

NOSTALGIA FOR EL INDIO

Fernando Fuentes

This biography of Emilio Fernández, one of Mexico's most famous film directors of the so-called Golden Age of Mexican film, was written with the analytic professionalism and historic vision characteristic of Emilio García Riera.

In his detailed revision of *El Indio* Fernández' cinematographic work, the author provides a critical evaluation of the film maker's production, and generally refers exactly to his sources, be these material from newspapers, magazines or books, or testimonies of those who lived or worked with *El Indio* Fernández during his artistic career and whose testimony sheds light on the film director's private life.

Emilio García Riera, author of more than ten books about the cinema, dedicates this text to a study of one of the greatest figures of Mexican cultural nationalism; a vigorous film creator who, in spite of his numerous weaknesses, managed to mark his movies with his own unmistakable style, a remarkable achievement in a film world which tends to reduce those who should be creators to the mere level of doers.

Emilio Fernández has been classified by some film buffs as the best film maker in classic Mexican cine. When we see the movies he made in the 1940's we can appreciate that these are poetic creations; his sentimentality is overwhelming but at the same time, lyrical, and his visual ca-

capacity creates a clear photographic identity whether he portrays the Mexican countryside or the urban scene.

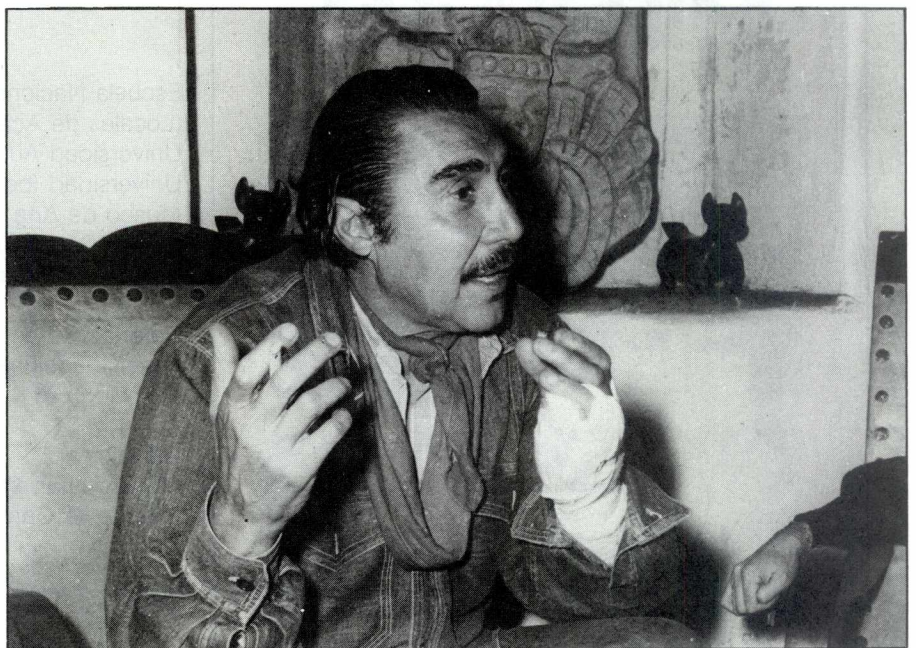
All the solemn moments in his films are impregnated by a nostalgia for the Revolution on the nationalist level, and by nostalgia for virginity on an emotional level, whether the film is set in the violence of the provinces or in urban cabarets or burdels. The rhythm of his stories is marked by impulses of a energetic sensibility and an admirable artistic capacity.

El Indio Fernández is a poet of pure and solitary ideals, a figure become legend.

Origins, Revolutions, Emigration

Emilio Fernández, known in the film world as *El Indio*, was born in what is now a ghost town but was part of a mining zone called Mineral de Hondo, in the municipality of Sabinas, Coahuila. He was the only child of Sara Romo, a Kikapoo Indian, and of Emilio Fernández Garza.

He participated in the Revolution as a boy, or at least, he dedicated himself to taking mental photos: "I had what all boys dream about: a pistol, a horse and a battleground. These were my toys and the revolutionaries were my playmates. I grew up in



Descendant of the Kikapoo Indians, he was proud of his indian blood. Photo by Héctor García/Foto Press

Journalist

the Revolution. At ten years of age, they made me a soldier, that's how I grew up. I studied in one school and another, from here to there. I visited all the cardinal points. From corporal, I became first captain." (Quote from García Riera.)

According to *El Indio*, he fought on the side of Pancho Villa's troops under the command of General Felipe Angeles, who was famous for his knowledge of artillery and for his moral and political integrity. *El Indio* entered Military College in 1920, and became part of the founding team of the Military School's aeronautics division.

"My greatest pride in life is having participated in the Revolution, which left me four wounds earned during armed actions," relates Fernández, adding that in one battle he was taken prisoner in Puebla and condemned to 20 years prison. Afterwards he was transferred to a prison in Tlatelolco in Mexico City, and he was able to escape three years later, and fled towards the United States, where he lived for nine years, working in various agricultural jobs.

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In Hollywood

He returned to Mexico only to go back to the United States a few months later, and headed for Chicago. Here, he saved a young German woman (Olga Freud) from drowning in a spontaneous act that brought him eventually to Hollywood. It turned out that Olga Freud was the lover of a well known gangster, "Baby Face", who, in gratitude, invited Fernández to eat and drink in a first class hotel in Chicago, where the cine's first "latin lover", Rodolfo Valentino, was staying. Valentino, impressed to see *El Indio* dance a perfect tango, invited him to a drink, and offered to take him to Hollywood. Valentino was on tour with his wife, Natasha Rambova, and they went from Chicago to New York, but it was precisely there, in New York, where Valentino died. His body was taken from New York to Hollywood, passing through Chi-



With his daughter in 1951. Photo by Héctor García/Foto Press

cago on the way, and *El Indio* joined the funeral cortege to accompany Valentino to his final resting place.

This was how *El Indio* arrived in Hollywood in the 1920's, and there he met various people from Latin America, including Alfonso Sánchez Tello, Chano Ureta, Ramón Pereda, Roberto Gavaldón, the Cuban René Cardona, the Chilean Tito Davison and Gilberto Martínez Solares, all of whom later became directors of Mexican cine. *El Indio* began to work with them in Hollywood in the film industry, as extra, double, in secondary roles and as dancer, for example, in *Flying down to Rio*, (Thornton Free-

land, 1933), with the Mexican actress Dolores del Río.

He received his film education in Hollywood: exaltation for the movies of Serguei Mijailovich Eisenstein, devotion for the star system, faith in John Ford for his methods of historic reconstruction, and the conviction that melodrama is the best means to transmit the pulse of life.

Return to Mexico

Before returning to his native land, *El Indio* posed as model for the statuette used in the Oscar Awards, given by the recently founded Motion Pictures

Academy. This was an act of symbolic importance in his film career, and it was thanks to his athletic and well-proportioned physique that he was "immortalized" in the statue designed by Cedric Gibbons and sculpted by George Stanley.

Back in Mexico in 1934, Emilio Fernández began to work in the national film industry as actor in *Janitzio* (Carlos Navarro, 1934), a movie considered significant because it began a certain "erotic struggle" with established traditions. Thanks to *Janitzio*, *El Indio* discovered Mexican esthetics: the conquest of nature by the camera, and the taming of the human being by tragedy.

He also worked in films such as *Corazón bandolero* (Raphael J. Sevilla, 1934), *Cruz Diablo* (Fernando de Fuentes, 1934), *Celos* (Arcady Boytler, 1935), *Las mujeres mandan* (Fernando de Fuentes, 1936), *Allá en el rancho grande* (Fernando de Fuentes, 1936), *Almas rebeldes* (Alejandro Galindo, 1936), *Adiós Nicanor* (Rafael E. Portas, 1937), with a script written by *El Indio* himself, and starring him in the main role), *Aquí llegó el valen-*

tón (Fernando A. Rivero, 1938), *Los de abajo* (Chano Ureta, 1939), *Juan sin miedo* (Juan José Segura, 1939), *El Charro Negro* (Raúl de Anda, 1940), and *Rancho Alegre* (Raúl de Anda, 1940), among others, in which he worked as director's assistant and script writer as well as actor.

All the solemn moments in his films are impregnated by a nostalgia for the Revolution on the nationalist level

His Films

The first film he directed was *La Isla de la Pasión*, with David Silva and Isabela Corona, about the tragic adventures of a Mexican battalion which fought until death to defend the desert island of Clipperton (or of the Passion) in the Pacific Ocean, which belonged to Mexico up to 1931. The film abounds in strong pictur-

esque details and counts with the participation of convicts.

Soy puro Mexicano, directed by Fernández in 1942, starred Pedro Armendáriz and David Silva. Here *El Indio* demonstrated that Mexican machismo could be useful to Mexico's allies in the Second World War, but in spite of its patriotic excesses, it was not a box office success.

Emilio Fernández' real film making career began in 1941 with *Flor Silvestre*, film set in the revolution, where for the first time he worked with a cast and collaborators of the best quality and highest prestige in Mexican cine of that epoch: script writer Mauricio Magdaleno, the actors Dolores del Río and Pedro Armendáriz, and, most importantly, the photographer Gabriel Figueroa, who, due to the various movies he filmed with Fernández, won international awards, and who would be considered one of the best, if not *the* best camerographer in the world during the decade of the 40's.

The movies made by *El Indio* express tendencies inspired by Eisenstein, which can especially be appre-



He is remembered as a lover of his country and a defender of Mexican romanticism. Photo by Héctor García/Foto Press

ciated in another film made in 1943, *María Candelaria*, where he worked with the same crew as in *Flor Silvestre*. This story relates the vicissitudes of an indigenous couple from Xochimilco, convincingly acted by Dolores del Río (who was beginning to work in the Mexican film industry after having starred in Hollywood), and Pedro Armendáriz. This movie received world wide acclaim and was awarded prizes in the Cannes Film Festival.

A particular trait of films made by *El Indio* was the frequent use of characters of plebian extraction who portray some "social enigma" and become simple idealized symbols created in the reflection of a romantic image, but totally lacking in ideological force and tending to a demagogical treatment of "national problems". Indigenous themes are treated with all solemnity, with what could be described in ideological terms as a cult to indigenism, to the "eternal values of the native race".

However in *María Candelaria*, the beauty of Figueroa's camera work, combined with the intense poetic climate created by the director, caused general admiration for one of the first productions of a promising school of Mexican cine.

"I had what all boys dreamed about: a pistol, a horse and a battleground. These were my toys and the revolutionaries were my playmates"

The same group made two more films in 1944 and then did not work together again until 1949. The two films were: *Las abandonadas*, also set in the Revolution, and relating the trials of a heroine who finally succumbs after a life of sacrifices (misery, loneliness, prostitution and illness), and *Bugambilia*, a story set in the Mexico of the beginning of the 19th century.

In 1945, *El Indio* directed *Pepita Jiménez*, based on the Spanish novel by Juan Valera. This first attempt by Fernández to deal with non-Mexican themes, showed his obvious limitations. But in the same year, with the collaboration of Gabriel Figueroa and the actor Pedro Armendáriz,

with María Elena Marquez as the female star, he made what was perhaps his best film, *La Perla*. The story is based on a novel by John Steinbeck, and for the first time, deals with the social problems of the indigenous people in a coherent way without demagoguery, transcending purely picturesque elements. Here, both director and photographer reach their highest levels of artistic excellence; *La Perla* represents the best example of their style and esthetic conceptions.

Best Moments

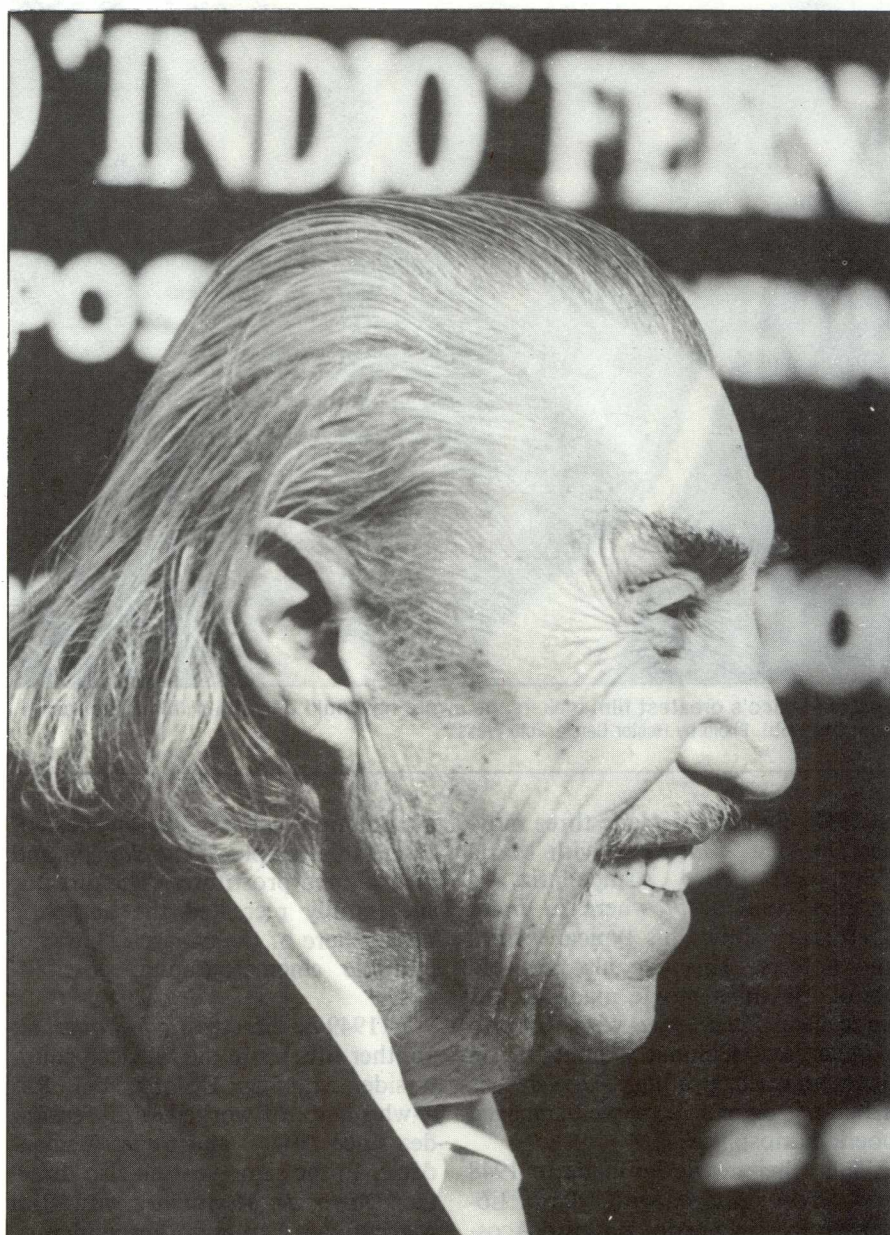
La Perla signified the height of Fernández' career. Mexican intellectuals

and other progressive sectors of the country, acclaimed the director and named him the "film champion" the people needed.

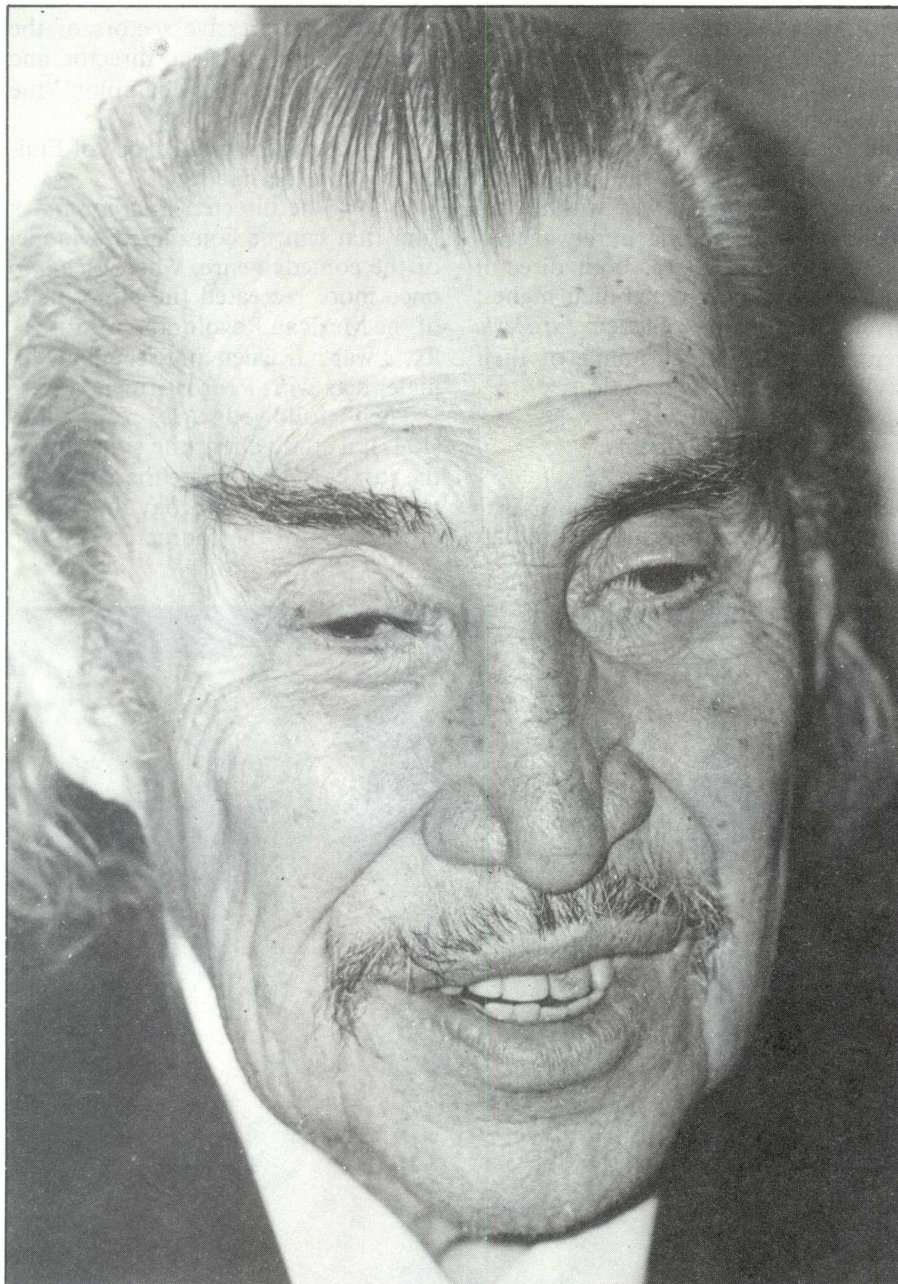
Thus began the great epoch of Emilio *El Indio* Fernández.

In 1946 he directed *Enamorada*, a film that can be considered a model of the comedy genre, where *El Indio* once more recreated the atmosphere of the Mexican Revolution. María Félix, a war hardened and rebellious female, acts with Pedro Armendáriz.

Then followed *Río Escondido* (1947), a study about the situation of the rural teacher, where there is a certain amount of demagoguery due to the idealization of the characters.



"Soy puro mexicano". Photo by Héctor García



One of Mexico's greatest film makers: he swore he would only direct films that came from his soul. Photo by Héctor García/Foto Press

In 1948, Fernández made three movies: the first, *Maclovía*, with María Félix and Pedro Armendáriz, is another rural story where *El Indio* once more shows his typical virtues and defects. This can also be said about the third movie made in this same year: *Pueblerina* with Roberto Cañedo and Columa Domínguez in the main roles, although *Pueblerina* is a better movie with a well-achieved poetic atmosphere.

The other movie he made in 1948 was *Salón México*, with Marga López, Roberto Cañedo, Rodolfo Acosta and Miguel Inclán. Fernández here abandoned the rural setting and located this film in one of the capital's

most famous cabarets: *Salón México*, a veritable temple of the *danzón* and of exploited prostitutes. The director successfully recreated the authentic atmosphere of the cabaret, source of multiple cinematographic possibilities.

In 1949 he directed *La Malquerida*, another film set in the Mexican countryside, starring Dolores del Río—who had not worked with Fernández since 1944—and Pedro Armendáriz. In the same year he also directed *Duelo de Montañas*, with Rita Macedo and Fernando Fernández.

Un día de vida (1950), a film about the Revolution with Columa Domínguez and Fernando Fernández, is

the last of the series which best show *El Indio's* talents and marks the end of the era when he appears to have worked with most freedom and confidence. Fernández placed great hopes in this movie, but it was poorly received by the public. It can be said that his decline and fall began at this time.

The Downfall

In 1950 he directed *Víctimas del pecado*, with Ninón Sevilla, Rodolfo Acosta and Tito Junco, a film which clearly belonged to the then fashionable genre, the suburban melodrama, interspersed with the almost compulsory dances and Afro-West Indian music. This was a thoroughly conventional film which unwittingly included humorous moments.

His next films were typical examples of his style but were practically ignored by the public, in a clear indication of his imminent fall: *Islas Mariás* (1950), with Pedro Infante and Rosaura Revueltas; *Siempre Tuya* (1950), with Jorge Negrete and Gloria Marín; and *La bien amada* (1951) with Roberto Cañedo and Columa Domínguez.

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These failures led *El Indio* to try and gain the confidence of producers by making films to their liking. In this way, in 1951, he directed *Acapulco*, which turned out to be a pathetic attempt to conciliate commercial interests with his own style.

El Indio was in disgrace with producers, although he tried desperately to regain his prestige. For Fernández, the decades of the 50's and 60's were full of an almost uninterrupted series of offenses, frustrations and economic difficulties, and brought out his violent nature.

In 1952 he directed *Cuando levanta la niebla*, with Arturo de Córdova and María Elena Marqués. The following year he suffered a great setback in his career with *La Red*,

starring Rossana Podestá and Armando Silvestre. These two characters were confined on a beach, but the director failed to achieve the constant erotic violent tension that he wished to create.

Every film he made afterwards, lacked real importance: *Reportaje* (1953), a movie that with the pretext of linking various stories, counts with the participation of several of Mexico's most popular movie stars of the time: Arturo de Córdova, Dolores del Río, Jorge Negrete, María Félix, Pedro Infante, Pedro Armendáriz, Libertad Lamarque, and others; *El Rapto* (1953) with Jorge Negrete and María Félix, was a film that tried unsuccessfully to repeat the success of *Enamorada*; *La rosa blanca (Momentos de la vida de Martí)* (1953), a biographic film about José Martí, with the classic errors of historic-commemorative cine, and *El Impostor* (1956), with Pedro Armendáriz and Silvia Derbez, and other films.

Final Years

During the 60's and until the mid 70's, Emilio Fernández alternated between directing occasional films and acting minor roles in Mexican and foreign films, including some by Sam Peckinpah. He appeared in *Detrás de esa puerta* (1972, directed by Manuel Zeceña), *El Rincón de las Vírgenes* (Alberto Issac, 1974), in 1980 he acted in John Huston's *Under the Volcano*.

He had the conviction that melodrama is the best means to transmit the pulse of life

His last works as director were *La Choca* (1973), with Pilar Pellicer and Mercedes Carreño; *Zona Roja* (1975), with Fanny Cano and Armando Silvestre; *México Norte* (1977), with Roberto Cañedo and Patricia Reyes Spindola, and *Erótica* (1978), with Jorge Rivero and Rebeca Silva. All of these were considered unimportant works made by a director who was far from the fame and success he once knew during the so-called Golden Age of Mexican film. *

On August 6, 1986, *El Indio* suffered a heart attack and died in Mexico

For Fernández, the decades of the 50's and 60's were full of an almost uninterrupted series of offenses, frustrations and economic difficulties

City. He is remembered as a flag bearer of nationalist values, a lover of his country, of the fecundity and fruits of this land and its people, a defender of Mexican romanticism, as

a man who showed the values of tenderness and solidarity with poetic expression in his films, and who made a great contribution to Mexican cine. □

Emilio Fernández (1904-1986) by Emilio García Riera.
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