

HOT

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SHADOWS

A Sampling of Mexican Noir

In Julio Bracho's *Another Dawn* (1943), one of the first and finest of Mexico's dark urban crime dramas, political activists Andrea Palma and Pedro Armendáriz turn the tables on a sinister operative played by Octavio Martínez

O n the afternoon of January 25, 2014, the Castro Theatre in San Francisco resounded with the noise of a thousand minds being blown. It was the first International iteration of the annual NOIR CITY festival, and on screen was *Victims of Sin* (1951), a cinematic incendiary bomb packed with sizzling music and dance, flashing neon and smoky cabarets, sordid crime and searing melodrama. The shimmering black-and-white cinematography is classically noir, but the film is in a kind of emotional 3D, its moral atrocities and heroics flying right at your face. For most of the audience, this astonishing work by Mexican director Emilio Fernández was their first experience of *cabaretera*, a genre of feverish crime melodramas set in the nightclub world. Along with the movie that preceded it in the program, Roberto Gavaldón's lyrical and blackly comic *In the Palm of Your Hand* (1951), it was also for many their introduction to Mexico's torrid and wildly entertaining take on film noir.

The Morelia International Film Festival, under artistic director Daniela Michel, has spurred the rediscovery of these films with restorations presented at festivals and repertory cinemas around the world. They are



Three years after playing a *femme fatale* who seduces Arturo De Cordova in Roberto Gavaldón's *In the Palm of Your Hand* (1951), Leticia Palma would be banned from the Mexican film industry after a dispute with Jorge Negrete, head of the National Association of Actors, the Mexican actors guild



Left: Pedro Armendáriz is menaced by Anita Blanch, playing one of the many women with good reason to wish him dead in *Night Falls* (1952); Top right: Andrea Palma plays a world-weary nightclub hostess in *Another Dawn*; Bottom right: Armendáriz, in the same film, get the drop on a sinister operative played by Octavio Martínez

a revelation, especially for audiences steeped in American noir and used to watching fugitives race for the southern border, imagining that safety and freedom lie on the other side. Mexico, for classic Hollywood, is a colorful and exotic backdrop, an imagined escape hatch from the rules and safety of the modern world, a languid and slightly delirious vacation from reality. It is a picturesque hideout where criminals on the lam can lie in the sun and nurse drinks in shady cantinas (*Out of the Past*) or swim and gamble in chichi gated resorts (*His Kind of Woman*, *Kansas City Confidential*). It is a where Americans go to cut loose and get up to no good (*Naked Alibi*, *The Breaking Point*), crazed by dreams of treasure (*The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *Plunder of the Sun*). It is a pastoral, pre-modern place where herds of goats block the roads and languid Mexicans shake their heads at crazy gringos (*The Big Steal*); where hapless tourists might find themselves stranded in a primitive, savage landscape (*The Hitch-Hiker*); or where cynical crooks can be redeemed by simple villagers (*One Way Street*).

Mexican films of the 1940s and '50s tell an entirely different story of a country at once energized and disenchanted by modernity. The *época de oro*, or golden age, of Mexican cinema began in the 1930s, and even before World War II their film industry dominated the Spanish-speaking world, developing its own stars and winning international awards for its directors and cinematographers. This ascent was crowned by the opening in 1945 of the Churubusco Studios in Mexico City, among the largest and best-appointed in Latin America. The country emerged from the Second World War riding high, having avoided the devastation so much of the world suffered while benefiting from the wartime economic boom. The administration of Miguel Alemán Valdés, Mexico's president from 1946 to 1952, was a time of frenzied modernization and urbanization. Alemán's corrupt, crony-ridden administration favored industry, big business, and foreign investment, producing economic growth but also deepening inequality and environmental destruction. The resulting anxiety and dislocation nurtured a darker strain in Mexican films, which throughout the twentieth century played an outsize role in building a national self-image. Charged with vitality, confidence, and cultural pride,

these films are also haunted by a sense of estrangement, an obsession with moral rot lurking under shiny surfaces.

From Dawn to Nightfall: Pedro Armendáriz and the journey from hero to anti-hero

"There is only one Mexico: the one I invented," declared Emilio Fernández, whose films of the 1940s defined iconic images of native landscapes, indigenous culture, and the Mexican Revolution—a formative, decade-long struggle begun in 1910. Concurrently, starting in the late '30s, director Alejandro Galindo pioneered a new genre of popular urban dramas revolving around crime and the struggles of the working poor, made with keen attention to the language and texture of lower-class life. After the war, directors Roberto Gavaldón and Julio Bracho pushed the genre further into full-fledged *películas negras*, depicting plush lives riddled with greed, deception, and sexual angst, as well as the struggles of the urban poor in a ruthless jungle of gangsters, pimps, prostitutes, and entertainers. Fernández himself eventually took the plunge with *Salón México* (1949) and *Victims of Sin*.

Gabriel Figueroa, the cinematographer on these last two films, was once called his country's greatest muralist by another candidate for that title, Diego Rivera—whose iconic painting "The Flower Carrier" seems to decorate half the apartments in American movies of the 1940s. No other cameraman has been so celebrated as a national hero. In his collaborations with Fernández on films like *María Candelaria* (1943), *Enamorada* (1946), and *The Pearl* (1947), Figueroa granted Mexican peasants and revolutionaries heroic stature by the way he framed and sculpted them with dazzling light against enormous skies. But Figueroa also staked a claim to the dark city lensing gorgeously sinister images of neon-smeared alleys, shadowy stairways, nightclubs dense with smoke and sweat. In movies like *Salón México* and Julio Bracho's *Another Dawn* (1943), he draws the starkest contrast between Mexico City's proud public face of monuments, palatial buildings and wide sun-struck boulevards, and its nocturnal underworld of seedy back streets and tawdry hostess clubs.

Another Dawn takes place over a single night. A convoluted plot



Corruption, machismo, and the power of image: costumes tell much about the conflict between Mexico's revolutionary myth and the forces of the modern world in *Rosaura Castro* (1950)

that pits labor activists against crooked politicians in a skirmish over some incriminating documents merely forms a scaffolding for suspenseful set-pieces and a love triangle suffused with disillusionment and regret. The protagonist, Octavio, is first seen on a bus, peering over the top of a newspaper as he tries to evade a suspicious character who is tailing him. This framing isolates the instantly recognizable eyes of Pedro Armendáriz, almond-shaped eyes with a clear flame behind their darkness. As the star of many of the Fernández-Figueroa movies, often playing fiery revolutionaries or earthy peasants with tragic destinies, he became the archetypal Mexican hero. In *Another Dawn*, he is again a noble man of the people, but now he is caught in an urban labyrinth of personal betrayal and betrayed ideals.

Taking refuge in a movie theater, Octavio runs into Julieta (Andrea Palma), an old friend now unhappily married to Ignacio (Alberto Galán). Introduced as she lights up a cigarette under a No Smoking sign, Palma has a Dietrich-like weariness and gallantry. (She was Bracho's sister and had starred in a scandalous, proto-noir tale of prostitution and incest, 1934's *Woman of the Port*.) There is more than a hint of *cabaretera* in a long

sequence in a seamy nightclub filled with idling girls and blaring music, where Julieta—with her husband unemployed and blowing what little money they have on a grasping mistress—has been forced to work as a hostess. *Another Dawn* is not as bleak in its outlook as the noir films that would flourish after the WWII, but it evokes a claustrophobic mood of entrapment and suspicion, a wee-hours pall of burnt-out exhaustion.

Armendáriz was unafraid to blacken his heroic image. He gave one of his best performances in Roberto Gavaldón's *Rosaura Castro* (1950), a kind of noir-chili-Western that plays as a bitter inversion of Emilio Fernández's romantic visions of the Revolution. Best known for urban crime melodramas, Gavaldón brought the richest and deepest noir sensibility to Mexican cinema during the postwar years. He regularly collaborated with writer José Revueltas, a novelist, crime reporter, and communist party member who spent time in jail for his political activities, but whose screenplays often submerged their left-wing sentiments in satisfyingly decadent stories about the corruption of the rich and powerful. As the title character in *Rosaura Castro*, Armendáriz enters astride a horse, grinning under a vast

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Nightclubs are a key setting in Mexican noir, at once spectacle and moral battleground. Here, Pedro Armendáriz watches Eva Martino perform in *Night Falls*

sombrero, jingling his spurs and tossing coins to village children. This role squeezes out all the overbearing arrogance underlying his charisma; Rosauro is a small-town boss who takes for granted his right to impose his will on his neighbors and beat or kill anyone who challenges his authority. What makes the film interesting is that the central figure is both protagonist and villain, wholly unsympathetic yet never uninteresting. The good guys arrayed against him are weak satellites, and the strongest voices to challenge him are those of women—the grieving mother of a man he killed, the fiancée of one he banished, the wife he treats with brutal disdain, and his own iron-willed mother.

A funeral snaking past carnival tents, a marionette bullfight, toy guns and real guns, schoolchildren rushing to the windows to see a body carried past in the street, a bored mariachi band playing outside the boudoir while Rosauro visits his mistress, a clock tower ominously ticking towards midnight—the film deftly uses these everyday images and rituals to create the mood of a tragic ballad. The darkly beautiful cinematography by Raúl Martínez Solares turns picturesque adobe-lined village streets into a night-flooded maze through which the anti-hero rushes implacably toward his own doom—which comes, in the end, with cruelly precise irony. It is understood, if not openly stated, that Rosauro Castro was a soldier of the Revolution, and that his devolution into a petty tyrant illustrates the filmmakers' criticism of the autocratic and self-dealing Party of the Mexican Revolution, which held power uninterrupted from 1929 through the end of the twentieth century.

Armendáriz, Revueltas, and Gavaldón painted an even harsher portrait of a winner-take-all culture in the gritty *La Noche Avanza* (*Night Falls*, 1952), which stripped all vestiges of mythic glamour from the star's persona. The vain and brutish *jai alai* champion Marcos Arizmendi oozes toxic machismo, laying out early on his strong-man philosophy. "The weak deserve their fate," he sneers. "The weak don't count." As he scornfully juggles three different women and earns the hatred of every man around, the suspense comes from wondering how and by whom he will be taken down. No Hollywood movie of the time would have taken the risk of placing such an utterly despicable character at the center of the story, inviting the audience to enjoy the clever and twisting course of the bastard's downfall. The people around him look good only in comparison; this is an altogether ugly world, driven by vengeance and greed, rife with lies, cheating, and double-crosses. There is an air of casual and gleeful contempt in the film's treatment of its anti-hero, crystallized in a final image that makes up in startling insolence what it lacks in subtlety. The last scene unfolds in the hot morning sunshine of an ordinary street as the refuse of the night is swept away, and a stray dog gives its wordless commentary on a poster bearing Marcos Arizmendi's name.

This is just one of many images that would be inconceivable in a Hollywood movie of the time. Most Mexican films never opened in America, except un-subtitled in theaters catering to Spanish-speaking immigrants. but there was considerable traffic in both directions



Ninón Sevilla arrived in Mexico from Cuba making a splash in the class-war comedy *Carita de cielo* (1946), performing two numbers in little more than underwear and tail feathers

between the two film industries. Pedro Armendáriz, whose mother was American, also made films in Hollywood, notably with directors John Ford and John Huston; his compatriots Dolores del Río and Arturo de Córdova also moved back and forth. The border was porous, as it always has been and should be.

Nightworld: *Cabaretera* and *Rumberas* Films

Nightclubs are an essential noir location, but the ones that appear in American films are pallid and sedate compared with their Mexican counterparts where the smoke is thicker, the music spicier, the neon and passions hotter, the sins and shadows blacker. These settings spawned a unique genre, *cabaretera* films, which pitted female entertainers and prostitutes against the pimps and gangsters who exploit them, against poverty, the disdain of polite society, and the blows of injustice and fate. These movies often seem like a way for a still conservative society to have its cake and eat it too, offering the pleasures of racy dancing and commodified sex while glorifying wholesome virtues. This hypocrisy is even the subject of a representative entry, Alberto Gout's *The Adventuress* (1950), in which the matriarch of an old, respected family from Guadalajara (played by Andrea Palma) is also the sadistic madam of a high-class brothel. Ninón Sevilla stars as an innocent provincial girl whose world falls apart after her mother runs off with a lover; she is tricked into prostitution, drugged and raped, and spends the rest of the movie alternating between furiously denouncing her enemies and performing elaborately frivolous stage shows in big white nightclubs with fruit on her head.

The same basic tension persists in two gems of the genre by Emilio Fernández. In *Salón México*, the director abandoned his usual village or

rural settings to cast the titular nightspot as a kind of sweaty, boozy purgatory where the heroine, Mercedes (Marga López), suffers glamorous degradation in order to keep her innocent younger sister in an exclusive convent school. Her spike heels, cheap black satin, and tarty makeup are a prison uniform in which she endures the pawing of drunken customers and the abuse of her loathsome pimp, Paco (Rodolfo Acosta, in his trademark pinstripes and hair oil). She hides her bruises and shame from her sister, but her self-sacrifice earns her the dog-like devotion of Lupe (Miguel Inclán), a homely middle-aged cop who protects and yearns to

marry her. But however grimly the script portrays Mercedes' life at the Salón México, Gabriel Figueroa's cinematography revels in the *sfumato* of lamps shining through smoky haze, neon spilling into murky alleys, bottles shimmering behind bars, the kaleidoscope of seething crowds and fluttering decorations, laundry festooned over rickety tenement stairs, twirling fireworks and dancing shadows. Here and in their next nightclub outing, *Victims of Sin*, Fernández and Figueroa created some of cinema's most rhapsodic visions of the urban night.

Victims of Sin belongs to the sub-genre of *cabaretera* called *rumberas* films, named for the female entertainers who brought Afro-Caribbean rhythms and dances to Mexico—in

this case, the white-hot Cuban star Ninón Sevilla who burns up the floor with sexy, percussive, spontaneously frenetic dancing. Her nemesis, Rodolfo, is again played by Acosta as a zoot-suited, jitterbugging *pachuco* pimp who outdoes himself in hissable villainy: savagely beating women, shooting a female ticket-seller during a hold-up, and ordering his abject girlfriend Rosa, who presents him with their baby, to dump the child in the trash. Violeta (Sevilla) rescues the infant in the nick of time and raises him as her own, reduced to street-walking after Rodolfo fires her from the cabaret. She is saved from this life by

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Arturo de Córdova and Gloria Marín contemplate her likeness in *Crepúsculo* (1945), written and directed by Julio Bracho, who went from avant-garde theater in the 1930s to popular cinema in the 1950s to political exile after his 1960 film *The Shadow of the Tyrant* was banned

a good man—who first stops by her crib to pay for her services. He is Santiago (Tito Junco), a taciturn hombre who never ventures outside without a mariachi band trailing after him. In contrast to Rodolfo's zoot suits, he wears denim and a cowboy hat, and his own nightclub by the railroad tracks has a working-class flavor, unlike the gaudily tropical Cabaret Chango.

The word melodrama derives from the root of music plus drama, and never has that etymology made more sense than in this film, whose emotions are as overwhelming and irresistible as its rhythms. (The musical offerings include performances by major stars Pérez Prado and Pedro Vargas, and the regal, outrageously risqué Rita Montaner.) Fernández pulls out all the stops, and then some. *Victims of Sin* is like a fireworks show, one explosive climax after another. Violeta hauls off and slaps Rosa silly on hearing she has abandoned her baby; an over-the-top brawl breaks out in the cabaret; all the hookers on the street surround and pummel Rodolfo; and Violeta, in an unforgettable burst of heroic action, leaps through a window with guns blazing to rescue her adopted son. From here, the film morphs into a mother-love tearjerker that outdoes D.W. Griffith at his most mawkish—yet it all works, thanks in large part to Ninón Sevilla's charismatic conviction, and Fernández' unabashed sympathy and admiration for women at the bottom of society's ladder.

Eternal Twilight: Arturo de Córdova and the fatal women

If Pedro Armendáriz was the archetype of traditional Mexican manhood, Arturo de Córdova represented a modern urban mascu-

linity that is morally and sexually compromised. With his smooth good looks and suave, lightly ironic manner, he excelled at playing intelligent, sophisticated men who succumb to carnal fixations. Julio Bracho's *Crepúsculo* (*Twilight*, 1945) set the template for a series of entrancing, voluptuous melodramas painted in a lustrous palette of shadows by the masterful Canadian-born cinematographer Alex Phillips. De Córdova plays a respected surgeon, Dr. Mangino, who has written a book titled *Crepúsculo*, which is at once a clinical treatise on mental diseases and an account of his own descent into the depths of romantic obsession and guilt. The film's mood of brooding interiority, overwrought emotion, and overripe eroticism is enhanced by the sensuous and oppressive luxury of its settings. When the doctor's mind is clouded by the intensity of his lust and jealousy, a shadow creeps over his face as if some huge weight loomed above him: Phillips' images literally translate consciousness into light and shade, while Bracho's script deftly uses the eclipse of light as a metaphor for psychological and moral decline.

Dr. Mangino has toured Europe and absorbed cutting-edge medical developments; at a swanky party, he delivers an editorial about the need for Mexico to modernize and abandon nostalgia for pre-Revolutionary times. But this man of science and progress is captive to the most primitive of instincts, enslaved by the totemic power of a nude statue modeled on a former lover (Gloria Marín), who is now married to his best friend. Their adulterous affair precipitates an accident and an operation in which the doctor fails to save his rival, enveloping him in an ambiguous but debilitating sense of guilt. The forces of reason and passion are embodied conventionally by two women who con-



María Félix in *The Kneeling Goddess* (1947), a delirious exercise in style with extravagant work by cinematographer Alex Phillips and art director Manuel Fontanals

form to the stereotypes of temptress and savior, but in the end both are helpless observers of the doctor's internal struggle. He is not crushed by circumstances but consumed by his own turbulent mind.

Gavaldón's *The Kneeling Goddess* (1947) might be alternatively titled, "Déjà vu for Arturo de Córdova," as his character is mesmerized by a naked, almost obscenely suggestive statue of his lover. In an act of staggeringly bad taste, he gives this art object to his betrayed wife as an anniversary present. From this tacky gesture to his total collapse and degradation is but a few short steps: he winds up slumped over a table in a nightclub, drunk and disheveled, nauseously watching his lover Raquel cavort onstage. Phillips' camera floats through glistening, all-white sets stuffed with pseudo-classical columns, marble stairways, and Streamline Moderne furniture. This vulgar ostentation reaches a delirious peak in the Panamanian nightclub, a cavernous place continually seething with rowdy sailors, where Raquel performs a maniacally up-tempo number in a satin wedding dress.

She is played by María Félix, a legendary beauty who was known as "*la devoradora de hombres*," literally the devourer of men. With her resplendent figure, black eyes and wickedly arching eyebrows, pearlescent skin and great cloud of dark hair, Félix played women who revel in their power, but are not truly evil or heartless. A national muse, she was painted by many of Mexico's greatest artists, inspired songs by her

second husband Agustín Lara and others, and was honored with a special jewelry collection by Cartier. Of her *femme fatale* roles, she spoke knowingly: "With these films, I became the number one enemy of the Mexican family morals. Somehow, I seduced the public, even those who criticize the conduct of my characters in the films....The public imagination did everything for me."

The other female pillar of Mexican cinema was Dolores del Río, who became a star in Hollywood in the 1920s but returned to her native country in the early forties, frustrated by the vapid glamour and ornamental exoticism of the roles she was offered in America. She joined the team of Fernández, Figueroa, and Armendáriz in the celebrated films *Wild Flower* (1943) and *María Candelaria*, her roles as nobly tragic peasants were still defined by her almost numbingly flawless beauty. It was Roberto Gavaldón who gave her one of her most complex and challenging roles in *La Otra* (*The Other One*, 1946), as a pair of identical twins. The good-and-evil-twins plot may seem hackneyed now—*La Otra* was the basis for the Bette Davis vehicle *Dead Ringer*—but it is treated with unusual subtlety and ambivalence by Gavaldón and Revueltas. Location shooting in Mexico City provides a palpable flavor of real life: bus stops on rainy streets, Chinese restaurants, department store windows decked out with Santas and Christmas trees. Magdalena, the selfish and cynical sister who married a rich man, lives in a Rococo mansion full of mir-

Legendary beauty María Félix was known as "*la devoradora de hombres*," literally the devourer of men, and became a national muse who inspired songs and paintings by her countrymen.



The tragic consequence of a woman posing for an artist: Dolores del Río and Pedro Armendáriz in Emilio Fernández' influential *María Candelaria* (1943)

rored walls and curving stairways, while Maria, a mousy manicurist, lives in a shabby garret. Phillips' camera moves restlessly through these crowded spaces, culminating in a tour de force scene of a Christmas procession of children with candles and fancy hats through the festooned lobby of Maria's tenement. A gun is fired in the shadows at the same moment that a piñata bursts, leaving a papier-maché head dangling grotesquely from a rope.

It is Maria, the "good" sister, who murders her twin, frames it as her own suicide, and takes Magdalena's place in the mansion. She seems driven partly by envy and desire for comforts and luxury, partly by an obscure mixture of contempt and despairing nihilism. Unmoved by the grief of her heartbroken fiancé, she settles into her crime, splurging on jewels, hats, and furs, cleverly burning her hand to disguise her altered signature. Another twist awaits, which shifts the moral balance between the sisters yet again. Del Río's performance makes excellent use of her impassive, inscrutable visage; she conveys a troubled inner life not through passion but through cold dissociation, suggesting a woman—or two women—with something missing in their souls.

The best of all the Gavalcón-Revueltas melodramas is *In the Palm of Your Hand*, a story of scams, seduction, and murder with a velvety, sensuous mood. Its pulp poetry is salted with wit: the macabre hilarity of a scene where an adulterous couple gets a flat tire while transporting a corpse in their trunk is worthy of Hitchcock. Arturo de Córdova is ideally cast as "Professor" Jaime Karin, a successful, fraudulent spiritualist and fortune teller. An amiable and theatrical charlatan, he has no illusions about his business, but clings to his redeeming love for his good wife, even as he uses gossip overheard in her beauty parlor to snooker his clients.

With what can only be called poetic justice, the grifter falls victim

to one of his own intended marks, sexy widow Ada Romano (Leticia Palma), whose idea of mourning garb is sheer black negligees and fish-net veils. Karin tries to blackmail Ada with the knowledge she and a lover conspired to kill her husband, but he's merely walking into the black widow's web. Soon, she has enlisted him to get rid of her previous lover, and it doesn't take a psychic to see where this plot is going. Spellbound, Karin observes his own ruination, at once clear-eyed and utterly powerless to stop himself. The film's cleverly double-edged title refers both to the control one person can have over another and the inability to escape one's own character and destiny, which the palmist tells his customers are encoded in the hands. The script is perfumed with necrophilia, intoxicating as night-blooming jasmine; Ada is compared to both a silent gun and a "secret waterfall of death."

The sequence that opens *In the Palm of Your Hand* is one of the most succinct illustrations of the way film noir translated the twentieth century's public terrors into private, subjective stories of guilt and compulsion. Visually rhyming a spinning globe, a blooming mushroom cloud, and a fortune-teller's crystal ball filling with smoke, this montage links the giant forces of the postwar age—the H-bomb, the Cold War, accelerating technology—to the anxieties and frailties of ordinary people who seek comfort in the timeless hocus-pocus of mediums, palm reading, or even a street-performer's clairvoyant sparrows. This elegant film descends gradually into raw fear and grief, like the horrifically beautiful slow motion flowering of a mushroom cloud, or like the hypnotic waterfall called "The Dream," where the lovers meet to plan their crime. As these melodramas demonstrate, the ultimate source of mysterious, destructive power is not the splitting of the atom, but of the human heart. ■