"Real War and No Make-Believe"

The spectacle of the Mexican Revolution on screen

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Abstract

In 1914, the Mutual Film Company signed a contract with the Mexican General Pancho Villa for the exclusive rights to his war. Under the agreement Villa was given $25,000 and a percentage of the profits in exchange for allowing Mutual cameramen to follow his southern advance on the federal forces of Victoriano Huerta. In addition to using the Mexican footage as part of their Mutual Weekly newsreel series, the film company released a feature film telling the life story of Villa himself. In all of these films, Mutual combined so-called authentic documentary footage with dramatic reenactments and even entirely fictional elements. Despite this deliberate construction of the Mexican Revolution on screen, the film's realism was its selling point. Mutual used its contract with Villa and a host of other public relations strategies to convince audiences that its films were absolutely authentic. But while reality was the pitch it was never more than a means to an end. Realism was a crucial part of Mutual's attempts to transform the Mexican Revolution into a cinematic spectacle they could sell to US audiences. By looking at these films through the intertextual web of advertisements, news reports and even fictional representations we will see how Mutual, helped by Villa himself, attempted to use stereotypes of Mexico and Mexican-ness to create the reality effect. Moreover, informed by the ideas of Guy Debord and others, we will see how reality itself was commodified and used to create the spectacle of the Mexican Revolution.
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Introduction

On January 7, 1914 The New York Times reported that the Mutual Film Company had negotiated a contract with Mexican general Pancho Villa to buy the rights to his war. For $25,000 and a percentage of the profits Villa gave Mutual exclusive rights to cover the Mexican revolution from behind his rebel lines. The deal, as it was reported by the Times, called for Villa to make his camp available to the Mutual crew, to wage attacks as much as possible in daylight and, if no good film was made of the actual events to reenact battles for the camera. Eight cameramen as well as two still photographers were rushed to Northern Mexico and arrived just in time to witness Villa’s army capture the border town of Ojinaga on January 11. They stayed with the Villistas for the next three months, shooting the army’s southern advance culminating in the dramatic and decisive battle of Torreón. In addition to releasing the footage as part of the Mutual Weekly newsreel series, Mutual conceived of a feature film that was to tell the life story of Pancho Villa himself. Promoted under the various titles of The Life of Villa, The Life of General Villa, The Tragic Early Life of General Villa and The Tragedy in the Career of General Villa, the film was released in May of 1914 as part of a double feature including extended coverage of the battle of Torreón. Using American actors as well as Villa’s own troops the film told the heavily sanitized and melodramatic story of the rebel leader’s youth, his early days as a bandit and his rise to the helm of the Constitutionalist army. While the young Villa was portrayed by Raoul Walsh, the general himself appeared in later scenes and much of the battle footage was reedited from Mutual newsreels. So-called authentic documentary footage was combined freely with dramatic reenactments and even entirely fictional elements—such as the inauguration of Villa as President of the Mexican
Republic. Despite this deliberate construction of the Mexican Revolution on screen, the film’s realism was its selling point. Mutual used its contract with Villa and a host of other public relations strategies to convince audiences that its films showed “real war and no make-believe.” But while reality was the pitch it was never more than a means to an end. Realism was a crucial part of Mutual’s attempts to transform the Mexican revolution into a cinematic spectacle they could sell to US audiences. It was not reality but the spectacle of the real that Mutual and the general himself hoped would turn Pancho Villa the bandit into Pancho Villa the movie star.

Both historians of early cinema and the Mexican revolution frequently cite the contract between Mutual and General Villa, but it is rarely elaborated as more than a curious aside. In histories of military filmmaking and the rise of the documentary, the story has been used to demonstrate the romantic exploits of intrepid cinematographers and early efforts to either document or fabricate reality on film. In accounts of US attitudes towards Mexico or histories of the Mexican revolution in general, it has been used to illustrate US fascination with the insurrection, Villa’s propaganda efforts or simply the general’s legendary egoism. But Villa’s contract with Mutual can be seen as much more than a curiosity.

Unlike American historians, Mexican writers like Margarita de Orellana and Aurelio de los Reyes have treated the Mutual deal as a significant event in the representation of Mexico and Mexicans in the United States. While de los Reyes’ book *Con Villa en México [With Villa in Mexico]* is principally a collection of primary documents and a call for further research, de Orellana, in her book *La Mirada Circular*
[The Circular Gaze], puts forth an analysis that focuses on the representation of the 'Mexican' in American news and fiction films. De Orellana notes the prominence of representations of Pancho Villa in the American media and his dual image as romantic hero and bloodthirsty bandit. Unlike some North American writers, de Orellana resists the urge to make reductive links between film images of Mexico, American public opinion and corresponding shifts in US foreign policy. Instead she argues that the “fiction films made of the Mexican Revolution are a confluence of the popular nineteenth century literature of the American South, the daily press reports of the revolution, documentary cinema and the Western.” By reading these various texts together and showing how films interacted with other genres to create meaning she draws our attention to the dangers of taking representations of the Mexican revolution out of their historical context. De Orellana argues that these images must be read in terms of what she calls the 'circular gaze': the process through which representations of the Mexican 'Other' acted as a mirror in which American audiences could see their own racial and cultural superiority.

Unfortunately, while de Orellana calls for fiction films to be read with other texts in mind, she does not apply the same depth of analysis to what she calls the documentary films of this era. Although fictional accounts of the Mexican revolution no doubt relied on news and documentary footage for their currency and credibility, we shall see that newsreels and so-called factual accounts of the revolution relied just as much on fictive strategies and categories for their effectiveness. Not only did many of these supposedly factual films use reenactment and recreation to produce the Mexican Revolution on screen, but stereotypes of Mexico and Mexican-ness that had been popularized by
fictional genres such as the Western became crucial tools in attracting and satisfying American audiences. Mutual and other companies advertised their documentary films as “real” and “authentic”, but simple adherence to the facts would never satisfy audiences. Ironically, it would not seem realistic.

To understand how fictive strategies buttress rather than detract from realism, we should turn briefly to Hayden White’s ideas on ‘The fictions of factual representation’ and Roland Barthes’ notion of ‘The reality effect’. The thrust of these ideas is that reality cannot simply be represented unproblematically but is instead an effect achieved through the essentially fictive strategies of coherence and correspondence. In purely formal terms, White argues, we cannot distinguish between literature and history.

A mere list of confirmable singular existential statements does not add up to an account of reality if there is not some coherence, logical or aesthetic, connecting them one to another. So too every fiction must pass a test of correspondence if it is to lay claim to representing an insight into or illumination of the human experience of the world.¹⁰ Film, like written discourse, is also “cognitive in its aims and mimetic in its means.”¹¹ In order to achieve the reality effect, all film, whether documentary or frankly fictional, must strive for both correspondence (that is it must look like what it is purporting to represent) and coherence (that is the events and characters must relate to one another in a way that makes sense). Seen in this way, reenactments and the invocation of stereotypes of Mexican-ness can be seen not as less real but as crucial means of adding coherence to a film’s subject matter and thereby helping to create the reality effect.

By considering the fictive nature of documentary film we are able to subject newsreels and other so-called factual accounts of the Mexican Revolution to the same kind of analysis de Orellana gave the fictional portrayals of Mexico. Like fictional
representations, realism is historically determined. As John Ellis puts it in his work *Visible Fictions*, realism is “highly dependent upon changing conceptions of what is appropriate”\(^\text{12}\) and, as we shall see, what audiences consider realistic can sometimes be hard to predict. By looking at the Mutual films of 1914 (which are themselves no longer extant) through the intertextual web of advertisements, press reports and reviews we shall attempt to uncover just what Mutual and their US audiences saw as an ‘appropriate’ representation of Mexico and its revolution. In this way, we can move away from simplistic questions of whether the footage was ‘real’ or ‘fake’ and begin to ask how and why Mutual set out to achieve the reality effect.

In answering these questions it is important to keep in mind that Mutual did not aim to reproduce the reality of the Mexican revolution on screen. Instead, Mutual wanted to create a piece of realistic entertainment that they could sell to US audiences. Far from a reproduction of reality, this was a commodification of reality, what French theoretician Guy Debord might have called ‘the spectacle of the real.’

In his seminal work *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord argues that modern capitalism has changed from a system of production into a system of representation, a system where the use-value of products has been entirely over taken by the exchange-value of commodities. This principle of commodity fetishism, first identified by Marx, “reaches its absolute fulfillment in the spectacle, where the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it, and which simultaneously impose themselves as the tangible *par excellence*.\(^\text{13}\) Ultimately, Debord sees the triumph of representation as an alienating process where workers (or producers) are transformed into spectators and reality itself becomes nothing more than an object of contemplation. Following Debord’s
theoretical assertions several historians have attempted to trace the changes he identified. Much of this scholarship has focused on the increasing commodification of everyday life and the emergence of mass media and mass audiences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.¹⁴ In her work, *Spectacular Realities*, Vanessa Schwartz suggests that, in *fin-de-siècle* Paris, reality itself was transformed into a commodity. Schwartz traces this commodification through the popularity of the sensationalist press, the emergence of wax museums, the panorama craze of the 1880s and ultimately the arrival of early cinema at the end of the century. All of these different media presented what Schwartz calls ‘spectacular realities’. She argues that, “the visual representation of reality as spectacle in late nineteenth-century Paris created a common culture and a sense of shared experiences” that were crucial to the foundation of ‘mass society’.¹⁵ But while these spectacular realities were helping to shape the ‘crowd’, they were also creating new ways of experiencing the world. Reality transformed into commodity becomes not a life to be lived but an image to be visually consumed. This is what Debord means when he states that “the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.”¹⁶ Eventually, all experience is shaped by the spectacle. Such a world makes drawing the line between reality and its opposite increasingly difficult:

One cannot abstractly contrast the spectacle to actual social activity: such a division is itself divided. The spectacle which inverts the real is in fact produced. Lived reality is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle while simultaneously absorbing the spectacular order, giving it positive cohesiveness. Objective reality is present on both sides. Every notion fixed this way has no other basis than its passage into the opposite: reality rises up within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real.¹⁷
Cryptic though Debord is, we must take his comments seriously when we consider the Mexican Revolution as it was re-presented on screen. We cannot distinguish between 'real' and 'fake' images. Instead, we must read the Mutual films as spectacles of the real; images that while not real relied on, and at the same time shaped, reality.

Commodified as an image of itself, reality must be sold to an audience and Mutual's efforts to create a spectacle that both corresponded and cohered to American notions of Mexican-ness was one way of making this sale. As we shall see Mutual used its public relations department to reinforce notions of Mexico as a savage place where violence and cruelty were everyday occurrences. By deploying these stereotypes and relying on sensationalist news reports and even fictional accounts of the Mexican Revolution, Mutual helped create the 'spectacular reality' against which the realism of its films would be judged. Ultimately the presumed violence and otherness of Mexico were themselves commodities that could be packaged and presented as part of the realism that Mutual was trying so hard to establish. Debord recognized that this self-affirming property of the spectacle was part of what made it so powerful:

[The Spectacle] is not a supplement to the real world, an additional decoration. It is the heart of the unrealism of the real society. In all its specific forms, as information or propaganda, as advertisement or direct entertainment consumption, the spectacle is the present model of socially dominant life. It is the omnipresent affirmation of the choice already made...

By looking at the ways in which Mutual attempted to package the Mexican Revolution as reality we will see this conservative impulse of the spectacle at work.

But while Mutual's films perpetuated and even relied on US stereotypes of the Mexican, it is important to recognize that the company did not act alone in its commodification of reality. Mutual's films required the active participation of Villa and
his men in order to achieve their reality effects. By posing for pictures, participating in reenactments and simply by waging battle in front of the camera the Villistas were performing for their American audience. These performances helped give shape to such cinematic ‘identities’ as the Mexican rebel, general and macho. In this sense, Villa was a full participant in his own commodification. Both parties hoped they could translate Villa’s growing celebrity in the United States into the box office appeal of a moving picture star. Debord calls the celebrity “the spectacular representation of a living human being” and states that “being a star means specializing in the seemingly lived.” With this in mind, we should view Villa the movie star as critically as all other aspects of the cinematic spectacle presented by Mutual. The films neither mask nor reveal the ‘real’ Pancho Villa. Instead Villa’s performances are one more aspect of the spectacular reality on screen.

By reading the films of the Mexican revolution as ‘spectacles of the real’ we will see that Mutual attempted to use well-established notions of Mexico and Mexican-ness to create the reality effect. Moreover, the people featured in these films cannot be seen as passive objects of the cinematic gaze. Pancho Villa and his men were fully aware of the presence of the cameras and were eager to give the movie men what they wanted. Finally the Mutual films relied heavily on other media and genres to produce their meanings. These intertextual links helped create the ‘spectacular reality’ against which The Life of General Villa would be judged. In this context, the Mutual films and the performances by the Villistas must be understood not only as part of de Orellana’s ‘circular gaze’ and its construction of the Mexican ‘Other’, but also as part of the growing dominance of the spectacular gaze. Under the spectacular gaze, reality becomes image and image subsumes
reality. The Mexican Revolution was just one more commodity in the society of the spectacle.
The Life of General Villa in context

As 1913 drew to a close a new strongman seemed to be emerging from the chaos of the Mexican Revolution. After victories in Torreón, Juárez and Chihuahua City, Pancho Villa’s Division of the North was a force to be reckoned with. Editorialists and US diplomats were beginning to see its leader, a bandit cum shrewd military strategist, as the man most able to put Mexico in some semblance of order.

The Mexico these observers described to the American public had been in an almost constant state of unrest for much of the last four years. After a year long uprising, long time dictator Porfirio Díaz was forced to resign and elections were held in October of 1911. Francisco Madero, leader of the revolt against Díaz, was elected president by an overwhelming margin, but less than a year and a half later he was assassinated in a coup led by General Victoriano Huerta. Huerta’s coup renewed the civil war and rebel armies formed under Emiliano Zapata in the South, Alvaro Obregón in the East and Villa in the North. By the spring of 1913 both Obregón and Villa had officially recognised the Governor of Coahuila, Venustiano Carranza, as the First Chief of the so-called Constitutionalist forces. As allegiances were forged and broken, the Mexican leaders were always aware of their neighbours to the north. After all, the United States had the potential to be a powerful ally or a dangerous adversary. But while the US government and public watched Mexico intently, they were reluctant to get involved.

The turmoil of events in Mexico fascinated the American public and news of developments south of the border dominated the nation’s front pages. From the outset, this interest was driven by the spectacular nature of the conflict. Mass audiences cultivated by the popular press and the nickelodeons clamoured to witness for themselves
the dramatic unfolding of the Mexican war. Naturally, there was a proliferation of films claiming to satisfy this demand, but the desire to watch the spectacle of war went beyond the cinema. Tourists and residents of border towns like El Paso flocked to the banks of the Rio Grande to watch actual fighting as it raged on the Mexican side. As Ciudad Juárez changed hands several times during the conflict, Americans gathered to watch from the riverbank or the relative safety of Hotel rooftops. On screen, through binoculars or even just in print, the details of the revolution were ideally suited to this kind of voyeurism. "The Mexican War," one American magazine joked in 1913, "looks to us as though they were trying to give an imitation of a Broadway musical comedy." Indeed, the conflict had all the intrigue and betrayal of fiction but with the bloody consequences of reality. Despite this, the US government maintained its neutrality and watched the situation from a safe distance. Even the official policy of "watchful waiting," announced by President Woodrow Wilson in August of 1913, seemed to reaffirm that America was content to remain a spectator with respect to Mexico's troubles.

Without any clear signal from Washington, American opinion was split. Many with business interests in Mexico saw Huerta as the only man strong enough to maintain order in the Republic. Those on the left tended to favour the radical land policies of Zapata and Villa, while many liberals viewed the civilian Carranza as a stabilizing force. But Villa's military successes in late 1913 changed matters. While Carranza could lay claim to the Constitutionalist cause, it was Villa who had captured the imaginations of the American media and public. Historian Clarence Clendenen sums up the situation at the beginning of 1914:

Villa's fame overshadowed that of his nominal chief, Venustiano Carranza. To the great majority of Americans, Villa had become the Mexican Revolution
personified. To the United States government his status had changed. He was no longer merely another Mexican insurgent general but a factor to be reckoned with in the determination of major policies. Moreover, by 1914, Villa also controlled much of the territory bordering the United States, giving the American press corps easy access to the general. With increased press coverage and Villa’s larger than life persona, it was only a matter of time before Villa began to attract considerable interest from the blossoming moving picture industry. If the American public had been watching the Mexican Revolution as if it were a drama, then by the start of 1914, Villa seemed to have emerged as a suitable hero.

Villa did not just wait for the film companies to come to him however. According to *The New York Times*, Villa let it be known in late 1913 that he was seeking to make a deal for the exclusive rights to film his campaign. He had good reason to think the US movie men would be interested. Since the launch of the first American newsreel by Pathé Frères in 1911 the market for such topical films had exploded. In addition to *The Pathé Weekly*, by 1914 Americans could choose to get their current events from *The Universal Weekly, The Gaumont Animated Weekly, The Mutual Weekly* or *The Hearst-Selig News Pictorial* as well as any number of smaller news agencies. With so many companies vying for the attention of the American audience, competition for the most sensationalist pictures was fierce. The fact that there was war footage to be had in a country so close to the United States made the Mexican Revolution an irresistible choice. Given Villa’s newfound notoriety it is small wonder that Mutual agreed to his terms.

With US interest in the Mexican Revolution peaking and Pancho Villa hoping to capitalize on his celebrity in the United States, the stage was set for Mutual to announce its newly inked deal with the Mexican general. But before they could do so, *The New
York Times announced it for them under the front-page headline 'VILLA TO WAR FOR
"MOVIES":

Pancho Villa, General in Command of the Constitutionalist Army in Northern
Mexico, will in future carry on his warfare against President Huerta as a full
partner in a moving-picture venture with Harry E. Aitkin [president of the Mutual
Film Company] of 130 West Fifty-seventh street, this city.

The business of Gen. Villa will be to provide moving picture thrillers in
any way that is consistent with his plans to depose and drive Huerta out of
Mexico, and the business of Mr. Aitkin will be to distribute the resulting films
throughout the peaceable sections of Mexico and the United States and Canada.22

The article went on to list some of the details of the arrangement and included comments
from Aitkin. Once the deal was made public, newspapers around the world picked up the
story, including The Evening News and The Daily Citizen of London and The Globe and
Mail in Toronto. The idea of a general selling his battles to a moving-picture company
was big news.

Reaction to the Mutual contract was mixed. On the one hand this was the apparent
fulfillment of the promise many had seen in the newsreel when it was first introduced a
few years previously. The Moving Picture World, a trade magazine for the film industry,
argued at that time that newsreels would be a huge improvement on the newspaper:

Nothing worth reporting and picturing will occur, for instance, like battles,
conferences and races, but that the camera men will be on the spot. The world will
never have the chance to doubt the authenticity of the details—the indisputable
evidence will be there. ...When war actually comes the reports will not only be
thrillingly interesting, but truthful and far more graphic than cables can chronicle
or writers dispatch.23

In keeping with this attitude, the American trade press tended to report the deal between
Villa and Mutual as a step forward in news filmmaking and as an excellent opportunity
for American audiences to witness the realities of war. Not surprisingly, news reporters were somewhat more circumspect with respect to the benefits of the new partnership. In an editorial on January 8, the *New York Times* worried that the deal introduced crass commercialism to the serious business of war.

To be a useful partner in this business, Gen. Villa will have to do more than let the camera men get what they can; he must see to it that the really interesting charges are made when the light is good and that a satisfactory part of the killing and dying is done in focus. All this might be expected to interfere with military operations conducted in theory for other purposes.

No doubt the films thus secured would command the attention and the money of multitudes, but even the most morbid seeker of horrors might be shocked, if not by the sight of the carnage, at least by the thought that it had been commercialized in this particularly cynical way.  

The *Times* reported in the same issue the rumour that Villa had chosen to delay the battle of Ojinaga in order that the cameramen could capture it on film. In the meantime, it was suggested, the Federal forces had been able to bring food and ammunition across the border from the US in order to resist his attack. The implication was clear: the conflicting interests of war and business would cost lives.

While the American press viewed the Mutual/Villa deal with a mixture of enthusiasm and alarm, across the Atlantic British newspapers took a more lighthearted view. With its tongue in its cheek, *The London Evening News* pointed out some unexpected benefits of having cameras at the front.

The Introduction of the film on the battlefield can hardly fail in any case to have a remarkable effect upon the behaviour of the troops. The soldiers will feel as individuals that the eyes of the world are upon them, and if a soldier feels tempted to run away the thought that he may be seen bolting across screen at home in the course of the next few days or weeks must surely exercise a great restraining
effect. On the other hand, his heroic deeds will be done in the limelight and fully and permanently recorded. 26

Lighthearted or not, this comment reminds us that the camera makes actors out of its subjects. Once conscious of the cinematic gaze the individual becomes an active participant in his or her own representation. It is in this way that the spectacle reshapes reality even as it purports to represent it. In the case of Mexico, the voyeuristic gaze of the American public made present by the film cameras of Mutual and others invaded the reality of the revolution — turning combatants into characters.
Performing The Tragic Early Life of General Villa

From the beginning, the Mexican Revolution was a performance. As Madero, Huerta, Carranza and Villa struggled to assert their power, to assure the support of their followers and to avoid antagonizing the United States, they all had to perform just the right amount of ruthlessness, heroism and respect for the principles of law. But the introduction of movie cameras transformed the implications of these performances. In front of the camera, the enactment of identities became the development of *dramatis personae*. So, for example, Pancho Villa became not just a revolutionary leader, but a character played at various times by both Villa himself and the American actor/director Raoul Walsh. Like the spectacle of the Mexican Revolution itself, this character was neither real nor unreal, it was the spectacular reality of Pancho Villa: Pancho Villa as image.

All of the principals of the revolution found themselves on screen at one time or another during the conflict and many had their own official cameramen, but it was Villa who first and most aggressively sought out the camera as a tool in his war. Perhaps it was because he recognized the propaganda value of film, or perhaps it was simply his ego; whatever the reason Villa appeared to relish the opportunity to represent himself to the world. Indeed, photographers working in Mexico constantly commented on Villa’s propensity for the camera. Terry Ramsaye, former editor of Mutual’s film publication *Reel Life*, summarized these attitudes a decade later, in his 1926 history of film, *A Million and One Nights*: “Villa became one of the worst of the genus described in camera vernacular as a ‘lens louse’.” Apparently (in the minds of American observers at least) performance came naturally to the general.
Natural or not, there is evidence that Villa made a conscious effort to change his image for the Mutual cameras. *The New York Times* reported that since his association with the film company Villa had found it necessary to start wearing a uniform “in order to look more military and dashing” (figure 1). Beneath a headline reading ‘Villa Unadorned and Villa Made Up for Film Pictures’, *The Times* ran two photos of the general contrasting the before and after images. A short article accompanying the photos pointed out that:

> Before the moving picture men joined the rebel army, Gen. Villa did not even take the trouble to be picturesque. A uniform was a foppery that he disdained. He made war in ragged citizen’s clothes, and a slouch hat, and did not even attempt to make a figure after the popular conception of Mexican warriors by wearing figured red bandanas, sombreros with belled rims, and fringed leather pantaloons.

Since Villa’s purpose in merging war with the moving picture business was to help fill the revolutionary purse by the income from the films, he overcame his prejudice in favor of ready-made business suits for purposes of war.²⁹ It seems that Villa made this change upon the urging of a Mutual representative, who told the general, American moviegoers would find it “strange and suspicious if they saw none of the trappings of glorious war on the man who purported to be the leader of the revolution.” In this instance, the Mutual rep seems to have decided to sacrifice correspondence to ensure the coherence of his films. Not only did the uniform cohere to what Americans expected a general to wear it also served the far more prosaic function of allowing an audience to easily identify Villa in a crowd. It is important to recognize that Villa’s previous sartorial choices were themselves part of a performance. No doubt the effect of eschewing uniforms was an attempt to differentiate himself from the pompous and privileged generals of the Federal army while stressing Villa’s common origins and
Villa Unadorned and Villa Made Up for Film Pictures.

Figure 1
Pancho Villa shown before and after his Mutual makeover.
affirming his close relationship with his men. But apparently Villa decided that, in front of the cameras at least, the impression made on the US audience was more important than his symbolic affinity with his men. The American public expected a ‘general’ not a ‘compañero’ and Villa was more than willing to play that role.

There were however some aspects of his identity that Villa was not willing to change for the movie men. Raoul Walsh, who not only played the young rebel in The Life of General Villa but also directed some of the background material for the movie, remembers how he struggled to get clear pictures of the general riding his horse:

Day after day, I would try to take shots of him coming toward the camera. We’d set up at the head of the street and he’d hit the horse with his whip and his spurs and go by at ninety miles an hour. I don’t know how many times we said ‘Despacio, despacio—slow—Señor, please!’

Walsh’s trouble was that Villa was a ‘macho’ — that is, he was performing machismo. A ‘macho’ does not ride his horse slowly. What Walsh may have seen as stubbornness was not however an unwillingness to perform, it was simply a performance of another kind. If you look carefully at photographs of a similar incident (figure 2), you can almost see a look in Villa’s eye that says: “Are you getting this? This is great stuff!” These stills, used by Mutual to promote their films, show not only the image of a proficient horseman but also the actions of a consummate performer. Villa wanted to appear on camera as a certain kind of man and no amount of coaxing from a director would compel him to drop this act. Film theoreticians like Laura Mulvey and Steve Neale have suggested that the voyeuristic gaze of the camera tends to feminize its object by emphasizing the activity of the look and the passivity of the looked-at. By looking back at the camera, Villa breaks down the “illusion of voyeuristic separation.” In so doing, he refuses to be turned into a
Figure 2
Pancho Villa shows off for the cameras. (source: reprinted from Aurelio De Los Reyes, *Con Villa En Mexico*)
passive and therefore feminized object of visual pleasure. By engaging the gaze of the audience, he asserts his own masculinity. While these performances of ‘machismo’ may have irked Walsh, they were an important part of Villa’s identity and not coincidentally an important part of what American audiences had come to expect as a (stereo)typical aspect of ‘Mexican-ness’.

Despite Walsh’s frustrations, Villa and his troops were extremely accommodating to the Mutual cameramen, more than living up to the agreement to reenact battles that were not successfully captured on film. In an account published in 1918 in Rob Wagner’s *Film Folk* an unnamed American cameraman had this to say of his experiences in the Mexican revolution:

The big battle stuff is almost impossible to get, and the best war pictures taken in Mexico have been faked. Mexican generals are more vain than actors, and are most eager to go bowling down to posterity in the movies. In order to perpetuate their heroics, they would re-ride a battle after it was over, with the dead still lying on the ground.32 While this cinematographer had not been stationed with Villa, his comments reveal the frequency and eagerness with which battles were reenacted. It was no doubt as much with contemporary public opinion in mind as it was with posterity, but all of the combatants in Mexico were willing to cater to the needs of the moving picture men if it meant projecting a more positive image on film. It was this eagerness, combined with the limitations of film technology, that led to the abundance of recreation in supposedly documentary films.

The use of reenactments, while frequent, was not admitted to by the film companies who insisted their films were absolutely authentic. It was therefore the challenge of the director in the field to make sure their films were clear and dynamic.
(which often meant reenacting dramatic scenes) while creating and maintaining the reality effect. Even with the cooperation of Villa, as Raoul Walsh's memories of his time in Mexico attest, this was not always an easy task.

[Manuel] Ortega stopped grinning when I told him I wanted the general's consent to dress some of his men in federal uniforms and stage a mock battle with their comrades. "Mierda! They will shoot me or the others will shoot them." He went away and presently I heard shouting among the soldiers who had marched in. Evidently my proposition was unpopular. Then I saw a man put down his rifle and walk reluctantly over to a dead federal and remove the bloody jacket. Under Villa's eye others followed suit; soon we were looking at hybrids, federals from head to waist and rebels from there down. The northern men refused to wear federal breeches and boots. Caps and jackets were as far as they would go. I had to caution Aussenberg [the cameraman] about his photography. The public would hardly accept government issue and bare feet. "Pan high. Just the action."

...Our main problem was not bullets. It was keeping the federals from laughing. Once they got over their reluctance to don the hated uniforms, everything became a big joke to the Sonora men. I had never heard of troops under fire grinning like apes at one another or the enemy.33

While many of Walsh's memories are themselves fabrications (Walsh recalls filming Villa's triumphant entry into Mexico City, but the director left Mexico in April, 1914. Villa did not reach the capitol until December.), this story rings true. Not only does it illustrate how Villa fulfilled his obligations to Mutual, but it also demonstrates the difficulties and ironies involved in producing cinematic realism. In order to achieve the 'reality effect', the performances that make it possible must be concealed. This is why the laughter of Villa's men is so problematic. While it is a perfectly normal response to being ordered to play-act for the camera, this laughter frustrates Walsh's attempts to recreate the reality of the Mexican revolution on film. In doing so it also forces us to interrogate
what we mean when we look for realism in our films. What is more real: the stern look of a Federal soldier or the laughter of a rebel made to dress like one?

Villa and his men were not the only characters Mutual presented to the US public. The cameramen themselves were part of a complicated publicity exercise that hinged on the image of intrepid Americans braving the dangers of a barbaric war to bring pictures back to the United States. In order to establish their identity as modern day adventurers the cameramen in México took photographs of each other filming the events. These photographs had the effect of proving that the cameramen were ‘really there’ as well as allowing the movie men to demonstrate their bravery for their American audience. One startling example of such a publicity still features the Mutual cameraman L. M. Burrud flanked by two Indian warriors wearing nothing but loin cloths (figure 3). Quite apart from the obvious constructions of the ‘primitive’ and ‘violent’ Mexican ‘savage’, this photograph constructs the cameraman as a civilized man in a barbaric country, a daring professional willing to do whatever it takes to get the shot. While this photo of Burrud is unusually explicit in its depiction of ‘savage’ Mexico, it is simply the most striking example of a whole genre of field photography looking to show the cameraman braving the wilds of a violent war (see figure 4). By playing on stereotypes of Mexican-ness, these photos affirm the cultural superiority of the photographer and his audience. This is de Orellana’s ‘circular gaze’ personified. The stark contrast of the civilized and technologically advanced cameraman in a primitive world of barbaric violence, not only helped attest to the realism of the film they produced, but it positioned the audience as comfortably above the savagery on display.
Figure 3
Mutual cameraman L. M. Burrud poses for the camera with his 'authentic' bodyguards. (source: Library of Congress, in Kevin Brownlow, *The War, the West and the Wilderness*)

Figure 4
Mutual cameraman Charles Rosher films the camp followers of General Villa. Notice the looks directed at the photographer. (source: reprinted from Kevin Brownlow, *The War, the West and the Wilderness*)
To further maintain the image of the adventurous moving picture man, the photographers wired home dramatic accounts of their exploits. These accounts were forwarded by publicity departments and mostly reprinted in the trade journals such as the *Moving Picture World*. One such account of the battle of Torreón was published in *The New York Times*. The account, printed on page three under the headline ‘THE BATTLE BY CAMERA’, detailed some of the more dramatic footage shot, as well as the various times the cameramen of Mutual had dodged bullets and narrowly escaped their death. Part of the message read:

Notify parents of [Sherman] Martin and [Frank] Thayer that both are safe. Went through hottest fighting of the war and have got the goods. Villa too anxious at times that we should get the hot stuff and we were under constant fire. Martin’s tripod smashed by shell; send him duplicate.

Conditions in Torreon indescribable. Dead everywhere unburied. Film shows nothing but actual fighting. Went four days on hardtack. No water. Been eating ever since we struck El paso.

There is no reason, necessarily, to disbelieve this account—Torreón was indeed a horrible and bloody battle—but as the *Times* pointed out in an editorial a day later, “If only these telegrams from the photographers were not such good ‘advance notices’—all printed as straight reading matter, too!—confidence in their veracity would be easier.” Not only did these cables function as unpaid advertisements they also helped perpetuate the idea of the Mutual cameramen risking their lives to record the important events of the day. This noble ideal could not help but sell tickets.

By stressing the dangers and barbarism of Mexico, the letters from the front as well as the publicity shots of Mutual cameramen played on the stereotypes of Mexican-ness already well established by fictional genres. These stereotypes of Mexican violence
along with exotic images of the macho General Villa were commodified and used to create the reality effect of the Mutual films. More importantly these public relations efforts along with sensational news reports and fictional depictions of Mexico created in the minds of the American public an idea of the Mexican Revolution; an idea born of the society of the spectacle. Reenacted or not, Mutual’s films would have to live up to this idea if they were to be considered realistic.
Watching The Tragedy in the Career of General Villa

Up until now we have focused on the making of the Mutual films of the Mexican revolution and how aspects of performance as well as the use of reenactment underlines the spectacular nature of the ‘reality’ presented by these productions. Now we shall turn to the reception of these movies upon release in the United States in an attempt to discover how they worked to create meaning for their different audiences. As we shall see, Mutual met with only limited success in marketing these reality films.

Once the films were edited and ready to be shown the Mutual Film Company put plenty of effort into their promotion. The cornerstone of their publicity campaign was the contract they had signed with Pancho Villa. Whether advertising the newsreel or the feature length *Life of General Villa*, Mutual ads invariably included a variation on the tag line, “Made under exclusive contract with General Villa.” Indeed, many of their ads in the trade press also stressed the press coverage of the deal. An ad in the *Moving Picture World* for example told potential exhibitors that “Newspapers throughout the world are printing pages of matter about this war—and the amazing contract of the Mutual Film Corporation with Gen. Villa.” After all, this free publicity was sure to draw crowds to the theatres. Ultimately these references to the deal and the media coverage of it were aimed at adding the stamp of authenticity to the film. Mutual insisted in all its ads that its films were “authentic in every detail,” (see figure 5) “pictures thrilling with nearness and the reality of actual sordid warfare.” But Mutual wasn’t the only company making these kinds of statements. It had become so *de rigueur* for film companies to make such claims that they must have begun to lose their meaning. This made the authenticating function of the contract all the more important. By pointing to their exclusive agreement
Figure 5
An ad publicizing the showing of The Life of General Villa at the Lyric Theater. Ads like this ran in The New York Times from May 5 to May 16, 1914. The Movie opened on the 10th and closed on the 23rd.
with Pancho Villa, Mutual not only identified their films with the most prominent of Mexican generals, they demonstrated that the films had been shot in a way that no other company could claim. Moreover the very fact that the deal had been reported by The New York Times and others attested to the news value of the films and therefore to their authenticity. Mutual knew all too well that it was on its realism that the film would succeed or fail.

The first mutual film to be released under the new contract with Pancho Villa was the footage taken at the attack on Ojinaga. For all the rumors that Villa had delayed the battle to allow time for the photographers to arrive, when the pictures were released they contained no actual battle footage. Instead the film focused on the ruined state of Ojinaga after the attack and the personality of General Villa himself. Despite its shortcomings the film garnered a generally favorable response from The New York Times and Moving Picture World. W. Stephen Bush, a columnist for the latter publication, lauded the film, going so far as to credit the movie with furthering the cause of peace.

In the so-called Mexican civil war there is, as these films testify most eloquently, nothing of the glory and glamour of war. The films convince us that the struggle in Mexico is down to the lowest level of human misery and sordidness: a lot of poor peons, more or less badly armed, fighting for they do not know what, and murdering each other like bands of savages. There is no scene of actual fight or murder in the films, but not much imagination is needed to piece out the rest of the story from common rumor and newspaper accounts. These films are the best possible peace arguments.  

Bush’s comments reveal the extent to which Mutual’s newsreel coverage helped bolster stereotypical views of Mexico as a sordid world filled with “poor peons” and “bands of savages”. As we have already noted, these depictions form an integral part of de
Orellana’s ‘circular gaze’ asserting American superiority through their depiction of Mexico as morally destitute and wrecked by war. Moreover, Bush’s comments reveal that the spectacle of Mexican depravity was central to notions of the realistic portrayal of the revolution.

Bush’s review was no doubt welcome to the publicity department at Mutual films, but a far more valuable endorsement came in the form of a rather bizarre incident at the film’s premiere. The audience included, among the press and other guests, Francisco Madero, father of the murdered ex-president of Mexico. Upon seeing a close up of Villa and some of his officers, according to the Times the old man jumped from his seat and exclaimed, “Raoul, my son Raoul. I did not know that he was fighting.”

Evidently the ex-president’s brother had joined with Villa in the fight against Huerta. While there is no evidence that this incident was planned in anyway by Mutual, it no doubt came as a most welcome surprise. What could attest to the film’s authenticity better than a father’s recognition of his own son?

In May of 1914, Mutual released its feature length film of Villa’s life along with extended footage of the battle of Torrécón. Seven reels in all, the majority of the film showed general Villa’s biography, with just two reels containing what were said to be ‘actual battle scenes’. While admitting that much of The Life of General Villa was staged, Mutual sensationally argued for the realism and power of its film. In one ad aimed at theater owners and film distributors Mutual claimed:

Much of this film had to be cut out because it was too realistically horrible to be publicly shown.

Some because it was obscured by the smoke and dust of battle.
Some was lost entirely by the shattering of cameras by bullets.
...It would be impossible to tell the scenes of actual battle from those posed to show the story, were they not separated and shown frankly by themselves, to avoid the smallest suspicion of misrepresentation.

Here then is a story vastly more exciting, more absorbing, more thrilling than even the most exciting of fiction, where woe and murder and intrigue weave into a tale of tragic reality—with vast educational interest beside. Every man and woman and schoolchild ought to see and, what is more to the point, WANTS to see these pictures.\(^4\)

This ad speaks to what many saw as the lucrative potential of movies to both entertain and educate. This had been the promise of the newsreel since its inception in 1911: that reality, properly commodified, could be sold to an audience who wanted and needed to buy it. Lines describing how footage was lost to “smoke and dust” or “the shattering of cameras by bullets” show how this ad works together with Mutual’s other PR strategies. When read with the photos of daring cameramen and their letters home in mind, this ad’s claims to realism are themselves authenticated. Realism, it was assumed, would make the film both more exciting and more educational. Advertisements, press reports and even other films worked together to fuel expectations for the Mutual movies. The film company had created a spectacular reality; all that remained was for theatre owners to show it to an eager audience.

With all the attention paid to establishing the authenticity of the Mutual films, it is hardly surprising that it was on the criteria of realism that the long awaited feature release was judged. If Mutual were pushing their film as ‘a tale of tragic reality’ then they would have to live up to that billing.

*The Life of General Villa* ostensibly told the story of how Villa, a lowly peon, came to be involved in the rebellion first against Díaz and then against Huerta. According
to the film it was not a political cause, but a matter of just vengeance. As Variety describes the plot:

The home of Villa is presented with his two sisters, one crippled and one good looking, though very young. Two Federal officers stop in for water, see the girls, remember them, and when the crippled daughter calls on a neighbor the officers return, one attempting to assault the younger sister, who is killed in a struggle, shot by the officer’s revolver she had grabbed from his belt to defend herself. Villa returns home, hears the facts, sees his sister die and through an Indian boy who saw the soldiers enter the house and is loyal to him, Villa invades the headquarters of the Federals, attempting to kill the two officers involved in the outrage at his home. He is imprisoned, but escapes through the Indian boy’s aid. The remainder of the five or six reels leads up to his becoming the chief of the revolutionists. The film climaxed in a final battle scene where Villa comes face to face with his sister’s attacker and kills him. Thus the victory of the rebel forces was also a personal victory for Pancho Villa. The Tragic Early Life of General Villa was essentially a melodrama telling a tale of revenge and triumph of good over evil. Regardless of its claims to realism, the film mirrored the fictive narrative structures of such popular film genres as the Western.

For the most part, the film was warmly received by the press. After a special preview screening of the film was held for war correspondents all of the New York dailies ran positive reviews. The New York World, Sun, Times and Herald all noted the realistic nature of the battle footage and reported as fact some of the scenes in the documentary reels. Indeed, the Herald went so far as to say the film “had all the realism of being in the midst of the action, only much safer.” But while the newspapermen loved it, Variety did not. Quite unlike the news journalists the Variety reviewer criticized the film harshly for its lack of realism. The review noted that much of the footage that
was supposedly real could very easily have been faked through "trick photography" or by being "cut out of film." The reviewer ended his critique by suggesting that the entire documentary portion of the film may well have been made using the fabricated scenes from the life story.

As a final conclusion, perhaps it wouldn't be a wild guess to hazard that the entire 1,000 feet of "The Battle of Torreon" was lifted out of the original "Villa" film, with the "Battle" title added for the benefit of the box office.46

What are we to make of this severely dissenting position? How could this reviewer disagree so starkly with the writers from the newspapers?

To answer these questions it is important understand who these different reviewers were and what they were looking for. In the case of the newspapers, the reporters were in fact correspondents many of whom were invited to a private screening by Mutual because of their expert knowledge of Mexico and the revolution. The Variety reviewer on the other hand, did not attend this private screening and it seems unlikely that he would have any first hand knowledge of the Mexican conflict. Instead, like the general public, he could only judge the realism of the film against the spectacular reality created by advertisements and media reports of the war. Many of the reviewer's comments seem to reveal this position. He criticized the film for not showing enough actual fighting and for the fact that those battle scenes that were included were not very impressive. Scenes, where the titles mentioned the advance of more than 6,000 cavalry, apparently showed "not over 40 horsemen" and "at no time were two opposing forces displayed, even in perspective."47 These faults, never mentioned by the newspapermen, reveal a concern with realism that is founded on the spectacular. The reviewer's position was not that one could tell that the battle scenes were faked but rather that "such little fighting as was
shown could easily have been staged.” Apparently the action was not spectacular enough to seem real.

As a writer for an entertainment magazine, it is hardly surprising that the *Variety* reviewer spent more time dealing with the dramatic account of Villa’s life than his colleagues did in the daily press. While this part of the film was admittedly staged, the entertainment publication still found it lacking in realism. According to *Variety* the film was poorly directed, and as evidence the publication offered several scenes where actors were caught looking into the camera.

A distinct titter ran through the house when Villa as he raced from his prison cell, after his unexpected liberation, stopped to consult with himself before the camera. 

...Not a soul left Villa’s home without giving the camera a glance, shrug or expressive look, stopping on the threshold.\(^48\)

As we saw earlier, the look of the actor at his audience has the effect of breaking down the transparency of film. No longer is the audience simply watching a passive object, but their gaze is met by an actor self-consciously addressing them. Whether in fiction or documentary, this address can not help but make explicit the performed nature of the medium. Given this effect, the *Variety* reviewer’s criticism becomes clear. These looks rupture the realism of the film by exposing the performances of the actors.

Despite the fact that *Variety* seems to have been in the minority with respect to the film’s realism, its reviewer’s opinion seems to have been born out by audiences. *The Life of General Villa* and *The Battle of Torreon* opened to the public on May 9, 1914 at the Lyric theatre. But despite overwhelmingly good reviews and a week of well-placed display advertisements in the *New York Times* (an unusually large amount of advertising for a film in 1914), the film had a remarkably poor showing at the box office during its
initial run in New York. On May 22, Variety reported that after just two weeks the films were “not the drawing cards the house nor the picture people (Mutual) had expected.”

After predicted profits of over $4,000 the Lyric’s owners were disappointed that gross receipts were only $2,200. A week later, Variety noted that The Life of General Villa had been replaced by the Gus Hill feature film, The Line-Up at the Police Headquarters, and that even before the film left the theatre it had been dropped from the newspaper advertising. Given the positive coverage in the New York dailies how can we explain the film’s lack of success?

There is no doubt that some of the reasons for the film’s disappointing showing at the box office were internal to it, but because the film is no longer extant, the historian has only limited opportunities to discover these shortcomings. We can and should, however, seek out intertextual linkages to understand other possible reasons for the film’s lackluster run at the Lyric theatre. Miriam Hansen points out that such linkages are especially important when thinking about early cinema:

Early films relied more overtly on cultural intertexts, such as the popular stories songs, or political cartoons on which many of them were based, whether illustrating or spoofing them. Such overt forms of intertextuality placed a much greater emphasis on the enactment of the film by the audience and on the audience’s interaction with the film, but it also meant that reception was at the mercy of factors that could be neither controlled nor standardized by means of strategies of production.

In the case of The Life of Villa we have already noted how the film relied on various media reports of the revolution to promote its authenticity, but this reliance also meant the film was at the mercy of the news cycle. As events in Mexico developed, opinions in the United States also evolved. As we shall see, when the United States decided,
belatedly, to send its troops into the Mexican conflict everything changed. Suddenly all of Mexico was the enemy.

Margarita de Orellana, in her work on the US fiction films made of the Mexican revolution, has pointed out that whenever Americans were characters in such films they were the heroes. While Mexicans could be seen as better or worse than one another in relative terms, Americans were routinely the victors.

In some cases sympathy towards the rebels was marked, granting some positive characteristics to the revolutionaries while demonizing the *federales*. ...Things changed, however, when there was conflict between Mexicans and Americans. Whenever a group of Mexicans confronted one or several Americans, the latter invariably won out. Mexicans almost automatically turned into bandits, no matter which side of the revolution they were on. Like the rebel of de Orellana’s fiction films, Villa could be portrayed as a hero only so long as the fighting remained among Mexicans. Unfortunately for Mutual *The Life of General Villa* was released just weeks after the United States sent its marines to occupy Vera Cruz, Huerta’s main port. Despite the fact that Villa (unlike Carranza and Huerta) did not denounce the occupation of Vera Cruz, in the context of US action against Mexico, he became ‘one of them’.

Given the US intervention in Mexico we must read *The Life of General Villa* in relation to a number of intertexts that reinforced the notion of a monolithic Mexican enemy. In the first weeks of May, the New York newspapers ran front page headlines such as, “MEXICANS FIRE ON OUR OUTPOSTS; CLASH AT VERA CRUZ WATER WORKS”, “MEXICANS KILL AND BURN U.S. SOLDIER” and “Mexicans Moving Closer to American Lines and Reinforcements Needed”. As these examples suggest headlines often blurred the distinction between the actions of Huerta’s federal forces and the constitutionalist
armies of either Carranza or Villa. While the articles themselves tended to clarify the
details somewhat, the homogenizing effect of the headlines would seem profound. As
well as stories detailing the barbarism of Mexicans, *The Times* ran a number of features
aimed at invoking American patriotism. In the Sunday pictorial supplement of May 3rd,
for example, the newspaper dedicated a page and a half to photos of American
servicemen and their actions in Mexico all under a celebratory headline referring to the
Stars and Stripes: "THEY FLY AT VERA CRUZ THE FLAG TRODDEN AT TAMPICO". Perhaps
the most crucial intertext for a reading of *The Life of General Villa*, however, is the
ritualized treatment of those killed in action in Mexico. On May 11, just two days after
the film opened, *The Times* published photos of the seventeen flag covered coffins of
those killed at Vera Cruz as well as a schedule for the day’s ceremonies to be held in their
honor. Among the solemnities were a cortege through the streets of New York, a funeral
oration by President Wilson himself and the singing of "Nearer, My God, to Thee" by
500 school children. If the media had made the savage violence of the Mexican
revolution into a spectacle then they were more than able to do the same for the sacrifices
made by American boys in uniform. The following day, *The Times* again published
pictures of the events and reported that as many as one million people watched the
cortege pass through the streets of the city. Given the reception of the American war
heroes, is it any surprise that the homogenized ‘Mexican’ became the ‘villain’ in the eyes
of the movie-going public?

In his book, *Pancho Villa’s Revolution by Headlines*, Mark Anderson notes but
cannot explain the apparently contradictory editorial coverage of Villa in this period. On
the one hand US newspapers lauded Villa’s support for Wilson’s action, on the other they
repeatedly condemned him for his savagery and lumped him in with Huerta and Carranza.\textsuperscript{58} In light of de Orellana's analysis, this equivocation becomes understandable. Villa may have been favored over his demonized opponents, but once set against American superiority he was nothing more than a bandit. On a diplomatic level Villa may well have been seen as an ally, but on a more visceral level, the United States was on the verge of war with Mexico and all Mexicans were the enemy. In this context, it is easy to see why any film that glorified a Mexican general would struggle with the public.

We noted earlier that in order to understand just how \textit{The Life of General Villa} was received and how it produced meaning for its audiences, we must read it in terms of its 'cultural intertexts'. With the involvement of the United States, the spectacle of Mexican violence that Mutual had hoped would draw crowds to their film, became the very thing America was fighting against. The spectacular reality of the Mexican Revolution presented by Mutual had been superceded by the new, more compelling spectacle of American soldiers sacrificing their lives in a hostile country. Mutual's efforts to transform Pancho Villa into a movie star would never be successful under these conditions. To return to the model for realism elaborated by Hayden White: the movie failed to be convincing, not because it failed the test of correspondence, but because it failed to be coherent. In the context of US intervention, a Mexican hero no longer made any sense.
Conclusion: The Outlaw’s Revenge

By 1915, the star of Pancho Villa had faded. After the dramatic success on the battlefield of 1913 and 1914, he suffered devastating defeats at Saltillo and Celaya at the hands of his former ally, Alvaro Obregón. Meanwhile the United States government officially recognized Carranza as president of Mexico. Villa was no longer a hero in the eyes of the American public; he was once again a bandit.

In 1915, Mutual rereleased The Life of General Villa under one last title; they called it The Outlaw’s Revenge. The new film was re-edited from the original and quite a bit shorter at just four reels (down from seven). It is impossible to know exactly what changes were made but the publicity material offers a clue. Gone are the formerly ubiquitous references to the “amazing contract” signed with Villa. Gone is any mention at all of the general’s involvement in the making of the film. Working with—or for—Villa was no longer something to be proud of. As one might assume from the title, Villa was an outlaw and nothing more. Perhaps most interesting of all is the fact that the ad for The Outlaw’s Revenge that ran in the Moving Picture World did not make a single claim as to the realism of its subject matter. While countless other films dealing with the Mexican Revolution continued to trumpet their authenticity, Mutual no longer made such claims. It seems they believed the spectacular reality of Villa’s life was no longer ‘appropriate’ to American notions of realism.

What of Villa himself? There is no record of how the general reacted to his film’s disappointing showing at the box office. But somehow one suspects he may not have been too surprised. There is the sense that he knew his celebrity in the United States was fleeting and that the film and the money it brought in to fund his campaign were merely
tactical. While he was eager to represent himself to an American public, he seems to have understood the compromised nature of any such representation. In perhaps the most well-known photo of the general (figure 6) we see him riding in all his glory along side his men. Taken by a Mutual photographer on the march to Torreón, it is easy to look at this picture and see nothing more than a ‘lens louse’ showing off for the camera. But if we look carefully, we see once again, Villa addressing himself to the audience, acknowledging its presence. In this address we see the disruptive gaze of the performer, the same look that troubled the Variety reviewer so much. This look, like the laughter of rebel troops forced to wear federal uniforms, ruptures the naturalism of the medium by acknowledging itself as a performance. In doing so, it calls into question the whole notion of documentary realism.

In disrupting the realism of Mutual’s film, Villa also destabilizes the stereotypes of Mexico that the movie both relies on and perpetuates. Homi Bhabha has noted that colonial discourse “employs a system of representation, a regime of truth, that is structurally similar to Realism.” Here we see that not only are their two structures similar, but that they sometimes rely on one another for their currency. Thus the same look that breaks down the illusion of reality by obviating performance, confronts the colonial power with its own stereotypical image of Mexico. By looking back, Villa refuses to be made passive by the colonial gaze; instead he asserts his agency, takes the stereotype of Mexican-ness and throws it back at the audience. With his look the fictive nature of the film is exposed and Villa emerges as not just a ‘general’ and a ‘macho’, but as a parody of ‘Mexican-ness’, as a self-conscious performer giving a wink to his audience. The ‘circular gaze’ that assured Americans of their superiority is broken.
Figure 6
The outlaw’s revenge: Villa shows off for the camera again. You can almost see him winking. Notice the Mutual stamp in the upper lefthand corner. (source: reprinted from Kevin Brownlow, *The War, the West and the Wilderness*)
We have noted that through its films of the Mexican Revolution Mutual did not aim to reproduce reality, but to create a convincing spectacle of the real: a film showing all the horror, blood and savagery American audiences had come to expect of that country. Villa’s look suggests that he understood his role in the spectacle of the real and was willing to play it to his own advantage. Through a process Mary Ann Doan has called ‘double mimesis’ Villa underlines the absurdity of his status as spectacle. By ‘respeaking’ Mexican-ness to reveal it as nothing more than a series of poses, postures and tropes, Villa turns the spectacular image of himself– Pancho Villa as character – into a critique – Pancho Villa as caricature. In enacting ‘Mexican-ness’ as a caricature, Villa implicitly questions the American stereotypes of Mexico and its people. He forces us to look with new scepticism at all images of his country and especially those that make claims to ‘authenticity’. Documentary films, news coverage, tourist brochures and even histories must all be read in terms of de Orellana’s ‘circular gaze’ and, just as importantly, they must be recognized as spectacular realities: images that are produced by and in turn help to reproduce the society of the spectacle. This is Pancho Villa’s revenge.

Notes

1 New York Times, January 7, 1914, p. 1
2 The actual text of the contract made no reference to lighting or reenactments (see Friedrich Katz, The Life and Times of Pancho Villa [Stanford University Press: Stanford CA, 1998], p. 325), but as we shall see Villa and his men were nevertheless more than willing to oblige the American film makers.
3 The New York Times speculated at the time that Villa had delayed his attack in order that the battle could be captured on film (Times, January 8, 1914, p. 2). See below.
4 Walsh also directed the gathering of much of the background material for the film, including some of the battle scenes. Walsh became famous in 1915 for his portrayal of John Wilkes Booth in Birth of a Nation and went on to be a successful actor and director in Hollywood over the next 50 years.
5 Variety, February 13, 1914, p.26
8 see Anderson, Pancho Villa's Revolution by Headlines
9 “...el cine de ficción sobre la Revolución Mexicana es una confluencia de la literatura popular del sur del Estados Unidos de siglo XIX, de la prensa cotidiana que relataba la Revolución, del cine documental y del Western.” Translated by author from Margarita de Orellana, La Mirada Circular (Cuadernos de Joaquín Mortiz: Mexico, 1991) p. 172-3
11 Ibid., p.122
13 Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983), 36 (NB: citations of this work are made using Debord’s original thesis numbering; all other citations use page numbers)
16 Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, 4
17 Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, 8
18 It seems some onlookers were even hit by stray bullets as they watched Madero and his men capture Ciudad Juárez in May of 1911. Oscar J. Martinez, Fragments of the Mexican Revolution: Personal Accounts from Across the Border (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983), p. 96
19 Variety, November 28, 1913, p. 9
20 Clarence C. Clendenen, The United States and Pancho Villa, p. 46-7
21 New York Times, January 8, p. 2
22 New York Times, January 7, 1914, p. 1
23 'THE CAMERA PRESS MAN' Moving Picture World, September 23, 1911, p. 868
24 New York Times, January 8, 1914, p. 10
25 Ibid., p. 2
27 While acknowledging these characteristics as performed it is important to recognize that they did not mask some deeper more authentic identity. As Judith Butler points out, using the example of gender, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender, identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.” In other words identity, like cinematic reality is produced. Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (Routledge: New York, 1990) p. 25
28 Terry Ramsaye, ‘Pancho Villa Fights for the Camera’ (1926) in Kevin Macdonald and Mark Cousins Imagining Reality, p. 24
29 New York Times, February 11, 1914, p. 2
30 quoted in Kevin Brownlow, The War, the West and the Wilderness, p. 102
32 quoted in Kevin Brownlow, The War, the West and the Wilderness, p. 96
34 see Moving Picture World, April 4, 1914, p. 46; May 16, 1914, p. 970; July 18, 1914
35 New York Times, April 1, p. 3
36 New York Times, April 2, p. 10
37 Variety, February 13, 1914, p. 26
38 Moving Picture World, February 7, 1914, p. 705
39 New York Times, May 11, 1914, p. 20
Moving Picture World, July 18, 1914, p. 384
New York Times, January 23, 1914, p. 2
Moving Picture World, July 18, 1914, p. 384
Variety, May 15, 1914, p. 22
New York Herald, May 5, 1914
Variety, May 15, 1914, p. 22
Ibid., p. 22
Variety, May 15, 1914, p. 22
Variety, May 22, 1914, p. 19
Variety, May 29, 1914, p. 19
"En algunos casos la simpatía hacia los rebeldes era marcada, otorgando leves características positivas a los revolucionarios y satanizando a los federales. ... Sin embargo, las cosas cambian cuando existe conflicto entre mexicanos y norteamericanos. Si un grupo de mexicanos se enfrenta a uno o varios norteamericanos, el último gana invariablemente. Los mexicanos se vuelven banditos casi automáticamente, estén del lado que estén, dentro de la revolución." Translated by author from Margarita de Orellana, La Mirada Circular, p. 166-8
New York Tribune, May 12, 1914, p. 1
New York Times, May 11, 1914, p. 2. It was quite unusual for the New York Times to run photos in its news pages, especially during the week.
Mark Anderson, Pancho Villa’s Revolution by Headlines, p. 176-187
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