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Reviews From Moscow Film Fest

Que Viva Mexico (U.S.-RUSSIAN-B&W)

Moscow, Aug. 28.

Sovexport release of Upton Sinclair & Assocs. production. Features non-pro cast. Written and directed by Sergei Eisenstein. Camera (black and white), Edward Tisse; editor, Grigori Alexandrov. Reviewed at Moscow Film Fest, Aug 14, '79. Running time, 90 MINS.

The great Russian director Sergei Eisenstein's unfinished epic film on Mexico, "Que Viva Mexico!," which he made in 1931-'32, has been a lodestone for film specialists, archivists and buffs every since.

Though two films were made from the footage, Sol Lesser's "Thunder Over Mexico," reportedly with footage given him by producer Upton Sinclair, and Eisenstein biographer Marie Seaton's "Time in the Sun," film people could just conjecture what it might have been like if Eisenstein, maker of "Potemkin," "Alexander Nevski," "October," "Strike," "Ivan the Terrible," etc., had been able to finish it.

It appears that problems with his backers and lack of funds closed the film down and Eisenstein went back to Russia. The footage was used for the two aforementioned films, in part, and reportedly appeared as stock footage in some Hollywood films including the notable "Viva Villa" of Jack Conway.

Five hours of rushes were screened at the Museum of Modern Art in Gotham and the Cinematheque Francaise in Paris and other film centers. Still, the dream about its power, brilliance and greatness, offered in part by the films made from it and the rushes, remained only conjecture.

Then the Museum of Modern Art purportedly was able to present Russia with the footage. Grigori Alexandrov, friend and assistant of Eisenstein, who was along during all the shooting, has now edited it into a film.

Alexandrov is first seen discussing the shooting and noting he followed Eisenstein's own script, ideas and sketches for this now supposedly definitive version. Then the film unfolds. Rarely seen is the first actual sketch about the Mexican Indians at a time of supposed freedom in a story of a woman's marriage.

Before this are Eisenstein's shots of Aztec ruins studying the faces of the modern Indians at that time still resembling the figures in the carvings on the immense ruins. Then comes the familiar tale of the young peon whose girl is raped by a haughty landowner and an aborted revolt by the peasants.

There is the cruel bullfight tale centering on a young matador and then some sketches and stills from an idea for an episode about the women who followed the revolutionaries during the Mexican Revolution. It ends in a montage of Day of the Dead shots, a holiday in which candy is made up as skeletal death symbols. But it is a time of rejoicing and renewal and the mainstay of the Mexican people who have coped with misery and death.

Of course, films have since dealt with many of these themes and some even before Eisenstein. It is not that they are predictable or redundant, there is still the brilliant imagery of Edward Tisse and Eisenstein's compositions. It is just that, overall, the film is a letdown after all these years of discussions as to what it might have been.

Eisenstein might not have used the overdone Mexican-motifed music and perhaps cut it in a different way and shot more for some scenes besides the planned sketch that was never done. At any rate, it is interesting to have the footage in a coherent mixture of documentary and fictionalized sketches.

It should be a boon to scholars, archives and museums though commercial usage appears extremely limited. But it is here for film lore and study. —Mosk.