

A Mexican Tragedy: The Mutilation of a Cinematic Masterpiece

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“We thought we were shaping life and cinematography, but as it turned out, life was shaping both us and cinematography”—Sergei Eisenstein

This is the sad tale of a film that was never allowed to be; or, more properly put, was doomed to leave the hands of its original creator and passed on like so much old furniture to be disposed of as the new owners saw fit and then, long afterward, to be re-assembled in a fashion the creator never intended in the first place. The phantom masterpiece is Sergei Eisenstein’s *Qué Viva Mexico!*, shot on location in that country in 1930-31 and forcibly abandoned before the director could apply his genius for montage to give it final shape. Two films utilizing Eisenstein’s film footage were made with the permission of the American novelist, Upton Sinclair, who was the de-facto executive producer of the film: *Thunder over Mexico* made in 1933 by Sol Lesser and *Time in the Sun*, made by Mary Seton in 1939/40. These latter never attempted to portray themselves as representing Eisenstein’s original vision for his picture. Rather they simply cannibalized his footage for incorporation into films with quite different purposes. But this is not the end of the saga. Thanks to the prescience of Sinclair, who in the 1950s deposited the unedited materials of Eisenstein’s film with the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the subsequent work of Jay

Leyda to make them accessible, we have today two further versions of the film, each edited with the intention of attempting to reconstruct from the shambles an idea of what it would have looked like if it had been finished. The first version, which we shall treat in great detail below, was assembled by assistant director Grigori Alexandrov and released in 1979, almost fifty years after the shoot. The second, and most recent version was compiled and released theatrically in 1998 by Oleg Kovalov, who was something of an Eisenstein devotee who has also issued a documentary about the director's life. The film is, like the clumsily reconstructed version of Orson Welles' similarly unfinished *opus*, *It's All True*, which was released in 1993. They both represent a theory as to what the finished film might have been like. Unfortunately, Kovalov's version, titled *Sergei Eisenstein: Mexican Fantasy* (*Sergei Eisenstein: Mexikanskaya Fantasiya*), has seen to augment an already corrupted enterprise with unnecessary fussing with Tisse's images, while adding vulgar, crude sound effects. As D.K. Holme points out in his review of this version, "The audio track is also unduly loud. A peasant takes a spit and the sound is explosive like a bombshell. The compiler has also seen fit to overlay scratched-out words of helpful information onto the images." Kovalov's audio and visual "emendations" to Eisenstein's footage are about as necessary as adding closed-captioning to a strip-tease act. The folly is on a level with someone trying to complete Soseki's *Meian* (*Light and Darkness*). No good can come of it. The narrative Kovalov has contrived from the surviving footage is a succession of unfleshed out nonsense scenes. There's a funeral; there are some lovers flirting with each other; there is a toreador preparing to face a bull; there are modern day Mexicans posed in profile beside the carvings of their ancestors; and there are some citizens joyously celebrating the Day of the Dead, drinking out of skull cups. This film's sole interest coincides with the freeze-frame button. There, Tisse's images, under the supervision of an Eisenstein who was moving away from montage toward composing in the film frame, can be studied and appreciated in all their frozen glory, freed from the tyranny of Kovalov's imposed 'meaning.'

One might wonder why Eisenstein, a Russian director famous for films with Soviet political themes, wanted to make a film about Mexico in the first place. One might think it was because Mexico also went through a revolution, just a few years before Russia. But in fact his interest was personal. At twenty-two years of age he had designed and helped direct a stage adaptation of a Jack London story, *The Mexican*. It was at this time that he first studied the rituals, costumes and masks of Mexico, and there was something in these images that touched memories of childhood and visits to the circus. Two years after this production he was captivated by *The Mark of Zorro*, directed by Fred Niblo and starring Douglas Fairbanks. In the early 1920s, Soviet filmmakers were closely studying American films in order to advance their own technique. *The Mark of Zorro* was an example of Hollywood innovation and exuberance, but it also had a Mexican flavor, however fanciful. Eisenstein got to meet Fairbanks and Mary Pickford on their 1926 visit to Moscow. Fairbanks promised to arrange for him to make a film with United Artists, and the star couple returned home with a print of Eisenstein's new film, *The Battleship Potemkin*, to be introduced to an astonished America.

That was the year the great Mexican painter Diego Rivera also visited the Soviet Union. He and Eisenstein became friends, and Rivera spoke often about Mexican history, architecture and art. He believed that it was important for a country to preserve and draw from its cultural past, remarking at one point that it was a mistake for the Soviets to condemn their tradition of icon painting. This kind of thing went against the grain, and by the time Rivera left a year later, he was out of favor and sharply critical of Soviet ideology.

Diego's influence on Eisenstein was profound. The young filmmaker's interest in Mexican culture now became an obsession, and for the first time the idea came to him of doing a film about Mexico. Mexico seems to have represented something vital and exciting to Eisenstein. Perhaps it symbolized a freedom that he had not felt since childhood. The

call of Mexico might have been in part the call of parts of himself — imaginative, sensual, spiritual—that he had denied and that was denied validity in the new revolutionary culture. He was apparently not aware of any of these implications, but he continued to dream.

Thanks to *Potemkin*, Sergei Eisenstein had become the leading figure in a group of young artists who were breaking new ground in cinematic technique. They were part of a larger avant-garde movement which fervently believed in the promise of Soviet art. Idealists of literature, painting, theater and film saw the revolution as an opportunity for experiment, innovation, radical freedom of expression. Just as the overthrow of the old regime meant the liberation of the people, so these artists sought to overthrow old cultural restrictions, while creating completely new forms and theories which would open up the arts to the enterprise and spirit of the people.

V.I. Lenin had a different opinion. He despised the avant-garde and thought that art was only valuable as propaganda. The rise of Stalin only intensified this instinctive hostility towards the artist. “Realism” in Soviet doctrine meant positive depictions of happy, industrious workers, of a society where there was no oppression and nothing to rebel against except the foreign imperialists. Over the years it also meant an increasing glorification, practically a deification, of Stalin himself as the embodiment of this society. This numbing, simple-minded recipe, nothing less than an attempt at mass brainwashing, could only be achieved by the eradication of all concern for form and style in art. There were many reasons for this, but perhaps the most important was the basic distrust of the despot for anything subtle or ambiguous. The artist’s concern with style is inherently ambiguous, since style deals with the way things are presented more than with what is presented in terms of content. When an ideology, a doctrine of mass political utility, is the only consideration in art, then not only style but metaphor itself is suspect. The fact that Eisenstein’s *October*, surely one of the most overtly propagandistic films ever made, was criticized for its

formal abstraction, demonstrates how far the Soviets would go to squash anything experimental, no matter how well-intentioned. Imagination was too dangerous to be tolerated because it presupposed an intelligent and therefore critical mind instead of a *lumpen* mass.

Many young film directors of this period were to discover this, to their dismay. Kuleshov, Vertov, Pudovkin were all accused of “formalism” or “ideological deficiencies” at one time or another. Dovzhenko, after several triumphs, was condemned as “counter-revolutionary” and “defeatist” in 1930 for his masterpiece *Earth*, which to our modern eyes appears as an unabashedly pro-Soviet film. Artists were censored, prevented from working, humiliated by Party condemnation, imprisoned and executed. If they were lucky they managed to leave the country. Eisenstein’s own mentor, the poet and dramatist Mayakovsky, killed himself while under arrest.

Eisenstein himself was a most self-assured and assertive young man. With his wide grin, high forehead and curly hair, he looked like an impish, overgrown child. He was a brilliant conversationalist, and if he warmed to a person he was kind and friendly to a fault. But he also made a point of ignoring status and rank; he could be sharp and dismissive with his comments, and brazen with his jokes, which rubbed some people the wrong way. His film style was audacious to the extreme, carrying the theory of montage as far as it could go, which seemed much too far to the cultural commissars. Yet he remained immune to serious political pressure longer than anyone else in the Soviet film movement. The reason was the international success of *Potemkin*, which lent prestige to the Soviet film industry. Because of that movie, Eisenstein was one of the most famous directors in the world, so for the time being he was tolerated.

Still, he had fierce opponents, and his most determined enemy was Boris Shumyatsky, a film authority who never made a film, a man who thought that the technique of montage was nothing but “bourgeois trickery.” Story-telling was all that mattered, according to him, and for that

you needed simple scripts with characters who represented the vices and virtues of the warring classes. Shumyatsky seemed to have a personal animus against the irreverent and flamboyant Eisenstein, and it was he who spearheaded the attacks on *October* and *Old and New*.

That Eisenstein was actually a true believer in the revolution is incontrovertible. He never questioned the basic tenets of socialism, nor did he doubt that capitalism was the enemy of freedom, or that the idea of class struggle was the basis for understanding society and history. One might speculate, as some have, that he felt guilty about his affluent origins (his parents had been moderately wealthy and his father had fought on the side of the Whites in the civil war) and therefore stayed loyal to Soviet ideology longer than the other *avant-gardists*. But one can clearly see that his views were based on strong intellectual convictions that were wholly in keeping with his character. Eisenstein's struggle as an artist was not as a dissident against communism, but as a communist whose ways of expressing himself, as well as a certain openness in his attitude and variety in his beliefs, were constantly being challenged by the authorities. At any rate, he was at the peak of his confidence and fame in the late 1920s, and when a reason eventually presented itself for the U.S.S.R. to send someone to the west to make movies, he was the obvious choice.

People in the countries he visited always greeted him with enthusiasm, to be sure, but also with a certain degree of circumspection: People from the land of the Revolution had come on a visit. It was soon evident that it was precisely the Revolution that was on the minds of these traveling Soviet artists. Sergei Eisenstein was the most celebrated and most recognized cinematographer in the world. They offered him numerous themes for filming. They entered into many agreements with him. Or rather, they reached many an understanding without actually coming to an agreement with him. When discussion got down to simple questions, i.e. not to Eisenstein's "intellectual cinema" but to the purpose of Eisenstein's film-making, to its impact on the movie-goer, it soon

became clear that this Eisenstein was more than they had bargained for. To the consternation of the producers, the director of *Potemkin*, however versatile, could never quite let go of the Revolution when making movies. A connoisseur of the world's art, a man in love with objets d'art (and therefore a European), a man of enormous scope, Eisenstein was the kind of person Americans should have liked. Still, when all is said and done, Eisenstein remained a Soviet artist. He could not and did not want to divorce himself, however briefly, from developments sweeping through his homeland. Negotiations would invariably begin with the clients' enthusiasm and end with their fright.

Eisenstein's Mexican trip, on the other hand, turned out to be a success. As a country that had gone through its own revolution, Mexico stood to benefit from many of Eisenstein's projects. Here he came to know the pathos of the Revolution. It walked side by side with them because, though not born together, the two revolutions in question were the offspring of the same world process.

Financing the film remained an open, bleeding sore throughout the project. Eisenstein shot his movie while short on funds. As a result, his footage was sold retail by the owners down to and including the left-over film. From this footage others made all sorts of films. The man who had invented the montage of attractions was demontaged in one of his finest pictures, namely, *Qué Viva Mexico!* It was an agony for him to be denied the opportunity of editing his own film.

The Alexandrov version of the film opens with a shot of a massive pyramid, one of the great Mayan ruins at Chichen Itza on the Yucatan. We hear slow, unearthly electronic music. Cut to other shots of the pyramid and temples, of strangely beautiful stone faces, the faces of ancient gods.

The narrator is speaking in Russian (subtitled into English): "The time of the prologue is eternity. It might be today...or twenty years ago...or it might as well be a thousand." We look upward, always upward, at the structures towering above us. Quick shots of the ruined monuments,

different angles and aspects like pieces of a puzzle. Then we see people sitting next to the statuary, their faces as solemn and distant as the gods. A lone figure, seen from the side, climbs the steps of the pyramid which continue up and off the screen into infinity. Again there are shots of various people, standing and sitting in the midst of the awesome stone figures. The faces, dark Indian faces, closely resemble the statues. A man stands stiff and upright, a serape pulled around him, at the temple of Quetzalcoatl. His eyes are closed, his expression serene as if in a sacred trance. To his right is a giant figure of carved rock, in which one can trace an inhuman visage—the eyes and mouth of the plumed god. And then, most startling—a long shot of a pyramid with a close-up of a woman's face in profile bending over it, each element in complete focus, with an effect of weird, dreamlike beauty.

The end of the sequence is an old Mayan funeral ceremony. A coffin is on the ground, with three small bowls placed on top of it. Through the open upper end we can see the face of the dead man. Sitting on the ground, around the deceased, are six people. Three men are on one side, three women on the other. The men are staring fixedly towards the foot of the coffin, the women towards the head. Their faces are as impassive as that of the dead man. In another shot we see the three men, with their faces still set in an otherworldly gaze, carrying the coffin away feet first. In an eternal stillness, death and life are as one.

Like the pyramid at Chichen Itza, the film is a ruin. Eisenstein's *Qué Viva Mexico!* is a picture that was never completed, never edited by its creator, never molded into the form he had intended. The closest we can come to this ruin is through the version we are watching now, that of Grigori Alexandrov. Alexandrov was a talented artist, but he was not a genius like Eisenstein. We'll never know how the film would have looked and sounded like with its director in control.

Let us take the film score as an example. Eisenstein's notes for this prologue call for Mayan drums and a high-toned chant. The synthesizer

music in the reconstruction has an eerie quality, but it's hardly Indian or Mexican in its feeling. Furthermore, some of the notes indicate a segue from the funeral sequence into the next section of the picture (with a young woman floating down the river to a tryst with her lover, symbol of vibrant rebirth after the grave). To watch *Qué Viva Mexico* is like walking through a temple that has been rebuilt from its pieces. We recognize the beauty of the fragments while knowing that the temple, the vision of its creator, was far greater than we can see.

The first section of *Qué Viva Mexico*, following the prologue, is called "Sandunga," which is the name of a slow Oaxacan folk song which was to have accompanied it on the soundtrack. It takes place in a village located in a lush tropical forest at the southern tip of Mexico, near the Pacific. We see palm trees, monkeys, parrots, alligators gliding in the water. A young Indian woman, naked to the waist, paddles a boat down the winding river. There are shots of a happily indolent couple lounging in a hammock. The narration speaks of an ancient, sensual paradise. Gradually the episode focuses on a young girl of the village who wishes to be married. It is the custom of her people that a girl must complete a necklace of gold coins, which she earns by working and saving her whole life—the necklace will be her dowry. At last she sells enough bananas to gain her final coin. We meet her fiancé, a quiet smiling young man. We see the old women of the village examining the bride's necklace, testing the gold with their teeth. Finally comes the day of the ceremony. The wedding pair walk happily from the small church. There is a lively dance, very simple and festive, and we see a little lamb wandering among the dancers. Eventually we fade to the tropical forest again, filled with parrots and monkeys, and we see the husband walking out of the thickness to a clearing. It is two years later. His wife and son are waiting for him, and they laugh and play contentedly together. Everything in this section is so soft and blissful, so full of romance, that it's hard to believe it was shot by Eisenstein. For the first time in his film career he indulges in a feast of the senses. There seems to

be no political stance here. Neither the camera nor the narrator indicate any judgment.

“Sandunga” tends to idealize and even exoticize its subjects. Some of the shots are very pretty, and there are examples of the geometric visual composition—a face in the foreground with three figures in the back, for instance—that is characteristic of the film as a whole. Nevertheless this first section of Alexandrov’s reconstruction is by far the weakest. It lacks purpose and forcefulness. At times it seems not much more than a bland travelogue, the kind you might see in a short newsreel of the period. Alexandrov’s choice of music is quite unfortunate—instead of the Oaxacan song accompanied by guitar we hear an overly sweet Spanish-tinged melody played by syrupy strings with a bit of harpsichord. It sounds like something you used to hear in an elevator or a dentist’s office. I imagine that Eisenstein would have turned “Sandunga” into something more interesting in the cutting room, injected his usual sense of rhythm and sharp visual contrast. But as it is, it still indicates something new for him—a resurfacing of an aspect of himself that had long been repressed.

During his years in the Red Army, he had thrust the romantic artist in him to one side. We find little of that quality in his major propaganda pieces of the twenties. But in Mexico this side of him was awakened. There is a feeling of essential goodness, love of life, and a love for the young women and matriarchs in “Sandunga,” perhaps reflecting his strong bond with his own mother. We see also a respect for the Indian peoples who have maintained many traditional ways in the face of modern encroachment. This was somewhat heretical in Soviet terms, since dogma would usually view the Indians as a primitive stage of historical development which required education and modernization in order to achieve freedom. Yet in all this Eisenstein still seems like a naive outsider, his vision of tropical life owing more to the idyllic imaginings of his youth than to the everyday reality he saw before him. It is like a gentle dream

about a foreign country, which in its very foreignness symbolizes the home he longs for and to which he can never return.

Along with his two partners, Eisenstein plunged into work as soon as they arrived in Mexico City, shooting scenes from the Festival of the Virgin, and some bullfight footage. There was no scenario, not even the germ of one, but Eisenstein was ecstatic. Then, on December 20, the Mexican federal police came to their rooms, arrested the three Russians and Kimbrough, and seized all their papers. As it appeared later, unnamed private parties in Hollywood had warned the authorities that Eisenstein had not been allowed to make a picture in the U.S. because he was a communist, and that his intentions in Mexico were subversive. The government, despite its avowed revolutionary heritage, was decidedly hostile to “reds.” But there was nothing in Eisenstein’s papers to indicate any intention of wrongdoing. Kimbrough was released, and pulled some strings at the Foreign Office and elsewhere. It was with some embarrassment that the police let the Russians go a few days later, with an apology from the government and a promise of full cooperation with the making of the film.

In early ‘31, they flew to Oaxaca, which had just suffered an earthquake, and shot scenes of the disaster, with the idea of scooping the newsreels. But, it didn’t pan out and the footage hasn’t survived. Back in Mexico City, Eisenstein spent hours in the Archaeological Museum, studying the pre-Columbian civilizations. He spent some time with Diego Rivera, staying with him and his wife, Frida Kahlo, at their house in Coyoacan. Kahlo’s dreamlike paintings astonished him, as did Rivera’s great murals depicting the Spanish conquest. He was also influenced by another work—a fresco by David Siqueiros called “Burial of a Worker”—with its intense close-up of the faces of workers carrying the coffin of a slain comrade. The design is echoed in the Mayan funeral scene at the end of the prologue. Rivera also introduced him to Anita Brenner’s *Idols Behind Altars*, a book which influenced the ideas in *Qué Viva Mexico*. Two

of the book's principal theses—that the ancient Indian religion survived hidden behind the forms of Catholicism, and that Mexican mythology sought to triumph over death by laughing at it—are prominent in the film.

Any last hopes that the picture could be completed in four months had already been dispelled. It had taken Eisenstein two months just to get accustomed to his new surroundings before he could start developing an outline. By mutual agreement the \$25 thousand figure was doubled to \$50 thousand, with the idea that a higher-budgeted film would reap a much higher profit. Much of the Sinclairs' time would be taken up with raising funds from various friends and acquaintances, a task which turned out to be more difficult than expected, because of the deepening impact of the Depression. Of the additional \$25 thousand, \$15 thousand was earmarked for sound synchronization and music after shooting was done, which left \$35 thousand for Eisenstein to spend in Mexico. All the footage was sent to California to be developed, which put the director in the curious position of not being able to see any of the film that he shot. It was economically infeasible to develop the film in Mexico (in addition, Tisse's written instructions were in Russian, and the U.S. lab had someone who knew the language) —but the arrangement was a handicap to Eisenstein, since watching the “rushes” shows a director what needs to be reshot, and helps him form ideas about the film's further development.

Sinclair showed some of the early footage to a select group in L.A. in January and it caused a minor clash with Eisenstein. He didn't like any film being screened publicly that had not been edited. Sinclair agreed and promised not to do it again, but it indicates the problem inherent in the separation between the director and the material, and it was a portent of things to come. In February they went by train to Tehuantepec, in the western Mexican isthmus, where they shot much of what was to be “Sandunga.” The Indians were wary of the camera, but the payment of a few pesos won them over. It was here in the tropics that the structure of the film—a series of episodes symbolizing different aspects of the life of

Mexico—began to take shape in the director’s mind. Each episode would have a different style, with different plants and animals and music, and different aspects of Mexican history and culture, ranging from the ancient Mayan through the present day.

Eisenstein was enthralled by what he found when, in March, they went to Merida in the Yucatan. “During the same Sunday celebration,” he would write, “the blood of Christ from the morning Mass in the cathedral is mixed with the torrents of bull’s blood in the afternoon bullfight.” He intended to draw this parallel in the “Fiesta” episode. In Merida they shot the sequences featuring the young matador David Liceaga. The bullfights became something of an obsession with Eisenstein. He continued to shoot more and more footage of the “corridos” throughout the Mexican trip, to the eventual consternation of Kimbrough and Sinclair. It was in fact quite difficult to integrate the actual bullfight footage with staged close-up shots of the matadors and picadors, but it seems as if Eisenstein was looking for something else as well, a palpable connection between sacred and secular that never comes across in the film as we have it.

That April they were in Chichen Itza, filming the Mayan ruins for the film’s prologue. Eisenstein’s geometrical composition within the shots became more deliberate here. There is a still which shows him shooting the profile of an Indian woman against the background of the pyramid. The shot in the film looks like a beautiful superimposition, but the still shows that there were no special effects—the woman simply leans her head into the frame, with the focus amazingly crisp in both foreground and background.

A combination of factors, rain, cloudy days, and sickness (in short, the things one would normally expect on a location shoot) delayed the filming. *Qué Viva Mexico* is in fact composed almost entirely of exterior shots, which gives it a spacious and open-ended look unusual for its time. It also made filming long and laborious, particularly since Eisenstein was a very slow and careful director to begin with. The scenario was growing

and taking shape, the idea of the film becoming grander in the director's mind, a development which was as natural to the artist as it was dangerous to the limits of the budget. Much time was spent in travel—by train, bus or car, sometimes by donkey or even oxcart—checking out a town or other location that would often be a dead end, working in oppressive heat or mugginess or dust. Through it all Eisenstein was focused on the work, leaving Kimbrough to handle the money and most of the correspondence with Sinclair.

During this period, he seemed to have become an entirely new person. Taking pen and paper, he began to draw, something he had not done since childhood. He filled books with his sketches, mostly in pencil, which flowed from his unconscious, helping him to visualize aspects of the film as he went along. In themselves they are remarkable works of art. The figures of peasant women, bullfighters, Indians, priests, animals, and many others, were drawn with a clear line in a flowing, abstract style which verges on the surreal. The sketches reveal great energy; some of them have an erotic content which seems both refreshingly innocent and charged with archetypal meaning. The sketches on religious themes, most often of Madonnas and crucified Christs, have a curious, pagan boldness. Eisenstein was tapping into a deeper part of himself in Mexico. His dream was taking shape—a group of peons stand against a wall, their expressions firm and impassive. Peasants carefully suck the juice from a huge maguey cactus. Riding over the desert expanse, against a bright and immense sky, is a young man with his fiancée. We are in part three of the film: "Maguey." It is a story of the powerful crushing the powerless. The tone is weary, yet majestic, and deeply sad. The time is prior to the revolution, in the days of the dictator Porfirio Diaz. Sebastian, the young man, brings Maria, his bride-to-be, to the hacienda, for the traditional approval bestowed by the rich landlord. Sebastian must wait at the foot of the steps while Maria is led to the great balcony where the landlord entertains his guests, who ogle her. The landlord's daughter then arrives in

a carriage, and in the hubbub, the forgotten Maria begins to leave. But one of the guests, a drunkard, accosts her and pulls her into a room. When she emerges later she is crying. The impatient Sebastian climbs the steps and sees the drunken man laughing over the prostrate girl. He starts to fight, but is overpowered and ejected from the hacienda, while Maria is kept imprisoned there. He then plots vengeance with three of his friends, and they mount an attack with gunfire. The brave attempt is repulsed, and they flee, pursued by the hired soldiers of the landlord, along with the landlord's daughter, eager for excitement. There is a gun battle among the maguey on the plain, and the landlord's daughter is killed. Three of the rebels, including Sebastian, are captured, while the fourth, wounded, hides among the cacti. The daughter's body is brought back to the hacienda among shouts of grief. The three young men are tied up, led out to the desert, and in full view of the fourth man. He remains in hiding, weeping as he watches. He watches as they are forced to dig holes and are then buried up to their shoulders in the earth. The armed men ride over the prisoners on their horses, forward and backward, trampling them to death. Later, Maria is set free. She walks out to the desert, sees the mangled half-buried body of her lover, and falls to the ground.

The sense of space is very rigorous in "Maguey." The hacienda towers over the peons as they look at what seems an unattainable mountain of power. The contrast between the expanse of the desert and the cramped feeling of the sequence in the hacienda puts into visual terms the gulf between the lives and the values of the peasants and that of their corrupt lords. (We are treated to a cruder form of political symbolism with an image of the pigs drinking the beer during the landlord's party.) In this section Eisenstein also achieves striking visual effects: the peasants crossing in a line along the horizon, the early image of one of Sebastian's friends putting the "torito" (a bull's head mask that shoots firecrackers) over his head and imitating the bull fight—an echo of "Fiesta" and a foreshadowing of the rebels' fate.

The sequence featuring the execution shows once again the figure of three men, hands bound and naked to the waist. They are arranged against the cloudy sky like the image of those who met their fate on Calvary. Their faces express stony defiance, resignation, and fear, but it is also as if they have gone beyond their individual selves into a mythic dimension—a statue of grim suffering and injustice. After they are buried to their shoulders, and the horses run over them (an illusion which is achieved fairly well, considering the state of special effects at that time), the film achieves a kind of tragic contemplation, an image of anguish which is starkly beautiful, horrifying, and primal. It is one of the most powerful sequences in Eisenstein’s career, and it alone raises *Qué Viva Mexico* to greatness.

While the story of “Maguey” on paper smacks of melodrama, with its reliance on the motif of men fighting to protect their women, and the old theme of the “droit du seigneur,” the carrying out of the story on film has the simplicity of heart, and the elemental political sense to make it work. Eisenstein portrays class struggle, but he doesn’t lose sight of the actual people involved. His attention to formal composition and detail unites the personal and the universal. These are individuals who suffer and witness what occurs, not some vague general mass. Eisenstein’s concern with form is therefore humanistic, because it implies a reverence for the unique, the individual, which can also serve as the archetypal. He was willing to look at the personal tragedy without dressing it up with slogans or heroism or victory, and this gives “Maguey” a truthfulness which sets it apart from mere propaganda.

Lastly, there is something that has been evident since the prologue, but which still must be said. *Qué Viva Mexico*, as we have it, is essentially a silent film. It was not meant to be, but it is hard to imagine now how the spoken word would have been synchronized with these images. The movie has a total focus on the image which is characteristic of the last phase of the silent era, and not at all of the emerging talkies. The reconstruction has

a musical soundtrack, indeed (and the music Alexandrov chose for “Maguey”—a sad, martial theme with guitars—is just right for once), and a narration, most of which could have been dispensed with, and there are no intertitles. But at heart it is silent all the same. It is ironic that Eisenstein’s trip to the west, supposedly to learn about the sound film, resulted in this strange visual poem for which speech is not needed.

From the moment he arrived at Tetlapayac in May, Eisenstein later said, he knew it was the place he had been looking for all his life. The hacienda was a beautiful building, with high towers and coral pink walls. It had been built by the conquistadors. He felt that the ghosts of history haunted the place. The residents of the town, not only the people he paid to act in the film, seemed to take to him immediately as if he was a lost brother. For Eisenstein, whose habit of disregarding social niceties usually left him isolated, the love and acceptance he felt there was a liberating experience.

The “Maguey” shoot, however, turned out to be far more arduous. This was because the rainy season had begun, and filming ended up being restricted to just a few hours a week. Originally planned for eight weeks, the hacienda section dragged on for twice that long. In June, Eisenstein made it known to Sinclair that he would need \$15 thousand more to complete the movie—the amount that had been reserved for synchronization. More money would have to be sought, but from where? This was, of course, unwelcome tidings for Sinclair. His wife had experienced exhaustion and ill health, which he partly blamed on the strain of raising money for the film. They had been unable to come up with enough to reach \$50 thousand, and had therefore ended up borrowing on their mortgage. Now Eisenstein needed more. The backers were uncertain whether they could get a return on their money.

One could well imagine, therefore, that Sinclair’s patience would eventually begin to wear thin. Throughout the process he had been in touch with Amkino, the Russian film distribution service in America, apprising

them of Eisenstein's progress. In mid-June he wrote Amkino's representative, L. I. Monosson, to ask if Moscow would be willing to invest \$25 thousand in the picture, offering a share in the profits and the donation of a certain quantity of his books to the Soviet Union for its libraries. Around the same time he attempted to sell the project outright to certain parties, which indicates a feeling that he'd gotten into something too big to handle. But there were no takers who could offer enough to recoup most of the Sinclairs' losses. It also took some effort to get the Russians' visas extended again.

Sinclair's irritation was evident from his comments on the footage: "Is this man mad?" he asked, as he watched repeat after repeat of the same shots. He simply didn't understand that it was normal to shoot that much for a film of feature length, or that 125,000 feet was comparable to other exterior shoots such as those for any sort of docudrama.

Then there was the egregious incident in July—one of the young actors in "Maguey" stole a pistol from the cameraman, and playing with it, accidentally killed his sister. Panicked, he ran into the Maguey fields pursued by horsemen. He was captured by the same man who played his captor in the film. After the man was charged with manslaughter, Eisenstein, with a dedication to the work that seems more than a little cold-blooded, managed to get him released under police guard for a few days in order to complete his part in the film.

Eisenstein filmed the festival of Corpus Christi at Tetlapayac, with the idea of interspersing scenes from it with the sequence of the execution. It was to be the most complex piece of montage in the film, according to his notes, with an intended link between the ceremony of the Sacrament (the body and blood of Christ) and the literal trampling of bodies and shedding of blood in the execution. But this cross-editing was never done, and the footage has been lost. Eisenstein's increasing interest in religious symbolism is unusual for a Soviet director. His use of religion in the film has an admittedly ironic tone, but the effect is not that of a critique so much

as an acknowledgment of the significance of religious imagery in relation to actual political conflict and suffering.

Eisenstein was becoming attuned to a visual language that went beyond Soviet typology. When he first shot the sequence of the bound men standing and waiting for their fate, he discovered that they posed in the figure of the triangle without any direction from him. To him, this meant that the motif of three (man, world, God) was inherent in the work rather than something projected onto it. He was elated by this realization.

In late August, his mood would darken after a letter from Sinclair. Although Sinclair knew that the Mexican film was intended as an alternative to the conventional Hollywood model, he had come to believe that the film's episodic structure, with no single narrative thread, would prevent it from gaining any further financial backing. He therefore proposed that "Magüey" be made as a separate picture—it was a clear-cut story with beginning, middle and end, the kind of story that could be sold to American audiences—and the profits from this separate film could get them back on their feet financially so that Eisenstein could go back to Mexico to finish his greater vision. Nothing could have been further from Eisenstein's own conception of the work. "You cannot take out of 'Hamlet' the scene of the death of Polonius," he replied, "make another drama of it and then use 'the rest' for another one. Our picture is a strict Mexican 'menu' and cannot be sold 'a la carte.'" He suggested attempting a co-production deal with a studio, perhaps they could try Laemmle at Universal. Meanwhile, relations with Kimbrough were deteriorating. He was impatient with the continued footage of bullfights and fiestas, and was advising Sinclair to clamp down and order the film completed by a deadline.

In the midst of this darkness came a ray of light in early September. Monosson informed Sinclair that Amkino was agreeing to participate with \$25,000, with the condition that this was the absolute limit of funding, and that the film could not be continued once that limit was reached. Once

again, \$15 thousand would be kept in reserve for post-shooting synchronization, with \$10 thousand to go to filming in progress. But with a caution that illustrated Sinclair's growing mistrust, this development was kept a secret from Eisenstein, with only \$5 thousand sent for the time being, in the fear that he would insist on using the earmarked \$15 thousand as he had before.

Mrs. Sinclair became ill with ptomaine poisoning on the twelfth of September. A few days later, Sinclair himself collapsed and was hospitalized. He was diagnosed with a hernia and a kidney infection, complicated by nervous strain and overwork. The exciting project of 1930 had turned into a crushing burden in '31, and after he got out of the hospital, Sinclair was focused only on getting the film completed as quickly as possible, with less and less attention paid to Eisenstein's objections. Eisenstein was still focused on his dream, his grand vision, with little regard for practical consideration or compromise. Blindness and intransigence on both sides were leading to ruin.

In the next sequence of the film we are viewing, the film is suddenly interrupted, and we see Alexandrov himself, in color, watching the picture in his screening room. He turns to us and explains that the next section was to be called "Soldadera." It would depict the women who accompanied the Revolutionary Army in 1910, going ahead to villages to gather food and supplies for the soldiers, feeding and caring for the wounded, and burying the dead. This episode was to be the culmination of all that had gone before: a vision of the people rising up to win their freedom, enduring immense suffering and privation, triumphing over the despotism that had been portrayed so vividly in "Maguey."

This section concerns a woman named Pancha who is first married to a federalist soldier who is killed in battle. She then marries a Zapatista and follows Zapata's army into war. When the troops take a military train, she and the other soldaderas get on board with them. During the long ride she gives birth to a child. The train stops, the soldiers go off to go into battle.

Her husband does not return. When the guns are quiet she goes out to the battlefield, finds the body, and buries it with her own hands. Soon after, the Revolution is victorious, and she can finally rest from her labors with hopes for a new life, both for her family and her country.

It was fitting, and perhaps inevitable, that the film would climax on a political note. The contract had actually stipulated that the film would not be political, but it was easy to get around that; this was all about events that had happened two decades earlier. There was no overt criticism of the present Mexican regime, as indeed there couldn't be, since all the rushes were reviewed by the Mexican Consul to make sure that nothing "defamatory" to Mexico had been filmed. But Eisenstein believed in revolution, and "Soldadera" was to dramatize the eruption of the people's will against tyranny. That it was to be shown through the point of view of women was a bold stroke. Instead of the usual stories of women staying at home, worrying and grieving, "Soldadera" was to show women as a vital, active part of the fighting.

"Imagine!" wrote Eisenstein. "500 women in an endless cactus desert, dragging through clouds of dust household goods, beds, their children, their wounded, their dead, and the white-clad peasant soldiers in straw hats follow them. We show them march into Mexico City...with the cathedral bells ringing the victory of the first revolution..."

Alexandrov, in a voice of casual resignation, explains to us that "Soldadera" was never shot. They ran out of money and time, he says, and therefore they had to go home without finishing the film. Thus, with a shrug of his shoulders, he disposes of all the conflict and controversy that ended *Qué Viva Mexico*, as if to say, "Ah, that was over forty years ago. Eisenstein and Sinclair are dead. Why stir anything up again? Let us forget all that and just let it be."

It is hardly uncommon for the costs of making a film to exceed the original budget, if only because the original conception in the director's mind tends expand as the actual work of the film progresses. A producer,

therefore, will usually be prepared to put more money into a picture if it promises to be a good one. But Eisenstein's producer didn't have cash reserves. Any expansion of the creative idea meant further strain on Upton Sinclair's energy and resources. In October of 1931, Eisenstein was asking for an additional \$20-25 thousand to complete the film. Sinclair countered that the picture had to be finished with \$10 thousand, with "Soldadera" and the bullfight story ("Fiesta") to be completed as quickly as possible. It was with some justice that he argued that Eisenstein was looking for a formal perfection that was not possible within the parameters of the original agreement.

He was bargaining with Amkino at the same time, trying to get them to agree to allow more of their money to be allocated to filming in Mexico rather than synchronization in L.A. But they wouldn't budge, and Monosson insisted on a definite budget and schedule from Eisenstein as well. The director went to the Pacific coast to shoot tropical footage for "Sandunga," promising to be back in a few days. He was gone for two weeks instead, cabling Kimbrough for money at regular intervals. The latter expressed his feelings about Eisenstein in a letter to Sinclair: "He has wasted many days when it was not necessary. He acts like a dictator. He demands money immediately, again and again and again.... He is thinking only of his artistic triumph. He will squeeze every nickel possible from you, then threaten that the picture will not be marketable unless completed properly.... He is a super egotist. And many people, including myself, think he is some kind of a pervert." Another letter from Kimbrough after Eisenstein's return to Mexico City is revealing: "I am a little rough with him these days.... He is like a negro. Kind words and consideration are not enough. It just goes over his head." None of this was calculated to ease Sinclair's fears. In an angry letter he told Eisenstein that he did not know a single person, including his wife, who did not think Sinclair was crazy for standing by Eisenstein this long. Indeed, Mary Sinclair had completely given up on the Mexican project, and she wanted the whole thing over with

—which must have been a considerable source of pressure on Sinclair throughout the ordeal.

The director knew that ten thousand would not be enough. He could not hurry the process, he had to go at his own pace. “I want you to understand,” he wrote, “that the shooting of a picture is going on different parts of it at the same time.” The episodes needed to be rounded out in order to fit into the whole. He said that costs could be cut in the musical aspects later, that music wasn’t as important a factor in this case. “I also want to point out that the very small production cost difference which exists between a ‘smashed’ picture and a picture worked up to perfection, make an enormous income difference in the box office.” It is a testament not only to Eisenstein’s powers of persuasion, but also to Sinclair’s continued belief in the picture, that at this late date, after the \$10 thousand ultimatum and the conflicts with Kimbrough, Eisenstein’s funding was extended to \$16 thousand! It would be necessary to persuade Amkino to allow more of its \$25 thousand to go towards filming, or else find other investors.

In early November, during the Day of the Dead festivities, Eisenstein set to work filming while Sinclair tried to raise more cash. The Day of the Dead shoot went beautifully. Critics were allowed to see some of the film by Sinclair. Among these was Edmund Wilson. They were all publicly effusive about its merit. Eisenstein had even submitted a schedule and budget which fell within the \$16 thousand limit. With cautious optimism, Sinclair instructed the director to shoot the remaining scenes from the other episodes first, so that they would then have an idea of how much money was available to make “Soldadera.” Unfortunately, the bad feelings between Kimbrough and Eisenstein came to the fore again, with Eisenstein writing to accuse Sinclair’s brother-in-law of drunkenness and antisemitic comments. It is difficult to ascertain how much truth there was, if any, in Eisenstein’s claim that Kimbrough was disrupting the shoot by drinking, not being able to get out of bed, and so forth. The fact is that Kimbrough

always denied it, Sinclair believed him, and this only reinforced his distrust of Eisenstein. It is evident that Eisenstein's real complaint concerned the heavy-handed manner in which Kimbrough supervised the project, which became more and more difficult for the proud Russian to endure.

Money had yet to come from Amkino. Unbeknownst to Sinclair, political schemes were afoot. Shumyatsky recalled Monosson to Moscow and replaced him with Victor Smirnov, one of his toadies. This was the first step in a process by which Shumyatsky and others were planning to humiliate Eisenstein. It was impossible for Sinclair to imagine the political climate in the Soviet Union at the time. The era of the "Great Purges" was beginning—a time of terror and deadly infighting, when no lie was too outlandish to be employed in destroying those within the Party who were perceived as being in the way of "progress." Eisenstein's prolonged absence was the perfect excuse for Shumyatsky to hang his enemy out to dry. Disturbing rumors reached Sinclair in late November. There was said to be talk in Russia of Eisenstein being a traitor.

At this point catastrophe struck: a telegram from Joseph Stalin himself: *Eisenstein has lost his comrades' confidence in Soviet Union STOP He is thought to be deserter who broke off with his own country STOP Am afraid the people will have no interest in him soon.* The message was as shifty and enigmatic as most pronouncements from the Great Leader (the statement that "the people" would have no interest in Eisenstein, for instance, reflected only the opinion of Stalin himself, who obviously had the final say concerning who was out of favor) but the meaning was clear. Eisenstein was in trouble and was expected to return home soon. Sinclair, to his credit, vigorously defended Eisenstein from any charges of disloyalty in his reply. According to Smirnov, there was confusion in Soviet cinematic circles about why it was taking so long for Eisenstein to finish his Mexican film. He wrote Sinclair that Eisenstein had never had official permission to prolong his stay, but that Eisenstein had written saying that it was Sinclair who was preventing him from returning to Russia. This was

nothing less than trickery on the part of Smirnov—the Soviets had always had the power to order Eisenstein home at any time, and Sinclair had been in full communication with Amkino from the start. It is clear that Shumyatsky was deliberately sowing discord between Sinclair and Eisenstein. The ax fell on December 5: A telegraph from Amkino stated that they were “delaying” the spending of money on the picture. In other words, they were threatening to withdraw from their agreement with Sinclair. Naturally, Sinclair was astonished and indignant. “The contract with me is a valid one,” he wrote Smirnov, “both legally and morally, and it is binding upon Amkino.... It seems to me that it is a breach of faith even to propose repudiating it.” All the plans and schedules had been set with the assumption that \$25 thousand would be forthcoming. Other investors had been encouraged to support the film on the strength of this promise. Negotiations continued frantically through the end of the year.

Around this time time, Kimbrough returned to California with a tale featuring Eisenstein as a liar and “proving” that one should not to believe anything he said. It was decided that Kimbrough would be given full authority to supervise any shooting, and to keep the director to a strict economy. Sinclair’s frustration blinded him to the fact that the relationship between Kimbrough and Eisenstein was beyond repair. When the former returned to Mexico City in January 1932, Eisenstein would not even speak to him. Repeated attempts by Sinclair to negotiate an understanding with Amkino met with a wall of silence, and he simply had to recognize that the Soviets had reneged on their agreement. The only way to force them to honor their words would be to sue them, but since that would mean a public rift between the famous socialist writer and the Soviet Union he had done so much to support, he would not even consider that step. (Perhaps this is exactly what Shumyatsky had counted on.) That crushing disappointment, combined with another emphatic refusal by Eisenstein to work under Kimbrough’s supervision, caused Sinclair to finally give up. The order went out to stop filming.

A fairly clear indication of Eisenstein's state of mind at this time can be found in excerpts from a letter he sent to his friend Viertel, who was a scenarist for MGM: "Kimbrough...poisons our existence and creates an atmosphere in which it is impossible to work. I wrote this to Sinclair, whereupon he abruptly halted our work. The last part of my film, containing all the elements of a fifth act, is ruthlessly ripped out, and you know what this means. It's as if Ophelia were ripped out from Hamlet.... Without this sequence the film loses its meaning, unity, and its final dramatic impact: it becomes a display of un-integrated episodes. Each of these episodes now points towards this end and this resolution.... We have 500 soldiers, which the Mexican Army has given us for 30 days, 10,000 guns and 50 cannons, all for nothing. We have discovered an incredible location and have brilliantly solved the whole event in our scenario. We need only \$7,000 or \$8,000 to finish it, which we could do in a month.... Sinclair stopped the production and intends to throw before the people a truncated stump with the heart ripped out!... A film is not a sausage which tastes the same if you eat three quarters of it."

Beseeking Sinclair, Eisenstein promised to work under Kimbrough without complaining, if only "Soldadera" could be shot. He cabled Moscow, requesting leave to finish the film, claiming that Kimbrough's authority was not binding, since it was imposed on him by force, and that the Mexican government wanted "Soldadera" completed. He received no response, but Smirnov, still carefully pitting one side against the other, informed Sinclair of the telegram. It became Sinclair's conviction for the rest of his life that Eisenstein hated Russia and wanted to stay in Mexico indefinitely to avoid returning, perhaps searching for some way to claim asylum in another country. He came to believe that the director's vision of a six-part epic was a ruse to keep him in Mexico, that in fact he was making six separate films which could not possibly be made into one movie, and concealing this fact from Sinclair. Much of this proved to be incorrect if not delusional. But it is an interesting question—was Eisenstein planning to defect?

More than likely, given his political convictions and his bad experiences in the west, the result was inevitable. But he certainly had reasons, other than the film, to delay his homecoming. He must have known something of the purges that were going on. Returning could be dangerous, perhaps even fatal. And in addition, he had come to love Mexico very deeply. The heartfelt joy and the awakening of hitherto repressed creative energies during his Mexican trip must have seemed preferable to the ominous rumblings from Russia.

This was the end. Eisenstein and his companions traveled north to the border in February, where they were delayed for over three weeks because the Immigration service refused to admit them. It was decided not to renew their visas, but to merely allow them a temporary permit to drive to New York from Laredo, and then sail to Russia. Meanwhile Sinclair had proposed to ship a positive print to Moscow, to be edited by Eisenstein in two months, with all film to be returned to Hollywood thereafter for synchronization. The negatives would remain with Sinclair. Eisenstein's despair and fury compelled him to an action which turned out to be one of his worst mistakes. He packed a trunk of unwanted things and sent it to Sinclair, who had to claim it at the Customs Office. When the trunk was opened in Sinclair's presence, scattered on top of the belongings was a series of homoerotic sketches.

Having sought to deliberately embarrass "that Puritan" (Sinclair), Eisenstein had succeeded far too well. The Customs officials wanted to confiscate the trunk, and needed persuasion to allow it in the country. The drawings were "not a work of art, nor anything of that sort," wrote Sinclair later, but "plain smut," and Eisenstein was a "sexual pervert" who hung around with "homos." From then on, he refused all communications from Eisenstein or his supporters. When Eisenstein took seventeen days to travel from Laredo to New York, stopping at various places along the way, Sinclair took it as a final confirmation of his indifference to returning to Russia, and to Sinclair's own reputation with the Soviets. In his anger, he

reversed himself and declared that Eisenstein would not be allowed to cut the picture at all. When he discovered that Eisenstein had actually viewed some of the rushes in New York, he was livid, and demanded the immediate return of the positives. Amkino dragged its feet and Sinclair brought out his lawyers, a quite unprecedented move for him. The print was returned, and Eisenstein set sail in mid-April, never to see his film again.

To save something from his investment, Sinclair supervised the editing of the “Maguey” section into a feature film which was called *Thunder Over Mexico*. It was released in 1933. The film met with opposition from Communists, and others who supported Eisenstein. There was a bitter war of words in the newspapers. The picture did not do well. More than that, it damaged Sinclair’s reputation in the American left. He was seen as the betrayer of a great artist’s vision, a phony socialist whose only real concern was making money. Consequently, he moved more to the center, and even won the Democratic nomination for Governor in ‘34. He almost won, but to the mainstream politicians of his day, including the Democratic party machine, he was still a dangerous radical. Among the forces that played a part in the scare tactics that led to his defeat were the Hollywood studios. Sinclair was a survivor, though. Although he never again achieved the popularity he had enjoyed in the 20s, his books still sold, and he won the Pulitzer Prize in 1942 for *Dragon’s Teeth*.

Bits and pieces of the Mexican film turned up in other productions. The epilogue was made into a short called *Death Day*. Some of the bullfight scenes could be seen in certain Paramount films. Bell & Howell made documentary shorts using “Sandunga” and “Fiesta” footage. Other scenes were pieced together for a 1940 film called *Time in the Sun*. Critical appraisal was negative, popular reaction nil.

For the rest of his life, Eisenstein was disconsolate over the loss of his Mexican film. He did not make a film for five years after his return to Russia, concentrating on theoretical writings.

In 1937, *Bezhin Meadow* was suppressed. But the next year, 1938, with the advent of *Alexander Nevsky*, he managed to return to favor. This was followed by a brief period of disfavor during the non-aggression pact with Hitler. His last work, *Ivan the Terrible* (1945-46), was first honored, then condemned after Part Two revealed the old Czar as uncomfortably similar to the paranoid, tyrannical Stalin. Eisenstein died in January 1948. He was only fifty years old. In his last days he began to talk about Mexico again. The resentment and the hurt were still there—he never seemed to have accepted his part of the blame for what happened. But there was also a wistful nostalgia, and a recognition that Mexico had changed his life as an artist for the better, despite all the dire consequences for his career. And to the end, he drew sketches of things he had seen in Mexico.

Miraculously, some vestiges of the film were saved for the future. Sinclair turned the remaining footage over to the Museum of Modern Art in 1954. He died in 1968 at the age of 90. Towards the end he had offered no objection to Alexandrov's idea of reconstructing the film. A year after his death, MOMA exchanged several thousand feet of *Qué Viva Mexico* for several Soviet films. Alexandrov's version is a gorgeous work, yet the absence of "Soldadera," and the hand of Eisenstein to edit the picture, gives it a limp quality at times. The film attains a certain degree of greatness during moments of the prologue, the early part of "Fiesta," and for most of "Maguey" and the epilogue.

Eisenstein, who rose to prominence by infusing propaganda with the flame of art, came to Mexico and found there a new dimension in himself: a warmth, humor, sensuality, and a kind of spirituality as well. The little Mexican movie grew into his most ambitious and imaginative effort. But there were other forces at work, forces we all must deal with—the exigencies of money, politics and its power struggles, the very necessity to compromise with others in order to achieve one's vision. Eisenstein was inexperienced in all these areas, and it cost him dearly. With remarkable parallels to the fate of Orson Welles and, perhaps even to Michael Cimino

(both of whom allowed *hubris* to ruin their careers), it is the old story of the genius who founders on the demands of the day-to-day. There are plenty of others to blame, but there is also no escaping the fact that Eisenstein's own character flaws (his lack of openness, his isolation from practical matters, his disregard for the needs of others in the pursuance of his goal) helped to doom a potential masterpiece.

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* *Qué Viva Mexico* available on VHS/DVD from Kino Video**