



UNDER THE MEXICAN SKY: GABRIEL FIGUEROA-ART AND FILM DIDACTICS

Gabriel Figueroa Mateos (1907–1997) became an emblematic figure in Mexico through his work as a studio portrait photographer, still photographer, lighting artist, camera operator, and cinematographer. From the early 1930s through the mid-1980s, Figueroa helped forge an evocative and enduring image of his country, its history, its landscape, and its people. Among the most important cinematographers of the so-called Golden Age of Mexican cinema, he worked with leading directors from Mexico, the United States, and Europe, traversing a wide range of genres while maintaining his distinctive visual style.

Figueroa's filmography consists of over two hundred films. In them the cinematographer displays his technical skill, careful handling of composition and lighting, affinity for the aesthetics of other artists, and ability to keep in step with a rapidly changing art form that was at once entertainment and industry. His talent was recognized at the world's premier film festivals and sought out by directors as distinguished as John Ford, Luis Buñuel, and John Huston.

Figueroa joined a vibrant context of photographers, filmmakers, painters, printmakers, and muralists—including Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Leopoldo Méndez, and Manuel Álvarez Bravo—who shaped and documented the country's transformation and modernization after the scarring battles of the Mexican Revolution of the 1910s. His filmography can be understood as a chronicle of the invention of modern Mexico. A journey through worlds both real and imagined, this exhibition is above all a confirmation that there are many Mexicos, and that many of them are but an effect of the seductive power of imagery.

The Charro

The *charro* or Mexican horseman, an archetypal symbol of creole and mestizo identity in Mexico, dates back to the eighteenth century. Horsemanship was

introduced to Mexico in the sixteenth century as an oppressive means of colonization by the Spanish conquistadores. It remained a privilege of the ruling class until the expansion of hacienda culture required native populations to develop equestrian skill. Once associated with the laboring cowboy, the image of the *charro* evolved into the epitome of the rancher skilled at riding and wrangling. Exuding romanticism, heroism, and machismo, this legendary figure was enshrined in literature, music, dance, and the visual arts as a symbol of Mexican identity, especially in the decades following the Mexican Revolution.

In a newly urbanized and industrialized Mexico, the *charro* was used to promote the nostalgic evocation and reinvention of rural Mexican customs and traditions. The entertainment industry took advantage of this mythic figure, who now mostly bragged about his love affairs and carousing, to present a version of hacienda culture that bore little relation to reality.

In August of 1936, Gabriel Figueroa first had the opportunity to work as director of photography on a feature film, *Out on the Big Ranch*. Directed by Fernando de Fuentes, the movie was an international success and established the formula for the *comedia ranchera*, a picturesque, bucolic genre that provided some of the most recognizable images of Mexican film. The *charro*, especially the amorous and singing version, became a mainstay of the genre. Iconic archetypes like the *charro*, shaped in part by Figueroa's films, have been copied, reinterpreted, parodied, and deconstructed by countless Mexican and Latino artists, writers, and filmmakers, including Rubén Gámez, Rodrigo García, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Gonzalo Lebrija, and Slanguage.

Revolution

The Mexican Revolution began in 1910 as an insurrection against the dictatorial government of Porfirio Díaz. Following ten years of battles, alliances, rifts, betrayals, and negotiations, the armed movement popularly known as *la bola* (the mob) paved the way for a new political regime that claimed to represent the common people. On the big screen, the revolution was the topic of newsreels, propaganda campaigns, and fictional recreations of legendary personalities and heroic battles. By the beginning of the 1930s, *la bola* was rapidly becoming mythologized on film.

Figuerroa worked as a still photographer, camera operator, and cinematographer on films that helped forge the popular memory of the conflict: *Shadow of Pancho Villa* (1932, Miguel Contreras Torres), *Enemies* (1933, Chano Urueta), *Let's Go with Pancho Villa* (1935, Fernando de Fuentes), *La Adelita* (1937, Guillermo Hernández Gómez and Mario de Lara), and *The Underdogs* (1940, Chano Urueta). Years later Figuerroa would single out the latter film as one of the first glimpses of his style that shared the aesthetic of the masters of Mexican muralism, who played an important role in postrevolutionary culture.

The cinematic restaging of the revolution made use of graphic media, popular song, novels, stage plays, photographs, and documentaries. This multimedia meditation on the nature of the armed struggle aimed to build national pride and to construct an empowered iconography for the new Mexico. Films about the revolution had such an enduring grip on the popular imagination that they would, in turn, inflect subsequent portrayals of the conflict, helping to forge a highly self-referential cinematic genre.

Landscape

The stunning Mexican landscape as imagined by Figuerroa became symbolic of Mexican national identity. Never simply a backdrop for human action, the land—whether abundant and Edenic or harsh and indifferent—defined a film's mood and message. In *Hidden River* (1948, Emilio Fernández), María Félix walks through the windswept, barren Mexican desert to reach the small town where she has been assigned to teach. By contrast the islands of Xochimilco, seen in *María Candelaria* (1944, Emilio Fernández), are a lush paradise for the indigenous people who remain there in defiance of white incursion. In both cases, the landscape reflects the central dilemmas of characters coping with postrevolutionary social change.

Figuerroa's sweeping vistas, cloud-filled skies, craggy volcanoes, and crashing waves testify to his reverence for natural beauty and his mastery of cinematic craft. His compositional skill came from careful study of Renaissance painting, which taught him how to establish symmetry and order. Contemporary painting offered other lessons, from the curvilinear perspective of Dr. Atl to the figural arrangements of Diego Rivera. Always seeking to heighten the impact of nature, Figuerroa refined his equipment

to achieve the effects he wanted, using infrared filters to "counteract the layer of air," as he put it, and to increase depth of field. His ultimate goal was to make every scene not simply beautiful but meaningful. As the novelist Carlos Fuentes commented in connection with Figueroa's films, "Nature is the setting for history, and history is the setting for violence."

Foreign Artists

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, artists, writers, and filmmakers from around the world helped to revitalize artistic life in Mexico. Many were lured by the social and creative energies unleashed by the revolution and the possibilities of a radical break from artistic traditions and social mores.

At odds with the romantic vision of the country popularized by a previous generation of foreign artists, photographer Edward Weston wrote, "I might call my work in Mexico a fight to avoid its natural picturesqueness." With the assistance of his second son, Brett, Weston and Tina Modotti photographed monuments, folk art, and vernacular architecture for anthropologist Anita Brenner's influential *Idols behind Altars*, a tome tracing the aesthetic history of Mexico from its pre-Columbian roots to the masters of Mexican modernism.

Filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein and his team—Grigori Aleksandrov and Eduard Tisse—came to Mexico in December 1930 with the aim of making the film that would come to be called *¡Que viva México!* This experiment in Soviet/Mexican creative exchange set out to be a "vast, multi-colored filmic symphony" about the country that Eisenstein had glimpsed, years earlier, in José Guadalupe Posada's prints, in conversations with Diego Rivera, and in the pages of *Idols behind Altars*. The film faced a number of obstacles and was ultimately left unfinished.

The foreign perspectives of these innovators of film and photography influenced the definition of Mexicanness that Figueroa and his generation of artists took on as a legacy.

Requiem

Following the triumph of the armed revolution of 1910, Mexico underwent an intense process of self-discovery. The Secretariat of Public Education launched an ambitious project to renovate national culture. Themes and symbols drawn from popular tradition—such as volcanoes, magueys or agaves, and grinning skulls—testified to a Mexicanness formerly stigmatized and now a source of pride.

Along with other like-minded Mexican artists, including Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Leopoldo Méndez, Figueroa embraced epic and tragedy as the dominant expression of his country's history. Death and mourning were prominent in the Mexican social imagination. The nation held fast to memories of violent foreign conquest and devastating internal conflicts. Moreover, a large part of the population still lived in conditions of precarious survival, subject to the whims of local and regional strongmen.

In his films Figueroa captured this collective pathos and paid tribute to the funerary traditions of the Mexican people. In *Flor silvestre* (Wildflower, 1943, Emilio Fernández), he quoted Orozco's 1928 painting *Requiem*; in *Macario* (1960, Roberto Gavaldón), he undertook the technical challenge of filming in the underworld of the Cacahuamilpa caverns; and in *Pedro Páramo* (1967, Carlos Velo), he gave form to the murmurings of a ghost town. Creating masterful compositions of shrouded figures, stricken faces, flickering candlelight, and deep shadows, Figueroa portrayed the tragic ends of imaginary lives.

Film and the Graphic Arts

Gabriel Figueroa sought to create with cinematography what other artists inspired by postrevolutionary nationalism had achieved in printmaking, music, and painting. He always acknowledged the influence of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Leopoldo Méndez, whom he called "my teachers in the ways of seeing men and things." In turn, these practitioners of traditional media understood film to be a crucial art form of the modern era.

The collaboration between Figueroa and Méndez, which began in 1947 and enriched six films, exemplifies this cross-pollination. As Figueroa

explained, "We would give him a film that we had just finished, he would interpret the theme and make eight or ten prints that we could use as the background for the titles.... It was a totally new possibility, seeing a print enlarged to this size, it was a real mural." Together with dramatic voiceovers and music, Méndez's imagery established and summarized the central themes of films including Emilio Fernández's *Hidden River* (1948), *Pueblerina* (Village girl, 1949), and *Un día de vida* (A day of life, 1950).

Méndez helped found the cooperative Taller de Gráfica Popular (People's Print Workshop) in 1937. Dedicated to socially engaged art, he was well aware that film—even more than painted murals or printed broadsheets—reached the largest and most diverse audience. Both Figueroa and Méndez varied their styles to suit particular films, always basing their vision on a shared sense of Mexican identity.

Emilio "El Indio" Fernández

Emilio Fernández Romo (1904–1986) became a film director in part as a result of advice he received while working as an extra and supporting actor in Hollywood. Adolfo de la Huerta, exiled ex-president of Mexico, told him, "Learn to make films and return to our country with what you have learned. Make films of our own and that way you can express your ideas so they reach thousands of people. This will be your greatest weapon."

Son of a Spanish father and a Kickapoo Indian mother—hence the nickname *El Indio*—Fernández was a veteran of the Mexican Revolution, which he claimed to have joined as a child. After escaping from the Santiago Tlatelolco prison, he fled to the United States and eventually arrived in Hollywood. In 1933, having learned the rudiments of film production, he returned to Mexico and established himself as a leading actor, screenwriter, and director.

The collaboration between Figueroa and Fernández began in 1943 with the filming of *Flor silvestre* (Wildflower) and *María Candelaria*. Figueroa went on to shoot twenty-four of Fernández's forty-one films. Macho on and off the screen, nationalist to an extreme, and fraught with a dreamer's sentimentality, Fernández once declared, "Only one Mexico exists: The one I invented." Such an invention would not have been possible without the

faces of actors like Dolores del Río and Pedro Armendáriz, the screenplays of Mauricio Magdaleno, and the images fashioned by the cinematographer whom painter Diego Rivera considered a creator of "murals in motion."

The Metropolis

Between 1930 and 1970, Mexico's population more than doubled, putting intense strain on urban centers. Film productions mirrored this newly urbanized culture, moving away from the feudal *ranchos* and into the swelling metropolis. The city and its tenements, rooftops, storefronts, nightclubs, and red-light districts became the principal settings of cinematic narratives.

Figuerola, so closely associated with expansive rural landscapes, proved himself equally well suited to the chaotic comedies and gritty dramas of the crowded city. From *While Mexico Sleeps* (1938, Alejandro Galindo) to *México 2000* (1983, Rogelio A. González), Figuerola filmed scenes that documented the emergence, flourishing, and fragmentation of a metropolitan culture that was at once accursed, celebrated, abandoned, and rife with danger. Such films focused on the troubled lives of peasants arriving in the big city, crooks, prostitutes, laborers, street children, and members of the emerging middle class.

Luis Buñuel's *Los olvidados* (The forgotten, 1950, released in the U.S. as *The Young and the Damned*) presented the lives of Mexico City's poor with a realism and grit unparalleled in mid-century Mexican cinema. Figuerola set aside his talent for grandiose imagery, matching Buñuel's austere direction with a visual precision that yielded a masterpiece of Social Realism.

Narratives of the city also allowed Figuerola to explore the cinematic qualities of the night. Nocturnal scenes demonstrated his skill in manipulating light and shadow as well as his affinity for German Expressionist cinema and American film noir. In these films, the night provided shelter to figures disdainful of the law and social morality. Under the cover of darkness, the city became a catalog of sinful excitement, stretching from the cabaret to the morgue in films such as *Salón México* (1948), and *Victims of Sin* (1951), both directed by Emilio Fernández and shot by Figuerola.

Color and Telenovelas

By the end of the 1960s, the Mexican film industry was showing signs of fatigue, struggling to adapt to contemporary tastes and modes of production, and television was supplanting film as the primary form of popular entertainment. Figueroa's filmography reflects the turbulent shifts in the industry. After his box office success with the popular comedies of international star Cantinflas in the 1950s, Figueroa spent the 1960s and 1970s working on adaptations of telenovelas. One of the most indelible films of the period, *Días de otoño* (Autumn days, 1963, Roberto Gavaldón), starring the angsty Pina Pellicer, tells the story of a small-town transplant to the big city, abandoned at the altar and living a lie to save her reputation. The film, based on a novel by the enigmatic B. Traven, utilized the melodramatic female-centered narratives that were then becoming popular in serialized television productions.

The synthetic color explosion of the 1960s had made its mark on Figueroa's black-and-white aesthetic by the end of the decade. He had attempted the use of color in *La doncella de piedra* (The stone maiden, 1956, Miguel M. Delgado), but was uncomfortable working with material he could not immediately view because it was processed outside of Mexico. As the 1960s progressed, however, he made increasing use of the chromatic variety enabled by cheaply produced synthetic dyes and pigments. The Tito Davison film *El amor tiene cara de mujer* (Love has a woman's face, 1973), adapted from an Argentinean telenovela that had made a splash in Mexico in 1971, expressed a bright, candycolored sensibility that was a departure from Figueroa's grand cinematographic style.

Luis Buñuel

Luis Buñuel (1900–1983) directed thirty-two films over his lifetime. Twenty of these films were shot in Mexico with the collaboration of Mexican artists and technicians. Gabriel Figueroa served as cinematographer on *Los olvidados* (The forgotten, 1950), *Él* (Him, 1953, released in the U.S. as *This Strange Passion*), *Nazarín* (1959), *Fever Mounts at El Pao* (1959), *The Young One* (1960), *The Exterminating Angel* (1962), and *Simon of the Desert* (1965).

As artists, the Surrealist director Buñuel and romantic realist Figueroa had little in common. These differences became evident on the set of *Nazarín*: "It was...during this shoot when I scandalized Figueroa, who had framed a shot for me that was aesthetically beyond reproach, with the Popocatepetl [volcano] in the background and the inevitable white clouds—what I did was simply to turn the camera around to frame a shot of a landscape that was trivial but seemed to me to be more authentic, more near. I have never liked prefabricated cinematic beauty...." These differences did not stop Figueroa from assisting Buñuel in the making of several projects that, to this day, stand as provocative, anomalous offshoots of Mexican filmmaking.

Manuel Álvarez Bravo (1902–2002), one of the most significant Mexican photographers of the time, worked as the stillman for *Nazarín*. His photographs, intended to serve as a production diary and as promotional material for the film, add yet a third perspective, illustrating that any production is a place where many films seem to be occurring at the same time.

Hollywood

Figueroa first arrived in Hollywood in 1935. With the financial support of the Mexican production company Cinematográfica Latinoamericana, S.A. (CLASA), he served as an apprentice to Gregg Toland, the celebrated cinematographer who later shot Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941). For the next several decades, Figueroa found work and artistic inspiration in the Hollywood studios. In 1948, upon the death of Toland, movie mogul Samuel Goldwyn asked Figueroa to take the place of his mentor. Despite generous terms, Figueroa declined. He preferred creative independence, working instead through willing collaboration with other artists in support of his national film culture.

Figueroa had good reason for his reluctance to move to Los Angeles. His links to people and organizations of leftist affiliation, magnified by the prevailing anticommunism of the day, left him prey to surveillance and suspicion in the United States. As early as the late 1940s (which likely led to the denial of his visa in 1947), Figueroa was being monitored by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). In 1952, director Elia Kazan

named him as a communist sympathizer in his testimony to the House Un-American Activities Committee.

Remaining in Mexico did not prevent American directors from recruiting Figueroa. He worked as a cinematographer for directors as diverse as Don Siegel, Norman Foster, Brian G. Hutton, George Schaefer, and Daniel Mann. These films spanned a variety of genres, from adaptations of novels by John Steinbeck and Graham Greene to the ambitious war comedy *Kelly's Heroes* (1970, Brian G. Hutton), shot entirely in Yugoslavia, and the modern western *Two Mules for Sister Sara* (1970, Don Siegel), which saw Figueroa returning to familiar narratives about revolution in the Mexican countryside.