

The Screen

A Mexican Trailer

On the night of Sept. 22, speaking on the occasion of the world premiere of *Thunder Over Mexico*, Upton Sinclair announced from the stage of the Rialto Theatre in New York that inasmuch as Eisenstein himself had agreed that a political film of Mexico could not be made by a Russian, that therefore the protests and attacks against Sol Lesser's version of the film were futile and ridiculous. An hour later an outburst of hisses, loud boos and indignant outcries greeted the first public showing of *Thunder Over Mexico*, a political white-washing and eulogy of the infamous Wall street puppet regime of Calles-Rodriguez. The man who some ten years ago had written a book to prove that all art is propaganda had lent himself as a prime mover in the shameful task of re-creating 234,000 feet of film shot by a revolutionary Soviet director into seven reels of infantile and boring narrative winding up with an impudent glorification of "The New Mexico."

The spectators present at the opening of the film came with an enthusiastic expectation drummed up by months of an uninterrupted barrage of ballyhoo on the part of Mary Craig Sinclair's Mexican Picture Trust Company. The film they saw has since been neatly characterized by Thornton Delehanty, of the New York Evening Post, as "a trailer" which "will make you that much more clamorous for *Que Viva Mexico!*"

Upton Sinclair's counter-blasts to the rising wave of opposition to the release of *Thunder Over Mexico* have been very conveniently directed by him against a small group of "art enthusiasts" whose worship of Eisenstein's "passion for the macabre, the grotesque, and especially for the synthetic ideational image-form . . ." has so far been the motivating cause for their moral indignation. These individuals, whose protests were for the most part based upon rumors, personalities and gossip, thereby provided the sponsors of *Thunder Over Mexico* with a man of straw needed to divert the underlying political issues involved, into innocuous channels—with the further advantage of providing a lot of "inside dope" publicity copy.

There is no need to dwell at length upon the cretinistic performance of the gentlemen who "assembled" *Thunder Over Mexico*. Its reception even by those critics of New York's metropolitan press whose ultimate test for cinematic values is summed up in the word "entertainment," may be looked upon as the *coup de grace* for the film even as a production in Hollywood's understanding of the term,* not to speak of "a great masterpiece of art." Our primary concern is the inescapable fact that *Thunder Over Mexico* is, politically speaking, a distortion of content. The causes for its formal perversion can only be understood if they are regarded as flowing directly from the *conscious* inversion of Eisenstein's original intentions.

Thunder Over Mexico carries out fully Sinclair's promise to the Mexican Minister of Foreign Affairs that "the film would not show the people of present-day Mexico as mistreated or unhappy." Said "mistreatment" and "unhappiness" have therefore been ascribed to the regime of Porfirio Diaz, some thirty years ago. By means of what unscrupulous trickery? An explanatory title and a couple of shots of Diaz's portrait culled from Eisenstein's 234 reels of negative, a large part of which was shot for the sole purpose of sidetracking the Mexican Government spies who Sinclair has admitted, trailed the Soviet director during every minute of his stay in Mexico. But at that the story of the peon Sebastian, "whose story is that of all the others," is not half so pathetic as that of the average Hollywood "Western" cowboy hero, and we have seen Warner Baxter interpret more convincing villains than the stiff-whiskered operetta "ham" who rapes (It is not clear whether the girl is

really raped. Mordaunt Hall of the New York Times never got it that way. As far as he could see, she was merely "insulted.") the peon's betrothed. This brand of cheap "play," unfit for a Coney Island sideshow, is palmed off on American movie audiences as the work of Eisenstein, creator of *Potemkin!*

A prologue that strives for ethnological profundity and succeeds in being only a series of self-conscious "still" travelogue shots. The rape (?) of a peon's girl by a guest of the *hacendado*. Attempt to save the imprisoned girl. Failure. Chase. More chase. Still more chase. And chase again. The *hacendado's* daughter is shot. The hero is captured. "And for you, the punishment of the horses!" Burial of Sebastian and two other peons up to their necks. Soldiers on horseback trample their heads. Grafted sound effects that might have been taken from a "Silly Symphony." Dark, dark skies. Composite shots of peons listlessly climbing, climbing, climbing. More composite shots. More superimpositions. More "wipe-offs." Believe it or not, but even Regina Crewe was bored to tears!

Out of this godawfully boring recital in which the peons are at all times shown as characterless "passive resisters" (a direct slander against the heroic revolutionary traditions of the Mexican masses!), we are "wiped-off," "overlap-dissolved" and "super-imposed" into Mr. Sol Lesser's idea of "Revolt!" A puff of smoke, some fireworks sparkling meaninglessly in the night, and a small pile of burning straw! There is your revolution! Shades of *Ten Days* and *Potemkin!* The fraud of the scenes entitled "Revolt!" set a new mark for "the best cutter in Hollywood—Sol Lesser" (Sinclair) a man who turned out military recruiting pictures during the World War and is about to release a film by Carveth Wells slandering the Soviet Union.

As to the handling of the anti-religious material shot by Eisenstein in Mexico, we will limit ourselves to a quotation from the review of "Thunder" that appeared in the New York Times of September 25th:

"In one or two scenes M. Eisenstein derides religion, but later the title writer does the reverse, for one gathers that present conditions in Mexico come, in the film, as an answer to a girl's prayer." (Our emphasis—S.B., T.B.).

"Give us the strength of our fathers!" prays the peon girl. Presto! A "New Mexico" appears before your eyes, full-blown with marching men, blaring trumpets, football teams, and the dynamic rhythms of the "wheels of industry" manned by former peons. This about the Mexico where not a foot of soil remains unstained with the blood of oppressed peons! This about the "new Mexico" that suppresses the Communist Party and murders its heroic leaders! This about the Mexico where the feudal-reactionary Catholic Church is daily regaining its foothold thanks to the Wall Street inspired policies of the Rodriguez military dictatorship! This about a country where the peasantry is being driven from the land and massacred by roving bands of *cristeros* and armed assassins of the "Ligue De Defensa Social"!

"I promised the Mexican Foreign Minister . . ."

Rarely has there been such unreserved unanimity in the reception of a film by the critics of the daily press. It is both highly significant and an inescapable index to the fraudulent nature of *Thunder Over Mexico* that not a single one of them was in the least fooled by what was being offered them as "Eisenstein's masterpiece." This applies even to those critics who tried to keep a more or less straight face by repeated references to the "beauteous photography" (Boehnel, World-Telegram) of Eduard Tisse.

Even the Socialist New Leader complained that "all there is to the revolution is a bonfire inside a fire-proof hacienda (!)"

Credit for the most damning unmasking of the publicity lies upon which *Thunder Over Mexico* came riding into the Rialto Theatre, must, however, go to none other than the cynically outspoken Film Daily, a publication that knows no other language save that of the profit-seeking motion picture exhibitors. The Film Daily advises the exhibitors:

"A forced and artificial ending with the help of written titles shows Mexico of today freed from the peonage system and everybody happy . . . Plug it on Eisenstein's reputation . . ." (Our emphasis).

SAMUEL BRODY
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* "The picture, as is, will not get to first base, either as a critic's picture or in straight box-office parlance." VARIETY, Sept. 26, 1933.