

Conquest and Dialogism in *Tepeyac*¹

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(translated into English by the author)

It has been more than twenty years since Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's 1994 book, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, offered one of the first histories of films about the European conquest of the Americas.² Their book took part in an intense scholarly debate generated by the quincentennial Columbus celebrations of 1992, and examined a pervasive discursive formation that had shaped a positive slant in high school textbooks regarding the "achievements" of Columbus and other conquistadors in the era of Spanish imperialism. Shohat and Stam underscored the problem of textbooks and films that represent only a triumphant and heroic European perspective on the conquest, which they contended leads to a situation in which other "voices and perspectives"³ are excluded from cultural discourse because they are not authorized to "resonate in the world."⁴ This problem for film in particular persists to this day, and is seriously complicated by questions that have been articulated by Bill Nichols in the context of ethnographic film theory: "how can dialogism, polyvocality, heteroglossia and reflexivity avoid the fundamental rebuke of sustaining

¹ This article is an extensively revised and updated translation of sections pertinent to *Tepeyac* (Mexico, José Manuel Ramos, Carlos E. González and Fernando Sáyago, 1917) of RAMEY, James. "La resonancia del exilio y la conquista en el cine indigenista mexicano". In: Claudia Arroyo, James Ramey, Michael Schuessler (eds.). *México imaginado: Nuevos enfoques sobre el cine (trans)nacional*. México D. F.: CONACULTA y UAM, 2011, pp. 117-158.

² SHOHAT, Ella and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Jorge Ayala Blanco includes a chapter on indigenous related Mexican cinema in AYALA BLANCO, Jorge. *La aventura del cine mexicano en la época de oro y después*. Miguel Hidalgo: Grijalbo, 1993, pp. 145-155; Stam returns to the subject in relation to Brazilian cinema (see STAM, Robert. *Tropical Multiculturalism: a Comparative History of Race in Brazilian Cinema and Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997, and STAM, Robert. "Cabral and the Indians: filmic representations of Brazil's 500 years". In: Lúcia Nagib (ed.). *The New Brazilian Cinema*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2003, pp. 205-228. More recently, Keith John Richards gives a useful region-wide overview of conquest-related films; see RICHARDS, Keith John. *Themes in Latin American Cinema: A Critical Survey*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2011, pp. 7-13.

³ SHOHAT and Stam, *ibid.*, p. 62.

⁴ SHOHAT and Stam, *ibid.*, p. 62.

hierarchical relations and minimizing use-value to others when the questions, technologies, and strategies are so heavily of ‘our’ own devising?”⁵ It is certainly true that attempts to represent the conquest in the Euro-American medium of film have often sustained such hierarchical relations and have often failed to present anything but a Euro-American set of prejudices, preconceptions and attitudes. But does this mean films about the conquest are necessarily condemned to suffer the “fundamental rebuke” Nichols describes? I believe that a careful examination of Mexican film history from the silent period through the mid-sixties suggests otherwise. I will argue that one early film in particular, *Tepeyac*, was a precursor of Mexican films and films about Mexico that capture distinctive resonances of the “voices and perspectives” of the indigenous victims of the conquest by means of complex, multi-discursive representations of exilic indigenous cultures in Mexico.



Fig. 1: *Tepeyac* (Mexico, José Manuel Ramos, Carlos E. González and Fernando Sáyago, 1917).
 Filmoteca de la UNAM

⁵ NICHOLS, Bill. “The Ethnographer’s Tale”. In: Lucien Taylor (ed.). *Visualizing Theory*. New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 72.

Shohat and Stam's history, among other things, assesses each filmmakers' success or failure in offering a "resistant commemoration of the conquest."⁶ They criticize films they see as perpetuating the discursive tradition of conquest-legitimation that dates back to the fifteenth century, in particular two biopics on Columbus from the quincentenary year: *1492: The Conquest of Paradise* (USA, Ridley Scott, 1992) and *Columbus: The Discovery* (USA, John Glen, 1992).⁷ Shohat and Stam reserve praise for what they term revisionist films, films that attempt, however imperfectly, to represent the cultural complexity and perspectival distinctiveness of indigenous peoples: "An anti-colonial narrative was [...] performed via the 'view-from-the-shore' projects, and through didactic films and videos whose titles clearly reveal their anticolonial thrust: *Surviving Columbus: First Encounters* (USA, Conroy Chino, *et. al.*, 1990), *Columbus on Trial* (USA, Lourdes Portillo, *et. al.*, 1993), *The Columbus Invasion: Colonialism and the Indian Resistance* (USA, John Curl, *et. al.*, 1991), *Columbus Didn't Discover Us* (USA, Wil Echevarria, *et. al.*, 1992)",⁸ etc.

Another voice in the Columbus debate, however, was that of Stephen Greenblatt, who argued that studying the accounts of conquistadors like Columbus could tell us something useful only with respect to European representational practices in general.⁹ He pointedly forgoes any analysis of the accuracy or value of European representations of indigenous cultures:

I have been very wary of taking anything Europeans wrote or drew as an accurate and reliable account of the nature of the New World lands and its peoples. [...] I have resisted as much as I can the temptation to speak for or about the native cultures as if the mediation of European representations were an incidental consideration, easily corrected for. [...] We can be certain only that European representations of the New World tell us something about the European practice of representation".¹⁰

⁶ SHOHAT and Stam, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

⁷ For a detailed comparison of biopics about Columbus (Scott's film in particular) to the "epic grandeur and historic roots" exploited by Hollywood Westerns, see WOLLEN, Peter. "Cinema's Conquistadors." In: Ginette Vincendeau (ed.). *Film/Literature/Heritage: A Sight and Sound Reader*. London: British Film Institute, 2001, pp. 19-23. See also CUSTEN, George F. *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992.

⁸ SHOHAT and Stam, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

⁹ See GREENBLATT, Stephen. *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, and GREENBLATT, Stephen. "Introduction". In: Stephen Greenblatt (ed.). *New World Encounters*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

¹⁰ GREENBLATT, *Marvelous Possessions*, p. 7.

But Greenblatt's apparent act of humility is also a device of expedience because it permits his book to abstain from any discussion whatsoever of indigenous cultures and their perspectives. This pious approach to historical epistemology enables Greenblatt, conveniently, to focus his book entirely on European perspectives on the conquest and on, to redeploy one of his buzzwords, the "resonance"¹¹ those practices have had for European culture over time.

In relation to the particular representational practice of ethnographic filmmaking, Fatimah Tobing Rony takes Greenblatt's purism a step further. In her introduction to *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle*, she writes, "One result of this ever present division between Historical Same—Western subjectivity—and Primitive Other is a speaking for and thus a silencing of the peoples depicted in ethnographic cinema, an assumption of voice made especially dangerous because of the perception that film is a window onto reality."¹² Though Rony acknowledges "the precariousness of my position" in drawing such a stark opposition, and though her next move is a promise to "turn at various points in the text to reflections on how the people of color who performed and acted in these films experienced the process,"¹³ there seems no doubt that she would see attempts to represent the "view-from-the-shore" in conquest films as profoundly counter-productive, as a "silencing of the peoples depicted"¹⁴. Rony would therefore presumably reject even the sparing praise Shohat and Stam give to fiction films that offer "resistant commemoration[s] of the conquest",¹⁵ especially in the cases of films that deploy ethnographic documentary-style footage of indigenous peoples as part of their representational repertoires.

I wish to suggest, however, the positions adopted by Greenblatt and Rony sustain a kind of scholarship that reinforces the notion that "only some voices and perspectives (...) resonate

¹¹ GREENBLATT, Stephen. "Resonance and Wonder". In: Ivan Karp and Stephen D. Lavine (eds.). *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, pp. 42-56.

¹² RONY, Fatimah Tobing. *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996, p. 13.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ SHOHAT and Stam, *op. cit.*, p. 71

in the world.”¹⁶ Ironically, by focusing exclusively on what can be said about European representational practices, both books parallel the exclusionary discursive practices of the conquistadors themselves. That is, since Greenblatt, Rony and the colonial supporters of Spanish imperialism each, for different reasons, stand against efforts to represent the subject position of indigenous peoples, we can identify Greenblatt and Rony, with the exclusionary slant of the Columbus films and textbooks critiqued by Shohat and Stam. In other words, the objection of theorists like Greenblatt and Rony to representations that attempt in good faith to express the “view-from-the-shore” unfortunately aligns their approach with five centuries of discourse that validates only the “view-from-the-deck” perspective. Moreover, by dismissing as suppositious any European (or perhaps even any non-indigenous) representation of the “view-from-the-shore” cultures, the positions of Greenblatt and Rony toss the gold out with the dross by seeking to exclude attempts to evaluate the construction of indigenous subjects in those representations. The rationales have changed, but what constitutes heresy remains the same.

The earliest conquest film Shohat and Stam discuss is *Christopher Columbus* (USA, David MacDonald, 1949) and the earliest “revisionist” film they discuss is *Terra em Transe* (*Land in Anguish*, Brazil, Glauber Rocha, 1967). They also include several Mexican conquest films, including *Cabeza de Vaca* (Mexico, Nicolás Echevarría, 1991) and *Fray Bartolomé de las Casas* (Mexico, Sergio Olhovich, 1993). But Mexico has been making films that express “resistant commemorations of the conquest” since the Mexican Revolution.¹⁷ It is worth noting that the Revolution (1910-17) was, in a sense, itself a “revisionist” project, one carried out on the battlefield against Porfirio Díaz’s Euroimperial-style dictatorship and its hegemonic colonial tradition. Sadly, according to Ivan Trujillo, former director of the National Autonomous University of Mexico’s (UNAM’s) National Filmoteca, many of the Revolution-era indigenista films have been lost, including *Cuauhtémoc* (Mexico, Manuel de la Bandera, 1919), an epic feature film that sympathetically dramatized the defeat of the last Aztec emperor. Furthermore, as Jorge Ayala Blanco of UNAM points out, there

¹⁶ SHOHAT and Stam, *op. cit.*, p. 62

¹⁷ There is archival evidence of conquest-related films from as early as 1904, when Carlos Mongrand, a French filmmaker in Mexico, made *Cuauhtémoc y Benito Juárez* (Mexico, Carlos Mongrand, 1904) and *Hernán Cortés, Hidalgo y Morelos* (Mexico, Carlos Mongrand, 1904). See DE LOS REYES, Aurelio. *Filmografía del cine mudo mexicano, 1896-1920*. Mexico City: UNAM, 1986.

has been precious little representation of indigenous peoples in Mexican film, and what exists has all too often “fomented the idea of the Indian as *sui generis*, failing to analyze the roots of the Indians’ social marginalization.”¹⁸ That social marginalization has led to a situation in which many Mexican indigenous communities have withdrawn into remote, inhospitable areas, to live in a kind of exilic limbo within their own homeland. Since the roots of this pernicious predicament reach back to the diremptions of the conquest, it is worth our time to attend to instances of these roots as objects of deliberate representation in Mexican cinema.

A handful of films have survived that bear traces of these roots. These films, which Ayala Blanco terms “indigenista” films,¹⁹ register distinctive resonances of the “voices and perspectives” of the conquered indigenous peoples by means of complex discursive strategies for representing Mexico’s indigenous cultures. Shohat and Stam’s contention that revisionist films are a recent phenomenon should itself be revised in the case of Mexican film history. The emblematic precursor for this history that I will discuss here is from the third decade of Mexican filmmaking. *Tepeyac* is a silent feature from 1917 that dramatizes the legendary appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe to the recently-converted Aztec Juan Diego in 1531. Like a small but significant lineage of Mexican features that would follow it, and which I have discussed elsewhere,²⁰ *Tepeyac* allows the “voices and

¹⁸ AYALA BLANCO, *op. cit.*, p. 145. The translation is mine, as are all subsequent citations from texts and films with Spanish titles.

¹⁹ AYALA BLANCO, *ibid.* The term “indigenista” as Ayala Blanco uses it refers to fiction films that deal with the problems faced by indigenous peoples in Mexico.

²⁰ Including *Janitzio* (Mexico, Carlos Navarro, 1934), and *Tarahumara: Cada vez más lejos* (Mexico, Luis Alcoriza, 1965); see RAMEY, James. “La resonancia de la conquista en *Janitzio*”. In: *Revista Casa del Tiempo*, Vol. 3, N° 30, 2010, pp. 54-57; and Ramey, “La resonancia del exilio y la conquista en el cine indigenista mexicano”, pp. 133-154. Paul Schroeder is misguided in dismissing *Tepeyac* as “not of great consequence in terms of the evolution of cinematic form in Latin America”, as it is, among other things, one of the earliest manifestations of several recurring tropes of indigenous-themed films in Mexico, especially the inclusion of documentary-style footage within a live-action narrative context; see SCHROEDER, Paul. *Latin American Cinema: A Comparative History*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2016, pp. 31-32. Furthermore, *Tepeyac*’s principal director, José Manuel Ramos, is identified as a major figure of the period by Charles Ramírez Berg, who calls him “one of the most prolific screenwriters and filmmakers of Mexican silent cinema”; see RAMÍREZ BERG, Charles. *The Classical Mexican Cinema: The Poetics of the Exceptional Golden Age Films*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015, p. 212. Moreover, José Alberto Moreno Chávez has argued for *Tepeyac*’s influence on Julio Bracho’s *La virgen que forjó una patria* (Mexico, Julio Bracho, 1942); see MORENO CHÁVEZ, José

perspectives” of the victims of the conquest to “resonate in the world” by means of complex discursive representations of indigenous subjectivity in Mexico.

Tepeyac

Tepeyac is a majestic artifact of the Mexican Revolution that narrates the origin story of the Virgin of Guadalupe. As Emilio García Riera of the University of Guadalajara puts it, *Tepeyac*'s thrust was to “unite the patriotic with the religious” in Mexico's changing nationalist ideology.²¹ Mexico's revolutionary constitution of 1917 incorporated progressive features regarding territorial organization, civil liberties, and democratic forms, as well as anticlerical and antimonopoly clauses. *Tepeyac*, made in the same year that constitution was written, goes out of its way to affiliate itself with both the revolutionary project and the mythology of Mexican Catholicism.²² The Revolution's official dogma was that the church represented a malignant holdover from the time of the conquest and the Spanish Inquisition, but the military leadership also recognized that Mexico was overwhelmingly Catholic. The film's discursive navigations, as we will see, must therefore be read in light of the ticklish relationship that the Revolution's anti-church leadership, which had the power to suppress any film, was attempting to negotiate with the Catholicism of the populace. In this way, the film can be understood as a revisionist text containing an uneasy mix of discourses that reflects the Revolution's strained efforts to find a middle ground that would

Alberto. *Devociones políticas: cultura católica y politización en la Arquidiócesis de México, 1880-1920*. México, D.F.: El Colegio de México, 2013, p. 240.

²¹ GARCÍA RIERA, Emilio. *Breve historia del cine mexicano: Primer siglo 1897-1997*. Mexico City: Ediciones Mapa, 1998, p. 42. This emphasis on the film's politico-religious dimension is picked up and amplified by Paulo Antonio Paranaguá in his discussion of the film as a revolutionary manifestation of pan-Latin-American historical religious discourse; see PARANAGUÁ, Paulo Antonio. *Tradición y modernidad en el cine de América Latina*. Madrid: Fondo de Cultura Económica de España, 2003. Isabel Arredondo also offers a useful analysis of *Tepeyac*'s deployment of Guadalupe as a figure of “intercession” on the one hand, and as “a symbol of the nation, of Mexicaness”, on the other; see ARREDONDO, Isabel. *Motherhood in Mexican cinema, 1941-1991: the transformation of femininity on screen*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2014, pp. 32-34.

²² David M. J. Wood has suggested that Mexican audiences during this turbulent historical period would have seen the film as a “utopian characterization of what the nation *could* be” (my translation); see WOOD, David M. J. “Cine mudo, ¿cine nacional?” In: Claudia Arroyo, James Ramey, Michael Schuessler (eds.). *México imaginado: Nuevos enfoques sobre el cine (trans)nacional*, México D.F.: CONACULTA and UAM, 2011, p. 33.

historiographically distinguish the “good” churchmen from the “evil” conquistadors, thus making more tenable a union of the patriotic with the religious in the evolving imagined community of Mexico in 1917.



Fig. 2: *Tepeyac* (Mexico, José Manuel Ramos, Carlos E. González and Fernando Sáyago, 1917).
Filmoteca de la UNAM

This political tightrope-walking begins in the first moments of the film. The title is followed immediately by three intertitles that give quotations (the second and third intertitles give a single quotation divided in two parts):

“The day that the Virgin of Tepeyac is no longer worshipped in this land, not only will our Mexican nationality have disappeared, but also all memory of those who now dwell in Mexico.”
Ignacio M. Altamirano

“The Mexicans worship a Virgin of Common Consent: those who profess Catholic ideas, for reasons of religion; the liberals, in memory of the flag of ‘10; the Indians, because she is their only god;

the foreigners in order not to offend national pride; and all consider her a SYMBOL of the essence of Mexico.”
Ignacio M. Altamirano

These quotations identify the film as a work that sanctions the worship of the Virgin of Guadalupe (also referred to as the Virgin of Tepeyac, and of “Consuno,” meaning “common or universal consent”), a sanctioning that is against the official line of the Revolution. But the quotations also appear to identify the film as pro-revolutionary, ostensibly referring to the “Liberals” who ousted Porfirio Díaz, and to the “memory of the flag of ‘10,” which appears to be patriotic lingo for the revolutionary banner that was first unfurled in 1910 by Francisco Madero. It suggests that the Liberals worship the Virgin of Guadalupe precisely because of “the flag of ‘10”; *i.e.* they are grateful to the Virgin for granting the Revolution victory. And, in the case of most of the troops and most of the pro-revolutionary public, this observation would have been true, since they were ardently Catholic.

From the beginning of the film, the project of uniting revolutionary patriotism and religious fervor is made manifest through quotations from textual discourse. Mexico was then, as now, a nation that revered its literary figures, so the quotations must be understood as a legitimating move. Indeed, Ignacio Manuel Altamirano was in 1917 known as a distinguished novelist and poet whose words commanded respect. Complicating this legitimation effect, however, was the fact that Altamirano had died at the age of 59 in 1893. His quotation, unless it has been invented or altered by the filmmakers, must then refer to

the memory of *the flag of 1810*, the year in which the priest Miguel Hidalgo rallied the “Liberals” of that era to a revolt against Spanish rule in the name of the Virgin of Guadalupe. That revolt eventually led to Mexican independence from Spain and, serendipitously for the filmmakers, took place precisely a century before the beginning of the Mexican Revolution. What Tom Gunning might call the “unease” indicated by the crafty insertion of this farrago of discursive and historical juxtapositions would be hard to overstate.²³

On the subject of race in *Tepeyac*, Paul Schroeder has argued that despite a certain degree of nuance, the film ultimately presents an “ethn racially whitewashed” version of “Euro-American modernity” in the age-old “criollo” tradition of colonial Mexico.²⁴ Building on this view, Mónica García Blizzard has argued that *Tepeyac* favors Mexico’s “white minority as representative of the national” and displays a “preference for varying degrees of whitening for the representation of the Mexican nation”.²⁵ And yet, the film continuously makes a show of its relationship to a historicized racial discourse as its fundamental legitimating factor, a particularly significant approach in light of the fact that the film tells the story of a religious miracle that is foundational to discourses of race in Mexico. The film’s narrative structure is a story within a story. A 1917-era story in the style of an Italian melodrama²⁶ serves to frame the film’s main diegesis: the legend of the 1531 rebirth of the Aztec goddess, Tonatzín, as the Virgin of Guadalupe. The link of the story within a story occurs when the film’s 1917 white female protagonist, Lupita, sits in bed and reaches for a history book.²⁷ (Fig. 3)

²³ See GUNNING, Tom. “Film History and Film Analysis: The Individual Film and the Course of Time”. In: *Wide Angle*, Vol. 12, N° 3, 1990, pp. 7-8.

²⁴ See SCHROEDER, Paul A. “Latin American Silent Cinema: Triangulation and the Politics of Criollo Aesthetics”. In: *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 43, N° 3, 2008, p. 38.

²⁵ GARCÍA BLIZZARD, Mónica. “Whiteness and the Ideal of Modern Mexican Citizenship in *Tepeyac* (1917)”. In: *Vivomatografías: Revista de estudios sobre precine y cine silente en Latinoamérica*, n. 1, 2015, p. 76. Available at: <<http://www.vivomatografias.com/index.php/vmfs/article/view/15>> [Access: October 2016]

²⁶ See DE LOS REYES, Aurelio. “The Silent Cinema”. In: Paolo Antonio Paraguá (ed.). *Mexican Cinema*. London: British Film Institute, 1995, p. 70.

²⁷ For a useful analysis of Lupita's characterization as a normative, white, Catholic, heterosexual Mexican woman in the film, see SERNA, Laura Isabel. *Making Cinelandia: American Films and Mexican Film Culture before the Golden Age*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014, pp. 140-143.

When she opens it, we see a page that reads, in antique typeface, "The Miracle of Guadalupe." The film then cuts to an outdoor scene of an Aztec priest at the mouth of the cave-shrine of Tonatzín at a site called Tepeyac. The film soon reveals its ideological stance *vis-à-vis* the conquest when an intertitle tells us that the indigenous "race" of the Aztecs takes fair vengeance on a conquistador ambushed near the mouth of the shrine: "The conquered race does not miss the chance to avenge itself on the white man for all the humiliations that have been suffered." (Fig. 4)



Fig. 3: Lupita reads about "The Miracle of Guadalupe"



Fig. 4: The "conquered race" takes vengeance on a conquistador

The viewer is thus discursively coopted as a sympathizer to the suffering of Mexico's ancestral indigenous population and as a critic of the "humiliating" conduct of the conquering "white man". In this way, the film posits itself for its viewers as an adaptation of a "historical" text that will recount one of Mexico's genetic national narratives: the December, 1531 rapprochement of religions and races that takes place with the rebirth of an Aztec goddess as a Christian virgin-saint whose skin is brown.

On another discursive front involving race, the opening sequence of *Tepeyac* reveals a conspicuous awareness of the film as a culturally conditioned textual artifact. As was often done in films of this period, the opening credits show the actors taking bows as if on a stage. However, the two actors who play characters of indigenous descent, the Guadalupe Virgin and Juan Diego, are shown in modern costumes, while the actors who play the white characters (Lupita, the bishop, the priest, and the Spanish conquistadors)

are shown only in their period costumes. Moreover, the star of the film, "el indio Juan Diego", played by Gabriel Montiel, is shown first as a modern, sophisticated, self-possessed indigenous man wearing fancy contemporary clothing, and then again transformed into his shabby Aztec guise, complete with servile body language and long tangled hair. (Fig. 5 and 6).



Fig. 5: Montiel in modern dress



Fig. 6: Montiel as "el indio Juan Diego"

This points to one of the Revolution's most delicate political objectives: to integrate indigenous and white Mexican cultures in the wake of cataclysmic violence. The montage implies that the civilizing mission of the church has transformed "barbaric" Aztecs into "sophisticated" modern Mexicans. Although the costume transformation is no doubt condescending in the "criollo" sense that it marks the conquest-era Aztec characters as being in need of "dressing up," its main objective seems to be a contemporary commentary underscoring a new porosity of class and racial roles in a Mexico that has passed through the transformations of the Revolution. In other words, this introductory film rhetoric suggests that indigenous people in modern Mexico have gained the right to attain, and be represented as holding, high social standing. This ploy underscores the film's status as a site for the conflict of racial, political, and historical discourses that intersect in a complex cultural construction of the indigenous subject through the representational variables of costume, body language, and historical context.

The meta-discursive move of the dual presentations of the indigenous characters is reiterated and intensified in the opening credits' presentation of the white priest

Bernardino de Sahagún, one of the chief defenders and chroniclers of the indigenous people during the conquest. First we see a portrait of the bald, grimacing priest, then an intertitle tells us that this is a real portrait of the historical Sahagún hanging in Mexico's national portrait gallery. Then the portrait dissolves into an image of the bald, grimacing actor who will portray the priest, all still within the frame of a painting. (Fig. 7 and 8)



Fig. 7: Portrait of Sahagún



Fig. 8: Live-action actor resembling portrait

It should not be lost on us that this transformation of a painted figure into a film actor foreshadows, in reverse, the film's climactic moment in which the actress playing the Virgin of Guadalupe vanishes so that her painted image may appear miraculously on Juan Diego's humble *ayate* (or fiber cloak), thus becoming the famous proof he needed to persuade the Archbishop that he had been the percipient of a divine visitation. This remarkable formal inversion of interstratified discourses in the opening credits, then, functions as a clever conceit incorporating the discourse of formal film language, the historical discourse of the conquest, the religious discourse of the Guadalupe legend, and the legitimizing discourse of the Mexican Revolution, which was itself conceived as a revisionist attempt to "construct" Mexican culture anew. The choice of Sahagún as the white man to play the counterpart of the brown goddess's *acheiropoieton* was astute, since Sahagún was seen as one of the most indefatigable white defenders and proto-ethnographers of the indigenous people in Mexico, especially of the Tenochtitlán region.

Once again, readings of the film as merely enacting a crude privileging of whiteness over indigeneity ring hollow, and fail to appreciate the film's creative and subtle engagement with the aporetic complexities of race that demanded attention in the period immediately following the writing of the new Mexican constitution.

Other examples of *Tepeyac*'s originality and importance as a film are its scenes that are patently documentary in style, which take on heightened significance in light of what Ana M. Lopez has written about the evolution of Mexican filmmaking from a documentary-dominated industry before 1916 to a narrative-dominated cinema strongly influenced by Italian melodrama after 1916.²⁸ *Tepeyac* thus stands on the threshold between the documentary era of Mexican cinema and the era of the Mexican melodrama, incorporating the most effective features of each. The scenes in the conquest-era sections of the film re-enact, in documentary style, various indigenous domestic practices from that period, and in the 1917 sections the film documents indigenous carnival practices that bear traces of the Aztec heritage. In one scene, we see the poverty-stricken Aztec family of Juan Diego in 1531 gathering and preparing food, with what was to become a quintessential indigenista-film trope of *la tortillera* in later indigenista films: an indigenous woman making tortillas. The woman, apparently a non-professional actor, prepares a meal for Juan Diego and another indigenous man. The men bundle reeds they have gathered from the labyrinth of waterways in and around Tenochtitlán (evidently filmed in Xochimilco, in southern Mexico City). Thus the Aztec domestic sphere is visually reconstructed by the filmmakers with a mixture of documentary and fiction-film techniques. By contrast with the opulent, baroque settings in which the Archbishop and other Spaniards are seen to live, the sense of exile experienced by the indigenous people in the wake of the conquest is palpable, and elicits empathy.

²⁸ LÓPEZ, Ana M. "Early Cinema and Modernity in Latin America". In: *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 40, N° 1, 2000, p. 69.



Fig. 9: Contemporary documentary footage of "Aztec" street performer

In the closing sequence, the protagonist-couple from the 1917 melodrama decide to celebrate their happiness at being reunited by visiting a carnival celebration at La Villa, near the Basilica of Guadalupe in northern Mexico City. In a series of shots that Paulo Antonio Paranaguá has described as semi-documentary,²⁹ they watch a carnival dancer dressed as an Aztec perform for the crowd—he can be read as a carnivalesque representation of the resonance of the conquest that the film is actually about. (Fig. 9)

After watching his antics, Lupita spends time in the marketplace buying candles and other goods from indigenous women in their market stalls. In both documentary-style scenes, a sense of being pulled into the perspective of indigenous Mexicans is conveyed to the viewer. Thus, to extrapolate a Bakhtinian term, a kind of cultural heteroglossia enters the film, which is to say, heteroglossia not on the stratum of verbal language, but on the level of larger cultural systems. A dialogic relation between this sort of documentary view refracted through the indigenous perspective and conventional narrative filmmaking was becoming a trend in Mexican cinema; as Lopez puts it, referring to that era, this mixture of styles was “characteristic of the Mexican cinema throughout the rest of the silent and early sound periods: transforming foreign narrative models [*e.g.* Italian melodrama] by setting them in explicitly Mexican *mise-en-scènes*.”³⁰ One can only speculate, but it does not seem unreasonable to imagine that *Tepeyac*'s artful combination of documentary and narrative devices served as a prototype for many of the Mexican indigenista films that followed it.

²⁹ PARANAGUÁ, *Tradición y modernidad en el cine de América Latina*, p. 60.

³⁰ LÓPEZ, *op. cit.*, p. 70.



Fig. 10: *Tepeyac* (Mexico, José Manuel Ramos, Carlos E. González and Fernando Sáyago, 1917).
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To conclude briefly, *Tepeyac* is a precursor of Mexican films that supplement Shohat and Stam's history of revisionist or "view-from-the-shore" conquest films. Like later films, it presents a fictional context of adverse socio-historical conditions for indigenous cultures in Mexico, exilic conditions that are explicitly resonant of the conquest. In such films,

this resonance absorbs its particular pitch and timbre from the competing discourses that vibrate in them: discourses of race, politics, history, religion, gender, otherness and exile. These discourses are never fully at ease in one another's company, but as we have seen, the tension between them is made productive by historically contingent factors of cultural context. Furthermore, the dense interjacency of these discourses, as I have tried to demonstrate, shows its artfulness most clearly when a film like *Tepeyac* approaches the rendition of indigenous subjectivity through innovative linkages of film form with the cultural milieu in which it is situated, such as the Revolutionary political function of the "memory of the flag of '10" intertitle, the reverse *acheiropoieton* of the Sahagún portrait mirroring the Guadalupe *ayate*, and the innovative blending of conventional narrative filmmaking with documentary footage of the carnivalized remnants of Aztec culture itself.

The narrative that links *Tepeyac* to later Mexican films that follow in its footsteps is a story of increasingly successful efforts to represent exilic indigenous subjectivities *vis-à-vis* the conquest with insight and complexity. One factor that may grant Mexican filmic representations of the conquest an imprimatur of authenticity is that, as each film must demonstrate in its own way, the conquest and its pervasive repercussions were still, and are still, unfolding, including the Mexican Revolution's social convulsions as evidenced in *Tepeyac*. Rony's claim that such films inevitably "silence" the people they represent seems far less compelling in the context of a Mexican film about Mexican indigenous peoples than it might in the context of traditional ethnographic film practices that reproduce the "division between Historical Same—Western subjectivity—and Primitive Other."³¹ Furthermore, Greenblatt's epistemological suspicion that the analysis of European practices of representation can tell us only about those practices themselves is undercut, at least in the case of *Tepeyac*, by the multidimensional and ingeniously historicized portrait of indigenous cultures and individuals that the representational practice of Mexico's indigenista filmmaking has accomplished.

³¹ RONY, *op. cit.*, p. 13

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