

Document Citation

Title	Eisenstein's enchilada
Author(s)	J. Hoberman J. Hoberman
Source	<i>Village Voice</i>
Date	1980 Feb 18
Type	review
Language	English English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Que viva Mexico! (Thunder over Mexico), Eisenstein, Sergei, 1931

Eisenstein's Enchilada

By J. Hoberman

QUE VIVA MEXICO! Directed by Sergei Eisenstein. Edited and narrated by Grigory Aleksandrov. Produced by Mosfilm Studio. At the Public Theater, through February 17.

Sergei Eisenstein's *Que Viva Mexico!* (1930-32) occasioned one of the 1930's messiest artistic brawls. Following Eisenstein's fruitless Hollywood trip, novelist Upton Sinclair raised funds to allow the director to film a Mexican "travelogue." Eisenstein overran his modest budget, Sinclair seized the unfinished film and hired a producer of Tarzan movies to make a narrative of it. The unhappy result, *Thunder Over Mexico*, precipitated a torrent of ink, international defense committees for the protection of Eisenstein's concept, and picket lines around the Rialto. Sinclair never recovered his reputation, nor Eisenstein his film. Some 30 years after the director's death, what was left of the footage made its way back to Moscow. Now, Grigory Aleksandrov, Eisenstein's longtime associate, has edited the material the way they had planned. Or so he says.

Sinclair was accused of suppressing Eisenstein's revolutionary content. If anything, he tried to rev it up, for *Que Viva Mexico!* would probably have been Eisenstein's most personal film. Eisenstein had apparently been fascinated by Mexico for years, he associated it with the circuses of his childhood. In fact, his first theatrical production was a commedia dell'arte-cum-agitprop taken from a Jack London story, "The Mexican." Friendships with the Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and Jose Clement Orozco further fueled his imagination—there must have been smoke escaping from his ears when he left California and headed south. And unlike Hollywood, where Sam Goldwyn asked him to remake *Potemkin* as a vehicle for Ronald Coleman, Mexico didn't disappoint him.

Despite the logistical hassles, Eisenstein enjoyed a tremendous surge of creative energy. He returned to drawing for the first time since adolescence, filling cartons with his sketches. Sinclair was later shocked to stumble upon a cache of satirically blasphemous and homoerotic cartoons. Eisenstein fabricated a dream of Mexico out of what he found, lavishing miles of footage on rituals and fiestas, with an eye for the most baroque costumes and grotesque masks. He posed naked boys amid the ruins of Chichen Itza and draped barebreasted Indian madonnas across sun-dappled hammocks. Everything was sexualized—a peasant revolt triggered by the rape of a peon's bride. Mexico became a sensual, death-obsessed hallucination: Children feasting on sugar-candy skulls, lines of pilgrims crawling towards the shrine of Guadalupe on their knees. The way Eisenstein films village girls in extravagant lacy mantillas turning slow pirouettes under the shadow latticework of sheltering palms, you half expect Marlene Dietrich to pop out of a monkey suit and everyone to break into "Hot Voodoo."

Cynics think that Eisenstein would have gone on shooting in Mexico forever if Sinclair hadn't cut the cash flow after 14 months. Glibly, in his interpolated remarks, Aleksandrov explains that Sinclair was frightened that his connection to the Soviet filmmaker would damage his gubernatorial hopes. This is utter nonsense—Sinclair didn't run until 1934, two and a half years after Eisenstein returned to Russia. The reality is far more complex. Already edgy because of Eisenstein's unconventional, scriptless methodology and apparent procrastination, Sinclair was startled by a telegram from Stalin to the effect that Eisenstein's comrades had lost



Intimations of Mexican Mortality

confidence in him and he was "thought to be a deserter." When Amkino, the Soviet distribution outlet, reneged on its financial interest in the project, Sinclair panicked and shut production down. Eisenstein was set up as much by his enemies in Moscow as he was betrayed by the philistines of Hollywood, a fact that Aleksandrov knows but does not acknowledge.

Nor has he done much better by Eisenstein's footage. Now 77, Aleksandrov worked with Eisenstein in the Proletkult Theatre, assisted him on *Strike* and *Potemkin*, co-directed *October*, and served as his right-hand man in Mexico. But his inside-dopester's cut is structurally much the same as *A Time in the Sun*, the hour-long travelogue that Eisenstein-biographer Marie Seaton fashioned out of the Mexican footage in 1939. His plan as well as the "original scenario," portentiously read over the images, come from a description Eisenstein wrote in mid-production to help Sinclair raise more money for the project. However, if seen as a linked succession of Eisenstein shots, rather than a reconstruction of his original intent, there is some pleasure to be taken from Aleksandrov's film.

Eisenstein's images are so dynamic they can survive the most banal presentation. Thus, the schlocky mexicana music and outer-space sound effects Aleksandrov slaps on the track give sections of the film the haunting, distanced campiness of a Jack Smith "Orchid Rot of Atlantis" slide-show. Eisenstein's concern with composition peaked in Mexico: Each carefully worked out frame is a thicket of diagonals or looming foreground silhouettes. There is a striking absence of middle shots, so that tiny figures in monumental surroundings are continually juxtaposed with mega close-ups. In fact, with its bizarre camera angles, abrupt foreshortenings, and penchant for posing peons to "rhyme" with the landscape around them, *Que Viva Mexico!* is less a documentary than an anticipation of studio mannerists like Busby Berkeley and Orson Welles.

It's impossible to guess how Eisenstein would have structured the material. According to his Rumanian biographer, the loss of this Mexican footage broke his spirit before Stalin did. There are sections though where one can momentarily believe one is watching an Eisenstein film. The Mayan funeral in the prologue has a relentless, mad geometry; the jungle paradise of Tehuantepec seems painfully felt; the Maguey sequence, which made up the bulk of *Thunder Over Mexico*, is as cruel and stylized as any western up until *A Fistful of Dollars*. Even in this truncated, insipidly assembled form, *Que Viva Mexico!* retains a ruined majesty. Look upon it ye Kings of the Bs and weep. ■