

MEXICAN CINEMA AND THE FESTIVAL DE CANNES BY PAULO PARANAGUA

The Lumière cinematograph was first presented in Mexico on 15 August 1896 by a bold young Frenchman named Gabriel Veyre. In so doing, he found favour with Porfirio Diaz, the country's key military figure who is credited with uttering the famous phrase, "Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States". The CNC Film Archives house some camerawork by Veyre, which constitutes the oldest moving images we have from Latin America.

In 1910, the uprising against Porfirio Diaz sparked the Mexican Revolution, which turned into a bloody and prolonged confrontation between military leaders. Cinematograph operators tried to maintain a balance between the different factions to prevent screenings becoming another battlefield. Aurelio de los Reyes, a leading historian of Mexican silent cinema, considers this "documentary of the Revolution" to be the real golden age of Mexican cinema.

The Film Archives held at the National Autonomous University of Mexico has made it possible to identify trends in pre-industrial production. In this ultra-secular country, extreme religiosity was an acculturation factor for fiction films, which were inspired by both American series and the Italian Divas. For example, *Tepeyac* (José Manuel Ramos, Carlos E. Gonzalez and Fernando Sayago, 1917) seems torn between the cult of tradition and a fascination with modernity. *Santa*, a melodrama penned by Federico Gamboa, was brought to the screen in 1918 (by Luis G. Peredo) and again in 1932 at the start of the "talkies" (by Antonio Moreno), as if the moral ambivalence of brothels had lasting relevance in Mexico.

Numerous Mexicans learned the tools of the trade from Hollywood during the decade or so that saw the production of Spanish-language films in America. The "talkies" inspired Mexican producers, who were able to draw on a sufficiently rich musical scene and a well-established record industry. Their first international success, *Alla en el Rancho Grande* (also known as *Out on the Big Ranch*, directed by Fernando de Fuentes, 1936), led to a boom in the (rural) "comedia ranchera" (ranch comedy) genre, which later helped Latin Americans become familiar with Mexican folklore.

The music-hall tradition and the peaking popularity of cabaret gave rise to an urban version of the genre which turned melodrama into a "sentimental school" for Mexicans, as the late writer, Carlos Monsivais, put it. Directors such as Emilio "El Indio" Fernandez, Roberto Gavaldon and Julio Bracho moved from one genre to another. But they were all beaten at the box office by the comedian Cantinflas, who managed to engage audiences worldwide, despite the near-gibberish he was speaking! Diego Rivera placed the peasant character created by Cantinflas at the centre of one of his murals in Mexico, surrounded by ancestral and contemporary heroes and mythological gods.

Mexican film studios reached their zenith at a time when populism and cultural nationalism were growing, both of which brought lasting stability to the country and encouraged filmmaking. This situation was bolstered by the US, who backed Mexico against its main

rival, Argentina, for ideological and economic reasons. *So near to Hollywood and so far from God*: the Mexican film industry embraced the dominant aesthetic, but also subjected it to an important metamorphosis. At a time when they were nationalising their oil, Mexicans adopted musicals and melodrama, giving them a recognisable style of their own.

Producers benefited from State assistance, although this meant that scripts had to be approved by censors first. A distribution company, Pelmex, handled exports. Like some of the Hollywood majors, Mexicans built cinemas and monopolised their programming in several Spanish-speaking countries. Certain cinemas were also reserved for immigrants in the Southern United States.

The local “star system” expanded across the borders, encouraging co-productions and transnational exchanges. Top Mexican stars of the time included Maria Félix and Dolores del Rio – who launched her career in Hollywood, before going on to enjoy further success in her native country – as well as Cuban dancers such as Ninon Sevilla, who set the hearts of French teenagers aflutter. The star system also featured actors such as Pedro Infante, Jorge Negrete, Pedro Armendariz and Arturo de Cordova, all of whom embodied the Latin macho in all his splendour. They were later replaced by entertaining masked wrestlers. At this time, Mexico alone was producing as many films as the rest of Latin America put together.

Then one day, Luis Buñuel sowed his first subversive seed in this universe, which was about as harmonious as a ranch comedy. Rather than mirroring the surrealists, he played with the rules and conventions of conventional Mexican cinema, turning it on its head. For Don Luis, the journey was long and arduous as he navigated his way, back and forth, along a path that focused on his Spanish origins and the beginnings of his career in France.

There were pre- and post-Buñuel eras. In his wake, art-house cinema became established in Mexico through the work of Arturo Ripstein, Paul Leduc, Jaime Humberto Hermosillo and Nicolas Echevarria. In recent years, these directors have been replaced by a new generation that includes, most notably, Maria Novaro, Carlos Reygadas, Guillermo del Toro and Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu.

MEXICO AT CANNES

In 1946, the Mexican film industry was at its zenith. In Mexico, higher education, the publishing industry, research and cinema were all invigorated by Republican refugees from Spain. No other Spanish-language film industry matched Mexico in terms of popularity or prestige. Spain, which had only just recovered from the civil war, was still finding its feet. Diplomatic relations between Mexico and Madrid had been broken off. Nonetheless, while the two countries were ideologically opposed, Mexican cinema was seen as a source of inspiration in Madrid. The Spanish envied both the genius of the comedian Cantinflas and the flamboyant style of the director Emilio Fernandez.

Indeed, “El Indio” Fernandez’s classic *Maria Candelaria*, starring Dolores del Rio and Pedro Armendariz, beautifully photographed by Gabriel Figueroa, represented Mexico at the first Festival de Cannes in 1946. Post-war ecumenism helped place the film on the list of award

winners. Fernandez later returned to Cannes to pick up awards for the music of *Pueblerina* (1949), one of his most inspired films, and for his “visual narration” in *La Red* (*The Net*, 1953).

However, the Festival’s real “regular” (as some might put it) was Luis Buñuel. In 1951, *Los Olvidados* (also known as *The Young and the Damned*) was screened at Cannes, bringing the director back on the radar of film enthusiasts who had not heard anything from him since *Un Chien Andalou* (1928) and *L’Âge d’Or* (1930). After a twenty-year hiatus marked by the vicissitudes of the civil war and a fruitless exile in the United States followed by permanent refuge in Mexico, this quiet man in his fifties caused astonishment and walked away with the award for Best Director.

Each major step in his gradual re-adoption of various expressive techniques was screened at Cannes. With Mexican studios plunging into a long crisis, Don Luis’s chequered career would be marked by achievements and setbacks, just like the protagonist of *El* (1953). Nonetheless, three decisive works would bring him back to the Palais des Festivals: *Nazarin* won an “International Award” in 1959, causing a scandal in the process. Having returned to his native country to shoot, *Viridiana* won Buñuel the Palme d’Or in 1961 and caused a stir in Spanish film institutions, which swiftly banned it. The film’s Mexican-Spanish “dual nationality” would, however, ensure its international distribution. The following year, in 1962, *El Angel Exterminador* (also known as *The Exterminating Angel*) received the FIPRESCI award from international critics, showing just how free the veteran surrealist had become.

A friend and colleague of Buñuel, Luis Alcoriza, also won the FIPRESCI award in 1965 for *Tarahumara*, a film about the Indian territories that had deeply moved Antonin Artaud. Mexico then waited some thirty years before reappearing on the list of award winners. In 1994, the young Carlos Carrera received the Short Film Palme d’Or for his cartoon, *El Héroe*.

Little by little, a new generation of Mexicans has begun to appear in Cannes. Luciana Jauffred Gorostiza attracted the attention of the Cinéfondation, which gave an award to *Rebeca a Esas Alturas* (also known as *At that Point... Rebecca*) in 2003. The writer and director Guillermo Arriaga won the award for best screenplay for *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* directed by Tommy Lee Jones in 2005. The following year, another work by Arriaga, *Babel*, earned Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu – a Mexican who had chosen an international career – the award for Best Director. Yet again, in 2006, a simpler film directed by Francisco Vargas named *El Violon* (*The Violin*) received the award for Best Male Actor in the Un Certain Regard section, thanks to Angel Tavira’s performance.

In 2007, another famous filmmaker, Carlos Reygadas, won the Jury Prize for *Lumière Silencieuse* (also known as *Silent Night*), a beautiful film with very little Spanish dialogue. In 2010, while Javier Bardem received an award for his performance in *Biutiful* directed by Gonzalez Iñárritu, the Mexican film, *Año Bisiesto* (also known as *Leap Year*) directed by Michael Rowe won the Caméra d’Or. Mexico is now definitively back on cinema screens around the world.