Que Viva Mexico! Ethno-Exploitation and Thunder Over Mexico

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Along with Erich von Stroheim's *Greed* (1924) and Orson Welles' *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1943), Sergei Eisenstein's *Que Viva Mexico*! [1] is among the oft-repeated tales of directorial artistry betrayed by the commercial interests of producers. The rancor between Eisenstein and Upton Sinclair, who acted as financier for the project, is well documented and needs no further retelling here. What I would like to explore in this essay, instead, is the essence of their competing visions for the project. Though I will not seek to overthrow the widelyheld opinion that Sinclair restrained Eisenstein's somewhat quixotic attempts at bringing a grand vision of Mexican culture and history to the screen, I will attempt to contextualize Sinclair's ideas about the project within filmic practices of the early 1930s, a period which saw a vogue for visiting foreign lands and cultures through the cinema. This contextualization will focus in particular on the film that Sinclair assembled from the massive amount of footage that Eisenstein shot in Mexico, this being the film *Thunder Over Mexico* (1933).

Joanne Hershfield, in her article "Paradise Regained: Sergei Eisenstein's *Que Viva Mexico*! as Ethnography" takes a crucial step when she announces at the beginning of her essay that

> Previous studies of Eisenstein's attempt to compose a film based on Mexican history have focused on the film's production history, on the relation of the unfinished film to the director's larger body of work, and on his theoretical investigations into the nature of cinema…In this essay, I will suggest that Eisenstein's sojourn in Mexico, his collecting of over 170,000 feet of cinematic material, and his writings and drawings about his experiences may be considered as a form of ethnographic fieldwork. (55-56)

It goes without saying that this essay is indebted partially to Hershfield's long overdue call for more substantial analyses of Eisenstein's project than are to be found in the existing critical literature. What Hershfield offers in her essay is a Cliffordian analysis of the ethnographic dimensions of the project, with a requisite eye towards issues of self and other in ethnographic discourses. In this respect the essay is more than competent, but its inconsistency as regards ethnographic reading of the project detracts from her handling of how the project interacts with larger ethnographic trends at the time of its production. Though Hershfield lays out the terms of her study in the manifesto-like language cited above, vowing to eschew an assessment of Eisenstein's theoretical project, Hershfield unfortunately does not stay the course. Instead, her analysis strays far afield, saying that "the film's structure and its compositions are grounded in [Eisenstein's] evolving theories of a political and intellectual cinema" and subsequently falls back into a study of Eisenstein's theories of montage and how they reflect gender-based oppositions (58-59). Not only is this detour self-contradictory, it is also distracting from an otherwise promising critical orientation and veers towards a more commonplace auteurist approach to the project. More disconcerting, however, is the ahistorical scope of Hershfield's argument. Commenting on *indigenismo* in the project, Hershfield points out that though the Mexican intelligentsia was claiming the Indian as the

quintessential figure of Mexicanness,

Mexico's Indian population had long since shrunken to a negligible percentage of the nation's population and that the mestizo class, Mexico's largest racial group, had subsumed the vast majority of aboriginal descendants leaving only "increasingly isolated pockets of small rural villages" (65). This is a convincing diagnosis of the salvage-impulse of Eisenstein's project, but this conclusion is so perfunctory that Hershfield's reader may assume that Eisenstein's work exists in an artistic vacuum and that Eisenstein was the only film-maker hoping to document vanishing races and cultures. Hershfield's contextualization consists only a cursory (two paragraph) recap of movements in visual and written ethnography wholly without an attempt to place the QVM project within that context.

Ethnography as we know it began in the 1920s in both its written and cinematic incarnations. Though important ethnographic texts had been written before this decade, 1922, with the publication of Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* and the worldwide hit that was Flaherty's *Nanook Of The North*, was a watershed year for ethnography, effectively launching it as a popular and credible form of writing and film-making (Heider 18). To those familiar with the cinema, the story of Robert Flaherty and his ethnographic film-making is so widely known that it hardly needs lengthy description here. While much ink has been spilled criticizing the representational politics of Flaherty's films, what I'd like to stress here is that Flaherty himself was aware of the salvage impulse in his work, and that this impulse is largely characteristic of documentary ethnography in this period (45). This impulse to document and preserve cultures existing outside of modernity found quite a large audience. [2] To say this film was a popular success would be a bit of an understatement, *Nanook* was, and still is, one of the most popular theatrically released documentary films ever made (Barnouw 42).

But what made this film so popular? And, more importantly how is this all related to the QVM project? I would suggest that the answer to these questions can be found in part in Erik Barnouw's canonical history of the documentary film. Offering a thematic history of documentary film-making. Barnouw entitles his chapter on the epoch of Flaherty's early work as the era of the documentarian as "Explorer" (32). The suggestion behind such a title is that the documentary film in this era offered audiences an opportunity, via the technology of cinema, to see the world and its peoples, a luxury heretofore largely impossible. The earliest incarnation of the documentaryexplorer that Barnouw cites is the early ethnographer. It is to this incarnation that has particular import to the figuration I have proposed of Eisenstein as a sort of cultural *flâneur*. It is important to note that in terms of popular reception, ethnography in this period was essentially a generic mode of touristic voyeurism wherein the screen offered the viewer could accompany the film-_flâneur_. [3]

The popularity of films which featured the documentarian as explorer, such as *Nanook*, gave rise to a cycle of fictional ethnographic exploitation films. As Karl Heider explains, "these early films were commercial ventures, taking advantage of the public interest which had been stimulated by film-makers like Flaherty and ethnographers like Mead" (26). This sort of exploitation film is more or less what Upton Sinclair was looking for when he sent Eisenstein and his crew to Mexico. The now infamously bitter acrimony between the two throughout the production phase of the project can be understood through as a conflict between two different ideas about what kind of film this would be. If *Thunder Over Mexico* is any indication, we can safely say that Sinclair was interested in making one of the ethnographic exploitation films described above. Eisenstein obviously had other ideas for the project. When Eisenstein set out from Hollywood for Mexico in 1930, his plans for the film that he intended to make, if he had any at all, were vague at best. There was some suggestion, according to Harry Geduld and Ronald Gottesman, that the director intended "to make a picture like *Nanook Of The North* (Robert Flaherty, 1922), *Moana* (Robert Flaherty, 1926), and *Chang* (Merian Cooper and Ernest Shoedsack, 1927), depicting the spirit of the Mexican people, their culture, and the general appearance of the country in which they lived" (29). Over the course of his stay in Mexico and research into Mexican history and culture, his ambitions for the project grew exponentially. Eisenstein's final script outlines called for four major vignettes concerned with four different epochs in Mexican history, stretching from pre-Columbian times to the modern period. Such a scope was in all likelihood modeled on Diego Rivera's mural The History of Mexico and was most likely impossible to realize within the constraints of mainstream theatrical exhibition. But, seeing his financial investment in the project imperiled by such an enormous structure, Sinclair sought other forms for the final cut to take.

The conflict between these two views of the project can be seen in the correspondence between Eisenstein and Sinclair during film. Two suggestions from Sinclair

are particularly indicative of the direction he thought the film project should go in. The first comes in a letter addressed to Eisenstein dated a week after the group arrived in Mexico. In this letter, Sinclair advises Eisenstein that he needs "a story on which to string [his] pictures" and that a good idea for this "string" is the story of an Indian boy who comes into contact with modern civilization, "modern science and American ways and ideas" before returning to his village "a wiser and sadder man" (32). Sinclair's suggestion is a very interesting one in that he sees the film's narrative, "the story" to "string pictures together on", as one that should be concerned with the confrontation of modernity, "modern science and American ways and ideas", and the primitive Indian figure who, for Sinclair, exists outside of time and historical progress. Another, decidedly more blatant method of cashing in on the ethno-exoticism of Mexico is suggested by Sinclair in relation to finding a cheap but innovative way to narrate the film:

It has occurred to me to suggest that you might find one or more [narrative] devices from the Mayan legends or present day Indian customs, which might be used in making the titles. Perhaps you will be using the traditional gods of the, the feathered serpent…You might show this Wind God idol blowing commands or threats and his breath might take the form of Aztec letters and then of the translation. This particular suggestion might not be the thing used by you, but the main point is to have in mind the finding of some device which will be characteristic of Mexico. (56)

Not only is this particular idea laughably campy, but it also registers the sort of attitude implicit in Sinclair's conception of the project. What Sinclair has in mind is a commodification of Mexican culture and exoticism. The first suggestion shows the typical "noble savage" impulse, with the noble savage encountering modernity and ending up fleeing back to a sort of primitive utopia that is the native settlement. The second suggestion, however, is a much less subtle call for selling the exoticism of native cultures. The attraction in Sinclair's second suggestion is the novelty for modern audiences in seeing the traditional trappings of native cultures, regardless of how tactfully their employed.

Throughout the correspondences between Eisenstein and Sinclair during the making of the film there are many telling sideways glances that there are to another film being made roughly around the same time with many of the same elements. This film was F.W. Murnau's *Tabu* (1930).There are several types of references to TABU in the correspondence ranging in content from budgetary considerations, in which *Tabu* is viewed as an industrial model (Sinclair was encouraged by the positive box-office reception of TABU), to using the film as a prototype for questions of content. In fact, the idea of using a Mayan god to breath smoke titles is mentioned by Sinclair in connection with a discussion of narration that stems from his having seen the "innovative" use by Murnau of a French merchant's letters home as a means of providing an indirect narrator for *Tabu*. Finally, there is an account, via Kimborough of the production group screening the film while in Mexico, wherein *Tabu* is described as "a light, pretty picture," one which would have paled in comparison to QVM (172). But we must ask ourselves what this connection between the films consists of if we are to gain some deeper understanding of the QVM project; clearly Sinclair at least saw TABU as a commercial model for QVM, but how can this influence our understanding of the overall project? To answer this question we should look a little more closely at Murnau's film and the Sinclair-commissioned *Thunder Over Mexico*, the film that is, I will argue, Sinclair's attempt to imitate TABU.

Before describing *Tabu*, we must briefly tell the story of *Tabu*; in this story we will already begin to see the many parallels with QVM. Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, the by then internationally famous director of *Sunrise* (1927) arrived in Tahiti in the second week of May 1929 with the idea of making a film about the native population, in part to capitalize on the success of films like Flaherty's *Moana* (1928) and a fiction film entitled *White Shadows In The South Seas* (W.S. Van Dyke 1928) (Eyman 25). About a month later Murnau was joined by a celebrated documentary film-maker who was down on his luck in finding funding for his independent film projects, that filmmaker was, of course, Robert Flaherty, who had, coincidentally (or not) worked on *White Shadows* before leaving the project after a falling out with the director W.S. Van Dyke. The tension between Flaherty and Murnau quickly became unbearable, as Murnau was intent on making an artistic fiction film, and "Flaherty realized that Murnau was using him as a glorified advance man, letting him make arrangements with the natives in a way that the aloof German could never hope to" (26). Flaherty soon left the project, and Murnau made his Polynesian film. *Tabu* tells the story of Reri and Matahi, a young couple in the Polynesian Islands who become star-crossed lovers when the tribe's priest Hitu declares that Reri is a sacred maiden who must remain virginal for the rest of her life. The pair flee their home island but, ultimately "a weak French colonial officer, a European trader, a dishonest Chinese

saloon keeper, and a relentless Polynesian chief all conspire to thwart the love of the young Polynesian couple" (Heider 26). Despite its scripted plot, there is a strong ethnographic undercurrent in the film, but one that is primarily concerned with exoticism. This is announced in the film's opening title card which assures the authenticity of the film's exotic mise-en-scene: "This film was made in Tahiti…All persons appearing in the film are actual natives of the island, except for a few Chinese." This title-card has no other function than to assure us that this film was not made in a studio, but is instead the *actual* far off land of Tahiti and that these aren't actors in dark make-up but are *actual* natives of the island. In a step that further indicates the degree of ethno-exploitation in the film, Paramount advertised it with the tagline "Uncivilized Love! Rapturous Romance!" and contemporary reviewers praised it as "an entrancing cinema adventure into a beautiful primitive life" (Eyman 79).

Frustrated with Eisenstein's recalcitrance, Sinclair ultimately enlisted Hollywood editor Sol Lesser to cut Eisenstein's footage into a film which would become *Thunder Over Mexico*. *Thunder* is composed mostly out of the materials that belong to the "Maguey" section of Eisenstein's fieldwork, though parts of the prologue are used to advertise the Mexican Indians to be found in the film. As such it tells the story of Sebastian and Maria and their ill-fated trip to the house of the *haciendado* (land-owner). A cursory glance at the film in light of Murnau's *Tabu* demonstrates the debt that *Thunder* owed to the Murnau film. The film's opening title cards, for example, tell the audience that the film is set in Mexico and that we are going to see "The story of Sebastian and Maria, whose suffering represents the suffering of all Mexico" before the revolution of 1910. Another title rhapsodizes on the "pure-blooded creatures" whose "faces are carved in stone" that the film will feature. The film as a whole could be best described as a relatively cliched narrative telling of the abuses of the lower classes at the hands of the gentry, with the added attraction of seeing real Mexican landscapes and people.

At the time of its release, *Thunder Over Mexico* received scathing reviews and even touched off something of an uproar among leftist artists and intellectuals who felt that Eisenstein's film symphony had been mutilated into a by-the-numbers Hollywood film. Though Sinclair surely distorted Eisenstein's vision for the film, his alteration is best understood as reduction rather than mutilation. Love stories did have prominent positions in Eisenstein's treatment of Mexico. All four parts of the script feature some variation on the motif of the romantic couple: Concepcion and her courtship of Abundio in "Sandunga"; the tragic love story of Sebastian and Maria in the "Maguey"; the forbidden love of the matador Licega and his lover Señora Calderón in "The Fiesta"; and the bleak love story found in "Soldaderas", which features a woman following her husband to war and, after his death, finding a new husband to follow. The concept of "variation" is key to understanding this dimension of the project. The variations on the love story, arguably the most universal kind of story in human art, evokes a scope which encompasses Mexican history from a state of prelapsarian, pre-Columbian innocence, through the corruption and suffering under Spanish colonial rule and later the dictatorship of Diaz, leading up to the bitter hardships on the road to liberation and the return to utopia in the modern Mexico. Without this scope, however, each love story becomes less meaningful without the powerful context Eisenstein wanted to give it. We can then thus understand Eisenstein's frustration when responding to Sinclair's suggestion of making a single feature film out of the "Maguey" material:

> The project of making two pictures–one hacienda, and the others [separate] episodes is not possible: if they have not *one* subject running through, that does not mean that episodes are just a heaping up of disconnected material without forming a synthetic and symphonic whole. You cannot take out of *Hamlet* the scene of the death of Polonious–make another drama out of it and then use "the rest" for another one…Our picture is a strict Mexican "Menu" and cannot be sold "à la carte." (Geduld and Gottesman 132)

Thunder Over Mexico, by attempting to reduce Eisenstein's project, one completely at odds standard theatrical film practices of the time, into a seventy minute feature, leaves only the exotic elements of the project while losing its ambitious historical and cultural scope. To extend Eisenstein's culinary metaphor a bit, *Thunder* was to Mexican culture what Taco Bell is to Mexican cuisine, a bland appropriation hoping to capitalize on cultural exoticism.

Chris Meir wrote about Barry Lyndon in Synoptique 6.

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FOOTNOTES

1 Hereafter referred to as QVM, or the QVM project.

2 Of course it is worth remembering that Flaherty so wanted to document the traditional ways of Nanook and his people, that he asked them to use anachronistic, and often very dangerous, techniques for hunting and constructing igloos (Barnouw 40).

3 I am indebted here to Catherine Russell who suggests a conflation of the figures of the *flâneur* and that of the ethnographer or documentary observer in ethnographic filmmaking.