

GREGORIO ROCHA:

THE LOST REELS OF PANCHO VILLA with
EDMUNDO AND FELIX PADILLA :
THE VENGEANCE OF PANCHO VILLA

MAY 3, 2010 | 8:30 PM

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California Institute of the Arts

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THE LOST REELS OF PANCHO VILLA with EDMUNDO AND FELIX PADILLA : *THE VENGEANCE OF PANCHO VILLA*

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Jack H. Skirball Series

The award-winning documentary *Los rollos perdidos de Pancho Villa* (Mexico/Canada/USA, 2003, 49 min., b/w and color), by Mexico City-based filmmaker and media archivist Gregorio Rocha, recounts his painstaking intercontinental search for one of film history's most intriguing lost works: Raoul Walsh's *The Life of General Villa*, a quasi-factual 1914 biography commissioned by the Mexican revolutionary strongman (in which Villa allowed cameramen to follow him into actual combat). While sleuthing in countless archives, vaults and institutional back rooms, Rocha uncovers a wider, decidedly conflicted legacy of how the general was depicted in the newsreels and movies of the silent film era—and locates in the process the heretofore little-known origins of border cinema. *Los rollos perdidos* screens with a newly restored 35mm print of Rocha's most remarkable discovery, Edmundo and Felix Padilla's *La venganza de Pancho Villa* (Mexico/USA, 1930–34, 50 min., b/w). Mixing found footage of the real Villa and his army with re-enactments, this anarchic collage by the father-and-son duo freely crosses the borders separating north from south and fiction from documentary.

In person: Gregorio Rocha

"Movie-history enthusiasts, among others, will be intrigued by *Lost Reels'* quest for a cinematic 'Holy Grail.'" – *Variety*

See Josep Parera's article (in Spanish)

<http://impremedia.newspaperdirect.com/epaper/showlink.aspx?bookmarkid=KMDT7GA5K6M>

ABOUT GREGORIO ROCHA

Gregorio Rocha lives and works in Mexico. Following studies at the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos, he has been a documentary filmmaker for over twenty years, developing an interest in the history and preservation of early cinema and subjects related to the U.S.-Mexico vicinity. He has been recipient of the Guggenheim, Rockefeller and MacArthur fellowships and his works in video have received international distinctions in America and Europe. He is currently working on a three part TV series on the silent filmic representations of the Mexican Revolution; looking for funds to resume work on *Muros*, a personal meditation on separation barriers across the world and preparing a multimedia project on based on Sor Juana's poem *First, I dream*.

Recent Filmography

Lights, camera, revolution! (2010)

Three part TV series (in progress).

Amateurs (2009)

Restoration and documentary ongoing project about amateur filmmaking in Mexico.

Acme & Co (2006)

Feature length docu-fiction. Super 16mm/ Digi Beta. Imcine, Mexico.

The lost reels of Pancho Villa (2003)

Documentary Video/Film. Writer, producer, director. 49 min. Color and B&W. Archivia Films/ Universidad de Guadalajara/ The Banff Centre. Mexico (2003)

Contact: archiviafilms@yahoo.com.mx

“Gregorio Rocha begins his film by inviting archival materials to an impossible dialogue. To the mute photographic and filmic subjects, he plaintively demands, ‘Who are you standing there in front of the camera? Who took your picture? Where were you? What was going through your mind?’ With this ruminative gesture, Rocha invokes a now well-circulated notion that the historical nuances of the archive are not located in the institutional documents and artifacts but can be glimpsed in the subjugated perspectives of those in the margins and in the backdrop. *The Lost Reels of Poncho Villa* is a peripatetic video journey from the perspective of a displaced Mexican national looking for the displaced relics of a Mexican icon...

Rocha departs from the anarchic impulse of Baldwin, Bruce Conner, and found-footage collagists to examine the fragility of the historical record and the interpenetration of the fictional and the actual in early cinema. We follow Rocha, the ‘amateur’ archivist traipsing around the world on planes, trains, and automobiles in search of his cinematic holy grail--the lost reels of a 1914 Mutual film entitled *The Life of General Villa*. The Mexican Revolution was one of the first historical events to be photographed by roving newsreel cinematographers...

More than a mere case study for film preservationists, *Lost Reels* is a meditation on film’s role in the field of history. The search for ‘lost reels’ unsettles so much dust in the archive that other histories come to light. While the object of the hunt is foregrounded for the audience, it is the searcher himself whose peaks and disappointments provide an archival melodrama. Rocha turns the camera on himself to reveal the hours of travel and days spent in archive screening rooms... and plays with reenactment in one apocryphal scene in which he receives a mysterious call from a nameless source steering him to the University of Texas at El Paso just before he is about to give up on his search for the missing reels...

Rocha sets out to unravel the enigma surrounding the cinematic career of General Villa. Ultimately, he finds the conversation he was looking for, not with the tragic-heroic figure of Villa but with two unknown players in the film histories of the United States and Mexico – Edmundo and Felix Padilla of El Paso, Texas. Although Rocha has set out to find the presumably defunct footage of one of history’s most charismatic figures, he ends up discovering a border history so fascinating that it merits its own full-length treatment – a ‘to be continued’ at which Rocha hints during the final words of *Lost Reels*...

After the dramatized mystery call, Rocha ends up at the University of Texas at El Paso, where he finds a cache of 35mm nitrate prints. He tracks down some surviving members of the Padilla family. With the assistance of an oral history conducted by Padilla's grand niece, Rocha fills in the gray areas surrounding the mysterious reels labeled *La Venganza de Pancho Villa* (*The Vengeance of Pancho Villa*). Rocha has stumbled upon the holdings of itinerant movie exhibitors on the U.S./Mexico border and what may be the first U.S./Mexican border film. The father and son duo of Edmundo and Felix traveled throughout El Paso and the northern Mexican state Chihuahua showing *La Venganza*. Rocha unearths detailed editing logs and journals that prove that the Padillas purchased outdated silent prints (including *The Life of General Villa*) and edited together their own revisionist version of Villa's contributions to Mexican history. They often changed the compilation reel, even adding their own reenactment of the 1923 assassination of Villa.

Rocha declares the Padilla concoction an ingenious act of "cultural resistance" that foreshadows the work of future Mexican-American and Chicano films. Similarly, Rocha has taken his cues from [film historian] Jay Leyda and the Padillas in creating his own "dreamy mixture" of chronicle, compilation film, and diary from the lost and found reels of the archive." – Rita Gonzalez, "Los Rollos perdidos de Pancho Villa / *The Lost Reels of Pancho Villa*, directed by Gregorio Rocha," *The Moving Image* 6 no1 145-8 Spr 2006 (excerpts)

Curated by Jesse Lerner with Steve Anker.

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UPCOMING FILM/VIDEO PROGRAMS

May 6–8: CalArts Film/Video Showcase

May 10: Starting to Go Bad: New Narratives by Pat O'Neill

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May 10: Starting to Go Bad: New Narratives by Pat O'Neill

May 15: Teen Animation, Photography, Puppetry and Video Screening

May 16: Ring Festival LA: Considering Wagner featuring Villa Aurora Composers-in-Residence

June 2–3: Partch: Even Wild Horses

June 4–5: Dance Camera West

June 5: CAP/Sony Pictures Media Arts Program Screening

June 13–14: Studio: Summer 2010

July 8–September 5: Chen Chieh-jen: *Empire's Borders II*

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