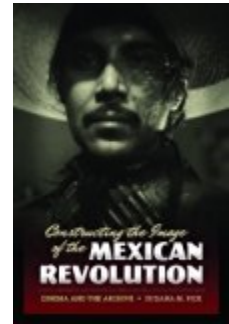


Zuzana M Pick. *Constructing the Image of the Mexican Revolution: Cinema and the Archive*. Austin: University Of Texas Press, 2011. 265 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-292-72562-1.

Reviewed by William Kelly (Morehouse College)

Published on H-Memory (April, 2012)

Commissioned by Linda Levitt



## Filming the Mexican Revolution

The Mexican Revolution was a messy event that simultaneously produced one of the more progressive constitutions of the twentieth century and one of the more successful one-party states of the twentieth century. The revolution was an exercise in nation-building, myth-making, power-grabbing, and modernization, among other things. Zuzana M. Pick's *Constructing the Image of the Mexican Revolution: Cinema and the Archive* uses film to show how memories of the revolution and its meanings have been changed, contested, and transmitted since the beginning of the violent phase (1910-17). As in other studies of the revolution, Pancho Villa has a prominent place in her analysis. For Pick, Villa is a window into the revolution as he has become symbolic of both the revolution's promise and its tragedy.

Broadly, Pick argues that images of the Mexican Revolution were deliberately transformed into nationalist icons both to reinforce a particular point of view and to demonstrate Mexican modernity. Nation and identity are contextualized and expressed through film, photographs, drawings, and other media, then tied to modernity. Pick sets the stage in the first chapter by looking at why early films were produced and how they were used. To be sure, they were propaganda, something she implicitly acknowledges. They were also expressions of modernity and changed how Mexican society saw itself. Methodologically, the first chapter establishes the pattern that will be seen throughout the study: Pick introduces the main themes and the two works she will compare; the analysis follows, in which the subjects are dis-

sected; a conclusion then sums up the chapter and points to the next. The pattern allows for consistent organization and presentation of thoughts and evidence. Additionally, it helps the reader stay on track when Pick descends into filmmaking jargon that may not be familiar to non-specialists.

Chapters 2 and 3 deal with Pancho Villa and the legends associated with him. Pick's focus on Villa gives her a jumping-off point for the rest of her analysis. In considering how the Villa myths have been examined over the years, Pick is able to present both foreign and domestic views of the revolution. It is an elegant analysis that also brings in notions of social class, state formation, and collective memory. Chapter 2 discusses two films released in 2003: *And Starring Pancho Villa as Himself* and *The Lost Reels of Pancho Villa*. Both are results of Villa's 1914 deal with the Mutual Film Company, which gave the latter permission to film various battles while Villa reaped monetary rewards. At the same time, audiences in the United States would be exposed to Villa's conception of what the revolution was about. The film that came out of the deal, *The Life of General Villa* (1914), is now lost and was, in fact, a combination of fiction and reality, something *And Starring* notes. Pick is interested in how Villa is presented because he represents the revolution, for better or worse. In the third chapter, Pick looks at two films produced in the decade after Villa's assassination that contest the Villa myth: *Viva Villa!* (1934) and *¡Vámonos con Pancho Villa!* (1935). *Viva Villa!* presents the fairly typical white legend, in which Villa is the hero.

Like *And Starring, Viva Villa!* presents him with an out-sized personality and as someone who cares deeply for his men. He is intelligent and articulate, despite his lack of formal education. He is, in short, the best of the revolutionaries. On the other hand, *Vámonos* portrays Villa as a ruthless figure, willing to let even boys die for the cause. Embracing the black legend accounts for its commercial failure, but also reinforces the idea of Villa as a revolutionary hero: the fact that the film went against popular notions demonstrates just how ingrained the idea of Villa as hero was, even a decade after his death. Pick's study hinges on the analytical notion that film helped create and reinforce revolutionary memories. In *Villa*, she has a concrete example that rises again and again in the century after the revolution's end.

The fourth chapter examines how foreigners have viewed Mexico in general and the revolution in particular. Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein attempted an ambitious project that would encompass the scope of the Mexican experience. Because it is unfinished, what emerges is a Mexico that is largely rural and folkloric. In Pick's analysis, Eisenstein subverts the view of rural passivity and breathes life into it, explaining that the countryside, like the city, was modernizing. Chapter 7 returns to the theme of foreigners in Mexico, this time as participants. The film version of U.S. author John Reed's 1914 book *Insurgent Mexico* (1971) shows Reed as both an observer and a participant. A similar analysis is made of Italian photographer Tina Modotti's experience in postrevolutionary Mexico. For Pick, the foreigners were seduced by Mexico and began to care deeply about it. This seduction reinforces the modernization trope established by the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI) and demonstrates Mexico's cosmopolitanism and the revolution's enduring appeal.

The fifth and sixth chapters deal with the golden age of Mexican cinema. Pick looks at the revolution through the lens of modernization, spectacle, and state control. The revolution is brought to the city in films that show how women lived and worked in that era. The films are melodramas that reinforce patriarchy, as well as state control. A disconnect developed between the women on screen and those who portray them because star power brought people to the cinema, and it was the stars the audience was interested in, not the characters. Pick uses the disconnect to show how ingrained interpretations of the revolution really were. That is, stars appeared in films that reinforced the revolution's core message of modernity. At the same time, the Mexican Miracle (1940-70)

reinforced state control and the state's interpretation of the revolution. Because the PRI was the party of the revolution, it wanted positive remembrances to be played in cinemas. Pick's earlier analysis of Villa should be recalled precisely because the general was such a complex character. He did not fit easily into any stereotype, which accounts for the numerous interpretations of his role. Pick argues that women deserve the same treatment. They were more than simple *soldaderas* or housewives or, in the case of one film, prostitutes (albeit with hearts of gold). Pick suggests that women be given the same agency and complexity as Villa, which can also be applied to the revolution itself.

Pick's study fits nicely into the existing revolutionary literature while bringing together a number of disparate topics united by film. She is able to look at aspects of state formation, myth-making, memory-making, women's history, and urbanization all at once. Granted, most of these are looked at briefly before Pick moves back to the main point—how the films contextualize and reimagine the revolution—but they are there. She does not make any new claims, though her analyses are nuanced and useful. Her conclusions are mostly sound, though she overreaches when she ascribes too much importance to U.S. filmmakers and photographers (p. 212). To be sure, they were an important group, but they did not establish the Mexican view of the revolution, as Pick seems to be saying.

For the most part, the study is well written. Pick does not shy away from the revolution's complexity and even, in the case of women, argues for more complexity. Women were not one-dimensional but were fully formed, something that is unseen in most films, though there are exceptions that she notes. Unfortunately, she tends to get bogged down in cinematic jargon, especially when discussing the technical aspects of the various films. There are also more than a few errors in translation, at least when it comes to book and film titles. There is no consistency in the sense that not all titles are translated to English, which will hamper readers who don't know Spanish. Another minor, but annoying, issue of translation is the rendering of "Porfiriato" as "Porfiriate" throughout the text. With all that said, Pick's text was readable and retained the reader's interest.

Pick's research is top-notch, with a good mix of primary and secondary sources from Mexico and abroad, and dealing with film and the revolution. Her most important sources are the film archives, though none of them are mentioned in the bibliography, and the

films themselves, which are mentioned individually. She brings all of her information together coherently, and each chapter follows a pattern, as mentioned above. Methodologically speaking, the pattern helps to keep everything clear in the reader's head. Historiographically, she offers avenues for future study, especially in terms of women, film, and the revolution.

In the end, Pick's study is useful and fills a gap in the

historiography. Film is an interesting vehicle for analysis because it inherently reflects modernity and modernization. Pick puts film into the larger context of the revolution, the Porfiriato, and Mexico's wrenching social changes in the first half of the twentieth century. The revolution remains a hot topic, as seen in Macario Schettino's work, among others, and memories of it are still contested. Pick's work will fit nicely with those studies.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-memory>

**Citation:** William Kelly. Review of Pick, Zuzana M, *Constructing the Image of the Mexican Revolution: Cinema and the Archive*. H-Memory, H-Net Reviews. April, 2012.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34565>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.