

La venganza de Pancho Villa

By Laura Isabel Serna, PhD

“La venganza de Pancho Villa” (dir. Felix Padilla, ca. 1930) roughly follows the life of Mexican revolutionary general and sometime rebel Francisco “Pancho” Villa (1878-1923). In an hour Villa revels in his victory over Federalist forces at Torreón, loots the hacienda of a Spanish landowner, enters Mexico City in triumph, suffers a serious setback as his men faceoff against regiments led by General Álvaro Obregón, and confronts U.S. forces multiple times. In a short coda Villa retires to life in the country before meeting his death at the wrong end of an assassin’s gun. This remarkable film, an amateur production really, consists of footage from American silent feature films, serials, and newsreel footage (from both the U.S. and Mexico) complemented by filmed still photographs and bits of original scenes made by its maker Felix Padilla.¹ Intertitles, some in Spanish, some bilingual have been appropriated from other films or were created by Padilla. Villa is played by at least four different actors, including Villa himself.

Upon the film’s inclusion in the National Film Registry, an official press release declared that the film provides evidence of “a vital Mexican-American film presence during the 1910-30s.”² Non-fiction filmmaker and preservationist Gregorio Rocha, instrumental in the film’s preservation, has called “La venganza de Pancho Villa” — a film before its time — that resembles the hybrid, oppositional media being produced in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands today.³ Indeed the film is oppositional in two ways. First, it participates in the broader postrevolutionary project of constructing (and re-constructing) the revolution through “collective memory, mythmaking, and history writing.”⁴ In this case, the film promotes Villa as a regional and popular folk hero in opposition to official silence on his legacy from the time of his death through the mid 1930s.⁵ Second and most emphatically, the film critiques American cinema’s one-dimensional portrayal of Villa as a bloodthirsty bandit. Its recontextualization of negative portrayals of Villa disrupts the powerful stereotypes of Mexicans put into circulation by the American film industry, recuperating Villa and by extension all Mexican men.

Understanding “La Venganza” requires a brief detour into Félix Padilla’s career as a film exhibitor. In the early 1920s, he and a partner ran a theater in a mixed-race neighborhood in East El Paso that catered to Mexican audiences who were de facto barred from the city’s Anglo theaters. When that theater closed he turned his hand to itinerant exhibition.⁶ He began to tour a regular circuit, comprised of small towns on ei-

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Heroes.

Americans are not the heroes in the Spanish translation of the intertitle above. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

ther side of the border, in a Studebaker truck that carried a portable projector, a hand-cranked 78-rpm phonograph, a selection of records, a collection of used films, and posters that could be tailored to program and venue.⁷ Padilla obtained his somewhat dated film — westerns, comedies, and dramas — from second-hand dealers in Los Angeles and used connections in Mexico City to obtain at least two slightly less dated Mexican.⁸ In this way, Padilla crisscrossed the border, working terrain neglected or underserved by the film exhibition infrastructure in either country.

Padilla’s experience as an exhibitor informed, indeed facilitated, his cinematic practice. Like other exhibitors from the silent period he had experience putting programs together to accommodate time constraints and local tastes. He had access to the materials required to make a compilation film—a stash of old films, a camera, a cutting table—and he had connections to venues where audiences would appreciate the compelling re-packaging of both racist and historical images from previous decades.

As its title suggests, the primary theme of “La Venganza” is revenge. On the level of narrative, the film’s abbreviated version of Villa’s life story unfolds as a series of attacks on his enemies, primarily though not exclusively Americans. Revenge also operates on the broader level of representation as negative images of Villa in particular and Mexican men more generally are reassembled and recuperated. This reclamation of Villa who while still a controversial revolutionary figure on a national level remained perennially popular in large parts of northern Mexico because of his defiant attitude towards the United States is accomplished by recontextualizing footage gleaned from a range of sources, mixing narrative and documentary, offering audiences visual perspectives that encouraged identi-

fication with Villa, and privileging repetition and spectacle over continuity.

Here I focus on the way the film mobilizes repetition and spectacle. Throughout the film the primary locus of Villa's anti-imperialist heroism resides in the repeated (and repetitive) staging of his confrontations with the U.S. military. "La venganza" presents a series of U.S. military incursions into Mexican territory and Villa's swift and uncompromising response. While two of these attacks are linked to historical events, they serve less as temporal markers than as steps to the spectacular final battle sequence that takes place not in "real" time but in the perpetual cinematic and social space of Anglo-Mexican conflict. These sequences reverse the motivational logic of their U.S. source texts in which Mexican depredations provoke Anglo punitive action. Instead, U.S. troops menace Mexico and Villa and his fighters pursue them and engage them in hand-to-hand combat. Collectively, these battle sequences with chases on horseback, gunfire, and dramatic death scenes constitute the emotional center of the film. The attacks flow one into the next exploding in the final, extended confrontation between American soldiers and the villistas (staged using footage from the five-reel feature "Lieutenant Danny U.S.A." (1916) and the twenty-part Universal Film serial "Liberty: A Daughter of the U.S.A." (1916) from which Villa's men emerge triumphant. In that sequence the Padilla's employ shot/counter shot to give audiences a unique perspective on events, like battles, difficult to render in other media. In this case medium long shots of Villa's men aiming their guns and firing alternate with close-ups of American soldiers falling under a rain of bullets. Mexican audiences, who regularly witnessed the defeat and often the humiliation of the Mexican bandit/revolutionary on screen, had the pleasure of experiencing Villa's dominance over Anglo troops multiple times. In this way, viewers are asked to read these films against the grain, effectively converting Villa the villain into a hero. The openness of these texts to alternate readings is demonstrated by an intertitle that appears during this heated battle scene. A bilingual intertitle that reads in Spanish "Los villistas acabaron con todo el destacamento Americano" (The villistas did away with the entire American deployment). In English the title reads "The American soldiers died like heroes."

Padilla's film marshaled gathered footage in the service of a spectacle that would have put the most action-packed western to shame. Imagine the thrill Mexican audiences on either side of the border got from seeing Villa emerge victorious from his multiple encounters with American troops in "La venganza." He was after all a regional hero and the anti-imperialist stance he took midway through the revolution resonated with many Mexicans along the U.S.-Mexico border who lived with Anglo discrimination. In

the first few decades of the twentieth century tense race relations in the El Paso-Jaurez region, one manifestation of which was segregated viewing contexts, nurtured oppositional readings of American films and acts of imagination that converted villains into heroes.⁹

¹ The film as it exists today was reconstructed from surviving footage according to the Padilla's production notes and Félix's collection of phonographic records were donated by his family to the American Film Institute in 2004. My analysis of the film is based on a digitized copy of this footage provided to me by Gregorio Rocha. As Rocha has noted some footage is missing from this version, particularly material related to Villa's early life. Rocha came upon the film while researching his documentary *Los rollos perdidos de Pancho Villa* (CONACULTA/FONCA, 2003), which chronicled his search for the lost Mutual Film Company footage of Villa from the film *The Life of General Villa* (1914).

² Library of Congress News Releases, "Michael Jackson, the Muppets and Early Cinema Tapped for Preservation in 2009 Library of Congress National Film Registry, accessed February 17, 2009, <http://www.loc.gov/today/pr/2009/09-250.html>.

³ Gregorio Rocha, "La venganza de Pancho Villa (*The Vengeance of Pancho Villa*): A Lost and Found Border Film," *Journal of Film Preservation* 65 (2003): 29.

⁴ Thomas Benjamin, *La Revolución: Mexico's Greatest Revolution as Memory, Myth, and History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 19.

⁵ See Anne Marie McGee, "Body Politics and the Figure of Pancho Villa: From National Exclusion to Regional Resurrection," *Anuario de Estudios Americanos* 67, no. 2 (2010): 428.

⁶ See Kathryn H. Fuller *At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture*. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian, 1996. (1996) and George Potamianos "Movies at the Margins: The Distribution of Films to Theaters in Small-Town America, 1895-1919," in *American Silent Film: Discovering Marginalized Voices*, ed. Gregg Bachman and Thomas J. Slater (Canondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 9-26. On Mexico see Claire F. Fox, "Fan Letters to the Cultural Industries: Border Literature about Mass Media," in *Globalization on the Line: Culture, Capital, and Citizenship at U.S. Borders*, ed. Claudia Sadowski-Smith, 121-46 (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002). Félix's own itinerant practice is the subject of an impressionist documentary film by Gregorio Rocha, *Acme and Co.: historias del cine viajero* (CONACULTA 2006).

⁷ Magdalena Arias, interview by author, El Paso, Tex., 10 October 2004. Edmundo Padilla, interview by Magdalena Arias, El Paso Tex. 30 November 1976 (Arias 2004 and Padilla 1976). Arias, Magdalena. 2004. Interview by author. El Paso, Tex., 10 October. Padilla, Edmundo. 1976. Interview by Magdalena Arias, El Paso, Texas, 30 November, University of Texas at El Paso, Institute of Oral History.

⁸ Arias, 2004. Padilla collection, private, El Paso, Tex.

⁹ I have written at length about this film in an essay on which this shorter version is based. Laura Isabel Serna, "La Venganza de Pancho Villa: Resistance and Repetition," *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 37, no. 2 (fall 2012): 11-42.

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