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THE *INDIGENISMO* OF EMILIO “EL INDIO” FERNÁNDEZ:
MYTH, *MESTIZAJE*, AND MODERN MEXICO

by

Matthew JK Hill

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Spanish and Portuguese
Brigham Young University

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

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This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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ABSTRACT

THE *INDIGENISMO* OF EMILIO “EL INDIO” FERNÁNDEZ: MYTH, *MESTIZAJE*, AND MODERN MEXICO

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Master of Arts

As one of the major directors of Mexico’s Golden Age of Cinema (1936-1956), Emilio “El Indio” Fernández (1904-1986) created films which for many came to express the official vision of Mexican identity. Part of this identity was based on the ideology of *indigenismo*, which posited that the pre-Columbian past held the basic kernel of Mexico’s national essence while advocating the incorporation of modern Indian groups into mainstream society. El Indio’s films reflect the paradox of *indigenismo*: praise for indigenous cultures and a simultaneous effort to make them disappear. The following study examines three of his *indigenista* films, *María Candelaria*, *Río Escondido*, and *Maclovía*, to see how Fernández created representations of Mexico’s indigenous populations that contributed to and deviated from *indigenista* policies in post-Revolutionary Mexico. This representation relies on the formation of a national myth

based on a static, aestheticized Indian which incorporates all Mexicans into official state history.

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INTRODUCTION

The vision which director Emilio “El Indio” Fernández (1904-1986) had of Mexico and the Indian as seen through the lens of his *indigenista* films can be readily summed up in the declaration made by the school teacher in his film *Maclovía* (1948): “¡Raza india que atesora virtudes fundamentales y que marca con su fulgor todo lo que significa algo de grande en México!”¹ The terms “Mexico” and “Indian” were, for Fernández, synonymous and signified a fundamental, mythic, virtuous, and timeless conception of the state that was established in the wake of the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920. This notion of Mexico proffered by Fernández was an intuitive sense of the essential identity of the Mexican people and their cultural inheritance, an underlying “subsuelo psíquico de la patria,” as Monsiváis calls it (56), known as *mexicanidad*, “Mexicanness,” and was given ample expression in his films.

Emilio Fernández Romo was born in the northern Mexican state of Coahuila in 1904.² His father was a military man and his mother a Kickapoo Indian, hence the nickname “El Indio” which he used proudly throughout his life. Although the details of his early years are sketchy and often unreliable, we know that by the mid-1920s he was working as an extra in films in Hollywood (Taibo 25). When Fernández returned to Mexico from the United States in 1934, he immediately began working in the rapidly developing movie industry and became a well-known, if minor, actor (García Riera, *Fernández* 16). In 1941 El Indio directed his first film, *Isla de la Pasión*. *Soy puro mexicano* and *Flor silvestre* followed in the next two years, both exaltations of the Mexican national essence. However, in 1943 Fernández leapt onto the national and international scene with the release of his fourth film as director, *María Candelaria*, based on the plot of *Janitzio*, a 1935 *indigenista* film directed by Carlos Navarro in which Fernández played the starring role. *María Candelaria* represents the beginning of El Indio’s *indigenista* cinema and the reification of

the nationalist-*indigenista* concept of the Indian in Golden Age movies.³

El Indio's perception of *mexicanidad* was part of a larger trend of Mexican nationalism that developed after the end of the Revolution with the encouragement of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), the ruling party of the Mexican government. An essential part of that nationalism was the ideology of *indigenismo*, a set of attitudes and social and political policies geared toward the incorporation of native groups into mainstream Mexican society. Alexander S. Dawson writes, "[...] revolutionary Indigenistas"—as those individuals who subscribed to *indigenismo* were called—"were united by their sympathy for the Indian and their desire to incorporate Indians into a reconstructed modern nation, in which living Indians were treated with respect and dignity, and their traditions accorded respect as the true national past" (xiv-xv). In reality, *indigenismo* was just one facet of Mexican nationalism, yet because of the persistence of the so-called "Indian question" in Mexican thought and the continued existence of contemporary indigenous groups within the national territory, it became the face of nationalism.⁴ This is especially true because of the emphasis on identity and unity after the end of the Revolution when the newly reorganized state found itself facing the issue of how to rebuild Mexico and construct a "more stable, prosperous, and equitable society," as Dawson puts it (xv). Ultimately, the post-Revolutionary government's goal was to create a strong central state with a relatively homogeneous population, one which could take its place in modernity (Dawson xv-xvii). However, as Dawson writes, "Rejecting the Europhilic traditions of the past, they [Indigenistas] turned their attention to the Indian, both as the symbol of the national type and the object of reform" (xiv). The "national type" which Dawson refers to was the image of a favorable revisionist interpretation of Mexico's pre-Columbian past. This image was offered to all Mexicans, regardless of their genetic and cultural heritages, as

the authentic essence of Mexican identity.

In order to inculcate this new identity in its citizens and rally support for its projects, the Mexican state fomented a nationalist ethos in the arts, whose most visible representatives were the *muralistas* and the national cinema. Emilio Fernández was not only a devout believer in the Revolutionary ideology (including *indigenismo*), but as one of the premiere directors of Mexico's national film industry in its so-called *Época de Oro* (1936-1956), through his films he also became one of its principal apostles and exegetes. Although El Indio's idea of Mexico can be seen in many of the films that he made, it is through his *indigenista* films that he most explicitly praises the indigenous element of Mexico and affirms Mexico's essential Indian identity.⁵ While only five of his 40 films can be appropriately labeled as *indigenista*—*María Candelaria* (1943), *La perla* (1945), *Río Escondido* (1947), *Maclovía* (1948), and *Paloma herida* (1962)—the fact that the same images are constantly articulated and rearticulated in each of these films attests to the consistency (if not coherency) of Fernández's vision of the Indian in Mexico.

The *indigenismo* of Emilio Fernández consists of a few basic elements, presented in various permutations throughout his *indigenista* films but essentially the same in spite of slight alterations. First, there is abundant praise for the pre-Hispanic and pre-Revolution indigenous past—vis-a-vis the myth of the noble savage—as the true essence of *mexicanidad*. Second, Fernández demonstrates a tendency to glorify the triumphant Revolution that has eliminated or will eliminate social injustice from Mexico. Finally, El Indio actively promotes the concept of *mestizaje*, or the necessary and massive role of the State in assimilating the Indians into mainstream, Hispanicized Mexico, especially through education and participation in the national economy. In the three films examined in this study, the Revolution and its political successor, the Revolutionary government, are seen

as interchangeable with his idea of the Indian, and therefore representative of the ‘true essence’ of the Mexican people as a whole.⁶ Fernández’s ultimate purpose was to make a ‘Mexican’ cinema which the spectator could identify with and rally around in support of the new, Revolutionary Mexico.⁷ The zeal and sincerity with which he promoted his notions bordered on the religious and were meant to inspire an analogous sentiment in his viewers.⁸

Claudia Arroyo Quiroz describes the success of Emilio Fernández’s directorial career as the product of group collaboration. As she points out, the vision which *El Indio* tried to transmit to the viewing public would not have been possible without the invaluable skills of many talented individuals such as Gloria Schoemann, who frequently edited *El Indio*’s films, or Mauricio Magdaleno, *El Indio*’s oft utilized screenwriter (181-85).⁹ However, of all the members of Fernández’s filmmaking team, it is the figure of Gabriel Figueroa who stands out as *the* crucial element in bringing *El Indio*’s vision to life. Regarding Figueroa, many critics (Charles Ramírez Berg, Carlos Monsiváis, Claudia Arroyo Quiroz, Douglas J. Weatherford) have suggested that without him, *El Indio*’s movies would not have been possible, or at least would not have had the same impact or success had they been filmed by someone else. Like Fernández, Figueroa’s cinematic formation has roots both in Mexican cinema and in Hollywood, and Figueroa acquired a great deal of his technical knowledge while working in the United States.¹⁰ In his work as a cinematographer, Figueroa transformed this knowledge into his own cinematic expression and became a pioneer in Mexican cinema. Charles Ramírez Berg cites a number of recurring characteristics of the more than twenty films on which Figueroa and Fernández collaborated, including a preference for diagonal lines, deep focus (an inheritance from Gregg Toland), and static, aestheticized images ("Invention" 19-20). This last feature is significant, as Figueroa’s stylized representation of Indians and their surroundings became a symbol of Mexico’s

native heritage and was decisive in solidifying the vision of indigenous Mexico seen in El Indio's movies. Besides the influence of his Hollywood roots, Figueroa was also heavily influenced by the muralists (both their murals as well as their portraits of "tipos populares" (Arroyo Quiroz 188) and other prominent Mexican artistic figures such as José Guadalupe Posada and Dr. Atl, as well as Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein. Posada's focus on local themes, Dr. Atl's insistence on a uniquely Mexican aesthetic (as will be discussed later), and Eisenstein's penchant for juxtaposition and montage were all decisive factors in the development of what would become the Fernández-Figueroa style.¹¹

The work of these artists allowed Figueroa (together with El Indio's vision) to maintain "la solidez mítica de la Revolución Mexicana," as Carlos Monsiváis writes, through the reexamination of the native elements of Mexico (58). Following the tradition of their artistic predecessors, the Fernández-Figueroa team did not strive for realism but for the "triumfo de la alegoría sobre el realismo" and the "mitificación de lo nacional (que es lo popular y lo heroico)" (Monsiváis 59, 56), hence the intense symbolism, the larger-than-life characters, and the aestheticizing of both characters and landscape in El Indio's *indigenista* films. In this way they were able to create "a space for the articulation of *lo mexicano* in cinema," which for them corresponds to myth and legend (Ramírez Berg, "Invention" 23). Through these images and their accompanying stories and dialogues, Fernández and his team gave an interpretation, not of Mexican reality, but of Mexico as it could and should be: "[A] los espectadores mexicanos [...] les regocija: esto no es México, pero quizás debería ser así" (Monsiváis 53).

Yet despite the "fuerza de las imágenes," "la belleza," and the "coherencia visual" which Monsiváis rightly perceives in Fernández and Figueroa's films (56, 58), these are marred by the very tendency toward myth that was the impulse for such filmic beauty. In

other words, by utilizing the representation of indigenous peoples as easily identifiable symbols destined for the consumption of everyday Mexicans and dedicated to the service of nationalism, Fernández exoticizes Mexico's native population, converting them into objects of artistic contemplation, all the while overlooking the conditions of actual indigenous groups. Therefore, despite the ostensible solidarity with native peoples which Fernández displays in these movies, the vision that he offers of Mexico's Indian population is not one based in indigenous reality, but in the unifying, modernizing needs of the Mexican government in the post-Revolution years. The Indian portrayed in these works is an object of art, a mythic and aestheticized image designed to inspire patriotic loyalty in Mexican moviegoers. It is from this mythic and aesthetic perspective that I will examine the indigenous presence in El Indio's *indigenista* films.

Although the critic Dolores Tierney argues against auteurist interpretations of El Indio's movies,¹² such a reading is a sound and logical consequence given his public, exaggerated nationalism off-screen and the repetitive nature of his *indigenista* films. Furthermore, as critics have indicated, Fernández's political views that informed his *indigenista* films generally followed the policies of the Cárdenas regime,¹³ further suggesting that an approach which attempts to view his *indigenista* works as a whole is fully justified.¹⁴ This is not to say that an auteurist approach is valid for *all* of his films, but in this thesis I will study three of his five *indigenista* movies—*María Candelaria*, *Río Escondido*, and *Maclovía*—investigating how the above-mentioned features of El Indio's *indigenismo* play out in the films, as well as the social and political implications of the myth of Mexico they helped foster. Regarding Fernández's second *indigenista* film, *La perla*, it will not be included in this chapter because, while the element of the noble savage is still present (García Riera, *Fernández* 86-92), the movie lacks the praise for the Revolution and

mestizaje which is so prevalent in El Indio's other *indigenista* films. However, the most important reason for its exclusion from this study is that, unlike the other three films, the screenplay for *La perla* was written, not in collaboration with Mauricio Magdaleno, El Indio's preferred *guionista*, but by John Steinbeck, the American novelist. Therefore, the story itself, despite El Indio's direction, represents an anomaly in El Indio's *indigenista* repertoire, and hence is not representative of his full creative efforts in this regard.¹⁵ Also, although *Paloma herida* (1962) can be seen as an *indigenista* film because of its depiction of abuses perpetrated by *criollos* and *mestizos* toward an indigenous community in Guatemala, it will not be discussed here as its status as a film produced after the end of the Golden Age puts it out of the scope of this study, which is Fernández's Golden Age *indigenista* films.¹⁶ Furthermore, because *Paloma herida* depicts the lives of Guatemalan Indians rather than Mexican ones, also excludes it

Nevertheless, I will examine *María Candelaria*, *Río Escondido*, and *Maclovía* to understand how El Indio utilizes *indigenismo* to advocate a mythic and unified national body rooted in Mexico's pre-Columbian past while ultimately promoting a homogenizing *mestizaje* fully committed to participation in modernity. Drawing upon Claudia Arroyo Quiroz's idea of *la conciencia pictórica* and Andrea Noble's discussion of gaze, the first chapter discusses *María Candelaria* and *Río Escondido*, two of El Indio's most studied films, and will examine how Fernández's *indigenismo* privileges the absent Indian—whether through death or assimilation—over the living one. This conspicuously absent Indian is appreciated, not only for its supposed aesthetic qualities that provide legitimacy for a Mexico attempting to make a place for itself among the industrialized nations of the world, but more so for its potential as the symbol of Mexico's national myth. While the first two films have ample scholarship devoted to them, the third film of this study, *Maclovía*, is

a much-neglected work that, when looked at carefully, offers surprising insights into the development of El Indio's indigenist thought. Therefore, the second chapter will elucidate the differences and purposes in Fernández's fourth *indigenista* movie as they relate to the basic tenets of his *indigenismo*. In this chapter I suggest that *Maclovía* can be viewed as a uniquely Mexican version of the Christian account of the Fall of Adam and Eve that advocates *mestizaje* via incorporation into society through the agency of the Revolution. In the third and final chapter, using the concept of "oblique perspective" discussed by Charles Ramírez Berg, I will show that the notion of Mexico proposed by Fernández (and given expression by Gabriel Figueroa) was, from the beginning, inherently flawed because of the divergent nature of the elements of which it was composed. Moreover, the fissure that oblique perspective symbolizes is symptomatic of the relationship that was developing in 1940s Mexico between the state and its citizens, Indian and non-Indian alike. This fissure represents an important shift away from a monolithic, state-sponsored identity towards a more grass-roots concept of the Mexican nation that emphasizes pluralism over homogeneity in its citizenry.

Indigenismo and Emilio Fernández in Context

Before proceeding with the analysis proper, it is necessary to discuss in greater detail the development of *indigenismo* in post-Revolutionary Mexico and to trace the "genealogy" of El Indio's particular brand of *indigenismo* in order to place his films in their historical and literary/filmic contexts. This will allow us to see how the influences that informed his work led him to create a cinema that was designed specifically to accomplish the objectives set forth by the *indigenista* enterprise.

As Dolores Tierney puts it, "*Indigenismo* argues that the roots of modern Mexican

identity lie in the cultural legacy of its pre-Colombian Indian cultures,” providing post-Revolutionary Mexican society “with a ‘myth of origins’ which conveniently elided its colonial past and provided a notion of national identity and a racial ideology that broke free from the European-dependent culture” that was dominant prior to the outbreak of the Revolution (73). *Indigenismo* was simultaneously intellectual discourse, social theory, artistic object, and political policy (Hershfield 48), and penetrated every aspect of life through the nationalistic fervor that swept through Mexico in the years after the Revolution (Cockcroft 145). At its core, the purpose of *indigenismo* was to integrate the numerous marginalized indigenous groups of Mexico into participation in mainstream Mexican society, but like many political projects in their initial stages of expression, *indigenismo* did not have a unified ideology or plan for realizing the desired incorporation (Dawson *xiv*). Nevertheless, as time progressed there emerged from the many voices a basic conception of what Mexico was, or at least what it needed to be. Tierney’s description of *indigenismo* mentioned above is appropriate as a starting point to understand this movement in its historic and cultural context. The ‘myth of origins’ she mentions was a necessary element in the nation-building project of the post-Revolution period and became a mainstay of Fernández’s *indigenista* films.

Although it was a conflict that came to represent the masses’ struggle for political, social, and economic enfranchisement, the Mexican Revolution was in reality a very complex struggle for power and control among various and sometimes quite disparate groups. There were wealthy landowners trying to preserve their property from the ravages of war, anti-reelectionists whose goal was to end the *Porfiriato* (Porfirio Díaz’s roughly 35 year dictatorship over Mexico that ended in 1911 with the advent of the Revolution), bourgeois businessmen attempting to create conditions propitious for trade, and Mexican

nationalists tired of slavish imitation of European models of living. Finally, there were *campesinos* and Indians demanding *Tierra y Libertad*, Land and Liberty, as the Zapatista slogan went, and the end of abuse by landowners and corrupt local leaders. As the conflict began to wind down after the drafting of the 1917 Constitution, the group that eventually achieved dominance—a modernizing faction of the bourgeoisie (Cockcroft 135)—found itself with a great dilemma: how to unite these divergent groups and interests into a workable power base that could be used to consolidate and promote its programs for governance and economic development. On the one hand, the newly formed government relied upon the expertise and economic clout of landowners and businessmen to develop a capitalist state. On the other, the marginalized sectors of society (women, *campesinos*, Indians) which had fought under the key figures of the Revolution were demanding rights and redress for a century of neglect under Mexican rule in exchange for the support given during the Revolution. These interests frequently ran counter to each other and often resulted in conflict, as illustrated by the continuation of Emiliano Zapata's war against the capital after 1917 and the eruption of the Cristero revolt in 1926. As an ideology which looked to the pre-Columbian past for its identity and to the modernized, industrialized world for its day-to-day future, *indigenismo* provided a way to satisfy, at least nominally, all parties.

While *indigenismo* was used in the post-Revolutionary years as a unifying concept for constructing the new Mexico, the use of the image of the Indian was in actuality, quite old, dating back at least to the struggle for independence (both political and cultural) from Spain (Chicharro 19-21).¹⁷ However, unlike previous generations which employed the Indian only as an appropriated image without considering the physical or social conditions of actual Indian groups, a major facet of post-Revolutionary Mexican *indigenismo* was the

improvement (or “redemption” as they termed it¹⁸) of indigenous groups’ circumstances. This included hygiene, education, farming techniques, acculturation training, and cooperation “with the federal government to end poverty, exploitation, and isolation” (Dawson *xiv-xv*). Lázaro Cárdenas’s presidency (1934-1940) would be a milestone not only for *indigenistas* within his government but also for the Indian groups themselves, as it was in this period that Revolutionary *indigenismo* reached the peak of its influence and the most radical ideas were being proposed as methods for helping Indians. Among the more important developments of the official policy was the view that Indians were not worthless or ignorant, and the affirmation that they were entitled to the benefits of modernity and democracy as fully capable, rational beings (Dawson *xiii-xv*). *Cardenismo* also emphasized the need to reach out to indigenous groups and bring them the material benefits of modernity. His *sexenio* (the six year presidential term in Mexico) was defined by his emphasis on agrarian reform and because of his generally positive response to the needs of workers, peasants, and Indians. This official position does not hide the fact that disparaging attitudes towards native groups still existed during Cárdenas’s and succeeding presidencies. Despite this, post-Revolutionary *indigenismo* represents a significant departure from previous programs directed toward the Indian, if not in the ultimate goal (assimilation is still the desired result), then at least in the methods and attitudes created to reach that goal. Furthermore, *indigenismo* opened a new range of discursive possibilities that furthered the development of actual progress for indigenous groups.

As mentioned earlier, a fundamental part of the nation-building project that occurred in the years after the Revolution was determining the role of the Indian in Mexican society, for “[t]he ‘Indian’ was at once revered as the receptacle of authentically Mexican values, yet whose resistance to the processes of modernisation threatened to call them into

question” (Noble 87). This quandary was based in part on the so-called “archaeological Indian,” a politically and economically motivated regeneration of pre-Hispanic indigenous groups—especially the Aztecs—that emphasized the grandeur and merit of Mexico’s Indian *past* through archaeological and anthropological research. Additionally, as David A. Brading writes regarding Mexican archaeologist Manuel Gamio: “Governing the entire [archaeological] project was Gamio’s conviction that contemporary Indians conserved in essential, albeit in eroded, form the culture of their ancestors” (78). By focusing on the connection between marginalized, contemporary native groups and the high cultural and political achievements of the great pre-Hispanic cultures, Gamio linked the greatness of the latter to the potential for modern-day Indians to successfully assimilate into Mexican society.

As one of the original architects of the concept of the “archaeological Indian,” Manuel Gamio used modern methods of archaeology “to recuperate and renovate the great monuments of native civilisation, incorporating them as the tangible, public demonstration of Mexico’s native origin” (Brading 87). Here we might read the words “recuperate” and “renovate” as synonyms of “appropriate” and “alter,” as Gamio’s ultimate purpose, consistent with *indigenismo* generally, was not the enfranchising of Mexico’s native groups as semi-autonomous entities through political means, but rather the incorporation of “Indian communities into the national society of modern Mexico” (76). An essential aspect of *indigenismo*’s proposed incorporation was the creation of a common people bound by language, character, history, and race (82), hence *indigenismo*’s preoccupation with *mestizaje*, the supposedly harmonious blending of indigenous and European (Spanish) races into a superior pseudo-superhuman race that would achieve prosperity and peace, as the Mexican intellectual José Vasconcelos would suggest (63-64).¹⁹ However, as Brading

points out, for the most part this recuperation-incorporation effort did not translate into a respect for contemporary Indians' customs or values, but rather was intent on eliminating these as obstacles to *mestizaje* and economic progress (83). Even in the heightened period of concern for indigenous groups in Mexico represented by *cardenismo*, there was never official or general acceptance of a push for cultural pluralism or autonomous government for indigenous peoples. Cárdenas himself, despite harboring a "profound respect for the dignity of the Indian," still viewed them, as Dawson suggests, as "the slowly assimilating primitive" and "took it as axiomatic that human civilization was evolving from a collection of localistic folk cultures into national [...] communities defined by class and ideology" (xiii, 93, 78).²⁰ Therefore, even where there was a great deal of respect for indigenous groups within the Revolutionary government and constant praise for Mexico's indigenous past, it was, according to Dawson, a tempered praise as Indians "were broadly perceived as a crippling burden to the nation," one that needed to assimilate into the general population (xiii-xiv). Assimilation meant becoming *mestizo* (if not genetically, at least culturally and linguistically), and in order to instill the virtues of *mestizaje* into Indians and the general population, the state promoted the development of a distinctively "Mexican" identity. This push for all things "authentically" Mexican also corresponded with the rise of nationalism after the Revolution and the push for a unified national identity with the Indian at the forefront.

To speed the process of *mestizaje* along, Gamio, in conjunction with other prominent figures of the day such as José Vasconcelos, encouraged the development of a "national" artistic tradition which sought "inspiration in [...] native sources" (Brading 79). This approach originated from the desire to inspire patriotic fervor in the Indians who would view such authentic Mexican artwork (because they could relate to it), as well as the fact

that the only positive element Gamio saw in indigenous cultures was their artistic production (79, 83). From Gamio's perspective (as well as from that of other influential individuals), an authentically Mexican artistic tradition would serve to unify the native and non-native populations alike in the pursuit of a common ideal, indicated, of course, by the government. In this way, the path to modernization and progress would be cleared through the eradication of undesirable elements in the native populations, relegating Indians and their cultures to a safe but symbolic place in the past. Thus, *indigenismo* was, for the most part, an exoticizing discourse that depended ultimately on the disappearance of indigenous groups as separate ethnic identities (76).

It was out of the general context of Gamio's culture-making project that the new Mexican aesthetic tradition would be born. Probably the most revered and lasting contribution of aesthetic *indigenismo* was the *muralista* movement, most frequently represented by the three legendary figures of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. These and other artists created massive, monumental, public art which the state used to bolster belief in the teleological myth of Mexico's inevitable march toward greatness. The image of the Indian depicted in a great deal of these works, but especially those of Rivera, was a generous and laudatory revision of Mexico's indigenous past that bordered on religious reverence towards pre-Columbian groups, and one that portrayed modern Mexico as the direct cultural heir of these great and worthy civilizations. Thus, as Tierney writes, *indigenismo* "conveniently elided its colonial past"—i.e., ignored many social and historical complexities—in order to develop a "myth of origins" that would unite disparate groups into support for the state established after the end of the Revolution, integrate marginalized Indian groups into national society, foment democracy and economic development for a homogeneous, unified Mexico.

In addition to the muralist movement, Mexico's film industry became a key component in the nationalist campaign. Although Mexicans had been making movies since the late 19th century, it was not until the 1930s that the government began to foster actively the development of a national film industry (Garmendia 59). During two decades, from approximately 1936 to around 1956, Mexico's cinema flourished. This period, commonly known as the *Época de Oro*, or Golden Age, of Mexican cinema produced a number of films which reinforced Mexican nationalism and *indigenista* ideology regarding Mexico's national identity. Because of this, and the heavy funding provided by the state, the Mexican movie industry generally responded with overwhelming support for its primary sponsor. Charles Ramírez Berg writes: "The state's direct involvement in Mexican filmmaking made it the de facto executive producer of Golden Age cinema. With this kind of state participation and protection"—including state-sponsored distribution companies as well as laws exempting the film industry from income tax—"it is no wonder that the Mexican film industry responded by producing a record number of films, nor that so many of them had a nationalistic bent" ("Skies" 27-28). El Indio's *indigenista* cinema would prove to be no exception.

By the time El Indio rose to prominence in 1943 after the success of *María Candelaria*, he had internalized a great deal of the ideology of *indigenismo*, especially *cardenismo*, as has been mentioned. Emilio García Riera states, "De la gestión cardenista, *El Indio* recogería al iniciarse como director en el sexenio siguiente dos ideas básicas repetidas una y otra vez en su cine: el beneficio de la instrucción pública y, sobre todo, la exigencia revolucionaria de dar la tierra a quien la trabaja" (Fernández 9). As this critic suggests, El Indio was fond of reproducing in his films *cardenismo*'s partiality towards education, as is made abundantly clear in both *Río Escondido* and *Maclovio* where the figure

of the school teacher acts as an agent of social change in the communities. Also, as Tierney indicates, the drive towards assimilation was a major facet of *cardenismo*, and although there are seeming contradictions in Fernández's representation of indigenous assimilation, it is a common theme in all three movies considered here, as will be discussed in the following chapters. Therefore, because of El Indio's proclivity toward *cardenismo*, his *indigenista* films can be seen as ideological documents of a time, but not of the 1940s when they were made. Rather, they are documents of an *indigenista* discourse that preceded Fernández's directorial incursion into Mexican cinema.²¹ In other words, Fernández's films reflect the policies of Lázaro Cárdenas's *sexenio* rather than the modernizing policies that would be put into place after the latter's term was over in 1940. As Cynthia Steele writes of the policies regarding Indians in the 1940s and 1950s:

Las políticas desarrollistas de las décadas de 1940 y 1950 abogaron por la completa integración del indio al moderno Estado industrial. Atrás quedó la idea del indio como el cimiento espiritual de la nación que se consolidaba. Conforme decaía el nacionalismo en México, también se abandonaba la idealización de la sociedad indígena y campesina. (79)

Although the Revolutionary and *indigenista* discourses would continue to be used to retain popular support for the government, the state never again concerned itself in the same way with indigenous rights or claims.²² The fact that El Indio's *indigenista* films can be seen as reflecting *cardenista* policies rather than those of Cárdenas's successors in the presidency demonstrate an adherence to outdated models of *indigenismo* and cultural identity. Fernández repeated over and over, as García Riera indicates, his version of Mexico/*indigenismo*, eventually becoming stuck in a pattern of thought out of which he could not escape, even during the height of his career.²³ This discursive and aesthetic petrification is visible

in his work through the repetition of the same basic concepts listed above, and through the perpetuation of certain visual images and styles which became characteristic of the Fernández-Figueroa style. Nonetheless, this style would be used to create the myth of Mexico's identity in cinema and cement Fernández's reputation as *the* Mexican director of the Golden Age.

Notes to Introduction

¹ Throughout this thesis, with the exception of *María Candelaria*, whose text I copied from the subtitles that appear on the DVD, the transcriptions of dialogue and quotes from the movies used in the text are my own. If there are any errors in the transcriptions, I alone am responsible for them.

² There seems to be some confusion as to El Indio's year of birth, as Paco Ignacio Taibo I offers 1903 and both Emilio García Riera and Dolores Tierney say it was 1904. While the later date is used here, the fact that there is a discrepancy is revealing of El Indio's tendency toward story-telling and the fabrication of his own life history, filled with improbable events and meetings, but related with complete sincerity (Taibo 19; García Riera, *Fernández* 12). For example, Taibo quotes El Indio as saying that he had been with the Revolutionary general Felipe Ángeles in the taking of the city of Torreón in 1914 when Emilio was 10 or 11 years old (20). Later, Taibo writes the following of the years 1926 and 1927:

1926 [...] Emilio afirma que este año lo pasa en la cárcel, pero hay múltiples testimonios de que ya estaba en Hollywood. Por una parte, Emilio sigue diciendo que está aún en la cárcel, pero al mismo tiempo narra su amistad con Rodolfo Valentino.

1927 [...] Afirma que estuvo este año en China. Sabemos que interpretó films como extra en Hollywood. (25)

The contradictory details of his life that Fernández affirmed and reaffirmed attest to the unreliability as a narrator of his own life story.

³ The so-called Golden Age of Mexican cinema lasted roughly between 1936 and 1956 and corresponds, respectively, to the release of the films *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, and the pseudo-*indigenista* movie *Tizoc* starring Pedro Infante. The Mexican state heavily

subsidized the industry, making it a "national" one, and many of the films, but by no means all of them) had a patriotic/nationalistic leaning, often expressed through the exaltation of some aspect of Mexican culture, such as the patrón and haciendas, idyllic village life, or the supposed natural passion of Mexican people. Melodrama was a common genre, as were historical recreations of episodes or periods in Mexico's past. Musicals were also a common feature. El Indio's movies range from *indigenista*, examined here, to *cabareteras* (movies about cabarets), as well as some historical recreations, among other genres. The Golden Age was called thus because of the wide distribution and popularity of Mexican films throughout all of Latin America and Spain. Mexico gained a strong reputation worldwide for making films that represented the identity of a generation of Hispanics.

⁴ The Mexican sociologist and essayist Roger Bartra has compiled an anthology of essays on Mexico's identity as conceived by some of its prominent intellectuals throughout the twentieth century titled *Anatomía del mexicano*. The theme of the Indian's place in Mexican identity and society is a frequent topic of these essays.

⁵ Regarding the use of the terms "Indian," "indigenous," and "native," out of the desire to avoid the too frequent repetition of all these terms, I employ them freely and interchangeably, fully acknowledging their problematic nature. This is due to the absence of a simple word which expresses both the plurality of the native ethnic groups who were the primary targets of *indigenismo*, and the homogeneous, universalized notion of indigenous identity often used by *indigenistas* in the 1930s and 1940s (see Dawson *xix, xxvi*).

⁶ For example, in *Río Escondido*, the voice of the narrator at the beginning of the film gives preference to the indigenous origin of Mexico as he interprets Diego Rivera's mural to the awestruck Rosaura Salazar: "He aquí nuestros orígenes," he says of the Aztecs. The fact that the mural is in the Palacio Nacional suggests an association of the post-Revolutionary

Mexican state as the political heir of the deposed Aztec lords. The narrator sustains this genealogical link from pre-Hispanic times to the present as he continues his narration of Mexican history, interpreted here as a series of invasions and resistance, with the Indian playing a key role in maintaining sovereignty. Benito Juárez is a central figure in the mural (he also appears in the portrait hanging in the Salón de Embajadores), as is the heroic Mexican "pueblo," constantly referred to throughout the opening sequence, both praised for their humble, indigenous origins. These associations suggest that the Mexican state and indigenous groups—both past and present—are of the same stock and therefore synonymous. See also Dolores Tierney, 77.

⁷ Emilio García Riera cites an interview of Emilio Fernández realized during the filming of *Río Escondido* where the director talks about the role of the national cinema and its connection to the state, affirming multiple times that his motives were meant to lend support to President Alemán or Mexico in order to make Mexico progress and come out of its lethargy. See García Riera, *Emilio Fernández, 1904-1986*, pages 105-108. See also Joanne Hershfield's *Mexican Cinema/Mexican Woman, 1940-1950*, page 52.

⁸ *Río Escondido* is again illustrative here. García Riera and a critic he cites, José de la Colina, both point out the religious symbolism frequently used in the film and the similarities between the Christian archetype of Christ as the messenger of God to bring peace to humankind that is played out in the movie. See García Riera, *Emilio Fernández, 1904-1986*, pages 125-27.

⁹ In the three films discussed in this thesis, both Schoemann and Magdaleno were a part of El Indio's team in these respective positions.

¹⁰ Figueroa received a grant to study cinematic technique in Hollywood and was taught by renowned cinematographer Gregg Toland.

¹¹ See Charles Ramírez Berg's two studies on this style: "The Cinematic Invention of Mexico: The Poetics and Politics of the Fernández-Figueroa Style" and "Figueroa's Skies and Oblique Perspective: Notes on the Development of the Classical Mexican Style."

¹² See Chapter 2, "'El Indio' Fernández, Mexico's marginalized golden boy and national auteur" in her study, *Emilio Fernández: Pictures in the Margins*.

¹³ Emilio García Riera gives evidence of El Indio's predilection for Lázaro Cárdenas in the introduction to Fernández's biography:

[...] delata la honda huella que dejó en El Indio el gobierno de México por el general Lázaro Cárdenas en los años 1934 a 1940, años que son a la vez los que señalan la incorporación del joven Emilio [...] al cine nacional, después de su aprendizaje hollywoodense. Escribe Adela Fernández que su padre 'tuvo un cariño desmedido por Lázaro Cárdenas y aprendía cosas de él como si fuera un niño y devoto estudiante; repetía sus palabras y comentaba obsesivamente durante años sus enseñanzas como si acabara de platicar con él.' (*Fernández* 9)

¹⁴ Fernández's connection with *cardenismo*, as Cárdenas's policies have been called, is important and will be discussed throughout the thesis. Again, although Tierney takes issue with auterist interpretations of El Indio's work that highlight Mexican nationalism, I include these comments here to justify my position in light of her analysis.

¹⁵ Gabriel Figueroa relates an anecdote about the making of *La perla* which highlights Fernández's reduced role in the film. Here, Figueroa tells how El Indio's aestheticized vision of the Indian clashed with the sensibilities of writer John Steinbeck:

Bueno, pues Emilio mandó vestir a todos los hombres iguales y con idénticos morrales. Las mujeres también parecían uniformadas, todas de rebozo y vestido negro. Aquello parecía un ballet. Eso, naturalmente, asustó a Steinbeck y al

productor Óscar Dancigers cuando vieron los rushes. Me llamó Steinbeck aparte y de plano me dijo que no le gustaba el resultado. ‘Esta es una historia realista. Todo está demasiado...estilizado, teatral.’ Entre él y Dancigers convencieron a Emilio de que había que repetir dos días de filmación. Emilio se calló y obedeció, pero desde ese momento odió a Dancigers para siempre. (Isaac 31)

¹⁶ The fact that *Paloma herida* was made in the post-Golden Age years does not automatically exclude it from analysis as one of El Indio’s *indigenista* movies. However, in order to view those *indigenista* films made during the Golden Age as a coherent whole, the inclusion of *Paloma herida* would introduce an element that was not present when the other movies (*María Candelaria*, etc) were made. However, it does open the possibility of further investigation on the development of Fernández’s *indigenista* cinema after the Golden Age and his fall from grace.

¹⁷ For further reading on the use of the image of the Indian in Mexican identity politics, see Roberto Blancarte’s (comp.) *Cultura e identidad nacional*. Mexico City: CONACULTA; Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1994.

¹⁸ Dawson writes the following regarding the idea of the redemption of the Indian:

Through their efforts Indigenismo acted as a medium through which a series of actors, including social scientists, bureaucrats, intellectuals, teachers, and Indians themselves negotiated a new place for indigenous peoples in Mexico. [...] [T]hese struggles would also contribute to the creation of new political subjects: Indians empowered to demand rights as citizens and act as agents in their own redemption.

(xv)

¹⁹ For a brief description of Vasconcelos’s major ideas, see Dolores Tierney’s *Emilio*

Fernández: Pictures in the Margins, page 76.

²⁰ Claudia Arroyo Quiroz suggests that Cárdenas's regime was one of relative tolerance that advanced pluralism as an alternative to total assimilation (192). However, Alexander S. Dawson firmly deflates the notion of Cárdenas as an advocate of pluralism, citing Cárdenas himself as an opponent of cultural pluralism in Mexico and emphasizing his nationalist position and his assertion of the essential unity of Mexico which denied the importance of race or culture, Cárdenas basing his policies on class. In reality, his policies would become the foundation for the extreme neglect of the Indians perpetrated under Ávila Camacho, Alemán, and later presidents (85-87, 133-40).

²¹ As an interesting comparison to El Indio's *indigenista* movies is a group of texts produced in the post-Revolution years, also known as *indigenista*. Representative of these texts are *Lola Casanova* (1947) and *El Diosero* (1952) by Francisco Rojas González; *El callado dolor de los tzotziles* (1949) by Ramón Rubín; and Gregorio López y Fuentes's novel, *El indio* (1935). This last text is especially interesting because of its connections to *cardenismo*, seeing as it was written in the year following Cárdenas's election. Comparison of the novel *El indio* with Fernández's *indigenista* films demonstrates an affinity of ideas between Fernández and López y Fuentes. Cynthia Steele describes the *cardenista* elements in the novel, including ostensible support for the incorporationism of Cárdenas through cultural rehabilitation, economic development, social reform, and education (65-66); the perception of Indians as the noble savage; and praise of *mestizaje*, although this praise is nuanced. However, this potential criticism of *mestizaje* is resolved through the repetition of the doctrine of cultural evolution (69-70), which posits that human civilizations are progressing on a continuum from primitive to modern. Mexico's Indians were considered to be on the more primitive end of that continuum. If Mexico were to evolve to the highest level of culture and modernity, the Indians needed to be brought into mainstream life or

eliminated. These same ideas are found throughout Emilio Fernández's *indigenista* movies, further cementing the connection between El Indio's *indigenista* cinema and *cardenismo*.

For more information on post-Revolutionary *indigenista* literature, see Sylvia Bigas Torres's, *La narrativa indigenista Mexicana del siglo XX*; César Rodríguez Chicharro's *La novela indigenista mexicana*; and Lancelot Cowie's *El indio en la narrativa contemporánea de México y Guatemala*.

²² Regarding this, Cockcroft writes: “For decades the state spent immense sums propagandizing this normative model of ‘revolutionary nationalism,’ along with the political model of a ‘directed democracy.’ Neither of these models ever again even approximated their fairly credible levels under Cárdenas” (145).

²³ García Riera cites a review of *Río Escondido* that alludes to the rhetorical stagnation of El Indio's films that was taking place even during his peak years as a director. See the review by the French critic André Camp on pages 121-23 of García Riera's *Emilio Fernández, 1904-1986*.

CHAPTER I

THE ONLY GOOD INDIAN IS AN ABSENT ONE

The quote that inspired the title of this chapter might seem out of place considering its original context and the overall tenor of this project.¹ However, by including it here I hope to illustrate a vital though paradoxical concept of the *indigenista* project in Mexico: the necessary absence of the Indian. As established earlier, despite ostensible desires to show the social revindication of indigenous groups in Mexico, El Indio's films, rather than attempt to represent them as they are (no small feat given the limitations of representation), merely repeat the tendency to exalt and aestheticize the Indian. The artistic rendering of indigenous people shown in Fernández's *indigenista* films is designed to evoke in the viewer a sense of the grandeur of Mexico's pre-Columbian past and the potential glories of its future. However, by emphasizing a static and picturesque representation of native peoples, the films necessarily stress the disappearance of the Indian—through death or assimilation—as a separate and identifiable group from mainstream Mexico, hearkening back to Gamio's encouragement of the development of a uniquely Mexican artistic tradition for this very purpose. The preservation of the Indian that *indigenismo* purports and which is portrayed in El Indio's films is, therefore, not one based on actual groups, but on the image and memory of them as a unifying myth and symbol for the *mestizo* majority.

Using the concept of *la conciencia pictórica* developed by Claudia Arroyo Quiroz and the idea of gaze developed by Andrea Noble in her study of *María Candelaria*, I analyze *María Candelaria* and *Río Escondido* to examine the role of the aestheticized Indian utilized by Emilio Fernández as director and Gabriel Figueroa as cinematographer in the creation and perpetuation of the myth of indigenous Mexico as the essence of Mexico's national identity. Within the paradigm of this myth, Indians are seen as objects of artistic contemplation that can be appropriated for exploitation in the service of post-Revolutionary Mexican nationalism. In addition to their status as cultural artifacts, the

native peoples depicted in El Indio's indigenist films are passive and silent, unable to act or speak for themselves without the aid of the State. Fernández and Figueroa's insistence on the picturesque, silent, and static image of Indians attests to their quality as symbols of the national myth. This suggests that while Indians are supposedly the protagonists of these movies, in reality, the rhetoric of *indigenismo* gives preference to the non-indigenous elements as the agents of change among native groups under the influence of the Mexican state. Moreover, the endings of both *María Candelaria* and *Río Escondido* imply that what Mexico needed at that time (1940s) were not active and autonomous indigenous communities, but rather Indians that quietly allowed themselves to be absorbed into modern Mexico.

As I will be referring to both films alternately throughout this chapter, brief synopses are necessary before continuing. *María Candelaria* is the story of two star-crossed Indian lovers. Narrated from the point of view of a painter in the post-Revolution years, the story itself takes place in 1909 in Xochimilco, near Mexico City. The young and beautiful Indian woman María Candelaria has been ostracized from her community in Xochimilco because she is the daughter of a "mala mujer." She lives a solitary life on her *chinampa* (a small plot of land among the canals of Xochimilco, the remnants of Lake Texcoco), her only companions being Lorenzo Rafael, her betrothed, and a little piglet that promises economic prosperity for the couple once they marry. However, due to the machinations of the avaricious Don Damián, who also desires María Candelaria, Lorenzo Rafael is thrown into prison. In an effort to rescue him, the heroine agrees to pose for the painter who, with the help of the local priest, attempts to have Lorenzo Rafael freed. However, after painting her face, the artist asks María Candelaria to pose nude for him to be able to finish the painting. She refuses and runs off, leaving the painter with only her head completed. One of the

painter's other models offers to pose for the body of María Candelaria, and the artist finishes his work. However, when the other members of the village find out about the painting, and, thinking María Candelaria has actually posed nude, they track her down and stone her to death. The last scenes are of Lorenzo Rafael carrying her away in his canoe down the Canal de los Muertos with María Candelaria's body surrounded by flowers.

Río Escondido narrates the story of a terminally ill *maestra rural*, Rosaura Salazar, in her work in the small, forgotten, desert town of Río Escondido. Having been given her commission personally by the President of Mexico (a figure looking remarkably similar to President Miguel Alemán (1946-1952), Rosaura departs by train for Río Escondido, somewhere near Ciudad Juárez in the northern state of Chihuahua. However, instead of finding support for her mission, she finds an abusive cacique (a rural political leader), Don Regino Sandoval, who is monopolizing the water of the town and exploiting the labor of the Indians who live there for his personal benefit. He has made the previous schoolteacher his lover, has intimidated the local priest, and unjustly controls the villagers through his gang of henchmen. Nevertheless, with the aid of a young doctor in training, Felipe, Rosaura is able to establish a school and challenge Don Regino's authority. Later, after an attempt by Don Regino to seduce and then rape her, Rosaura shoots and kills the cacique. The villagers, taking their cue from Rosaura, attack and kill his henchmen, liberating the town and opening it to modernity and progress. In the end, however, due to her illness, Rosaura dies and is buried under the school house where she taught in Río Escondido.

In her article “*La conciencia pictórica de Gabriel Figueroa*,” Claudia Arroyo Quiroz recognizes in Gabriel Figueroa's cinematography for Fernández's films a tendency to “encuadrar las imágenes en movimiento como si fueran pinturas, en ocasiones de manera insistente” (190). The images produced as a result of this tendency are indeed reminiscent

of paintings because of the way they are framed and because of their perceived immobility. Furthermore, the critic establishes the relationship between these images and “la tradición pictórica indigenista que se desarrolló en el México posrevolucionario” (188), noting specifically that in the movies produced by El Indio’s moviemaking team, “la cinefotografía de Figueroa había establecido ya un diálogo muy claro con el arte visual mexicano” (186). The dialogue she mentions is found in Figueroa’s frequent allusions to *indigenista* paintings, especially those of Diego Rivera, but also those of other Mexican artists (186-88).² Furthermore, Arroyo Quiroz, in her analysis of *María Candelaria*, identifies a melding of the focalizer (the camera) and the narratorial voice through the character of the painter. Since he is the one relating the story, the images presented are shown as though seen from the painter’s perspective. By combining the vision of the camera with the narrator’s story, Arroyo Quiroz states that Figueroa, under the direction of Fernández, “creó un tipo de conciencia pictórica [...] que conlleva ciertas implicaciones ideológicas en relación al discurso indigenista de la película” (189-90). Although she refers here specifically to *María Candelaria*, this conception of the role of the camera in creating meaning for the narrative is also applicable to *Río Escondido*. Therefore, by merging the vision of Mexican plastic arts and the subject matter of El Indio’s films with the vision of the camera, Figueroa presents an aesthetic view of Mexico that tends toward myth and symbol.

For example, in the scene in *María Candelaria* where we are first introduced to the character of Don Damián, we witness the arrival of indigenous laborers and farmers who have come bringing their goods to his store. What would typically be a mundane occurrence—men loading and unloading goods—is transformed into a picturesque moment and preserved by the camera (Figure 1). By capturing this event on film and emphasizing its aesthetic nature, Fernández and Figueroa draw attention to the perceived artistic qualities

of daily life for the indigenous inhabitants of Mexico. Moreover, although the images presented through the lens of the *conciencia pictórica* are in movement (it is a “movie”), they stand out, not because of their energy or activity, but because of their static, immobile nature. Besides this particular shot, there are a number of



Fig. 1. An example of the *conciencia pictórica* framing images in motion to create paintings. From *María Candelaria*.

scenes that depict Indians as objects of art, such as those of the Xochimilcans as they react to María Candelaria paddling out to sell flowers, the *Bendición de los Animalitos*, and the torch scene at the end of the film. These images and others reveal the aesthetic eye of the *conciencia pictórica* as it captures the quotidian routine of Indians in Mexico. However, the image most preferred in *María Candelaria* by the *conciencia pictórica* “como su objetivo [...] de contemplación y estetización” is the star couple, María Candelaria and Lorenzo Rafael (Arroyo Quiroz 193). Besides highlighting the differences between these characters and the collective indigenous masses of Xochimilco, as Andrea Noble and other scholars have indicated, the view of the *conciencia pictórica* also serves to immortalize the images of them as the ideal indigenous couple. Shots of María Candelaria and Lorenzo Rafael as devout Catholics, dedicated couple, and Arcadian peasants abound in the film. This will be discussed in greater detail later.

In the same way that the *conciencia pictórica* of *María Candelaria* linked images of Indians to the indigenist painting tradition, *Río Escondido* takes that same practice and magnifies it to the point of becoming the central focus of the movie. While there is no visible element within *Río Escondido* to frame the images, such as a painter, the beginning

of the film suggests a possible source of the *conciencia pictórica*. The opening scenes are a series of shots of the Zócalo in Mexico City and various buildings and works of art. As Rosaura Salazar rushes to her meeting with President Alemán, she pauses in front of the Campana de Dolores, an impressive courtyard within the Palacio Nacional, and Diego Rivera's mural of Mexican history, among other things. Throughout her short journey to the President's office, Rosaura is guided to her final destination by the voice of narrators who interpret for her the icons of Mexican history as she appears before them. Based on this sequence of events that lead up to her meeting, it is possible to consider the *conciencia pictórica* of this film as a tour guide of Mexican history through its arts, akin to a guided museum tour such as the one that visitors can take at Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City. Visitors walk through various rooms dedicated to different periods in Mexican history and view iconic emblems of the nation, such as Porfirio Díaz's bedroom, Benito Juárez's carriage, and a mural by José Clemente Orozco.

This interpretation of the *conciencia pictórica* as a lesson in official Mexican history in *Río Escondido* is important as the elements of that history are transformed in the film into works of art and elevated to the status of national symbols meant to inspire faith in and devotion to the post-Revolutionary government. In this way, besides the major figures of Mexican history presented in the murals, the anonymous indigenous inhabitants of *Río Escondido* are also brought into the artistic tradition of the state through the engravings made by Leopoldo Méndez that play behind the opening credits of the movie. However, it is not only the villagers who are aestheticized in the credits, but also the non-indigenous actors, Fernando Fernández, María Félix, and even Carlos López Moctezuma. By highlighting the mythic qualities of the stars of the film, *El Indio* emphasizes the unified and coherent version of history demanded by the rhetoric of *indigenismo* and Mexican nationalism.



Fig. 2. “La última gota de agua.” Framing of indigenous women in *Río Escondido* in imitation of painting, characteristic of the *conciencia pictórica*.

This is not to say that the indigenous inhabitants of Río Escondido are not the principal target of Fernández and Figueroa’s artistic vision. For example, when the action shifts from the capital to Río Escondido, the focus of the *conciencia pictórica* also shifts from city life to the barren countryside of

rural northern Mexico, giving preference to images that portray the suffering of the Indians under an unjust government. These images are accentuated through the juxtaposition of the people themselves with the desolation that surrounds them, tying them, much like María Candelaria and Lorenzo Rafael, to the land. The shot of the women at the well in Figure 2, framed so dramatically by Figueroa’s camera, shows “la última gota de agua,” the moment when the public well in Río Escondido finally runs dry, signifying the impending doom of the villager’s residents. This recalls the President’s instructions to Rosaura regarding the needs of Mexico before she left with her commission: “México carece de agua. Agua.”

Later, after Rosaura has arrived in Río Escondido, in a scene in the school house Fernández



Fig. 3. Rosaura Salazar teaches indigenous children in *Río Escondido*

shows her teaching indigenous children about the glories of Benito Juárez.³ She and the students are framed in profile in the acts of teaching and learning, the light from the window illuminating the Indian students in a not-so-subtle suggestion of the progress and intelligence of

the students in absorbing the knowledge being imparted (Figure 3),⁴ hearkening back to President Alemán's injunction to educate the illiterate masses: "Por otra parte, mientras los grandes núcleos humanos no salgan de las tinieblas del analfabetismo, no podremos levantarnos de este letargo de siglos."⁵ The Indians then, despite their difference from the clean and orderly scenes in the capital, are still a part of Mexico and must be incorporated into the national myth.

In both *Río Escondido* and *María Candelaria*, a favored subject of the *conciencia pictórica* are the obligatory folk-Catholic rituals where the beauty, spirituality, and ingrained traditions of the masses ("lo popular y lo heroico," according to Monsiváis (56) are presented to the viewer in all their simple splendor. The fact that the festivals, processions, and rites depicted are associated with Catholicism is not happenstance. Although El Indio was not especially enamored of the Catholic church and its beliefs, or even religion generally, he saw in these celebrations something authentically Mexican and fundamental to the nation's cultural experience. In his biography of El Indio, Emilio García Riera cites an anecdote where Fernández declares himself a firm evolutionist and rejects the notion of religion and divine creation upon seeing a group of monkeys at the zoo. Yet only a few lines earlier, García Riera cites a quote attributed to El Indio by Fernández's daughter Adela regarding his beliefs: "A mí no me gusta cuestionarme acerca de si creo o no en Dios. Con la Guadalupana no tengo duda alguna porque en ella está presente la fe del pueblo y basta esa fe para que haga milagros" (qtd. in García Riera, *Fernández* 9). These curiously contradictory statements, while ostensibly dealing with certain aspects of Christian-Catholic doctrine, have less to do with religion than with the creative, syncretic nature of indigenous and campesino Catholic folk rituals. El Indio recognizes in them an inherent spirituality belonging to the indigenous past and which represents in his films one of the most powerful

symbols of the faith of the Mexican people. Because Mexico for Fernández was mestizo, the festivals depicted in his movies represent a common legacy for those viewing, as well as a primary ingredient of *mexicanidad*.

It is not surprising, then, to see in El Indio's indigenista films an insistence upon capturing in lengthy detail the movements and emblems of the indigenous masses in their rites, arguably producing, in my opinion, some of the most moving and beautiful moments in his indigenist repertoire. These popular



Fig. 4. Indigenous inhabitants of *Río Escondido* during a ritual procession to ask for water

festivals also happen to be the impetus for major plot events. In *María Candelaria* the *Bendición de los Animalitos* serves not only as plot-thickener (a kind of cinematic flour) when Don Damián bursts onto the scene demanding payment of María Candelaria's debt, but the aggression of the Xochimilcans toward the heroine prefigures her stoning at the end of the movie. Likewise, in *Río Escondido*, when the villagers take out the crucifix to plead for water (Figure 4), amid the laments and the perfectly executed choreography and choral arrangement, Goyo, Rosaura's star pupil, is killed by Don Regino in an attempt to steal water from the latter's well. This sets the stage for the wake (also masterfully filmed) of the murdered child where the Indians, under Rosaura's immovable resolve, appear for the first time as a threat to Don Regino and his lackeys. It is here that Rosaura utters one of the most famous lines in the film. After Regino and his men have left, Rosaura says, addressing her indigenous compatriots, "Ya han aprendido que a un pueblo unido no hay injusticia que se le pueda imponer." The ultimate consequences of that statement are conclusive: after Don

Regino's death at the hands of Rosaura, the people of Río Escondido unleash their anger on Don Regino's henchmen, liberating the town and opening the doors to justice and modernity. The coincidence of folk Catholic rites and the occurrence of plot-altering events ties popular tradition to material change for the denizens of the town and suggests that the spiritual power intrinsic in the indigenous soul is capable of regenerating Mexico (with a little help from their friends in the capital).

From the very beginning of both movies the spectator is introduced into a world of art and symbolism. In all cases, the images created by this conciencia pictórica serve to underscore the mythic value of what the spectator is seeing. Furthermore, by associating these images with the artistic tradition established by the government in the post-Revolutionary years, they are incorporated into the pantheon of Mexican icons alongside historical figures such as Cuauhtémoc, Benito Juárez, and Emiliano Zapata, and are awarded the same level of artistic authority as the creations of Posada, Dr. Atl, and Rivera. This constant emphasis on the mythic quality of Mexican cinema and its necessary role in forming a unified nation responded to “una necesidad de institucionalizar tanto a un arte filmico local como a las figuras más emblemáticas del cine nacional como componentes clave de patrimonio cultural de la nación” (Arroyo Quiroz 184). The most visible of these emblematic figures were the stars who played the main roles, but it is possible to substitute the word “stars” with “images,” “music,” “characters,” “situations,” or “themes” which now belong to Mexico as part of its cinematic tradition.⁶

For example, as mentioned earlier, in the opening scenes of Río Escondido, Rosaura (María Félix) makes her way through the Palacio Nacional up to President Alemán's office and encounters the recently finished mural of Mexican history painted by Diego Rivera.

Taken aback by the size of the mural (a symbol of the greatness of the Mexican history

which she is beholding), Rosaura becomes lost in the official narration of the major people and events until she herself becomes a part of the narrative alongside Aztecs and other figures. This incorporation is highlighted when, as she is running up the stairs, with the mural to her right, it becomes difficult to distinguish Rosaura's figure from the band of Aztec warriors painted at the head of the stairs (Figure 5). In this way Figueroa and Fernández



Fig. 5. Rosaura becomes incorporated into the narrative of Mexican history.

Mexican History. This is further driven home at the end of the film when, after Rosaura's death and the "regeneration" of Río Escondido, the stone marker indicating her burial place and achievements is read aloud by the same voice who narrated the course of Mexican history at the beginning of the film.

This process of apotheosis/appropriation applies not only to the main *mestiza* character from the capital, but to all the images in the films which the *conciencia pictórica* chooses as its artistic inspiration, but most especially to the Indians. Wanting to capture the essence of what he considered to be "los mexicanos más puros que hay" (García Riera, *Historia* 3:67), El Indio exalted and stylized the Indians and their lifestyle, which, while beautiful and in many ways moving, failed to capture the reality of indigenous life. What it did capture were visions of myth, a version of Mexico which would contribute, as Fernández hoped, to the nation's ultimate success by initiating the viewers into the ritual that was being Mexican.

Despite the fact that Fernández's vision of indigenous people responded to

nationalistic urges and was based on a stylized view of them reminiscent of the already mentioned myth of the noble savage, I feel that the praise for the indigenous elements of Mexico seen in El Indio's movies is sincere, although misguided.⁷ Nevertheless, the greatness attributed to the Indians in his films represented a thing of the past. Naturally, this past informed Fernández's present, yet it always remained firmly as a moment in time, or rather, before time, that Mexicans could look back on to understand who, according to Fernández, they really were. We can see this relationship between post-Revolutionary rhetoric and the pre-Hispanic past in *María*



Figure 6: An opening scene in *María Candelaria* juxtaposing the pre-Hispanic past and the post-Revolutionary present of Mexico.

Candelaria through the visual juxtaposition of the supposedly indigenous model⁸ posing for the painter at the beginning of *María Candelaria*, and the indigenous-like masks and statues that precede it, seen in Figure 6 (Hersfield 55). Here, as Joanne Hersfield has written, Fernández “specifically links the past to the present through his representation of Mexico’s ‘eternal’ Indianness” (55). El Indio stresses the perpetual and unchanging indigenous nature of Mexico in *María Candelaria* through a conversation between the painter and the priest in the prison when they are attempting to free Lorenzo Rafael after his arrest. The painter’s lines to the priest during this scene confirm Fernández’s eternal conception of Indian Mexico:

Mire usted, señor cura. No creo exagerado decirle que en María Candelaria he encontrado todo lo que buscaba. Yo pinto indias, como usted sabe, y desde que la vi sentí en ella lo que debió haber sido en el pasado esta raza delicada, emotiva y

maravillosa. Ella es para mí como una esencia de la verdadera belleza mexicana. This “‘eternal’ Indianness” as seen through the lens of the Fernández-Figueroa team translates into praise, not for what indigenous peoples had been, but for what they could become in the ideology of 1940s cultural nationalism: *mestizo*. Although the Indians in *María Candelaria* and *Río Escondido* were genetically Indians, for Fernández they were just *mestizos* in embryo. The cultural superiority that intellectuals in the post-war years considered intrinsic to contemporary, *mestizo* Mexico, was simply latent in modern indigenous groups. These only needed to be “redeemed” in order for their innate virtues to be fully activated; if they could be aroused by the right stimulus—usually education in El Indio’s *indigenista* films—they would be able to join national life. Therefore, as the *mestizos* are, “the Indians could be for Mexico” (Hershfield 72). Any future the Indians would hope to have is predicated upon their participation in the building of modern Mexico and national life and culture.

In the case of *María Candelaria*, the emphasis on the tragic love story does not make immediately clear the connection between María Candelaria and Lorenzo Rafael and the necessity of modernization that was a key aspect of *indigenismo*. However, as other scholars have noted (Hershfield, Noble, Tierney), the temporal, geographic, and cultural distance between the viewers and the film-story permits the incorporation of two seemingly insignificant Indians from Xochimilco into the national pantheon of Mexican heroes, and makes them the forerunners of the rehabilitated Mexico. The key to their beatification lies in both the exemplary character of the couple and on their necessary sacrifice as “Mexico’s Adam and Eve,” as Tierney calls them (94), effectively cementing their status as the foundational figures of post-Revolutionary Mexico’s originary myth. The two Xochimilcans are characterized as loving, devout (or at least spiritual), obedient, resourceful, courageous,

and stoic. They are also simple, honest, and intimately tied to the earth. In political terms, this translates into the characterization of the ideal citizen, supportive of the national government's policies, especially of agrarian reform and *indigenismo*. In other words, María Candelaria and Lorenzo Rafael represent model Mexicans, figures that can be admired from a 1940s perspective as ideal candidates for assimilation. These two Indians represent figures that have been appropriated by the state and "harnessed to the concept of the centralised nation" (Noble 76).

The concept of distanciation mentioned above is significant because it situates the events taking place in the movie out of the realm of the lived experience of the spectators, and into the realm of myth and memory. Andrea Noble, referring to the distanciation between spectators and movie in *María Candelaria*, writes the following:

This distanciation takes place on a number of levels. First, the opening intertitles describe the events about to be witnessed as 'una tragedia de amor arrancada de un rincón indígena de México, Xochimilco en el año [de] 1909.' [...] In this way, the urban spectator viewing the film in the 1940s is distanced both temporally and geographically from the events on the screen. (90)

Although Noble is writing specifically about *María Candelaria*, this distanciation also appears in *Río Escondido* and is key for two reasons: time and place, and identification. First, in the case of *María Candelaria*, there is the issue of temporality: the movie takes place before the beginning of the Mexican Revolution, in 1909.⁹ Therefore, the 1940s viewer is separated by more than 30 years of history in which the landed elite and the oligarchy have (supposedly) been overthrown by the Revolution; therefore, any abuses suffered by the poor at the hands of the rich and powerful have been eradicated, a nod to the Revolutionary government (Tierney 79, 82). In the case of *Río Escondido*, although

the events are contemporary with the 1940s viewer, they are separated by space, both geographical (we know that Río Escondido is located in the barren deserts of northern Mexico somewhere near Ciudad Juárez) and inhabited (i.e., the middle class cinema-goers¹⁰ cannot relate to the lifestyle nor the places that are being depicted). In a way, the viewers are also transported back in time due to the fact that the modernizing wave that had spread across the more urbanized parts of Mexico had not yet reached many of the backwater villages in Mexico's vast hinterland, represented by the otherworldly Río Escondido.¹¹

Second, there is the issue of "spectatorial identification" with the characters on-screen. In *María Candelaria*, the collective mass of Indians living in Xochimilco is differentiated from María Candelaria and Lorenzo Rafael by traits of darkness and lack of civilization and intelligence.¹² They differ markedly from the beauty and courage of the star couple, and this is intentional, as Andrea Noble has explained: "[...] the film sets up a clear distinction between María Candelaria and Lorenzo Rafael and what Emilio García Riera terms as the *populacho*. On the whole, the *populacho* is presented as a collective [entity] [...]. Collective cinematic identity by definition functions here to prevent close spectatorial identification" (89). From this, it can be logically concluded that we are not supposed to like the *populacho*. Mythically they represent the antagonist in the originary story and cannot triumph without serious repercussions for the recipients of the myth-story (i.e., the viewing public); therefore, any apparent victory they gain must be turned to the benefit of the myth. Furthermore, because the *populacho* in *María Candelaria* represents the other half of *indigenismo*'s conception of the Indian (a stumbling block to economic progress), I would contend, contrary to what Tierney asserts (82-84), that the representation of the *populacho* as violent, degenerate, and ignorant is done deliberately. Rather than try to gloss over their violent barbarity, through El Indio's efforts to emphasize it, he accentuates what

1940s Indians were for 1940s urban, middle class spectators: childish creatures that need the tutelage of the state to teach them true civilization. Their cultural identity is depicted as unworthy of emulation and therefore eliminated from the regenerated, post-Revolutionary Mexico from which perspective the painter narrates the story. This interpretation is certainly reasonable given that, despite the fact that the particular brand of *indigenismo* that *cardenismo* championed was about as generous toward the Indians as any government would ever be after his presidency, the assimilation of the Indian into mainstream society and the eradication of ‘undesirable’ qualities in indigenous lifestyles was still a central preoccupation of Cárdenas’s regime, as has been stated earlier. The eventual disappearance of the *populacho* in *María Candelaria* is the natural conclusion of *indigenismo*’s logic.

The question is, then, if María Candelaria can be seen as the quintessential representative of the *indigenista* project, why did she die along with the *populacho*?

Dolores Tierney offers the following analysis:

The central couple’s moral exemplarity is based on a link to the past and a rural existence. [...] Hence, by focusing on the past, the narrative elides the contradictions of the indigenist project, praising a dead *indígena* (María Candelaria as martyr) rather than dealing with the actual problems of the contemporary (live) *indígena* population. (83)

El Indio’s films and, as Tierney points out here, the entire *indigenista* project, are rooted in Indians that are conspicuously absent; in this case dead. It is much easier to create a myth out of a memory and an image than from the daily visible shortcomings of a living individual or group. As for Lorenzo Rafael, it is not completely unfounded to suppose that he followed María Candelaria, not necessarily in death, but at least in withdrawing himself from the indigenous community of Xochimilco. The last image of the film is Lorenzo

Rafael steering the small boat containing María Candelaria's body down the "Canal de los Muertos" where he remains with her, a memory and symbol of the courageous and passionate foundations of contemporary Mexican society.

In Río Escondido this obsession with "disappearing" the Indian has a related but significantly different spin: assimilation. Unlike in María Candelaria where the state had a minimal positive impact in the lives of indigenous peoples, in Río Escondido the entire conflict is based upon the struggle between the state as "totalmente comprometido con la modernización y con el progreso de su pueblo, y al poder local como despótico y primitivo" (Arroyo Quiroz 195). When Rosaura arrives in Río Escondido she discovers that the municipal president Don Regino has turned the school into a stable and made the former teacher his querida, thereby eliminating both the influence of the state in the form of the teacher and the possibility of a political awakening in the Indians through education. The Indians themselves are presented as dying of thirst, a physical symbol of an inner desire for knowledge and redemption. Only Rosaura Salazar, as the appointed maestra rural for the village, has the ability to give them the water they need, hence the movie's title. With the help of the young doctor-in-training, Felipe (and an outbreak of small-pox), Rosaura is able to force Don Regino to reopen and repair the school. Here, attentive indigenous children rapidly adopt her patriotic discourse and worldview. In one of the many scenes in the classroom, the young Goyo is drawing while Rosaura lectures about virtuous citizenship. A camera glance to Goyo and his schoolmates reveals a brilliantly executed drawing of Rosaura holding a child that bears strong resemblance to the traditional representation of the Virgin of Guadalupe (Figure 7), indicating both the teacher's divine errand from the state¹³ as well as the fact that the students are internalizing her civic sermons. Furthermore, by having the star pupil create a work of art as a symbol of his conversion to modern Mexico,



Fig. 7. Goyo draws a picture of Rosaura holding a child in *Río Escondido*

Fernández and Figueroa reaffirm both the film and its images as symbolic icons in the national imagery of Mexico.

It is significant that in the film the children, rather than the adults, are the ones receiving and reproducing her lessons. One of the major programs under Cárdenas was the *internado indígena*,¹⁴ a kind of regional boarding school that was designed to adapt to local circumstances (language, ethnicity, traditions) and provide indigenous youth with an opportunity at education with the ultimate

purpose of producing future leaders and agents of progress in their home communities.

While the program started in 1933, it was overhauled in 1936 during Cárdenas's presidency due to chronic problems and became "the centerpiece of Cardenista efforts to educate the Indian" (Dawson 35-37, 44). Despite constant difficulties, in many ways the program was effective in creating a body of bilingual students that became professionals that "pursued a variety of careers within and outside of the state," including "engineers, teachers, doctors, lawyers, and the like" (Dawson 53). The children of Río Escondido are portrayed by Fernández as the future of the *pueblo* and the ones who are able to capture the vision that Rosaura is presenting to them in their lessons. Noble describes this as the "'liberated' gaze," associated with modernity and change (91); the fact that the village youth are able to "see" modernity makes them ideal candidates for assimilation into the national body. This

contrasts strongly with the *populacho* in *María Candelaria*, which is described by Noble as exhibiting a “pre-modern gaze” (90), effectively rendering them incapable of understanding and assimilating into Mexico’s move toward modernity. Additionally, while the *populacho* of *María Candelaria* defies spectatorial identification, the viewer comes to know and identify with several children in the village, including Goyo, Ponciano (the little boy who suggests that the good Mexicans should “quebrar” the bad ones), as well as a number of other children whose names are spoken throughout the movie.¹⁵

In the case of the adult villagers of Río Escondido, they exhibit qualities that place them somewhere between the pre-modern *populacho* and the visionary quality of their children. Therefore, although the collective group of adult villagers in Río Escondido does not prevent spectatorial identification in the same way that the *populacho* does in *María Candelaria*, they are still not full participants in their own narrative. In reality, it is not even their narrative, but Mexico’s (Mexico being equated here with the post-Revolutionary government), and they as indigenous villagers have a part to play, but instead of the lead role in their own political awakening, they take a supporting role, the main responsibility falling on Rosaura and Felipe as agents of the state. Thus, urban, 1940s spectators can fully identify with these two characters because of their individuation and similarity to themselves. Although the inhabitants of Río Escondido are portrayed as worthy and noble, the viewer does not identify with them as equals, but rather as an adult towards a child. Instead of looking on the villagers as repugnant and degraded, the viewer is moved with compassion because of their suffering, but this compassion is contingent upon their willingness to be modernized. This is emphasized in the school when, on the first day of class, Rosaura looks first at the eager young students and then at a propaganda poster that displays a seated and drunken Indian campesino wearing a sarape and an

oversized sombrero which covers his eyes. The poster's text reads, "Esto se acabó. México en lucha por la grandeza económica." She once again looks back at the students with emotion, realizing that the fulfillment of that poster is about to begin (Figure 8). Despite the admirable sentiment and dedication that Rosaura's character represents, she still views the



Fig. 8. As Rosaura Salazar contemplates her students, the camera juxtaposes her gaze with a poster advocating a strong national economy through the elimination of vice and poverty among indigenous populations.

Indians (here the children are viewed as extensions of their parents and therefore part of the collective population) as a "project," proto-Mexicans that need a great deal of work if they are to become completely integrated into the life and economy of the nation. Therefore, despite this more benevolent approach toward indigenous peoples, they are still viewed as a homogeneous mass, although one with potential.

Finally, while admittedly these villagers attain what can be termed a political awakening—evidenced by their killing of Don Regino's lackeys—they are only able to do so with the aid of the state. The denouement of the film suggests that, had Rosaura not come and provided the opportunity and encouragement to do so, the Indians would not have become politically active. Arroyo Quiroz finds a direct correlation between this fact and the representation of the Indian in *Río Escondido*:

Esta marcada estetización de la comunidad en *Río Escondido* —que pone de manifiesto un claro interés por crear imágenes artísticas del 'pueblo' mexicano en el cine—, refuerza la imagen del indígena como un sujeto homogéneo y pasivo, y conlleva un efecto inmovilista. [...] Esto abre entonces la posibilidad de una

correlación entre la inmovilidad estética y la pasividad política de los aldeanos. (197)

By associating the static, picturesque nature of the indigenous inhabitants of Río Escondido with their political mobilization through the agency of the state, the film endorses the assimilationist ideology of the state by advocating that the Indians “become agents of their own redemption” under the tutelage of the state. In all cases, however, this indicates the necessity of leaving behind qualities identified as “backwards” and incorporation into the political machine of the state. Thus, the Indians cease to be Indians and become Mexicans. Finally, by celebrating this aesthetic representation of the indigenous peoples, *El Indio* once again provides the viewers of the national cinema with a potent symbol of Mexico’s might and glory.

Informing both aspects of this drive to disappear the indigenous elements of Mexico in Emilio Fernández’s films is a teleological notion of social and cultural evolution that permeated post-Revolution discussion of Mexico’s future and the role of the indigenous populations within the national territory in that future. In *El Indio*’s *indigenista* cinema and as a part of his fundamental quality of *mexicanidad*, this telos is interpreted as *fatalidad*, fatality. In the narration of Mexican history in the opening scenes of *Río Escondido*, the voices of the narrators, describing what Rosaura is seeing, declare the inevitability of Mexico’s existence and progress:

Soy la campana de Dolores [...] En mi voz late *la eternidad de México* [...]

Genio de España y genio de Cuauhtemotzín. Una boda que por cruel parece expresar *la fatalidad que toda vida nueva requiere* para fincar raíces de patria. He aquí a *los inspirados* de nuestra independencia [...].

Después, *como una culminación* de tanta pasión de pueblo, los hombres de la Reforma [...].

Semillas tiernas que siembran las manos de los maestros en los surcos fecundos de la escuela, *para germinar en hombres fuertes del mañana*, almas limpias *que han de forjar el futuro glorioso de la patria*. (emphasis added)

Nowhere present in these declarations is the idea of contingency; Mexico's future *is* glorious and certain because that is what is meant to be, what *has* to happen in El Indio's interpretation of Mexican history. This is reiterated frequently throughout both *María Candelaria* and *Río Escondido* as part of the necessary events that had to take place for Mexico to reach its full potential. María Candelaria had to die so that Mexico could look on her and see in her and Lorenzo Rafael the roots of their own greatness. The *populacho* had to disappear so that Mexico would not be mired down by backwards traditions and superstitions. Goyo's death, as Rosaura tells his grieving sister at the wake, also had to happen: "No llores. Muy temprano te tocó sufrir pruebas muy grandes. Pero yo te prometo que tu esfuerzo no será en vano, que esa santa sangre derramada, como la de tantos otros mártires, pertenece ya a México. Y un día sabrás que fue necesario para fertilizar su destino." Rosaura herself, as has already been discussed, becomes enshrined in the halls of Mexico's historical memory, her physical and mythic presence guaranteed by the memory of the people of Río Escondido and the plaque erected to her in the school. "Mexico," by incorporating all of the images of these individuals and groups into a museum collection of national heroes, strips them of all nuance and human value and converts them into archetypes, symbols, myths, useful referents to inspire support for and faith in the so-called Revolutionary government. As for the Indians represented in *María Candelaria* and *Río Escondido*, their conspicuous absence is a reminder that for the rhetorical needs of the developing capitalist Mexico of the 1940s, the only good Indian is one that is not there.

Notes for Chapter 1

¹ “The only good Indian is a dead Indian.” Attributed to the 19th century American, General Philip Sheridan, this quote was the result of a conversation had with an Indian, Towasi, who said, referring to himself,

‘Towasi, good Indian.’ [...] It was then that General Sheridan uttered the immortal words: ‘The only good Indians I ever saw were dead.’ Lieutenant Charles Nordstrom, who was present, remembered the words and passed them on, until in time they were honed into an American aphorism: *The only good Indian is a dead Indian.* (Brown 166)

² Artistic representation presents a problem in that almost any time something that exists outside the realm of art is portrayed by someone or something else (e.g. Indians depicted in El Indio's movies), there is a deformation of the thing represented. The degree of deformation differs from work to work, yet it is always present. In the case of realist works, there is an attempt to keep the deformation to a minimum. On the other hand, in Fernández's *indigenista* films, the goal is severe stylization, which leads to a greater distance from the reality of the thing being shown and its aesthetic representation.

².Arroyo Quiroz cites a number of scenes from both *María Candelaria* and *Río Escondido* that correspond to artwork by Diego Rivera and other Mexican artists and photographers, including Rivera's *Vendedora de alcatraces* (1942) and *La molendera* (1924). Figueroa himself was very proud of the connection between his cinematography and the Revolutionary Mexican artistic tradition, and an anecdote he liked to repeat is illustrative of this connection. The following text is from an interview of Figueroa with Margarita de Orellana:

GF: [...] Tanto los grabados de Leopoldo Méndez como los de Orozco y Siqueiros me ayudaron a conseguir la fuerza que logré plasmar en la pantalla. Pero la única vez que copié un grabado fue la imagen de un velorio que había hecho Orozco. Aparece en *Flor Silvestre*. El día del estreno me tocó sentarme junto al pintor. Ya me esperaba una reacción de él, a pesar de que para las escenas de fusilamientos me había inspirado en José Guadalupe Posada. En el momento en que aparece el velorio, Orozco hizo un gesto extraño, inmediatamente le puse la mano en la pierna y le dije:

--Maestro, soy un ladrón honrado. Y me contestó:

--“Oiga no, usted tiene una perspectiva ahí que no logré yo, necesita invitarme a verlo trabajar para saber cómo logró ese plano.” (Figuroa 39-40)

³ In one of her lengthy sermons about the virtues of Benito Juárez, Rosaura Salazar directly quotes the voice of the off-screen narrator who summarized Juárez’s life at the beginning of the film. Her repetition of the official discourse on Juárez to the Indian schoolchildren represents her internalization of the state’s Revolutionary rhetoric in her own mission to rescue Mexico. This information is then passed on to the children who, it is assumed, also adopt her (the State’s) doctrine, become enlightened, and take an active part in their assimilation into mainstream society.

⁴ This particular image is possibly a homage to José Clemente Orozco’s “Anglo-America” from his mural in the Dartmouth Library in New Hampshire, *An Epic of American Civilization*. In this section of the mural, a school teacher standing in semi-profile is surrounded by students who face each other in full profile, similar to the poses taken by Rosaura and the students in *Río Escondido*. While admittedly the students in Orozco’s painting are very pale and blond, there is a marked similarity between Orozco’s painting and

Figuroa's shot.

⁵ Emilio García Riera cites an interview with El Indio conducted by Fernando Morales Ortiz wherein Fernández waxes poetic about Mexico's greatness and future. The language he uses bears a striking resemblance to the words of President Alemán in the film. A few quotes from the interview are enlightening:

[...] ¡Ustedes no se imaginan la cantidad de obstáculos que se me ponen por delante, cada vez que hago una película! ¡Es que me quieren callar! ¡Es que yo no entiendo de cifras, sino de hablarle 'a lo macho' a nuestro pueblo para que salga de su letargo!

Las lacras de un país se combaten exhibiéndolas y aportando fórmulas de solución [...]. México es un niño y hay que enseñarle, valiéndonos del cine, cuáles son sus errores; hay que afinar sus virtudes, ¡para que siga adelante y se convierta en un verdadero coloso! (qtd. in García Riera, *Fernández* 107)

⁶ Here, another quote by El Indio from the Morales Ortiz interview with Fernández is helpful:

¡Es divino nuestro México! Da una gran serie de monstruos, de feos, de hipócritas y traidores, pero de pronto sale un Juárez, un Zapata, un Clemente Orozco, un Figuroa, ¡una mujer tan fantástica como María Félix! Y en esos terribles contrastes, está la grandeza del México que debemos llevar a la pantalla [...]. (qtd. in García Riera, *Fernández* 107)

By suggesting that the mestizo stars of Mexican cinema represent the greatness of Mexico, El Indio unwittingly reveals his view of the Indians as necessary but picturesque background to the "real" story of Mexico. Thus, in a way he suggests that the Indians,

despite their pride of place in *Río Escondido*, are merely secondary players in a game where their lives and cultures are at stake.

⁷ I base this opinion upon my own viewing of his *indigenista* films and comments made by both El Indio and those that worked with him. Here, a few comments made by Gabriel Figueroa in interviews with Alberto Isaac suggest a kinder interpretation of El Indio's *intentions* in making his films:

Hay que ver las películas de Emilio Fernández encuadrándolas en su época y en su circunstancia. Tenía visiones, intuiciones si quieres llamarlas, verdaderamente inspiradas. Su cultura, su mundo temático era limitado, de acuerdo, pero dentro de él alcanzó registros formidables. Y todavía viendo esos buenos momentos de su cine, uno se emociona, cuando menos yo sí. [...] Hace rato hablábamos de la tendencia de Emilio al 'mensaje', esa palabra tan desprestigiada ya. Pues bien, yo creo que Emilio era sincero. Soñaba con un México alfabetizado, con un México pegado a sus raíces, un México lopez-velardiano, 'fiel a su espejo diario'. A veces recargaba el tono al expresar sus ideas. (33)

⁸ Douglas J. Weatherford discusses the use of non-professional, indigenous actors as extras in Golden Age films and contrasts these with the casting of non-indigenous Mexicans in major roles where Indians are being played. Speaking specifically of Figueroa's work on *La Escondida* (dir. Roberto Gavaldón), Weatherford says the following of these extras and their relationship to Figueroa's camera:

Estos individuos aparecen en varias escenas de la película, pero permanecen callados y funcionan más como accesorios que como seres humanos, mientras los actores profesionales hablan por ellos e intentan reflejar sus vidas y experiencias. La actuación, claro, es siempre una simulación, una reproducción falsa del original. [...]

Pero, como es el caso en tantas obras de Figueroa, lo que más importa no es lo auténtico sino lo mítico. (486)

⁹ Regarding the year in which the movie is set, Emilio García Riera makes the following commentary: “El melodrama hace privar sus razones sobre cualquier otra, pese a que la trama se ubica en vísperas de la revolución, con riesgo de anacronismo (¿había en 1909 quinina gratuita para el pueblo, y pintores de inspiración indigenista?)” (*Historia* 3:367). Of even greater irony is the fact that, as Cynthia Steele writes, between 1880 and 1908 (just one year before the events *María Candelaria* would take place), “el gobierno [mexicano] vendió cinco mil yaquis rebeldes a los propietarios de las plantaciones de henequén en Yucatán al precio de sesenta centavos por cabeza; miles fueron vendidos a los propietarios de caña de azúcar en Oaxaca” (20). Fernández’s anachronisms are quite egregious in light of this information. Such inclusions reveal the mixing of discourses that was common in post-Revolutionary *indigenismo*.

¹⁰ See Andrea Noble’s discussion of the prime audience of the Golden Age’s films in *Mexican National Cinema*, 72-79.

¹¹ Some of the criticism leveled at *Río Escondido* in the wake of its release held that such a place did not really represent Mexico because any place like it would be an aberration or an isolated case and therefore not useful as a rallying point for change. However, both Hershfield (64) and Stephen R. Niblo (*Mexico in the 1940s: Modernity, Politics, and Corruption*, chapter 1) affirm the existence of these remote pueblos governed by self-interested caciques, and therefore confirm the relevance of Fernández’s vision in the movie.

¹² For greater detail on this subject, see Noble’s and Tierney’s discussions on *María*

Candelaria in their books *Mexican National Cinema* and *Emilio Fernández*, respectively.

¹³ As Emilio García Riera accurately points out, the Biblical symbolism of Christ as the bearer of living water to the spiritually thirsty perfectly describes María Félix in her role as the agent of President Alemán in the regeneration of Río Escondido (*Historia* 4: 146).

¹⁴ While admittedly *Río Escondido* tells the tale of a *maestra rural*, in general the ineffectiveness of the program of the *maestros rurales* led to the creation of other programs which were designed to correct the faults of the former. Considering that El Indio was a fervent supporter of Cárdenas's policies, and given the ultimate purpose of the *internados* and how they relate to Rosaura Salazar's objective, its mention here is entirely appropriate.

¹⁵ It should be noted, however, that the individuation of the Indian children in *Río Escondido* is an exception to El Indio's representation of Indians generally, tending as he does to show them as a mass rather than as individuals that could be identified with.

CHAPTER II
 MACLOVIA AND THE GARDEN OF EDEN, OR HOW EMILIO FERNÁNDEZ
 LEARNED HIS LESSON

And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is
 become as one of us, to know good and evil [...].

Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the
 garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence
 he was taken.

So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east
 of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming
 sword which turned every way, to keep the way
 of the tree of life.

-- Genesis 3:22-24

O brave new world, that has such people in 't.

-- *The Tempest*, Act V, Scene I, 205-06

In his biography of Emilio Fernández, Emilio García Riera says of *Maclovía*, “Así, un final feliz hacía la diferencia con *María Candelaria*, película de la que *Maclovía* era un [sic] suerte de versión con anotaciones al margen, o sea, explicada y agotada” (Fernández 133). Unfortunately, this is generally how El Indio’s fourth *indigenista* film is considered, with nothing worthy of discussion beyond the typical praises of Gabriel Figueroa’s photography. However, by writing *Maclovía* off as merely another *María Candelaria*, we lose the opportunity to see, as Dolores Tierney explains, how this movie “rewrites and departs from many of the ideological principles of *María Candelaria*” (95). Therefore, this chapter will analyze *Maclovía*, not as mere repetition, but as a retooling of the imagery and purposes of Fernández’s *indigenista* cinema and as a manifestation of a process of development in El Indio’s thought, reading the “anotaciones al margen,” as García Riera puts it, to show us a more mature conception of the *indigenista* project as the director envisioned it. While the underlying principles of Fernández’s ideology established in the introduction remain unaltered in *Maclovía*, the particular ways that El Indio gives them expression in the picture differ considerably from *María Candelaria*, clarifying and making more accessible the symbolism and mythic nature of his artistic vision of Mexico.

Maclovía is, if nothing else, a love story, and throughout much of the movie it seems as though its only purpose is to show “la historia simple y eterna de un hombre y una mujer,” as the off-screen narrator indicates at the very beginning of the film. Indeed, between this story and *María Candelaria*, the presentation of the amorous aspect in *Maclovía* is much more poetic and lively than in the earlier work. If this were the only thing that *Maclovía* represented, there would be little more to add what to García Riera has already written. However, the introduction of political and historical elements brings the film out of the romance genre and into the realm of social commentary, specifically Mexican

indigenismo. Produced in 1948, *Maclovia* can be seen as a blending of *María Candelaria* and *Río Escondido*, the one for its insistence on the picturesque, and the other for its heavy, symbolic nationalism. Through the lens of *indigenismo*, *El Indio* presents the perfect story, one that both exalts the Indians as Mexico's true essence and that takes the viewer toward a glorious *mestizo* future. In this regard, it is *how* *El Indio* helps the characters arrive at that future that distinguishes *Maclovia* from *María Candelaria*. If *María Candelaria* was a veiled myth of the ordinary story of modern Mexico, *Maclovia* is outright allegory of the most Biblical kind. In the same way that the scriptural archetype of Christ as the chosen Redeemer informs *Río Escondido*, *Maclovia* is a Mexican retelling of the story of Adam and Eve, with their expulsion from paradise and the subsequent founding of the human race. In this way, Fernández grounds the film—and by extension, Mexico's history—firmly in myth and affirms the central place of the Indian in Mexico's identity.

Additionally, this film more forcefully addresses the issues of the responsibility of the Revolution and its successor (the state established after the end of that conflict) in the redemption and assimilation of the Indian through *mestizaje*, and Mexico's inevitable march toward modernity. However, the vital role the Revolution plays in *Maclovia* distinguishes the work from both *María Candelaria* and *Río Escondido*. In *María Candelaria*, the Revolution is an implicit background referent which, while important as a way of distancing the events of 1909 from the moment of narration, as stated earlier, has no direct role in the events that take place in the film. The premise which provokes the telling of *María Candelaria's* story is narrated in contemporary Mexico (approximately 1943) after the Revolution has (supposedly) done its work and the Indian is redeemed. By omitting any explicit mention of this war in *María Candelaria*, *El Indio* presents it as a finished event. Even in *Río Escondido* the armed conflict itself is not as important to the plot of the film as

is the *memory* of the Revolution and its representatives in the government and the arts; it is the continuing realization of the major goals already achieved by the Revolution.

While in all three films the Revolution is pertinent to the outcome of the story, it is only in *Maclovia* that the Revolution itself takes an active part in the Indians' life. Therefore, considering the strong role of the Revolution in the movie, and in spite of the aestheticization of the Indians, it would be a mistake to suggest, as does Tierney, that *Maclovia* is "an isolationist fantasy" stemming from an adherence to the idea of Indian as the noble savage "rather than a parable of modernization" (96). Fernández portrays the Revolution (referring to the armed conflict and not the Revolutionary army) as a catalyst in bringing about social justice for Indian groups in Mexico because of its disruptive influence. Moreover, although there are negative elements in *Maclovia* that suggest that the Revolution's influence in the picture is tragic, the overall positive tenor of the ending implies the contrary. Because of this ending, the disruption that the Revolution effects can be viewed as both beneficial and necessary for the incorporation of indigenous peoples into Mexican society, alluding to the idea of *fatalidad* discussed at the end of Chapter 2. By associating the success of the Revolution with the fate of the Indians, Fernández makes explicit its fundamental role in consummating the redemption of the Indians through assimilation into the national body politic.

Maclovia follows the same basic story as *María Candelaria*, except that it takes place on the island of Janitzio on Lake Pátzcuaro in the western state of Michoacán in 1914, at the height of the Mexican Revolution. José María and Maclovia are two young Tarascan (Purépecha) Indians living on Janitzio. Although they are in love, Maclovia's father, Tata Macario, the leader of the Indians of Janitzio, forbids them from speaking to each other because of José María's poverty. However, when a detachment of soldiers from the Federal

army arrives on the island, trouble arises in the form of a racist soldier, Sargento Genovevo de la Garza, who hates Indians but desires Maclovia. When De la Garza attempts to seduce Maclovia, she rejects him. Eventually Tata Macario allows José María and Maclovia to marry, but on their first night together Sergeant de la Garza attacks the couple and throws José María into prison. The Sergeant then offers Maclovia José María's freedom if she agrees to sleep with him. At first she refuses, but then decides to give in out of love for José María. However, there is a local tradition which forbids any islander from giving themselves sexually to any one from outside Janitzio on pain of death, and so although Maclovia and the Sergeant never have sex, when the villagers find out what she plans to do, they rush to stone her. Fortunately, through the instrumentality of a sympathetic soldier, Cabo Mendoza, José María is freed and the lives of José María and Maclovia are spared, although they are forced to leave Janitzio forever.

The opening credits are framed by what appears to be a lush valley surrounded by mountains covered with vegetation. After the credits disappear, the camera pans the countryside, revealing fertile fields and a lake in the distance, while the narrator establishes the setting: “En el corazón de México hay una región que la suavidad del clima y la belleza del paisaje han convertido en un rincón de ensueño y de poesía.” We are taken to a *locus amoenus*, a garden-like paradise where “[e]n medio de ese lago [Pátzcuaro] hay una isla, la de Janitzio, en la que desde hace cientos de años una raza pura, la tarasca, conserva sencillas costumbres y legendarias tradiciones.” The camera fades to a lake surrounded by mountains in what



Fig. 9. Janitzio as originary place/time in Fernández's creation myth.

appears to be the early morning, disturbed only by the gentle paddling of a solitary canoe (Figure 9). While the narrator specifically places the story in 1914, we are symbolically taken back much further, to a moment before time and to a people that have inhabited this earthly paradise since before memory. This mythic setting is Mexico's Garden of Eden, or more appropriately in these first scenes, reminiscent of the creation story taken from the *Popol Vuh*: "Alone lies the expanse of the sea, along with the womb of the sky. There is not yet anything gathered together. All is at rest. [...] Only the expanse of the water, only the tranquil sea lies alone" (67). It is fitting, given Fernández's obsession with the idea of the Indian as Mexico's fundamental origin, to establish the setting with an allusion to an indigenous creation myth.¹ This does not take away from the notion of *Maclovia* as specifically relating to the Christian Garden of Eden, but rather complements it and ties it in to *indigenismo*'s goal of *mestizaje*, as will be discussed later.

At any rate, Janitzio is established as a place of dreams and poetry, outside of time and inhabited by the Tarascans (or Purépecha), whose "sencillas costumbres y legendarias tradiciones" characterize their harmony with the earth and within the community. Although El Indio introduces the elements of an over-zealous father and a jealous woman, there is generally peace within the community: José María is respectful of Tata Macario's authority and Sara does not insist when she realizes that José María does not reciprocate her feelings. Fernández achieves this pristine vision of Janitzio through Figueroa's characteristic picturesque shots of the island and especially through lengthy scenes of the community fishing on the lake. By doing so, he not only establishes the essential harmony and peace that exist in this pre-Mexican time but also instills in the spectator a "greater sense of the nobility and moral exemplarity of the entire community" (Tierney 97). The main characters of the film, José María and Maclovia, are Janitzio's Adam and Eve,² not because of their

position within Tarascan society on the island, but because of their potential as the founding couple of the regenerated Mexico, whose simple lives reflect the incorruptibility of life before “civilization.” Particularly important is the lack of concern for the material aspect of life beyond those things necessary to preserve the essential order of their world. In a conversation between Tata Macario and José María, Macario forbids José María from speaking to Maclovia because he is poor and has nothing to offer her:

TATA MACARIO. Ya ves qué amolado que estás. Hasta para pescar tienes que salir en la canoa del pueblo.

JOSÉ MARÍA. Yo soy ansina como su buena merced dice, pos, pos porque no me importa el dinero, tata Macario.

TATA MACARIO. A ninguno nos importa en Janicho,³ pero mi hija sí me importa. Through this dialogue, Fernández makes clear the lack of desire for money among the people of Janitzio, placing them outside the pull of Western civilization and the capitalist regime that was being established in Mexico after the Revolution. They are innocent and, for the most part, untainted by outside influences that would corrupt them, all these qualities revealing their condition as the noble savage discussed earlier with *Río Escondido* and *María Candelaria*.

It is in this mythical, ideal world that José María and Maclovia live, along with the indigenous community of Janitzio. Their tranquil existence recalls the undetermined period of time that Adam and Eve spent wandering in the Garden, undisturbed and unaware of anything outside their surroundings. The only outsiders that live on the island and that have regular contact with the people are the Teacher and the Priest. That these are the persons of primary influence in the lives of the indigenous inhabitants of Janitzio is also significant as both symbolize fundamental aspects of the island’s world. On the one

hand is the Priest, whose connection with God and spirituality associate him with the Tree of Life which was found in the Garden. Although the Priest himself is characterized as condescending, paternalistic, and reactionary, his symbolic importance is not found in his relation to the Catholic Church but rather to the inherent spirituality of the Indian, much like the Catholicism of Lorenzo Rafael and María Candelaria mentioned in Chapter 1. This inherent spirituality is what informs and gives life to the Indians' existence. As counterpoint to the Priest there is the Teacher, secular and impassioned in his quest to educate and redeem the Indian. His prolonged sermons on the virtues of both education and the Indian place him in the camp of modernity and therefore assimilation and the state. His association with knowledge and progress link him to the other tree mentioned specifically in the Biblical account, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

In the film, the relationship between the Teacher and the Priest reflects the dichotomy between the two trees in the Biblical account, the one offering eternal life, youth, and happiness in the Garden in the presence of God forever; the other, knowledge, wisdom, experience, but ultimately death and suffering. However, both cannot exist indefinitely in the presence of the other, or, better expressed, one cannot eat of the fruit of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and also partake of the fruit of the Tree of Life. God sets up this distinction in the book of Genesis when he gives instructions to Adam and Eve regarding proper behavior in the Garden:

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat:

But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. (Gen. 2.16-17)

Included among those trees from which they can eat is the Tree of Life, only the Tree of the

Knowledge of Good and Evil being forbidden. Likewise, as long as José María remains uneducated and inexperienced in secular things, he can remain under the fatherly care of the Priest on Janitzio where they live like children, ignorant but happy. Such paternalism is evidenced in a few scenes where the Priest counsels or defends his position of influence over the Indians. For example, in the first scenes of the movie, José María and Maclovía go to the Priest to ask for his blessing and advice before they get married. As they enter the church and greet the priest, they kneel in front of him and he instructs and admonishes them regarding their responsibilities to Tata Macario and José María's ability to support a wife and family.

While this could be considered common behavior between a priest and his parishioners, José María and Maclovía's subordinate relationship to the Priest highlight the relationship between Adam and Eve and God in the Garden of Eden, mentioned above. Additionally, the scripture cited above also stresses the desire to keep Adam and Eve under control. Similarly, the Priest tries to do the same in the film on several occasions, such as when José María is unjustly incarcerated by Sergeant de la Garza. After learning of José María's predicament, many of his friends and supporters are gathered together in Tata Macario's house, including the Teacher and the Priest. At Maclovía's insistence, the Teacher agrees to write a letter of support to José María. The following dialogue, which takes place between the Teacher and the Priest prior to the writing of the letter, represents both the paternal nature of the Priest and the subversive elements of knowledge in the Teacher:

PRIEST: Con que es usted un herejote de tomo y lomo, dígame que tenga fe en Dios y que no desespere.

TEACHER: Herejote o no herejote, señor párroco, lo que importa es avisarle que vamos a hacer que la causa se vea pronto para que resplandezca la justicia.

PRIEST: La justicia divina, señor profesor.

TEACHER: Divina o no divina, que resplandezca, ¿no le parece a usted, señor párroco?

PRIEST: Bueno, hombre, bueno. Dígale entonces lo que quiera, pero no le quite su fe en Dios, que buena falta le hace a usted también.

By concentrating on the antagonism between the Teacher and the Priest, El Indio highlights the tension between the earthly control which the Catholic Church exercised over indigenous people prior to the Revolution and the drive for a secular state after the end of the Revolution.⁴ Additionally, through this dialogue (and a couple of well-placed, lengthy sermons by the Teacher), El Indio reiterates the necessity and benefits of indigenous education, a step in the process of assimilation and a keystone of *cardenismo*. However, the above dialogue should not be interpreted as a head-on attack of religion and Catholicism on the part of El Indio, but rather a reflection of his agrarian discourse and his focus on the innate spirituality of indigenous peoples which permeates Mexican culture.⁵ Fernández assures us of this through the Janitzians' continued kindly attitude toward the priest even when he is belligerent or condescending, such as in the above dialogue.

However, while the Teacher and the Priest are important in setting the stage for the story's main conflict, it is the presence of the Mexican Revolution in the film that sets in motion the events that push José María and Maclovia from their earthly paradise into the fallen world. Although this event in the Biblical account represents great tragedy and loss, in the film this loss is attenuated, as will be discussed later. The first encounter with the Revolution takes place in Pátzcuaro when Maclovia and Tata Macario are assaulted by the blatantly racist Sargento Genovevo de la Garza. However, he is not a member of the revolutionary army, but rather of the Federal, Constitutional Army. Really, his association

is muddled, at one time boasting that he would become “generalísimo de los ejércitos insurgentes” even though earlier in the movie he is identified as a Federal.⁶ Despite the fact that as a Sergeant in the Federal army, De la Garza represents a supposedly just system fighting for a noble cause, he uses his position of authority to gain unfair advantage and abuse his subordinates and those who oppose him. He is a corrupt individual, contrasted with the honorable Lieutenant and Cabo Mendoza who use their influence to benefit Mexico. So although he wears the uniform of the Federales, he is actually an impostor, a wolf in sheep’s clothing, a fallen angel. This is emphasized in the scene in the courtroom where he touts his fair skin and light eyes as a sign of his superiority, while, ironically, he is the only one in the film who abuses the Indians. Furthermore, he proves himself a disruptor and a tempter, and corresponds to the Devil or Serpent that tempts Eve in Eden. As will be discussed later in greater detail, it is through Sergeant de la Garza that events of the story unfold and José María and Maclovia are forced to leave the security of Janitzio and enter into the fallen world.

The second time the Revolution intrudes on José María and Maclovia’s life is when a small detachment of Federal soldiers arrives on the island to perform an important mission; among them is Sergeant de la Garza. Fortunately, his negative influence is countered at first by the presence of the just Lieutenant who reprimands de la Garza’s excesses towards the native population, and by Cabo Mendoza, an assimilated Indian.⁷ Yet even despite the fairness and generosity that the latter two demonstrate in the film, they are still paternalistic and unyielding in their demands. When the soldiers first arrive, the Lieutenant, accompanied by the Sergeant, meets with the Priest, the Teacher, and Tata Macario to explain the reason for their presence in Janitzio. However, as the Teacher later explains, outsiders are not allowed onto the island, and Tata Macario guardedly expresses his

disapproval of the situation. Despite Tata Macario's opposition, his protests are ignored and he is forced to allow entry to the military detachment. Adding to the sense of condescension being displayed toward Macario is the fact that both the Priest and the Teacher attempt to speak for Tata Macario, instead of allowing him to explain to the Lieutenant the customs and laws that are the motives of his opposition. Furthermore, instead of defending these traditions, while speaking for Macario, the Teacher belittles them:

TEACHER. Los señores son del ejército y vienen representando a las instituciones y a la ley, don Macario.

TATA MACARIO. Nosotros tenemos nuestras propias leyes, señor profesor, y no nos gustan que, que nos las pisoteen. Que las respeten como también nosotros respetamos a las de los demás.

LIEUTENANT. ¿A cuáles leyes se refiere usted, señor?

TEACHER. Viejas tradiciones, señor teniente. [...] Tienen una ley, bárbara si usted quiere, pero que es observada celosamente [...].

What stands out in this brief dialogue is the fact that the *criollos* and *mestizos*, despite their favorable disposition towards the Indians, do not consider the Tarascan traditions equal to “las instituciones y la ley” of Federal Mexico, and are spoken of as childish objections, minor annoyances to overcome in the implementation of a universal, national law. When Tata Macario insists, the teacher reprimands him for his obstinacy:

TEACHER. Póngase en razón, don Macario. Usted no puede impedir que se instale el destacamento.

LIEUTENANT. ¿O tiene usted alguna razón particular para oponerse? En ese caso, sólo me resta rogarle que nos haga el favor de colaborar en los fines que nos han traído aquí.

Although the Lieutenant politely requests Macario's cooperation in the matter, in reality, he is not asking Tata Macario but telling him what is going to happen. Furthermore, the Teacher's words are very revealing about the permanent results of the soldiers' arrival in Janitzio. The arrival of foreign elements on the island is presented as an inevitable future for the Indians. As seen at the end of the movie, their advent has fatal consequences for the people of Janitzio and most especially for Tata Macario.

Thus, the coming of the Revolution means the end of traditional life on Janitzio and the beginning of a new social order where Indians are no longer defined by regional loyalties and affiliations but rather are now members of a unified, homogeneous nation. The words of the Lieutenant are relevant here: “[...] México es una sola casa, un solo país. Vamos a borrar prejuicios y divisiones entre hermanos que no conducen a nada, y ya verán cómo no se arrepentirán.” By presenting the situation to Tata Macario as an obligation that he, Macario, as a Mexican, has to fulfill to his fellow Mexicans, the Lieutenant paints their stay on the island as a patriotic and noble privilege. Likewise, by depicting the arrival of the Revolution⁸ to an isolated indigenous community as a patriotic inevitability, *El Indio* suggests that assimilation of indigenous populations is a desirable and necessary process in Mexico's march toward greatness. Moreover, in showing the arrival of Federal troops to Janitzio, Fernández lends support to the efforts of the post-Revolutionary government (who, according to official rhetoric, was the *continuation* of the Revolution) in spreading its influence across the nation (Dawson *xiv*). Therefore, the Federal army represents here the coming of civilization, through “las instituciones y la ley,” to the natives of Janitzio.

Despite the positive depiction of assimilation that *El Indio* offers here, this is not what José María, Maclovia, nor any other of the inhabitants of Janitzio want, and the arrival of the military detachment brings great consternation to the island. This is particularly true

after the Lieutenant departs for Pátzcuaro, leaving Sergeant de la Garza in charge of the soldiers stationed on Janitzio. Because he has tried to force Maclovia once, his presence points to the fact that inevitably he will try to seduce her again. His pursuit of this goal coincides with the period when Tata Macario has forbidden José María from speaking to Maclovia, leading José María to seek other means of communicating his love for her. Specifically, José María seeks out the Teacher to learn how to write love letters to Maclovia. Since both José María and the Sergeant desire Maclovia,⁹ an indirect conflict ensues which results in Tata Macario allowing José María and Maclovia to marry. The Sergeant, angry because he is unable to possess Maclovia, attacks the couple on the night of their honeymoon, wounding José María and forcing him into prison. When Maclovia attempts to free her new husband, the Sergeant offers her José María's liberty in exchange for sexual favors. At first she refuses, but under pressure from Sara, her rival for José María's affections, Maclovia acquiesces to Sergeant de la Garza's demand, although they never actually commit the act.

This last point is significant because of the association of sexual transgression with the Fall of Adam and Eve. In the scriptural account, the Serpent tempts Eve and induces her to eat the forbidden fruit. A common interpretation of the forbidden fruit is the act of sexual intercourse. Therefore, by having Sergeant de la Garza tempt Maclovia with sexual sin, Fernández implies that Mexico's Adam and Eve (José María and Maclovia) are cast out of their earthly paradise because of fornication. However, because it is De la Garza who lusts after and tries to seduce Maclovia, and also because the sexual act is never realized, José María and Maclovia are exculpated from the stain of sin, allowing them to take their position as Mexico's founding couple and giving Mexico an unsullied past. On this point it seems as though Fernández is trying to rewrite Mexican history by completely undoing

the violence of the conquest and providing 1940s Mexican spectators with a new originary story. Where the conquest was witness to a host of rapes and other sexual abuse, resulting in the first *mestizos*, in *Maclovia* the originary couple—comparable to Cortés and Malinche—are two simple and virtuous Indians that have avoided the contamination of European sexual abuses. This should not be taken as a condemnation of *mestizaje*, but rather a different way to bring it about. Rather than *mestizaje* through forcible sex, José María and Maclovia become educated and leave the island under the protection of a beneficent state, implying an improvement in their situation.

The above discussion recalls Dolores Tierney's comment on *indigenismo*'s "'myth of origins' which conveniently elided its colonial past and provided a notion of national identity and a racial ideology" that no longer depended on Europe (73). In this version of Mexican history Indians are respected and represent, according to Fernández's mythic vision, the fundamental virtuous qualities intrinsic to all native-born Mexicans. In this sense Sergeant de la Garza represents not only the Devil, but also the Spanish soldiers who carried out the conquest, proud and cruel because of their fair skin and light eyes. If El Indio had allowed De la Garza to sexually possess Maclovia, it would have meant the repetition, legitimization, and continuation of the conquest and subjugation of Mexico's native population. By allowing sexual virtue to triumph and two indigenous people to consummate a relationship based on love and common consent rather than the forced sexual encounters of the conquest, El Indio affirms the essential virtue of the Indian and their right to represent Mexico's national identity.

Regrettably, once the community finds out what Maclovia had planned to do with Sergeant de la Garza, they follow the ancient custom of the island, which is to stone any woman who gives herself to an outsider. Interestingly enough, as with *María Candelaria*

and *Río Escondido*, the arousal of the Indians' violent passions coincide with the occasion of a popular religious folk festival, the Day of the Dead. As the people rush to the beach in a frenzy to punish Maclovia for her (uncommitted) sins—torches in hand—Cabo Mendoza frees José María so that he can help Maclovia escape. When Mendoza sees that the couple has been unable to flee, he orders the soldiers to intervene and prevent the people from killing the pair. When the soldiers arrive, they form a barrier with their guns and bayonets in the air. Likewise, Cabo Mendoza puts himself in front of the couple, ordering the mob to cease. The visual element of this rescue harkens back to the verse from Genesis, “So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life” (3.24) (Figures 10, 11).



Fig. 10. “Cherubims and a flaming sword”; soldiers protect José María and Maclovia from stoning



Fig. 11. Cabo Mendoza intervenes in the stoning of José María and Maclovia.

The scene described above, as García Riera has indicated, is one of the main differences between *María Candelaria* and *Maclovia*. However, this is more than just a slight plot twist, or even a happy ending. In the Biblical record the Cherubim and the flaming sword are placed in the way of the Tree of Life so that Adam and Eve are unable to return to the Garden of Eden and eat the fruit from that tree. These measures are therefore preventative and defensive in nature, designed to keep them out of the Garden and away from the Tree. As discussed earlier, the Tree of Life was among those trees whose fruit

could be eaten without penalty. However, once knowledge had been acquired (José María has learned to read) and sin introduced (Sargeant de la Garza), Adam and Eve could no longer live under the protection or in the presence of God in innocence. Likewise, José María and Maclovia are expelled from the island and are prevented from remaining there by a mob of angry Indians wielding torches and stones to keep them from returning to Janitzio to enjoy the paradise they have always known. Therefore, although Maclovia and José María are saved through the intervention of Cabo Mendoza, they must leave their home. This, as the Teacher explains to the Lieutenant earlier in the film, is, for the inhabitants of Janitzio, “peor que la muerte.” In this sense the end is tragic and follows the original archetype faithfully.¹⁰

Despite this tragedy, Emilio Fernández suggests that the expulsion from paradise was not completely disastrous. On the contrary, it was something necessary and good, though painful. Textually, this can be observed in the same stoning scene analyzed above. Although the Indians are identified with the objects meant to prevent José María and Maclovia from returning to the island, Cabo Mendoza and his soldiers can also be seen as representing the “cherubims and the flaming sword.” They also assume a protective role, though instead of trying to block access to paradise, they are offering protection and safe conduct to José María and Maclovia through technologically superior guns and bayonets. Such an interpretation of this episode suggests that through the Revolution, the effects of José María and Maclovia’s Fall could be rectified, at least to a certain point, by full participation in modernity. The soldiers, offering José María and Maclovia the chance to live, also put them on the path of progress (in a canoe), defined in the movie as the use of reason and full participation in the *mestizo* world outside of Janitzio. The comments made by Cabo Mendoza to the Indians immediately after he halts the stoning help to define

progress in this way.

Criticizing them for the violent deaths of Tata Macario and Sara, and for the cruel stoning of José María and Maclovia, Mendoza says the following: “¡Sus tradiciones, o lo que sean, les ha hecho cometer una injusticia muy grande! Pero las tropas darán protección a estos dos inocentes para que se vayan de Janitzio. Allí está una canoa. ¡Vámonos de aquí!” This incident is one of the only open condemnations of some aspect of indigenous life in *Maclovia*, the other being the verbal lashings which the Teacher freely hands out to his Indian students for not applying themselves in their schoolwork. Through this direct criticism of (supposedly) backwards, violent, and irrational traditions, Cabo Mendoza offers an insight into El Indio’s view of the Indians: although he was a fervent supporter of Mexico’s indigenous identity, he was also fully committed to the successful (yet humane) assimilation of native peoples into Mexican society. Furthermore, by having the Federal army be the instrument of the star couple’s physical salvation and entrance into modernity, Fernández hints at the national government’s necessary role in bringing about that incorporation.

In the case of José María and Maclovia, they have been prepared for this occasion. First, José María has learned to read and write, an invaluable skill that sets him apart from a great majority of Indians in Mexico in 1914. Second, he has the tools and motivation he needs to support himself economically: his canoe, his knife, and his net. Third, during the mob’s attack, Tata Macario and Sara attempt to prevent them from stoning his daughter and son-in-law but are trampled in the mob’s fury to exact justice on Maclovia, thus severing any ties of kinship that bound the couple to the island and their community. Finally, through the agency of the Revolution—both the armed conflict that promised to eliminate poverty and suffering in Mexico and the policies and programs of *indigenismo* designed to incorporate

the Indians that developed in the post-Revolution years—José María and Maclovia have safe conduct to a new land. As Tierney suggests, although this moment should represent a tragic one for José María and Maclovia, it is presented as something positive. With the villagers on the shore still holding their lit torches, José María and Maclovia “paddle away from Janitzio as the sun rises over the hills, suggesting that they are moving into a more progressive (and hopeful) future. This escape from the island suggests assimilation, rather than isolation and also a move toward modernization” (96-97). Thus, José María and Maclovia are cast out of Eden, but instead of lamenting their fate, we are led to believe that this is the start of a new life for them. Like Adam and Eve who founded the human race after their expulsion from the Garden, when these two young Indians leave Janitzio they will lay the foundation of modern Mexico through full participation in the nationalist project that will follow in the wake of the Revolution, ending the mythic tale of Mexico’s origins and entering into the world of history and destiny.

In spite of this strong voice in favor of indigenous assimilation into mainstream Mexico, it would be inaccurate to describe El Indio as having changed his favorable attitude towards indigenous peoples in this his fourth *indigenista* film. As mentioned earlier, official *indigenismo* in Mexico was characterized by a sort of socio-cultural schizophrenia that held up the Indian as the ultimate source of Mexican identity but also as something which needed to be eliminated so that Mexico could modernize. However, in the case of El Indio this is not a contradiction but rather a reconciliation of the two polarized identities which was not mutually exclusive. This is the fundamental difference between *Maclovia* and his previous two *indigenista* films (excluding *La perla*): rather than focusing on either the past (*María Candelaria*) or the present (*Río Escondido*) in the creation of Mexico’s national myth/identity, El Indio constantly juxtaposes both elements to suggest that in the “true”

Mexican identity both the past and the present, tradition and modernity, myth and history, art and reality are always present. Thus, indigenous assimilation into mainstream Mexican life is not an abandonment of indigenous culture and tradition in favor of a hispanicized modernity: modernity is merely the next phase of tradition.

This juxtaposition is forcefully repeated throughout the film in multiple ways and serves to reinforce both the need for assimilation and the inherently indigenous character of Mexico's modernity. For example, after Sergeant de la Garza accosts Maclovia and her father in Pátzcuaro, all three of them are taken to the *comisaría* and the official in charge attempts to resolve the dispute. When the Sergeant insults Maclovia and Tata Macario (and indigenous people generally), the *comisario*, sitting in front of a portrait of José María Morelos, silences him:

SARGENTO. ¿Ya lo ve amigo? Ellos mismos se aguantan. Malditos indios.

COMISARIO. Usted cálese y no diga imbecilidades. Aquí todos somos indios, empezando por mí y no se le olvide que represento a la ley y que soy el señor comisario.

Later in this same scene, the *comisario* launches into a brief speech about José María Morelos and refers to the latter's Indianness. While the purpose of the *comisario*'s speech is to denounce the Sergeant's racism, it serves as a vehicle for the *indigenista* ideology of *mestizaje* and attributes a universal indigenous heritage to all Mexicans (Tierney 97). Furthermore, by having the law represented, not by a *criollo*, but by a self-proclaimed Indian, the film confirms that the government represents the Indian and will support justice for all, not just the white and wealthy. This suggests that having indigenous ancestry and adhering to a Western justice system are not contradictory concepts.

A similar thing occurs in the economic sphere of the film where we see El Indio

emphasizing indigenous participation in Mexico's national economy. After the Teacher convinces Tata Macario to allow José María to marry Maclovia, Macario admits his fault but still insists on addressing José María's lack of material goods as a precondition to marrying his daughter: "El hombre de Janitzio no es un hombre de a de veras si no tiene su canoa y su cuchillo." Admittedly a canoe and a knife are not potent symbols of industrialized, capitalist Mexico, but what is important here are not the objects themselves but rather José María's initiation into the labor force and the mobilizing of his desires to possess and to consume. Neither is Fernández proposing that Indians are lazy. Rather, the film's text suggests that the inherent antipathy for money and position demonstrated by the indigenous characters is typical of Indians' love of their community over material wealth, as well as their natural tendency toward hard work and industry. These qualities, when activated, harnessed, and built upon, are, according to *El Indio*, the same qualities that distinguish Mexican workers who participate in the national economy out of patriotism and the desire to see Mexico progress. Socially, we can look at José María as an example of the complementary presence of modernity and tradition in *El Indio*'s ideal Mexican society. Fernández gives him the desire to learn to read and write, the ostensible reason being so that he can compose love letters to Maclovia while Tata Macario's prohibition is still in effect. Yet ultimately this element is introduced so that when José María is expelled from the island he is prepared to assume his position in the modern, post-Revolutionary world as a productive member of society, not in spite of his indigenous heritage, but because of it.

Regarding the spirituality of indigenous groups, *El Indio* makes use of the religious traditions of the people of Janitzio to emphasize the dual nature of Mexican identity.

Unlike *María Candelaria* or *Río Escondido* where the religious referents are generally more Catholic with less suggestion of adherence to non-Christian beliefs (e.g., the *huesera*

in *María Candelaria*), in *Maclovía* the duality of Mexican religious identity is explicit. For example, in a scene from the latter part of the movie, María Félix's character runs into the church seeking comfort after refusing Sergeant de la Garza's sexual advances in exchange for José María's liberty. Sara follows her inside the church and stands behind her. Although Sara shows hardness and jealousy by rebuking Maclovía for being unwilling to sacrifice for José María, her positioning in relation to Maclovía, her clothing, and the way the two address each other suggests that Sara is a Marian figure. This moment recalls a similar scene in *María Candelaria* where the heroine speaks to a statue of the Virgin Mary. However, where in *María Candelaria* the Virgin remained silent, in *Maclovía*, the virgin speaks back, and not only does she do so, but she is not the fair, European virgin from *María Candelaria*. Rather, she is more similar in appearance to the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Indian virgin that appeared to Juan Diego in 1531, a symbol of the fundamental union of Spanish and indigenous cultures.



Fig. 12. José María and Maclovía kneel before the pre-Hispanic statue inside the church.

In an even more explicit example, near the beginning of the movie José María and Maclovía go to see the priest at the local parish. As they enter, they kneel and make the sign of the cross to a figure seated on a small shrine near the entrance. Instead of a crucifix or the representation of a saint, their object of

eneration is a pre-Hispanic stone statue surrounded by candles and incense (Figure 12).

Although it seems improbable that such a blatant non-Catholic image would be displayed so prominently in the local church, especially considering the devoutness of the Priest in

the film, this can be viewed as a direct reference to the *mestizo* nature of Mexico, where Catholicism is thoroughly blended with indigenous cultural traditions to form a uniquely Mexican religion. In *Maclovía*, instead of idols behind the altars, there are idols on the altars. Despite this overt exhibition of indigenous tradition, in the scene mentioned earlier where Maclovía runs inside the church to pray (which happens after she and José María kneel before the stone statue), the central focus of the *mise-en-scène*, indicated by the lighting scheme, is not the stone statue but the large crucifix that hangs against the far wall of the church, illuminated by the light streaming through the window (Figure 13). However, even with the attention centered on the Catholic crucifix the statue remains visible in the frame, placed conspicuously in the foreground but hidden in shadow,



Fig. 13. Maclovía prays in front of the Crucifix with the pre-Hispanic statue in shadow in the foreground

suggesting that while indigenous peoples have embraced Catholicism, the faith they profess is rooted in the pre-Columbian past.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, by selecting the Biblical story of the Fall of Adam and Eve as the basis for the movie, Fernández draws upon these archetypal figures to depict a mythic and originary Mexico whose renewed existence as the post-Revolutionary state is a direct result of the triumph of the Mexican Revolution. The conquest, colonization, and century of Independence represent painful yet foundational moments in Mexico's development as a people. However, it should not be surprising that in retelling the story of the Fall that El Indio incorporates elements of indigenous cultures, such as the creation story of the *Popol Vuh*. Although this particular story does not come from the Tarascan culture,

its status as an alternative yet complementary version of the Christian creation story adds to El Indio's conception of Mexico as both Western and non-Western, co-existent yet unified as distinctly Mexican.

Although it can be suggested, as García Riera has (*Historia 4*: 204), that through *Maclovia* El Indio was trying to correct certain aspects of *María Candelaria* that were unclear or contradictory, I do not feel that such a simplistic view is warranted. With the exception of María Félix's acting and Pedro Armendáriz's third reprise of the same role, *Maclovia* is a better film. Livelier, less static images, a firmer and more coherent archetypal base, and the addition of a (potentially) progressive social stance regarding race, help to improve Fernández's original version of this film. While *María Candelaria* became famous because of the novelty of the exotic (and because of its excellent photography), *Maclovia* is deserving of praise for its cinematic merit, above that of its predecessor. Yet, despite its relative superiority over *María Candelaria*, *Maclovia* suffers the flaws associated with El Indio's cinema and 1940s Mexican *indigenismo* generally. In the end, if we are to take anything away from this film, it is that while Fernandez heavily emphasizes the picturesque and mythic nature of the Indian in *Maclovia*, the death of Tata Macario and Sara, José María's literacy, the arrival of foreign elements onto the island, and Sergeant de la Garza's aggression towards the couple, all serve to direct the viewers' feelings toward the desirability, necessity, and inevitability of assimilation. If a small metaphor will be permitted, Emilio Fernández's *indigenismo* is like his films: at the end of a day of filming, the Indians of Janitzio take off their Indian costumes and go to their modern, urban homes, shedding their simulated worldviews and accents, the whole enterprise never being anything more than a nostalgic re-creation, the ghostly echo of "la imagen [...] del mundo rural [...] que ha sido necesario inmolar," as Roger Bartra has written (18), so that Mexico could exist.¹¹

Notes for Chapter 2

¹ Admittedly the *Popol Vuh* is not of Purépecha origin, being the creation story of the highland K'iche Maya of Guatemala, yet the exaltation of all things indigenous that was commonplace in Mexico at the time certainly admitted indigenous traditions that extend beyond Mexico's borders. Furthermore, El Indio was known to mix these traditions in his films. In his *La historia documental del cine mexicano*, García Riera says of *La Perla*, “Toda la acción transcurre en un verdadero lio geográfico que mezcla costumbres y lugares del Pacífico y del Golfo de México, y la música incluye dos sonos jarochos” (3: 292). Thus, that El Indio might use something that has similarities to a traditional Mayan originary myth in a film that deals with Indians from Michoacán is, at least, a possibility.

² The idea of José María and Maclovia as Janitzio's—and therefore Mexico's—Adam and Eve may not be readily apparent. However, I take this position for the following reasons. First is Maclovia's connection to *María Candelaria*. Emilio García Riera cites José de la Colina in the latter's article, “El canto de Emilio Fernández” where Colina identifies the characters María Candelaria and Lorenzo Rafael as Adam and Eve: “Estamos ante el relato post mortem de la pasión de unos Adán y Eva indígenas” (qtd. in García Riera, *Fernández* 61). Also, Andrea Noble cites Carlos Monsiváis as identifying María and Lorenzo as “the ‘mythic couple of the Mexican cinema’” (80). Dolores Tierney also briefly discusses this in her discussion on whitening in *María Candelaria*. After calling Lorenzo and María “modern Mexico's central couple” (84), she says

[...] cinema becomes the privileged medium of Mexicanness in *María Candelaria*, offering a way of textually universalizing Mexico's Adam and Eve [...] providing a fantasy other which corresponds to stereotype and yet assures the Mexican nation that their Adam and Eve are white. (94)

As *Maclovia* is a remake of *María Candelaria*, it is logical that the main couple in *Maclovia* is also a Mexican Adam and Eve.

Second, *Maclovia* and José María can be seen as Eve and Adam because of the characteristics of Janitzio elaborated on in the film itself and in my discussion, and because of the basic plotline of the Fall of Adam and Eve. Janitzio is described as a garden-like paradise where people live without malice and death until the arrival of foreign elements, the Revolution, which brings the end of their culture. However, two people, José María and *Maclovia*, are spared and expelled from the island. These coincidences with the Biblical story of the Fall suggest that *Maclovia* is El Indio's final version of the mythic origins of *mestizo* Mexico.

³ One of the characteristics of El Indio's *indigenista* cinema is the tendency to represent the Indians as ignorant of Spanish pronunciation and socially appropriate diction. Indian characters' dialogues are often full of apocopation ("pa" for "para") and other missing syllables, metathesis ("naiden" instead of "nadie"), antiquated words and expressions ("su mercé", "asté" (usted)), and a distinctively "Indian" accent in pronunciation. The ultimate purpose of such linguistic brutality is to mimic the speech of actual Indians when they speak Spanish. It has the effect of distinguishing and separating the indigenous people in the films from their more fluid-speaking co-stars, exoticizing the Indians as different from non-Indian people, as well as adding a pathetic element which recalls a simple, bucolic, and quaint existence. "Janicho" is the affricated pronunciation of "Janitzio" and reflects the above desire to make the characters "authentically Indian."

⁴ It should also be noted that the Revolution and its aftermath saw a heavy wave of anti-clericalism in the government, and a campaign was mounted which was aimed at eradicating the influence of the Catholic clergy in the countryside. This persecution of the Catholic

church was the cause of the Cristero revolt of 1926 and demonstrates the tension between Church and State that was a hallmark of Mexican politics after the Revolution.

⁵ See my comments in Chapter 2 on Catholicism and popular religious festivals.

⁶ A brief, tangential, historical consideration of the confusion regarding Sergeant de la Garza's political affiliation has significance outside the mythic vision of the film, and potentially reveals the extent to which Fernández had internalized the contradictions of the Revolution. Historian Samuel Brunk discusses the use of Zapata's remains in the service of nationalism. In 1938, the Monument to the Revolution was completed in Mexico City. Of the Monument, Brunk writes:

Its goal was to symbolically unify a revolution that had been, in fact, a bloody encounter between diverse factions. A single monument devoted to the abstract notion of the revolution would, its creators apparently hoped, help break down persistent regional and ideological differences and contribute to making the revolution understood as a coherent, national movement—a movement that was, of course, to be directed and controlled by the revolutionary elite that had emerged at the national level. It made sense from this nationalizing and state-building perspective to move Zapata's body to this building. There it would join the bones of its colleagues: between 1942 and 1976, Francisco Madero, Francisco 'Pancho' Villa, Venustiano Carranza, Plutarco Elías Calles, and Lázaro Cárdenas were placed in the four massive piers of the edifice, which together support its huge dome. (162-63)

While this should not be interpreted as a kindly reading of the character of Sargento de la Garza, the flip-flops in his political affiliations show the contradictions of the official version of the Revolution and the attempt to erase the divisions between the respective goals of the Revolutionary leaders in life. Its purpose, like *indigenismo*, was to unify the people behind

the state, whatever the mental gymnastics that had to be undertaken to do so.

⁷ Emilio García Riera identifies Cabo Mendoza as “indígena” in his *Historia Documental del Cine Mexicano* (4: 202) and in his biography of El Indio, Emilio Fernández, 1904-1986 (133). Additionally, in the film itself, Mendoza affirms an indigenous identity.

When Maclovia, Tata Macario, and José María are bargaining with Don Generoso, the storeowner, over the price of the canoe, Mendoza interjects a comment, lamenting the condition of the Indians: “¿Cuándo llegará el día en que nos dejen de amolar tanto a los indios?” By including the “nos” in the phrase, he includes himself in the category of Indian. Additionally, at the end of the movie (as will be discussed), he criticizes the inhabitants of Janitzio for their ignorant adherence to cruel tradition and says they have committed a great injustice, indicating that he has distanced himself from tradition and joined himself to reason and order.

⁸ An important point to remember is that the Federal army was also part of the Revolution, and the faction led by Venustiano Carranza from the capital was originally part of the group that opposed Porfirio Díaz, which signalled the start of the Mexican Revolution. Although they were also fighting to gain control over the country through defeat of the warring parties, the *carrancistas* also represent the armed conflict of the Revolution.

⁹ This recalls Andrea Noble’s discussion of the gaze in her analysis of *María Candelaria*, where the heroine becomes “the locus of a visual conflict which echoes the encounter between the colonising gaze of the criollo painter and the resistant gaze of the indigenous male subject” (85). In my opinion, by having José María ultimately win out over Sargento de la Garza, Fernández does not suggest that this has anything to do with race, but instead with the virtues of the Indian over the vices of whites who are cruel to Indians. It is a behavioral and cultural superiority which permits José María and Maclovia’s survival in the

modern world.

¹⁰ Relating to this negative interpretation of the final scenes of *Maclovia* is what Roger Bartra describes as “el mito del edén subvertido,” which is the result of the violent encounters of indigenous America and Spanish Europe in the Conquest, and of rural life before the Revolution and the industrial Mexico that arose out of its ashes (14). Modern Mexicans, according to Bartra, are an in-between people, characterized by the inability to fully engage in either modernity or the past because modernity is out of their reach and the past has been obliterated through modernity’s arrival. He further argues that all modern and industrialized countries suffer from this myth-conception to one degree or another, and that a common feature of this myth is the longing for a rural past which was destroyed with the advent of modernity. Mexico, however, has a more acute case than other places because of “la antigüedad del proceso,” referring to the Conquest, and because of the Revolution which obliterated rural life (15). Finally, he says that “La reconstrucción literaria” —and here we could add “filmica” as well— “del campesino es una ceremonia de duelo, un desgarramiento de vestiduras ante el cuerpo sacrificado en el altar de la modernidad y del progreso” (17).

¹¹ Although this may be true for the actors playing the part of Indians, at the same time there continue to exist within Mexico contemporary indigenous groups who did not make it onto the screen but remain on the sidelines, watching the recreation of their lives as something dead.

CHAPTER III

TWO MEXICOS, OR THE FISSURE OF OBLIQUE PERSPECTIVE

Mexico's Golden Age of cinema arose from the desire to create films that explored specifically Mexican themes and images, and to develop a movie industry that could compete in size, production, and quality with Hollywood and Europe. Since the advent of cinema in Mexico in 1896, there had always been a great debt of influence to the United States, not only in technical and material terms, but also in style and representation.¹ This situation continued until the 1930s when Mexican cinema began to increase in strength and reputation. However, due to its close and prolonged contact with Hollywood, Mexican cinema "adopted," for the most part, "the Hollywood filmmaking paradigm" (Ramírez Berg, "Invention" 13).² This does not mean that Mexico's burgeoning movie industry completely imitated Hollywood's style. On the contrary, it was somewhat of an uneasy relationship, as Ramírez Berg suggests: "the history of Mexican cinema is the history of tension between the adherence to the Hollywood paradigm and the rejection of it, and between the assimilation of transmitted American values and the insistence on Mexican ones" (13). This tension was not lost on Emilio Fernández and Gabriel Figueroa who set out to make a distinctly Mexican cinema (Hershfield 52).

However, the creation of an authentic Mexican style was problematic given the extended association between the American and the Mexican film industries, and the fact that both Fernández and Figueroa were influenced early in their film careers by Hollywood. Yet as Ramírez Berg states, "though their style combined cinematic practices fostered by Hollywood, Fernández-Figueroa tailored them to the Mexican experience, then combined them in a proportion that gave it a look all its own" ("Invention" 21). *El Indio*, by emphasizing the "Mexicanness" of his films, reveals the ideology which informed Golden Age films generally,³ Mexican cultural nationalism. A major element of this nationalism was *indigenismo*, an ideology that posited Indians as the symbols of Mexico's national character.

As I have mentioned in previous chapters, Emilio Fernández and his movie making team created and used romanticized and aestheticized representations of indigenous peoples to construct Mexico's originary myth and to inspire faith in the institutionalized Revolutionary government. Furthermore, the mythic identity promoted by Fernández's films became for both Mexicans and the international community the face of Mexico, one which was touted by the state as proof of Mexico's place in the "civilized" world.

Nevertheless, as discussed earlier, the myth of indigenous Mexico depicted by Fernández had very little to do with the reality of contemporary Indians' existence. It was this reality against which political *indigenismo* (differentiated from aesthetic *indigenismo*) battled constantly, attempting to improve the lot of native peoples through education, hygiene, and other methods. However, despite a great deal of effort among many well-intentioned Mexicans (and some ill-intentioned ones) to rehabilitate and incorporate indigenous groups into mainstream society, by the 1960s poverty was still rampant among rural indigenous groups and many showed great resistance to the homogenizing policies of the national government.⁴ In effect, *indigenismo*, as an ideology of its time, had failed to bring about substantial or generalized change in the Indians' standard of living or social or political participation. The question is, then, why? The answer is complex and lies in a combination of social, political, and economic factors which cannot all be discussed here. However, an underlying cause of much of the political and economic exploitation which the Indians suffered is traceable to the fundamental contradiction intrinsic to *indigenismo* which condemned it to failure from the beginning: the view of Indians as objects. In attempting to absorb the Indian population, Mexican intellectuals and the elite did not count on the Indians acting or speaking for themselves. Where they expected Indians' grateful cooperation in implementing *indigenista* policies, they often found resistance and an unwillingness to be

subsumed.⁵

The same conflict that permeated political *indigenismo* also found expression in El Indio's *indigenista* cinema as he had a predilection for repeating the Revolutionary discourse in his films in support of the government's effort to integrate the Indian. However, by doing so, he also reproduced the view of indigenous peoples as objects, in this case aesthetic objects, thereby exposing the extrinsicality of the vision of Mexican *indigenismo*. In this chapter I will discuss the effects of *indigenismo*'s outsider's gaze on indigenous populations as seen through El Indio's films. Moreover, while this extrinsic objectification of Indians is evident in the static and artistic images mentioned above, it can also be seen in Fernández's movies through the use of "oblique perspective," a cinematic technique pioneered by Gabriel Figueroa as a part of his effort to create an authentically Mexican cinema and to distinguish Mexican films from those produced in the United States or Europe.

Oblique perspective, which is described in greater detail below, relies on the use of two vanishing points instead of the traditional one, or "linear perspective," that is generally found in Western art. The tension produced by the vanishing points in oblique perspective is resolved under a unifying arc created by the eye's movement between the two points. This dual perspective can be seen metaphorically as representing the two competing poles of Hispanic and indigenous cultures in Mexican society, with *indigenismo* as the unifying arc. As a nationalist ideology, *indigenismo* sought to reconcile the differences between the multiple cultural groups by creating a unified national identity. However, despite the emphasis on the mixed nature of Mexican identity—Spanish and Indian—this new identity required the disappearance of indigenous groups through assimilation, producing *mestizaje*. By associating *mestizaje* with oblique perspective, this technique is revealed as just as homogenizing and mono-perspectival as traditional linear perspective. Therefore, in the

second part of this chapter, I will show that by emphasizing Mexico's difference from the US through the oblique perspective, Fernández and Figueroa metaphorically perpetuate the contradictions of *indigenismo* and expose the inherent fissures of that ideology which led to its eventual abandonment and discreditation.

Rhetoric versus Reality

After the election of Manuel Ávila Camacho in 1940, the Mexican state made a sharp turn away from practices based on the egalitarian ideals of the Revolution and towards the consolidation of a capitalist state, causing greater neglect and deepening the poverty among Indians and *campesinos* in the countryside. This should not be surprising since the Cárdenas administration had laid the groundwork for the development of this capitalistic system, basing the economic aims of his presidency, at least in part, on the eventual disappearance of the Indian through assimilation into the national body. Yet in order to retain popular support in the face of such contradictions, the state continued repeating the same Revolutionary, *indigenista* discourse that had been in place since the 1920s. The use of the rhetoric of the Revolution for such a purpose was not new, dating back at least to the time of Manuel Gamio and his archaeological reconstruction of the indigenous past for nationalist purposes. Therefore, as David Brading writes, “The ultimate and paradoxical aim of official *indigenismo* in Mexico was to thus liberate the country from the dead-weight of its native past, or, to put the case more clearly, finally to destroy the native culture which had emerged during the colonial period” (88), with the purpose of improving Mexico's economic prospects through the elimination of the Indian.

However, as Alexander Dawson points out, far from disappearing in the years after the Revolution, “the Indian population was growing, and indigenous languages and cultures

were flourishing [...]; it appeared that Indians were proud of their languages, and they had no interest in abandoning them” (78-79). While this unexpected vitality caused some intellectuals to propose other models of official interaction with indigenous peoples, on the whole the government remained firmly entrenched in its assimilationist goals and would not yield. This became increasingly true after the end of Cárdenas’s term (1934-1940) when programs designed to reach out to the Indians withered into ineffectiveness due to drastically reduced funds or support.⁶ Therefore, although the government continued reproducing the same egalitarian discourse, in the 1940s “[n]o suggestion of pluralism, self-determination, or special rights would be tolerated by a state that now favored theories of unilinear modernization and economic development,” as Dawson indicates (135-36). What had only been nascent under Cárdenas came into full bloom and dominated the *indigenista* discourse from that time forward, much to the detriment of the Indian communities of Mexico, who were pushed aside and expected to join national life or disappear. The film industry would become a major tool in the state’s arsenal for assimilation.

As mentioned in the introduction, in the mid-1930s the government began heavily subsidizing the film industry with the express purpose of uniting the Mexican people through cinematic experience (Garmendia 60).⁷ In many ways, the attempt to consolidate power from which this cinematic push originated had been the major political project since the end of the Revolution when various factions had vied for political dominance. Much of the rhetoric used by the government had been “Revolutionary” in order to provide unity and support for the state’s political projects. Although Cárdenas was known for his outreach to the Indians, he was also quite shrewd in his use of the rhetoric of the Revolution. Through selective and controlled use of this rhetoric and social programs, during his *sexenio* Cárdenas was able to solidify the state’s control over all sectors of society by co-opting

unions, leftists, agrarians, industrialists, peasants, upper classes, and others into participation in and cooperation with a state machine economically and socially oriented towards a kind of reformed capitalism (Cockcroft 121-24, 133). After the end of Cárdenas's presidency, with control of the country firmly in the hands of a government dedicated to building up Mexico's economy through development, modernization, and foreign capital, the state needed to justify actions that seemingly went against the socially progressive ideals invoked by the Revolution.

The film industry's role in generating support for the government and its policies was paramount, creating a middle class, "national" audience supportive of the state. Regarding the role of Mexico's national movie industry in this process of legitimization, Andrea Noble writes:

In the 1940s, the national cinema found its audience in this vast and amorphous middle class, for whom the regular [...] weekly outing to the movies became part of the rhythm of family life, [...]. For those metropolitan spectators who had recently abandoned the close-knit security of rural village life, the cinema offered a form of collective public experience that provided a refuge from the alienating effects of urban life. For others, [...] the regular outing to the cinema had quasi didactic connotations, initiating the illiterate masses into the rituals of modern life. The 'lessons' to be learned in the movie theatre were multivalent: how to adjust to an increasingly secular outlook; [...] how to become a consumer in a society increasingly driven by capitalist accumulation; how to identify with cultural practices and symbols divested of their erstwhile regional associations and now harnessed to the concept of the centralised nation. (76)

Among the above-mentioned lessons learned from this collective cinematic experience,

it is this last one—being able to identify with the new symbols of the Revolutionary state—that is of most importance as this idea tends to subsume and incorporate all others in the definition of *mexicanidad*. These regional and cultural symbols were often associated with the rural and pre-Hispanic past—magueys, haciendas, mariachis, and especially idealized indigenous communities (126, 143)—and were offered to the viewing public as the “true essence” of Mexico with the purpose of rallying people to the cause of the post-Revolutionary state.

However, this legitimating influence was not limited to the middle class spectators within Mexico, but also to those without. Having lived so long under the shadow of Europe and the United States, Mexico in the years after the Revolution was eager to show its modernity and affirm its status among the industrialized nations of the world which for so long had considered Mexico as backwards. The arts and the cinema became the legitimizing tool for Mexico in the international community. For example, when Sergei Eisenstein came to Mexico in the 1930s to film what would become *¡Que Viva México!*, his project proved to be beneficial to the Mexican state. Andrea Noble again writes:

[...] as an avant-garde auteur of international standing, whose vision converged conveniently with official policy, Eisenstein’s unfinished film [...] confirmed to international audiences that Mexico was worthy of contemplation. [...] Eisenstein’s visit bestowed international prestige on Mexico and assured national cultural producers and audiences alike that the country’s indigenous heritage [...] was indeed a sight to be acknowledged as self, and imagined as an integral part of that self. (133-34)

Mexico’s “acceptance” into the international community was founded, not so much on economic or political power, but on its quality as art. What is more, instead of resenting this

simplification and objectification of the national identity, as Noble asserts here, this was one of the driving forces of the state's patronage of the muralists, cinema, and other important artistic developments of the first half of the 20th century. A decade or so after Eisenstein's visit, the same process was repeated with *María Candelaria*. The film, while warmly received domestically, became an international sensation when the Soviet ambassador to Mexico saw it at the premiere and demanded to meet the director and cast (García Riera, *Fernández* 48). This success was multiplied when in 1946 *María Candelaria* won several awards at the Cannes film festival, securing Fernández's and Figueroa's reputations abroad and legitimizing the Mexican state (54). Additionally, as Noble's quote indicates, the vision that Mexico constructed for itself, and the one which the outside world saw of Mexico, was that of the Indian. However, rather than a social or political revindication of indigenous rights and cultures, Mexican—and especially *El Indio*'s—films privileged an exotic, romanticized Indian, and emphasized the universality of indigenous identity in all Mexicans. The tendency towards this depiction of indigenous peoples, described in earlier sections, reflects what Tierney terms “European primitivism,” and places Fernández “in the position of colonial voyeur” (78).⁸

As a favored film director of the national industry, *El Indio* was a privileged “looker” whose gaze captured his particular version of indigenous life and presented it to urban viewers as Mexico's reality. In fact, this concept of looking is an essential element throughout all three *indigenista* films studied here, and the gaze of the spectator coincides with the *conciencia pictórica* of each film, placing the viewer in the same position as “colonial voyeur.” Figueroa's tendency to utilize intradiegetic elements such as windows, trees, or doorways to “frame” images or people underscore the status of the Indian as an aesthetic object (Arroyo Quiroz 193). Furthermore, the spectator is often allowed to

see both the viewers as well as what they are viewing in the act of looking. In *María Candelaria*, for example, the first time the painter sees the heroine carrying a basket of flowers to the market, we see him watching her, instantly captivated by her indigenous beauty. Later, when Lorenzo Rafael is in prison, the priest and the painter—colonial voyeurs *par excellence*—are framed by the prison bars as they try to convince him to allow María Candelaria to be painted. Andrea Noble describes this film as demonstrating the mutual gazes of Indian and Mexican toward María Candelaria, she becoming “the locus of a visual conflict which echoes the encounter between the colonising gaze of the *criollo* painter and the resistant gaze of the indigenous male subject” (85). Lorenzo Rafael’s indigenous gaze, the *mestizo* Don Damián’s frustrated, lustful gaze (especially upon seeing the painting), and the painter’s aesthetic gaze, all enter into conflict because each character desires to possess María Candelaria for his own motives.

Río Escondido complements and expounds upon the aesthetic qualities of the Indian, literally converting them—and María Félix—into works of art available for the viewing consumption of the Mexican national spectator. In *Maclovia* there is an especially noteworthy scene where, during the celebration of the Day of the Dead on Janitzio, the camera gradually moves from the floor of a church where candles are laid out, up to an arched window that frames Maclovia among the candles, giving the impression that someone from outside the community is looking in at her



Fig. 14. The extrinsic gaze of indigenismo: Maclovia framed by a church window.

during the festival. Not only does the *conciencia pictórica* frame the scene like a painting, but it also presents the observer with a beautifully rendered portrait of a lone indigenous woman in the midst of a solemn ceremony (Figure 14), a favored figure of El Indio. What should be clear in all the examples of looking mentioned above is the *extrinsicity* of the gaze, the inability to comprehend what is being seen except through an aesthetic filter, the imposition of images and attitudes of the viewing subject on the object being viewed. Even when Figueroa focuses on the viewers in the films (the painter, Rosaura Salazar), it is understood that they are looking *at* something worthy of their attention.

The similarities between the act of looking in Emilio Fernández's indigenist films and the official ideology of *indigenismo* should be readily apparent, the external vision of the movies themselves and the status of *indigenismo* as an elite ideology imposed from the outside coinciding perfectly. Likewise, El Indio's films have met the same fate as the mid-century Mexican nationalism and *indigenista* political policies. Both have been proven unviable as political programs or social ideology because of their imposition on native peoples by external elite groups (Arroyo Quiroz 200-01), and because of the disjunction between the state-sponsored fiction of Mexico's Indian identity and the economic and social reality of indigenous groups in Mexico. It is here that we can turn to the concept of "oblique perspective" to understand the fundamental failings of El Indio's films and, by extension, of *indigenismo* itself.

In his article, "The Cinematic Invention of Mexico," Charles Ramírez Berg discusses the Fernández-Figueroa style and its political implications. Among the notable characteristics of that style, he cites the use of two complementary perspectives, curvilinear and oblique. Curvilinear perspective was a technique pioneered by the influential Mexican painter Dr. Atl "that stressed spherical shapes in nature" and (supposedly) "more realistically

approximated the act of seeing by the human eye” (16). In his films, Gabriel Figueroa replicated this perspective “by using a [...] wide angle lens to give horizon lines a slight curve” (16). Additionally, “by combining [the wide angle lens] with low camera angles, deep focus, and oblique [...] perspective, [the] spectator’s eyes traveled in a curving line similar to that found in a Dr. Atl landscape” (16). In conjunction with curvilinear perspective is oblique perspective where “rectangular objects are photographed at an angle,”

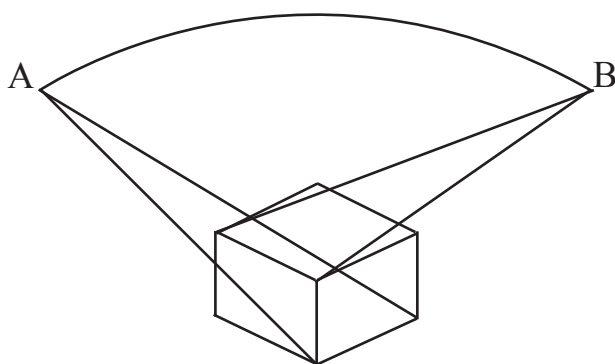


Fig. 15. Diagram of relationship between oblique and curvilinear perspectives, from Charles Ramírez Berg, “Cinematic Invention of Mexico” (Los Angeles: UCLA, 1994) 20

creating “two vanishing points rather than the normal *one*, to the left and to the right of the frame” (15, 19, *my emphasis*). This “initiates a tension” between the two vanishing points which “is resolved when the spectator’s eye moves in an imaginary arc from one vanishing point [...] to the

other,” thus reproducing Dr. Atl’s curvilinear perspective as shown in the diagram in Figure 15 (19). Ramírez Berg credits the Fernández-Figueroa team with using oblique perspective as a way to react against Hollywood’s dominance by creating “a space for the articulation of *lo mexicano* in cinema” (21), affirming that the American film industry tended toward linear perspective that used only one vanishing point. Through this version of “*lo mexicano*,” as described throughout this study, Fernández and his team “challenged Western artistic traditions and the dominant ideology it conveyed” (21, 23).

However, the use and social implications of oblique perspective are best understood in contrast with linear perspective where “parallel lines converg[e] at a central vanishing point” (Ramírez Berg, “Invention” 15). This was the perspective most often used in traditional Western art and in Hollywood films, and represents the great “ego” of Western

thought. As Ramírez Berg states, linear perspective “offered a capitalistic and patriarchal way of looking at the world for an emerging bourgeois viewer” (22), bringing the spectator into capitalist, consumerist patterns of thinking that emphasized individualism and reinforced the political, social, and cultural hegemony exercised by the United States over Mexico since the early 19th century. Fernández and Figueroa, desiring to break free of this cultural hegemony, deviated from the traditional movie making paradigm inherited from Hollywood and “provided a different way of viewing the world,” a specifically Mexican way, oblique perspective (20).⁹ Moreover, oblique perspective “ultimately [...] opens a fissure in dominant ideology” (23), a breach which distances their films and Mexican cinema generally from Hollywood. By utilizing this technique, Fernández and Figueroa assert their separateness from ‘crude’ capitalism and the United States’ insistence on materialism, and contest its hegemony over Mexico. Instead of submitting to a foreign, prefabricated notion of what Mexico’s place was in the modern world, a notion which harnessed and molded all its constituent elements into a singular vision, oblique perspective offered a multifocal perception of Mexico which showed the inherent duality of Mexican identity. Where Hollywood was unifocal, monocultural, assimilating, and homogenizing, El Indio’s films were designed to affirm Mexico’s difference, incorporating the rural, agrarian, indigenous past, and the industrialized, modern, European-based present into an indivisible whole.

Notwithstanding Fernández and Figueroa’s notable cinematographic achievement in favor of a uniquely Mexican aesthetic, I believe that Ramírez Berg’s recognition of their contribution ignores the domestic repercussions of this technique—and by extension, of Fernández’s films and Mexican nationalism generally—on the indigenous population. Certainly on the international stage such an innovation serves to differentiate Mexican cinema from traditional “Western” films. However, within Mexico the vision developed

by these filmmakers is no less dominant or unifocal than the tradition of linear perspective represented by the United States. The fissure to which Ramírez Berg refers appears not only in the dominant ideology of US culture and hegemony, but also in official Mexican *indigenismo*. If we view the dual poles of oblique perspective as the two fundamental yet divergent elements of Mexican national identity, indigenous and European, the arc of curvilinear perspective provides unity and reconciliation through *mexicanidad*, joining what appear to be two naturally centrifugal forces into one overarching identity and “proving” Mexico’s enduring, authentic, cultural inheritance. Oblique perspective in El Indio’s films, then, can be viewed as attempting to reconcile two disparate poles into one unified vision, showing the simultaneity of the indigenous and the Hispanic elements of Mexican culture. Yet, by attempting this reconciliation under the banners of *indigenismo* and *mexicanidad*, artists, intellectuals, and politicians created a unilateral view of what Mexico’s identity should be, forcing it upon indigenous and non-indigenous Mexicans alike. What are presumed to be two distinct yet equal forces are in reality disproportionately balanced in favor of the Eurocentric element whose mission is not to affirm the plurality of Mexican identity, but its essential unity. Rather than preserve indigenous culture, oblique perspective perpetuates the primacy of the *mestizo* and shows itself to be equally monocultural, the one perspective overshadowing the other: Hispanic over Indigenous, Urban over Rural, Rich over Poor, Capitalism over Collectivism, the Individual over the Community, the indigenous side always losing out because the dominant Hispanic sector was assimilating—or at least attempting to assimilate—the weaker indigenous groups.

This is the fissure of oblique perspective in Mexican society: the stark disjunction between the official version of Mexican history and the reality of indigenous life, or in other words, the difference between fiction and reality. When indigenous reality interrupted

the fictional state discourse through protest or non-compliance to policy, the state often responded violently by suppressing the dissenting voices which typically demanded land, autonomy, the right to preserve traditional cultural practices, or to denounce the glaring poverty that afflicted their communities (Cockcroft 151; Dawson 127-39). Furthermore, the policies designed to help indigenous communities often failed in producing the desired “redemption” of the Indian in the way that *indigenistas* expected, leaving many communities mired in poverty and perpetuating both the state’s hegemony over indigenous populations throughout the country and the existence of (at least) two substantially different Mexicos (Dawson 162-64). As Brading writes, “There were indeed two Mexicos. But the conflict was between [...] a populace whose traditions and institutions were rooted in the three centuries of Spanish dominion and the modernising projects of the revolutionary state” (Brading 88).

As a legitimizing tool of the government, the national film industry was utilized to make more palatable to the urban spectator the obvious neglect that many indigenous groups experienced under state *indigenismo*. Therefore, despite the fact that Emilio Fernández and his team of filmmakers developed a style that came to represent Mexicans’ vision of Mexico, as well as a subversion to US hegemony and cinematic practice, their films served to advance the state’s goal of the assimilation of Indian groups within the national territory. Additionally, because the Mexican state financed a great many films of the *Época de Oro*—with money from one agency or another—this suggests that the vision of Mexico presented in them was at least partially a product of the efforts of the state to promote its own agenda. Even more ironic is that during the 1940s the government’s modernizing economic policies allied it closely with foreign capital interests (especially from the United States) which, instead of subverting a hegemonic relationship, served to deepen and further cement the

US's economic and political dominance over Mexico (Cockcroft 133-35). Therefore, the association of oblique perspective and Mexican national cinema with the state's goals to assimilate (i.e., erase) minority groups, subverts the subversion assigned to this innovative technique by Ramírez Berg, incorporating it as merely yet another tool of the state and discouraging any potentially fruitful resistance to foreign and domestic hegemony.

Notes for Chapter 3

¹ For example, the majority of equipment and film stock came from the United States (Ramírez Berg, “Skies” 27).

² To describe this paradigm, Ramírez Berg cites David Bordwell’s chapter *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*. As Ramírez Berg describes it, the paradigm consists of three principal elements:

[...] a system of narrative logic centered on cause and effect linkages of story events, a goal-oriented protagonist, and the adherence to Aristotelian narrative poetics.

Second, a system of cinematic time that governs everything from shot duration to the temporal ordering of shots to favored story devices such as flashbacks and deadlines.

Third, a spatial system that constitutes filmic space as story space. Compositions privilege human bodies, centering and balancing them in the frame. Additionally, [...] Hollywood’s mode of representation draws on the Renaissance tradition of frontality and linear perspective. (Ramírez Berg 13)

³ I wish to emphasize the word “generally.” While there were many films that did show public support for the Mexican government, it was by no means all films, nor even a majority. To suggest otherwise would be a fallacy. However, the presence of “non-nationalist” films does not detract from my argument here; it merely shows that there was a variety of voices and ideas being portrayed in films, and that not all films or filmmakers were dedicated to nationalism’s cause in the same way that *El Indio* was.

⁴ See Chapter 5, “The State, Foreign Capital, and Monopoly Capitalism,” in James D. Cockroft’s *Mexico’s Hope*. The chapter discusses the development of capitalism in Mexico from 1940 to the 1990s, and how it affected the lower and peasant classes, including Indians.

⁵ The forms and extent of indigenous resistance to policies designed to integrate them

into national life varied greatly from group to group and from situation to situation, and so a generalized effort cannot be described. However, two examples can illustrate some ways which Indians asserted themselves. In his chapter, “Empowering the Masses at the Congresos Regionales Indígenas,” Alexander Dawson describes a series of large meetings—Congreso Regionales—organized by the Cárdenas regime that took place between 1936 and 1940 throughout Mexico to encourage the participation of indigenous groups in Mexican society. A part of those congresses was a forum period dedicated solely to listening to native delegates articulate the claims and grievances of their communities. Although sponsored by the state, these open forums showed, as Dawson writes, a resistant Indian: “In both subtle and obvious ways they [indigenous delegates] undermined both the state’s claim to paternalistic authority of the Indian, and the deeply embedded racism of Mexican society” (102-03). By speaking for themselves, using the forums as a way to advance their own agenda, indigenous communities used the state to their own advantage. James Cockcroft writes of much different tactics when he describes the revolts of ex-Zapatista soldier Rubén Jaramillo who rose up in guerilla war in 1943 and then again in 1953 to challenge the state’s abuse of Indians and unfair land holding practices. He was killed by state agents in 1962 (Cockcroft 210-11).

⁶ See Dawson, pages 133-37.

⁷ Admittedly, the kind of movies that Garmendia is discussing in this article are documentaries that portray national traditions and events, used as propaganda for the state’s purposes. However, the fact that the Mexican government subsidized all genres and not just documentaries suggests that movies produced by the national industry were used for the same purpose. Even if they did not explicitly support the government, simply by achieving success Mexican films brought renown and money to Mexico which contributed to the good

reputation of nationalism.

⁸ Andrea Noble delves deeply into the idea of looking and the gaze as an essential process in establishing Mexican national identity in her study, *Mexican National Cinema*. Claudia Arroyo Quiroz also reveals the basic technique of looking in El Indio's *indigenista* films through her concept of *conciencia pictórica*.

⁹ Obviously this is not the only way in which they created a uniquely Mexican film tradition, but oblique perspective represents a unique development in Figueroa's cinematography.

CONCLUSION: SHIFT AND RESISTANCE

By the time of his death in 1986, Emilio Fernández had directed nearly 40 films—more than twenty of those with Gabriel Figueroa (“Filmografía” 54-55)—and had acted in a great deal more. However, after 1956, El Indio’s fortunes declined, and he directed only eight films between 1956 and 1986 (Taibo 250-53). A major factor in his fall from cinematic grace came from changes in the film industry in Mexico and internationally, mainly the resurgence of Hollywood after World War II and the tendency domestically to finance only those films which would turn an easy profit (Tierney 160-61). Yet despite Tierney’s insistence on other factors, it is not incorrect to affirm that another chief cause of his decline was the “repetition and anachronism of the same images of nationalism that brought him great success during his most prestigious years” (167). Paco Ignacio Taibo I cites Dolores del Río in this regard:

El problema de Emilio es que no supo salirse a tiempo del cine mexicano. [...]

No podemos seguir repitiendo hasta la saciedad lo que hicimos una y otra vez. Lo hicimos muy bien, qué bueno, pero no tiene sentido volverlo a hacer. La época de oro del cine indigenista o mexicanista ya pasó. (qtd. in Taibo 238)

Although Del Río refers specifically to El Indio’s post-Golden Age career, this same anachronism and tendency towards repetition was already manifesting itself in the 1940s in his *indigenista* pictures.

As established in the introduction, the *indigenismo* seen in Emilio Fernández’s movies had its origin, not in the ideology of the decade when they were made, but rather in the policies of the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas, whose administration was characterized by a public and prolonged outreach to indigenous groups. However, starting in 1940 with the election of Manuel Ávila Camacho to the presidency, Mexican economic and political policy made a hard shift to the right. Cockcroft calls this change a “retreat from radicalism,”

which entailed the deemphasizing of reform and social change in favor of “national unity” (134). This national unity, for the most part, meant the concentration on the “establishment of a strong state to facilitate capitalist development in collaboration with foreign capital in the name of nationalism and the Revolution” (135). The last part of the quote is most relevant here: “in the name of nationalism and the Revolution.” After Cárdenas, appeals to nationalist rhetoric often rang empty due to the disparity between the state’s words and its actions. This is especially true in light of the 1968 student protests which were brutally crushed by government forces at the Plaza de Tlatelolco (145). Even before 1968 it became increasingly obvious to many Mexicans that there was a great gap between the rhetoric used by the state and its actions. The same was doubly true for indigenous Mexicans.

Given the great disjunction between the post-Revolutionary state’s *indigenista* rhetoric and its praxis in 1940s Mexico, it seems surprising that El Indio would continue to uphold the (poorly named) Institutionalized Revolutionary government. However, it appears that for El Indio the rhetorical appeals worked, and throughout his career as a director he remained faithful to the rhetoric of the Revolution, or at least to his particular vision of Mexico. Unfortunately for him, this apparently blind adherence to the mythic image of the Revolution that was manifest in his films made him increasingly out of step with his audiences: “The basis for authorship in the 1940s [...] became the basis for Fernández’s ‘falling out of fashion’ post the Golden Age, in a film industry governed by commercial concerns and a country in which there was increasing divergence between Government rhetoric and popular politics” (Tierney 167-68). Yet even during the Golden Age El Indio found himself at odds with the state (although not national sensibilities). Here, a rather long anecdote is appropriate.

The incident was related by Mauricio Magdaleno to Paco Ignacio Taibo I and

included in the latter's biography of El Indio.¹ After *Río Escondido* was filmed, it had been shown to President Miguel Alemán in a private screening, and as a result, was almost banned from exhibition. Magdaleno describes what happened:

Pensaban que era antirrevolucionaria. El Secretario de Gobernación de entonces, Héctor Pérez, me había dicho que la olvidáramos. Me dijo: “Olvídense, nunca se exhibirá.” Estábamos espantados. Entonces yo propuse que fuéramos a ver al Presidente, Miguel Alemán. Yo había sido compañero suyo de clase, en el mismo año. Pero él era un poco mayor que yo. El ‘Indio’ y yo pedimos que nos recibiera, pero íbamos muy pesimistas. Todos nos decían que *Río Escondido* estaba maldita. Cuando nos recibió el Presidente Alemán en Palacio, ya había visto la película. Se la habían proyectado a él solo. Me dijo que si queríamos exhibirla teníamos que poner una nota en la que se dijera muy claramente que lo que ocurría en el film no había pasado durante su mandato. Les dijimos que pondríamos lo que él quisiera. Lo que nos importaba era que la película no se nos muriera en un almacén, enlatada. Así que salimos muy contentos. (Taibo 131)

The “nota” that was included in the film is the preface/disclaimer that appears at the beginning of the credits (“Esta historia no se refiere precisamente al México de hoy, ni ha sido nuestra intención situarla dentro de él,” etc.). As Tierney rightly points out, “This disavowal sets up an opposition between *alemanista* discourses and those of the text” (145), which correspond to the conflict between the rhetoric of the Revolution and the realities of Alemán's *sexenio*. However, in attempting to problematize traditional nationalist, conservative interpretations of El Indio's films by focusing on how *Río Escondido* seemingly departs from this paradigm, she oversteps the mark and complicates her analysis unnecessarily, ignoring both the rhetorical origins of the movie's *indigenista* discourse—

cardenismo—and the intent with which the films were made, to show support and solidarity with the national government.

Tierney engages *Río Escondido* from the point of view of contradiction, pointing out the disjunctions between the text of the film and the period when it was made, accurately identifying the multiple ways that the movie deviates from and contradicts the policies of Miguel Alemán's presidency. However, I believe it is safe to say that no one disputes the gap between Revolutionary rhetoric and post-Revolutionary practice, as both are well-documented in many fields of study. What *is* of interest is the fact that both El Indio and Magdaleno did not seem to recognize the potential danger in showing a post-Revolution Mexico that still struggles with the same problems the Revolution attempted to fix, as evidenced by their reactions both to the potential blacklisting of the movie and their immediate cooperation with the president by including the preface in the film. What this episode reveals is not an attack on the Institutionalized Revolutionary government by El Indio, but an unbridgeable chasm between the rhetoric of the Revolution that saturates the movie and life on the ground. Moreover, rather than challenge the auteurist, nationalist interpretations of El Indio's *indigenista* films, *Río Escondido* serves to highlight his Revolutionary orthodoxy, not through explicit support for every one of President Alemán's policies, but in the cult of Mexico, the adoration of the egalitarian ideals of the Revolution, the exaltation of the Indian and its fundamental place in Mexico's national identity. Given this obstinate, even blind loyalty to Revolutionary rhetoric, it is probable that El Indio would have created a film praising the ideals of the Revolution no matter who was in power or what they were doing with that power, because what he and millions of other Mexicans had been conditioned to believe was not the reality, but the myth of the Revolution, of the Indian, of Mexico.

In the end, it is possible to view El Indio's *indigenista* works as mired in the past, both in their representation of the indigenous peoples of Mexico, as has been discussed above, as well as his adherence to an outdated, mythical, Revolutionary discourse, one that had long ceased to be the true goals of the post-Revolutionary government, but which continued to be used by the latter as a means of disguising and justifying their policies. However, if we are to be fair to El Indio, he was not the only one left with the shell of an empty rhetoric, as most Mexicans found themselves in the same situation. As for Fernández's *indigenista* films generally, I believe that much of the criticism leveled at them is warranted. The static, plastic, aestheticized, stereotypical, and romantic view of the Indians, the noble yet falsified role of the state in attempting to solve the Indians' problems, their heavy and at times almost comic melodrama, the many anachronisms, and the frequent patriotic discourses that occur in all but *La Perla*, all serve to date and denounce these films.

However, one criticism that I think should be rectified is the ineffectiveness of the films as agents of social accusation. Many critics have complained² that El Indio's tendencies render the films useless in this regard, that his slavish adulation of the Revolutionary government and its leaders effectively nullified any call for social change. This accusation is, I believe, inaccurate, especially considering that the policies being implemented by Mexico's presidents in the 1940s served to further deepen the oppression of the Indians and alienate them from their lands and cultures. *María Candelaria* condemns the oppression perpetrated by lustful and greedy individuals—especially sexual abuse perpetrated by men toward women³—and to a certain extent, the complicity of the Catholic Church in the continuing subjugation of the Indians. *Río Escondido* decries the abuses of political leaders from within and without the official state organization, as well as the poverty and suffering of peasants and indigenous groups throughout Mexico. *Maclovía*

introduces the themes of racial discrimination and calls—however contradictorily—for equality among all Mexicans. If looked at in terms of the mathematical concept of absolute value, the accusation of corruption and the public denunciation of oppression against minority groups are marked achievements of El Indio’s *indigenista* cinema. Therefore, despite the multitudinous flaws exhibited by these films, they are still effective as tools of denunciation. At the very least they serve as examples of the contradictions and gaps between the official discourse of *indigenismo* in Mexico and real life for Indian groups in Mexico.

In spite of the cult of Mexico that had grown up in the years of heavy nationalism, the official history that the state produced and which Fernández and his team repeated and reified did not go unchallenged, nor were these filmmakers completely one-sided in their support for the government. Arroyo Quiroz, in discussing Fernández’s filmmaking team, emphasizes the multivocal nature of that process: “En el caso del cine de Fernández, la noción de ‘equipo’ es útil para reconocer la producción cinematográfica como un espacio no sólo de creatividad, sino también de negociación y conflicto, del cual emergieron imaginarios nacionalistas bastante ricos y complejos” (184). Even though he was the director, Fernández’s vision of Mexico and the Indian was not unilateral, nor uniquely his. Rather, it was the product of decades of *indigenista* thought, programs, policies, novels, and paintings. Moreover, the realization of those films required the contributions of many talented individuals who shared, at least to a certain extent, those same ideals. There was negotiation, compromise, and the presence of other visions that influenced his own.

Outside the realm of film, there were other voices which showed a different Mexico, a non-stylized Indian. Rosario Castellanos and her indigenist fiction are powerful voices denouncing the failures of Revolutionary *indigenismo* to effect any substantial or

generalized change in Mexico's Indian population through her graphic description of the deplorable poverty, exploitation, and abuse of contemporary indigenous groups. Likewise, Juan Rulfo presents a very different vision of Mexico's Indian population through his photography, a far cry from the sweeping allegory and stylization so common in the work of Gabriel Figueroa.⁴ Additionally, as time went on there arose an increasing number of voices that challenged Mexican nationalism and official *indigenismo*: anthropologists, revolutionaries, students, critics, and most importantly, Indians themselves. Since the end of Mexican nationalism around the 1960s,⁵ indigenous groups have taken an increasingly active role in demanding rights for their traditional communities and ways of life. This has come at an incredible cost, both in human life (NAFTA, the Zapatista uprising and its aftermath) and in legitimacy of the national government in the eyes of many Mexicans. This last point is probably one of Mexican *indigenismo*'s most ironic failures: in trying to forge and force a new national identity on its inhabitants, both indigenous and non-indigenous, the state only succeeded in creating forces resistant to that definition. Even when there are those that still believe the Revolutionary doctrine, it is in spite of the government and not because of it. The contradictions and hypocrisies practiced in *indigenismo* and Mexican nationalism provoked a shift away from the federal government as moderator of national identity towards a tendency to self-definition based on an acceptance of difference, rather than on the effort to erase it. While not all of these attempts have been successful, the overall effect has been the gradual acceptance of a plurality of voices in Mexico, voices which are trying to define themselves, rather than be defined.

Notes for Conclusion

¹ This anecdote is repeated by García Riera in his chapter on *Río Escondido* in his biography of Fernández, and is cited by Tierney as evidence of the internal contradictions in El Indio's nationalist cinema.

² See Emilio García Riera's chapter dedicated to *Río Escondido* in *Emilio Fernández, 1904-1986*.

³ Although I stand by this declaration regarding the denunciation of sexual abuse towards women in *María Candelaria*, it must be said that physical and sexual abuse toward women is a common motif in Fernández's films.

⁴ In his article, Douglas J. Weatherford writes about the stark contrast between Figueroa's cinematography and Rulfo's photography on the set of *La Escondida*, mentioned in a previous note. By focusing on the spectators off-screen, Rulfo reveals the disjunction between the beautiful film version of Indians' lives portrayed in Fernández's films and the real thing.

⁵ I base this date on the increasing disenchantment of the general populace with the government, as evidenced by the massive discontent manifested in the student protests of 1968. It stands to reason that these feelings did not suddenly surge in 1968, but had been growing for quite some time.

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