

# The UNAM Film Archives

## 50 Years of Cinema in the University

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Still from *La mancha de sangre* (Bloodstain), Adolfo Best Maugard (1933).

After digitally restoring images from its collection, the UNAM Film Archives just debuted the documentary *La historia en la mirada* (History on View), narrating the events in Mexico between the final stage of the Porfirio Díaz regime and the passing of the 1917 Constitution. When you watch this film, two things immediately come to mind:

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Photos in this article courtesy of the UNAM Film Archives.

one, that the Mexican Revolution was the first social movement in the history of the world that could be filmed; and two, that the Mexican nation, already rich in historic memory, has in these images of historic events as they took place, a broadened cinematographic visual memory.

### THE CINEMATOGRAFIC VISUAL MEMORY

It can be said that, since they came into being as such, human cultures generate and leave as a legacy what we call visual mem-

ory, in the form of architectural pieces and other artistic objects: frescoes, canvases, and engravings, mainly. With the emergence of photography in the mid-nineteenth century, the possibilities for increasing this store of memories grew significantly.

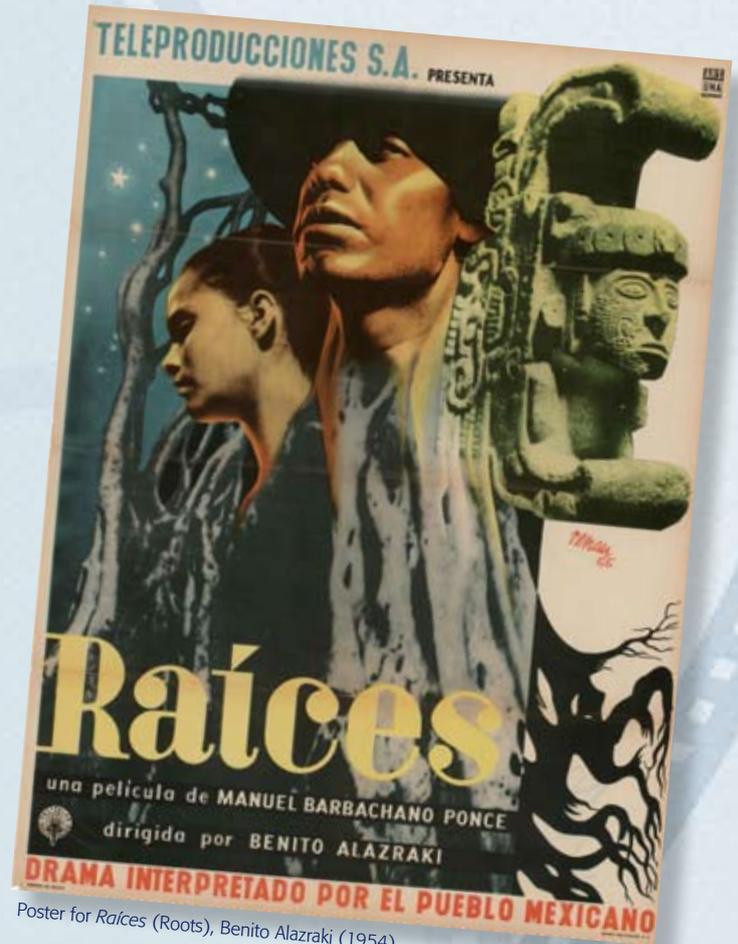
In the case of images, even before the appearance of the Lumière brothers' *cinématographe* in 1895, the world's peoples took an extremely important qualitative leap forward that would increase that visual memory by reflecting about it. For example, André Bazin, who has theorized about history and the meaning of the image, pointed out that photography embalmed time. For his part, another French essayist, Édgar Morin, thought that the image in movement had the quality of bringing the past up to date, or recovering it better than any other art, since time gone by, far from disappearing, takes refuge in and underlies all memories; the power of the image in movement corporealizes that memory.

Human generations disappear; societies are transformed; and ways of thinking and conceiving of the world change. Like books, paintings, buildings, and other cultural and artistic manifestations, cinema prevails, but it needs an institution to protect and preserve it, to locate, store, identify, restore, distribute, and exhibit those images and everything related to them, like objects and documents. All this constitutes the mission of a film archive like the UNAM's.

Since its foundation in July 1960, the archive has dedicated itself to the task of collecting, preserving, cataloguing, and disseminating materials related to the craft of cinematography, particularly those most representative of Mexican culture, as we will see further along. Thanks to its existence and the preservation work it does, it is possible to understand the moment when the films were conceived and to see trends, needs, and economic and social conditions. Thus, the images preserved have become documents for posterity.

#### EVERYTHING BEGAN 50 YEARS AGO

In Mexico's case, the idea of having an archive that would safeguard the national film patrimony began to become a reality 50 years ago. The inauguration was a ceremony on July 8, 1960 in which Dr. Nabor Carrillo, rector of the university, accompanied by, among others, Manuel González Casanova, was given by producer Manuel Barbachano Ponce the 16 mm copies of his films *Raíces* (Roots) (1953), directed by Benito Alazraki, and *Torero* (Matador) (1956), directed by



Poster for *Raíces* (Roots), Benito Alazraki (1954).



Billboard advertising the UNAM Film Archives' First Summer Film Festival in 1994.

Carlos Velo. This was the beginning of the Film Archives' collection, and formally began the loan service of films to university film clubs.

In 1960, cultural concerns in the university were very oriented toward the cinema and the possibility of understanding the world from this perspective. Eight years before, the Progreso Film Club had been founded, and in 1955, the magazine *Cine Club* (Film Club), at the same time that the Mexican Federation of Film Clubs was consolidating through the efforts of Manuel González Casanova. By 1956, the University Film Club was already hosting showings, which also went on in schools and faculties. Talks were organized featuring university figures like writer Jaime García Terrés, who published *El cine en la Universidad* (Cinema in the University), dealing with the transcendence of national cinema as the cultural patrimony of an entire people, underlining the need to promote one of the elements that goes along with the work of every film archive: the formation of cinema-loving audiences. The year 1959 would be important because of the creation of the Cinema Activities Department of the General Office for Cultural Outreach. This section responded to the inter-



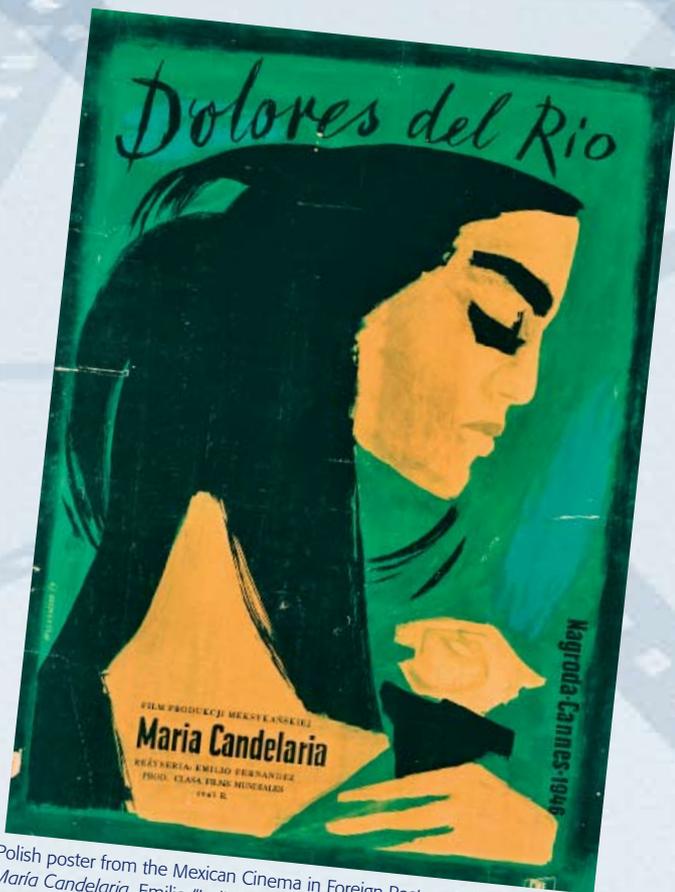
Poster announcing the 1980 inauguration of the Julio Bracho and José Revueltas Movie Theaters at the University Cultural Center.

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est of different university organizations in there being a body to deal with the film collection. By the following July 8, that section would turn into a university film archive.

#### RECOVERY AND PRESERVATION OF THE MEXICAN VISUAL MEMORY

The recovery of national or foreign films thought lost forever; the restoration of great classics of national cinema or of little gems that the passage of time has turned into transcendental works; the creation of collections of feature fictional films and documentaries produced by public institutions or independently; the safeguarding of home movies shot in small or semi-professional formats, of news footage from the 1930s to the 1970s, of old optical equipment, including everything from magic lanterns to projectors, cameras, and mov-



Polish poster from the Mexican Cinema in Foreign Posters Collection; *Maria Candelaria*, Emilio "Indio" Fernández (1944).

The Film Archive also publishes significant books about cinema, and has produced dozens of valuable, historical, full-length films as well as hundreds of documentaries, short subjects, and television programs, work that has merited awards.

folios; the preservation of thousands of magazines, pamphlets, scripts, and movie books, in addition to a large collection of posters, photo montages, and stills from Mexican and foreign films: all this represents what is undoubtedly the country's richest film documentation center, and one of the most important in Latin America, which offers its services to researchers, students, and the public at large.

In addition to all this, the film archive publishes significant books about cinema, and has produced dozens of valuable, historical full-length films like Leobardo López Aretche's *El grito* (The Shout) (1968); Alfredo Joskowicz's *El cambio* (The Change) (1971); Alfredo Gurrola's *Descenso al país de la noche* (Descent into the Country of the Night) (1974); and Raúl Kamffer's *Ora sí ¡tenemos que ganar!* (Now We Hafta Win!) (1978), as well as hundreds of documentaries, short subjects, and television programs. This work has merited awards, like the Golden Ariel for Overall Contribution to the Industry. In addition, the Film Archive has mounted original, successful shows as well as festivals and its own awards, such as the José Rovirosa Prize for the Best Documentary, the Film Archive Medal, and the Summer Festivals, all of which



Photomontage from Luis Buñuel's *Los olvidados* (The Young and the Damned) (1950).

have meant that many institutions, production companies, directors, and collectors trust the institution enough to deposit their materials in it.

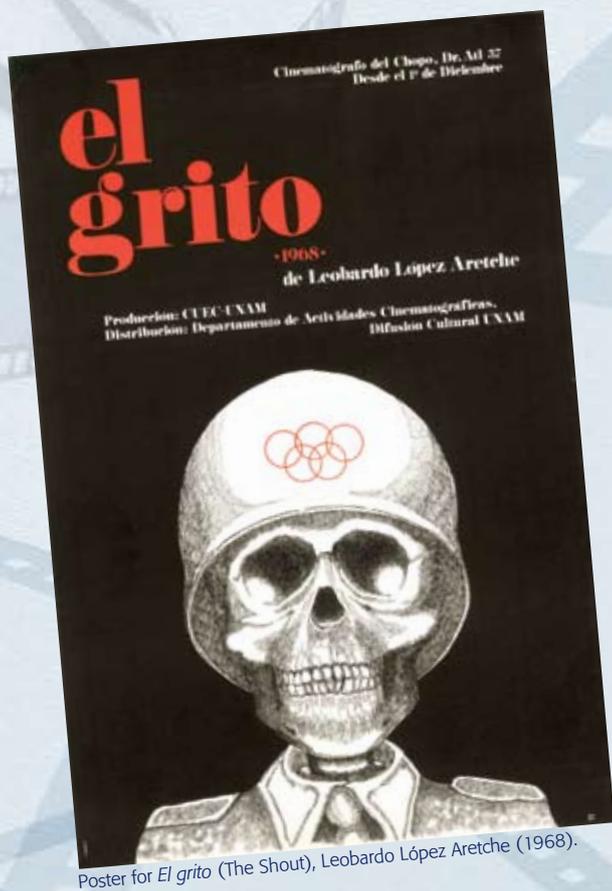
Showings are the central pillar of its dissemination work: a little over 1 000 titles are shown in different movie houses annually, including the José Revueltas and Julio Bracho Movie Theaters in University City's University Cultural Center, the El Chopo Art Film Theater in the El Chopo Museum, the House on the Lake in Chapultepec Forest, and, until very recently, in the Fósforo Art Film Theater, among other university venues. But, these films are also often projected in non-university venues, like those used particularly to show this collection during important national and international festivals.

The search for and collection and preservation of films have been basic for the UNAM Film Archive's development. As such, of central importance to the institution are the film and other materials donated that are found, acquired, restored, or archived. The Film Archive does not refuse entry to any title or collection, because it recognizes the present and future value of all these materials.

It especially important to mention that in addition to recovering images of the Mexican Revolution at its height, the archives include complete lots of work by the Alva brothers, pioneers of Mexican cinema, and other sources, pertaining to the years prior to or at the beginning of the revolution. For example, it includes the first full-length comedy shot in Mexico, *El aniversario de la muerte de la suegra de Enhart* (The Anniversary



The UNAM Film Archive facilities in University City.



Poster for *El grito* (The Shout), Leobardo López Aretche (1968).

of the Death of Enhart's Mother-in-Law) (1912), as well as footage from the period of the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship.

The archive also has several documentaries about practically unknown popular mobilizations during the 1920s in Mexico; its fictional film collection includes silent full-length features, some produced regionally, like *El puño de hierro* (The Iron Fist) and *El tren fantasma* (The Ghost Train), now restored. The number from the 1930s is even larger: the collection includes the original versions of *Santa*, *Dos monjes* (Two Monks), *Redes* (Nets) —the restored version—, *El compadre Mendoza* (My Buddy Mendoza), and *Vámonos con Pancho Villa* (Let's Go with Pancho Villa).

The institution has recovered other outstanding films, among them: *Los olvidados* (The Forgotten Ones, or, as released in the U.S., *The Young and the Damned*), *Desastre en Oaxaca* (Disaster in Oaxaca), *La mancha de sangre* (Bloodstain), *Zítari*, *Tepeyac*, *Muchachas de uniforme* (Girls in Uniform), *La mente y el crimen* (The Mind and Crime), *Olimpiada en México* (Olympics in Mexico), short subjects from the Fernando Gamboa collection about the Spanish Civil War, and even a porn film that used to be viewed in the 1930s and 1940s on the Mexico City brothel circuit. Among the recently restored works are Fernando de Fuentes's trilogy on the Mexican Revolution: *El prisionero 13* (Prisoner 13), *El compadre*

Along with several documentaries about practically unknown popular mobilizations in 1920s Mexico, the archive's fictional film collection includes the recently restored works of Fernando de Fuentes's trilogy on the Mexican Revolution.

*Mendoza*, and *Vámonos con Pancho Villa*; and Enrique Rosas's *El automóvil gris* (The Grey Automobile).

#### A COMMITMENT TO THE FUTURE

Collective memory in the form of a universe of images stored in cans and vaults; portraits of a world that no longer exists, but continues. Today, 50 years later, the UNAM Film Archive has changed, but continues to be an institution banking on the future, dedicated to educating generations of movie-lovers and researchers, armed not only with a rich treasure chest of collections of print materials for reference, but also with an invaluable collection of films: more than 43 000 titles to date.

The UNAM Film Archive continues its historic commitment, facilitating the way forward for future generations, opening up new pathways to emotions, culture, social responsibility, and the enjoyment of a film memory. Here, not only are images of the past stored; the bases for channeling the images of today and those that will keep coming are also being built. **MM**



Still from *El prisionero 13* (Prisoner 13), Fernando de Fuentes (1933).