlee, 1933); *Death Day* (Don Hayes, 1933); *Eisenstein in Mexico* (Donn Hayes and Harry Chandlee, 1933); *Time in the Sun* (Marie Seaton and Paul Roger Bunford, 1939); *Mexican Symphony* (William F. Kruse, 1942); *Eisenstein's Mexican Film: Episodes for Study* (Jay Leyda, 1957); and *¡Que viva México!* (Grigori Alexandrov, 1979). Although the filmed material totalled some 200,000 feet, as Goodwin (1993, p. 130) observes, this vast output also includes precautionary duplicate takes for, filming on location, the Soviet team was unable to review the rushes. John King (1990, p. 45) notes that the British Film Institute holds some five hours of these rushes, edited consecutively. The most readily accessible is Alexandrov's 1979 version (now available on DVD), on which my analysis is based.
- [2] See Geduld & Gottesman (1970); Karetnikova & Steinmetz (1991); De la Vega (1997) and Eisenstein (1983) for detailed accounts of the Mexican sojourn.
- [3] See Delpar (1992) for an account of 'the enormous vogue of things Mexican' in the United States during this period.
- [4] In this sense *¡Que viva México!* is but one example of a cultural process whereby national culture is validated on international cultural circuits in a gesture that confirms Mexico's legitimacy to itself. Although it could be argued that all nations are involved in this self-affirming pursuit of international cultural capital, the Mexican paradigm does seem to follow a particular pattern. This pattern is discerned in the geopolitical trajectory of two recent exhibitions of art originating in Mexico, namely 'Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries' (1991) and 'Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti' (1983). The former originally went on show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the latter at the Whitechapel Gallery, London. Having been legitimized in the metropolis, both exhibitions subsequently returned to peripheral Mexico for consumption by national audiences. See Bartra (2002) and Wallis (1994) on 'Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries', see Noble (2000) on the Whitechapel exhibition.
- [5] See Stam (2000) for a concise and cogent overview of the Soviet montage theorists. See also Aumont (1987) for a more detailed account of Eisenstein's theory of montage.
- [6] Robert Stam (2000, p. 38) reminds us that montage is the ordinary word for editing in both Russian and the Romance languages.

- [7] For so long elided in cultural theory, we are currently witnessing the return of the real and, with it, an interest in the materiality of indexical technologies of representation. Long neglected in film theory, the renewed attention that André Bazin is receiving is arguably symptomatic of this phenomenon (Margulies's [2003] volume, for example, opens with two newly translated essays by Bazin.)

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