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Paul Leduc: The Politics of Mexican Cinema in the 1970s

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Scholars broadly agree that, prior to the 1970s, the control of film production in Mexico was firmly in the hands of profit-minded producers and business people who had little artistic ambition (Maciel 200). For this reason, critics and filmmakers such as Manuel Michel argue that pre-1970s Mexican cinema lacked authentic cultural resonance or aesthetic merit (46). However, the political tumult of the mid to late 1960s shifted the attention of filmmakers to more explicitly social themes and prompted the rise of a “new” cinema of social conscience. Chief among the events that brought about this shift, as Jesús Treviño notes, were the leftist student movements that followed the Tlateloco massacre of 1968 (27). Two years after the massacre, the newly elected President Echeverria developed a policy of widespread state intervention in all modes of film production. Echeverria had many aims. As John Mraz notes, the President primarily sought to “reestablish his legitimacy with intellectuals and artists” after the national catastrophe of 1968 (206); likewise, as David Maciel describes, Echeverria’s choice to co-opt the work of many explicitly political filmmakers stemmed from his desire to “promote official cultural nationalism” (201). This nationalism sought a new
mexicanidad that, as Treviño suggests, had its roots in sympathy for communism, a concern for the needs of the poor, and an appreciation of the necessity to provide an authentic representation of Mexican life (35). In any case, the direct intervention of the government into filmmaking led, in part, to a means by which Echeverría might disseminate nationalist propaganda. It is, as Maciel argues,

...in the content or themes of national films where the state has manifested its most consistent preoccupation and direct influence. It devised a rigorous system of “artistic supervision” which is actually the censorship of movie content. (198)

As a result, the character of Mexican filmmaking at the time can be summarized by this tension: that directors were, at once, allowed to bring political themes to the fore of their work, but at the same time operated under the de facto supervision of President Echeverria, whose politics, as the historian and critic Daniel Cosio Villegas opines, were of a variety “not for dialogue but for monologue, not for conversing but for preaching” (qtd. in King 136).

It thus makes sense that critics tend to present strong arguments about the political agendas of Mexican filmmakers from the 1970s. Among the most popular in the subject is Paul Leduc, whose work has been cast as exemplary of the political ethos of the day. A member of the cineaste group “Nuevo Cine,” Leduc’s film Reed: México Insurgente (1970) marked, according to John Mraz and others, the advent of socially conscious Mexican filmmaking that could compete for attention in the international market (221). Concerning Leduc’s politics, John King notes that the director was likely radicalized by the student movements of 1968 (135). Further investigation reveals the
considerable extent of his involvement: Leduc, we learn, directed three popular documentaries about the student struggle (Mraz 201). Still, other elements of Leduc’s biography are worth considering. Unlike many other Mexican filmmakers, Leduc trained out of the country—in Paris, with French directors such as Jean Rouch (Berg 47). Upon returning to Mexico, Leduc stayed for the most part on the margins of the industry, mostly producing independent films (Tsao 217). Because of his affiliations with both French film in the 1960s and the Mexican political film movement of the 1970s, Leduc is cast as a kind of political auteur, making films in a personal style that succeed at—or, in the view of some critics, ought to succeed at—conveying the social and political agenda that animated his milieu. However, it is my position that, upon close examination, Leduc’s films seem not always to present a straightforward political message, much less one that would clearly bolster the aims of the Echeverria administration. For that reason, I will examine two of Leduc’s films, Reed: México Insurgente and Frida: naturaleza viva (1983), to reveal how they both shed light on, but in other ways subtly qualify, the aims of the leftist political movement that, at least in part, constituted the basis of the “new” Mexican cinema of the 1970s and early 1980s.
Reed: México Insurgente is based on the written accounts of John Reed, an American journalist who reported on the lives of rebels during the Mexican Revolution. Produced before Echeverria entered office, the film was initially met with resistance by the authorities and required, according to Leduc, “public pressure and pressure from film critics” to get the film bought and distributed by the government (qtd. in Treviño 28). However, upon release, the film was a major success in Mexico and was, according to Treviño, “widely promoted [by the Echeverria administration] as an example of the new kind of film-making” (28). In general, the film is applauded for its revisionist portrayal of the Revolution. As Charles Ramirez Berg writes, “[Leduc] wanted to bring an immediacy to the Revolution that had been lost in Mexican movies, precisely because a host of films like Aguilar’s [The Underdogs] had created a vapid, official myth of the Revolution” (203). Likewise, Tsao writes that Reed “demonstrated that a historical film could evade the solemnity of school textbooks and have the immediacy of a contemporary political documentary” (217). A number of critics thus agree that Reed succeeds in its ostensible political agenda by at once championing the ideals of communism and activism while at the same time re-presenting the harsh realities of real, authentic Mexican life in a vital way.

Such a reading operates to show the authentic political content of Reed, though many critics would attempt to read more explicit political “messages” in the film. Reed, with its black-and-white, cinéma vérité aesthetic and improvised cinematographic style, has a kind of rugged vitality that lends a sense of immediacy to its subject without propagandizing it. Perhaps more importantly, silence plays a significant role in the film’s
aesthetic, both by preventing the film from sentimentalizing the revolution with an overpowering score and by enabling Leduc to employ his documentary style more effectively. Likewise, this silence plays an important thematic role. In an interview about his work, Leduc explains, “In films today, there are too many words. We have forgotten the silences. Mexico is a country of silences” (qtd. in King 142). Indeed, Reed is a film of silences, all of which highlight the banal moments of the Revolution—the extended periods of boredom, of listlessness and shiftlessness, of physical and spiritual exhaustion—that, for viewers, divorce the Revolution from any claims to glamour or machismo as traditionally conceived. This element of the film’s aesthetic is most effective at claiming the Revolution for “the people,” but in a way that eschews all romanticization. Silence is the film’s most politically powerful tool.

A powerful and haunting example of the use of silence occurs near the beginning of the film, when Reed is escorted by a revolutionary to the town in which General Urbina, a rebel leader, houses his troops. The audience is provided a number of long shots of Reed’s donkey-pulled cart, all of which emphasize the infertility and emaciation of the Mexican landscape and ghost town. On the road, Reed and his escort encounter an old man. Haggard, skin charred and cracked, the man stands in the center of the frame; the camera lingers. The audience notices first the silence of the space—it oppresses, underlines not the desperation of the man but the sense that he lives alone in the empty town, resigned from life. Eventually, Reed’s escort gives the man a single ear of corn. Again, the camera lingers on the man; he stares at the corn, and then slowly returns to a rock near the side of the road on which he sits and, methodically,
eats. For a third time the camera lingers; the audience, like Reed, watches patiently as the man eats. In this scene, silence underscores both the spare visual aesthetic as well as the theme: the utter immobility of the poor. Such is the method by which Leduc presents a political message.

Many critics, however, do not focus their exegeses on silence or similar elements of the film’s aesthetic. Instead, they dig for an explicitly political message as part of Reed’s primary story arc: as Berg puts it, a “gringo” finds his political identity as an engaged leftist by means of the Mexican Revolution (204). Here is where some critics take issue with what they identify as the film’s “message.” In a condemning early article, Judith and John Hess argue that the film is “marred by various technical inadequacies” (a reading that fails to take into account the nature of the cinéma vérité style) and, because the film does not seem either to examine Reed fully or the fighters whose lives he chronicles, fails at what they assume are its “political and aesthetic” intentions. Berg, though he applauds the film, comes to a similar conclusion where he writes, “Even as intelligent a revisionist film as Reed: México Insurgente can’t place a silver lining around the nation’s revolutionary regret” (205). Taking into account the way Reed unabashedly presents the banalities of the Revolution, it seems unlikely that Leduc’s film attempts to present a political message that is explicit enough for the Hesses or optimistic enough for Berg. Instead, as I have shown, Reed succeeds precisely because it does not place a “silver lining” around the revolution.

Similarly, Leduc’s universally acclaimed later film, Frida: naturaleza viva, is essentially political, but its politics are presented in a manner considerably more oblique
than many critics might hope. Again, Leduc’s refusal to fully embrace the political motivations and agendas of the movement with which he is commonly associated, and for whom he at times acts as standard-bearer, does not indicate his outright denial of politics; rather, it constitutes his embrace of a more deeply qualified leftist politics, as we will see with *Frida*.

*Frida* is a formally innovative biography of Frida Kahlo, the Mexican painter who is most famous for her striking self-portraits. The film is entrancingly impressionistic, lacking a rigorously linear structure or plot development so as to prioritize the image and lend the narrative a heightened sense of fragmentation. In this film, Leduc most capitalizes on his penchant for the creative and meaningful use of silence, allowing it to reveal Kahlo’s physical and spiritual pain, her paranoia and vision. In some sense, the film is intensely insular—focused only on the person and persona of Kahlo. The insularity of the film has the effect of at once exposing and de-eroticizing Kahlo; moreover, the film reveals
Kahlo’s torment to be a result of the disordered *machismo* endemic in her milieu. But there is ostensibly a social element of the film as well that should not go unnoticed. Throughout the film, Kahlo engages in leftist politics, and in fact has a brief romance with Leon Trotsky. A Marxist vein thus runs through the film, coloring all of its very individual and private moments. Indeed, as Leduc was called the most political filmmaker of the movement (Tsao 101), his critics might be drawn to consider Frida’s relation to the Trotskyists and Stalinists the narrative content worth mining in order to discover the film’s most relevant political message.

But that would not be the right approach. The most radical element of this film, in either political or aesthetic terms, is its experimental form, which examines psychological themes and directly challenges the voyeuristic impulse of audiences. And in this form, interestingly, Leduc seems to deny an easy interrogation of explicitly political themes. The character Leon Trotsky explains the film’s true interests when, through a love letter to Frida, he tells the audience,

I write some thoughts about the connection between art and revolution. They aren’t the only forms of evolutionary culture. My future works will express a need for what you describe as the idea of the psychological complexity of man, the forceful expression of passion in one instant.

Indeed, one might think that Leduc’s film would attempt to define the connection between art and revolution; but instead, Leduc examines the “psychological complexity of man, the forceful expression of passion in one instant” through his character Frida. Leduc does so primarily by challenging the voyeuristic expectations of the audience as
they encounter Kahlo in many private moments. Berg puts it well: “by denying voyeuristic pleasure and making the erotic clinical...[by] substituting physical agony for sexual titillation,” the film provides “no voyeuristic comfort in the female body” (93).

The film, in this sense, certainly serves a political function: it is an attack on patriarchy in general and machismo in particular. But Leduc does not level that critique through the direct representation of explicitly political (or particularly Marxist, as many critics would have it) content.

Examples in the film are many. One of the most distinct examples occurs just after a scene in which Kahlo attends a party of leftists. The camera cuts from the loud party to a shot of Kahlo—naked, lying on her side and away from the audience. The camera slowly tracks in, as if gently intruding on a private moment. Kahlo’s elbow is cocked up in the air so that, we infer, her hand falls near the lower half of her stomach. We hear her whimper softly, and in context we assume that she is masturbating. As the camera moves steadily closer, the noises become more indicative of sexual pleasure—that is, until Kahlo raises her hand to reveal blood, which she wipes on her shoulder while letting out a cry of pain. The image cuts to Kahlo in her bed as she squeals in agony, staring at herself in the mirror. The implication is that she is, indeed, masturbating; but at the same time she appears to be in great pain. In this moment, the audience senses that its own voyeurism is under attack. Its expectation for sexual titillation has been undermined and humiliated by an encounter with pain that has, as Berg puts it, made “the erotic clinical” (93). Scenes such as these are themselves political acts—they are attacks on patriarchy. Nevertheless, the film subverts the
expectations of those who search for explicit political content or for, as the character Trotsky puts it, “art and revolution.” Therefore, for Leduc, the film critics agree is his best is also his least overtly political.

In these ways, Leduc successfully responds to the post-1968 call for a new cinema of social conscience, but not exactly in the way championed—or, for that matter, sanctioned—by President Echeverria’s administration. By the same token, Leduc’s films deny the exegeses of critics interested merely in projecting a certain political agenda on his films concomitant with that of the 1960s “new” Mexican cinema in general. Leduc is certainly, as his French contemporaries might suggest, an auteur in the sense that his work is at once political and personal. Readings that take this dynamic into account will shed light on a filmmaker who responds with nuance and insight into the social and political issues raised by his generation.
Works Cited


