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### Fideicomiso Para la Cineteca Nacional: Mexico's National Film Archive

The Cineteca Nacional is Mexico's federally run film archive. Since its opening in 1974 its mission has been "rescuing, classifying, preserving, restoring, and exhibiting the most important cinematographic works from both Mexico and the world"<sup>1</sup>. The Cineteca fulfills this mandate through its two departments: "Archives" which has a collection of over 13,000 films, journals, books, and cinematographic equipment; and "Programming" which curates daily screenings in its eight theaters and touring packages of international and Mexican films. Due to its close integration inside the federal government, the manner in which the Cineteca has interpreted its mission over its 35 years swings with the cyclical reactionary-revolutionary nature of Mexican politics.

The concept of a national film archive for Mexico goes back to 1949 with the passing of a federal Film Industry Law. The goal of the law was to stabilize the then troubled Mexican film industry by bringing it firmly under government control<sup>2</sup> and greatly restricting competition of foreign films<sup>3</sup>. One tool to accomplish this was the proposal of a cineteca nacional. This unrealized at the time cineteca was to be fundamentally integrated within the government agency – the Bureau of Cinematography – charged with regulating film production in the country. All films created in Mexico would be required to donate a print to the proposed cineteca. Failure

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<sup>1</sup> "Quiénes somos," Cineteca Nacional Mexico, Cineteca Nacional, 23 Apr. 2009  
<<http://www.cinetecanacional.net/institucion/?cont=DESC&option=0>>.

<sup>2</sup> Mora, Carl J, Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1986-2004, Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2005, 76-77.

<sup>3</sup> Mora, 149.

to do so would result in the Bureau suppressing the film's theatrical release and levying a fine on the producers. With its new status as the gatekeeper that could deny access to the nation's theaters, the government gained the additional ability to censor films that might threaten its political control. Further, the law would require the nation's film labs and studios to collaborate in the creation of the proposed cineteca by donating lab work and other services. While there was a provision that a cineteca would screen films at no cost for researchers<sup>4</sup> the purpose of a cineteca in 1949 was not a lofty crusade to preserve the film heritage of Mexico. Instead the state was extending control over the nation's film industry by implicating them in the creation of an agency that would have veto power over the films they wanted to release<sup>5</sup>.

When the archive was finally created 25 years after the 1949 law, the concept of legal deposit formed the source by which it gained its collection. Though the precept existed since 1949 the absence of a body to collect and care for the films gained by legal deposit meant the law went unenforced. However, other aspects of the 1949 law – limiting viewing of the films to only five people and tying the Cineteca to government censorship – were ignored<sup>6</sup>. This allowed the Cineteca to play a positive role in Mexico's film culture as a bulwark against the rampant commercialism of the industry through screening films of artistic and cultural merit.

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<sup>4</sup> Acosta, Magdalena, "Legal Film Deposit in Mexico," *Journal of Film Preservation*, 73: (Apr. 2007): 56.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, the concept of a Cineteca Nacional as the guardian of Mexico's film culture was not enshrined into law for fifty years (and more than 20 after its creation in 1974). The 1998 revision of the Federal Law of Cinematography states that films and negatives are unique cultural items that must be conserved in their original form placing the responsibility on the Cineteca to preserve Mexico's – including foreign films that screened in the country – cinematic heritage.

<sup>6</sup> Acosta, "Legal Film Deposit," 57.

The creation of the Cineteca as a propagator of an aesthetically concerned cinema was part of President Luis Echevarría Álvarez larger goal to transform Mexican Cinema. Media was an integral tool in Echevarría's program of *apertura democrática* (democratic openness). Reversing the oppressive and reactionary policies of the previous administration, Echevarría allowed greater latitude in political discourse and relaxed government censorship. As part of the government's related 1971 "Plan for the Restructure of the Mexican Film Industry, through his brother Rodolfo whom he had installed as the head of the Bureau of Cinematography, Echevarría effectively nationalized film production. Through the remainder of Echevarría's term this was programmatically accomplished through the creation of three government run production companies, a national film school, and in 1974 a "deferred dream [was] finally realized" with the Cineteca<sup>7</sup>. Andrea Noble in her book *Mexican National Cinema* describes Echevarría's contradictory administration as both a renaissance of Mexican filmmaking and "a cynical attempt to co-opt artists, writers, intellectuals and directors, many of whom had been actively involved in the protest movements against political corruption and repression, and to contain their work within state sanctioned structures"<sup>8</sup>. Echevarría's policy towards Mexican cinema is representative of his larger social agenda: relaxing freedoms and government control over speech and protest to achieve a stronger more secure government control over industry and spheres of production.

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<sup>7</sup> Mora, 119.

<sup>8</sup> Noble, Andrea, Mexican National Cinema, Routledge: New York, 2005, 20.

Reflecting the close connection of the Cineteca to the recently nationalized film industry, its first location was in two former soundstages of the major Mexican production company, Churubusco. Bucking the statute in the 1949 law that it wouldn't be able to screen films for more than 5 people<sup>9</sup>, the Cineteca had two public theatres seating 750 and 150 respectively. It also had vaults for storing the collection, a restaurant, and – reflecting its mission to support scholars and film students – one 35mm and three 16mm private screening rooms. Indicative of the Cineteca's non-commercial educational programming bent, the archive's opening event on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 1974 was a screening of Fernando de Fuentes 1934 film *El Compadre Mendoza*<sup>10</sup>. Nationalistically tying the concept of cinema the archive was promoting to the origins of the modern Mexican state, the Cineteca chose a film about the Mexican Revolution, and not a star-studded new prestige production. The Cineteca had 1,476 movies in its collection in 1974. By 1976 the collection had grown to 2,500 films<sup>11</sup> and in 1982, when a fire completely destroyed the building, the Cineteca had amassed approximately 6000 films – over half of which were Mexican productions.

The fire occurred on March 24, 1982 during an early evening screening of Andrez Wajda's *The Promised Land*. The exact cause of the fire, precisely how many films were lost, and how many people died in the disaster are still murky. Reports on the fire in the film preservation world outside of Mexico attribute the disaster straightforwardly to a nitrate fire. Raymond Borde in his 1984 report to UNESCO on the state of international

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<sup>9</sup> Acosta, "Legal Film Deposit," 56.

<sup>10</sup> "Historia de la Cineteca Nacional," *Cineteca Nacional Mexico*, Cineteca Nacional, 23 Apr. 2009 <<http://www.cinetecanacional.net/institucion/?cont=HIST&option=6>>.

<sup>11</sup> Mora, 119.

audio-visual archives invokes “spontaneous combustion” due to “old films which had begun to decompose [being] stored in non-air conditioned rooms exposed to very high temperatures”<sup>12</sup>. Anthony Slide ascribes no cause to the Cineteca fire, but since his description of it occurs in a long list of other nitrate fires also without an obvious catalyst, the implicit culprit here is also deteriorating nitrate spontaneously igniting<sup>13</sup>.

However, inside Mexico – perhaps due to the intensity of the disaster and responsible officials attempting to deflect blame – the cause of the fire is still debated. In an example of whitewashing history, the Cineteca’s website states the vaults at the time maintained proper temperature and humidity standards<sup>14</sup> – a fact contradicted by other reports stating the vaults were not air conditioned. While the fire is described as destroying the building and the holdings, the archive’s website neglects to attribute cause or even designate it as a nitrate fire<sup>15</sup>. As late as 2004 former Cineteca director Fernando Macoltela was denying the blaze was a nitrate fire asserting that in the ruins of the building were reels of nitrate that survived the disaster<sup>16</sup>. An article in *La Jornada* magazine on the twentieth anniversary of the disaster compiles the various explanations of the cause of the fire: a grease fire on a grill in the restaurant<sup>17</sup>, an electrical short

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<sup>12</sup> Borde, Raymond, “Appendix 1: Background Document Consultations of Experts on the Development of Audio-Visual Archives,” Final Report of the Consultation of Expert on the Development of Audio-Visual Archives, UNESCO, April 1984, 31.

<sup>13</sup> Slide, Anthony, Nitrate Won’t Wait, McFarland Classics: Jefferson, NC, 1992, 15.

<sup>14</sup> “Historia de la Cineteca Nacional.”

<sup>15</sup> “Historia de la Cineteca Nacional.”

<sup>16</sup> Solís, Juan, “Lo que el fuego se llevó,” *El Universal*, 14 Jan. 2004, 23 Apr. 2009  
<[http://www2.eluniversal.com.mx/pls/impreso/noticia.html?id\\_nota=33098&tabla=cultura](http://www2.eluniversal.com.mx/pls/impreso/noticia.html?id_nota=33098&tabla=cultura)>.

<sup>17</sup> This is the explanation forwarded by Carl Mora in Mexican Cinema on page 143.

circuit, a carelessly thrown cigarette, even sabotage<sup>18</sup>. While most of the press at the time zeroed in on the electrical fire as the culprit, a government investigation could arrive at no definitive conclusion due to the total destruction of the conflagration<sup>19</sup>.

However, any official investigation is more than a little suspect as the government at the time had a vested interest in placing blame elsewhere. In a move of nepotism similar to President Echevarría's installation of his brother as the head of the Bureau of Cinematography (BC), the president at the time of the fire, José López Portillo, appointed his sister Margarita to run the Directorate of Radio, Television and Cinema – the successor organization to the BC<sup>20</sup>. Echevarría's plan to create a nationalized quality Mexican cinema had failed at the box-office and had not raised the status of Mexican cinema internationally. Portillo and his sister<sup>21</sup>, in a reactionary response to what they viewed as the elitist nature of the Echevarría years, began privatizing the film industry and placed government funds away from art films and towards a populist lowbrow cinema<sup>22</sup>. This took valuable resources away from upgrading the safety standards of the vaults at the Cineteca; especially since nitrate film was stored in areas created for acetate prints which were without fire protection<sup>23</sup>. Margarita Portillo herself stated after the fire that she had been aware of the hazard of inadequate storage calling the

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<sup>18</sup> Garfio, Erica Montañó, "Dos décadas del incendio en la Cineteca; efemérides de un crimen cultural," *La Jornada*, 23 March 2002, 23 Apr. 2009

<<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2002/03/23/06an1esp.php?printver=1>>.

<sup>19</sup> Manzanos, Rosario, "Incendio en la Cineteca, escándalo cultural del sexenio de López Portillo," *Proceso*, 19 Feb. 2004, 23, Apr. 2009

<[http://www.proceso.com.mx/noticias\\_articulo.php?articulo=21881](http://www.proceso.com.mx/noticias_articulo.php?articulo=21881)>.

<sup>20</sup> Mora, 140.

<sup>21</sup> Known as La Marcartita for her McCarthyist purges of the film industry.

<sup>22</sup> Mora, 141.

<sup>23</sup> Garfio.

Cineteca a “time bomb”<sup>24</sup> and that “for two years I had been warning of the danger”<sup>25</sup>. She stated that she had asked for 25 million pesos to fire proof the vaults, but had been rebuffed by the government<sup>26</sup> due to the economic hardships brought about by the oil crunch. Her critics lashed out saying that if the government had been able to waste 40 million pesos to produce Sergei Bondarchuk’s warmed over film on the Mexican Revolution, *Campanas Rojas*, surely it could have found the money to safeguard Mexico’s cinematic heritage<sup>27</sup>. The fire turned what was for critics of the Portillo administration’s stance towards cinema a “figurative disaster [...] into a literal one”<sup>28</sup>. Or as a journalist stated the morning after the fire, the Portillos “had already done away with our national cinema's present, and they just now finished doing away with our past”<sup>29</sup>. It behooved the Portillo administration to find a cause of the fire that removed them from hint of culpability.

That the government, and presumably the Cineteca, was aware of the dangers makes the loss of life and films that much more devastating. While the official death toll was limited to three firefighters<sup>30</sup>, other reports mention numbers such six<sup>31</sup>, seven<sup>32</sup>, or eight<sup>33</sup> with as many as twenty people missing. As the catalog was destroyed in the fire an exact tally of the missing films is just as unknown. The number of films destroyed is

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<sup>24</sup> Mraz, John, “Mexican Cinema: Of churros and charros,” *Jump Cut*, Feb. 1984, 23-24, 23 Apr. 2009 < <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC29folder/MexFilmBook.html>>.

<sup>25</sup> Mora, 143.

<sup>26</sup> Blaming the government is an interesting defense considering she was the head of a powerful government agency and her brother was the president.

<sup>27</sup> Mraz.

<sup>28</sup> Mora, 143.

<sup>29</sup> Mraz.

<sup>30</sup> Garfio.

<sup>31</sup> Mora, 143.

<sup>32</sup> Garfio.

<sup>33</sup> Manzanos.

usually given as around or over 6000 films<sup>34</sup>. Essentially it was everything in their holdings except for a few posters and the Wadja print being screened that night; this included artworks by Eisenstein and Rivera, an original print of *Un Chien Andalou*, numerous foreign films, and early hand-colored prints. While the loss to Mexican heritage was appalling, since the archive didn't hold original elements many of the Mexican films were reacquired over years, thereby somewhat diminishing the loss. As such, over time it has been the collection of rare foreign works that has been unrecoverable for the Cineteca.

To rebuild the Cineteca, Margarita Portillo created the Comité Pro-Reconstrucción de la Cineteca which brought together production companies, federal agencies and filmmakers to reconstruct the collection and raise funds for a new location<sup>35</sup>. The actual unveiling of a new location happened under the successive administration of President Miguel de la Madrid who, in the oscillating nature of Mexican political intervention in the country's film industry, worked to re-nationalize film production after Portillo's policy of privatization. Opening on January 27<sup>th</sup> 1984, the new location of the Cineteca was a former shopping mall in the Coyoacán district of Mexico City. The mall was chosen partially because it included a four-screen movie theater that the Cineteca was able to repurpose to meet its programming needs<sup>36</sup>.

In the 25 years at this location the Cineteca has split the four screens into eight, established a Documentation and Research Department (a library with over 10,000

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<sup>34</sup> Where the ever-precise Anthony Slide got his total of 6506 films (over of which were 3300 Mexican productions) on page 15 of Nitrate Won't Wait is unknown.

<sup>35</sup> Garfio.

<sup>36</sup> Mora, 154.



books and many more journals open to researchers and the public), and, in 1994, installed environmentally controlled film vaults<sup>37</sup>. Its collection of films has grown from 2,968 in 1987<sup>38</sup> to 13,461 at the end of 2006<sup>39</sup>. Additionally, the Cineteca has over 30,000 videos and 330,000 other items of cinematographic history: stills, posters, cameras and other equipment<sup>40</sup>. Its daily programming includes new independent Mexican productions, classics of international cinema, new foreign films, screenings of classic Mexican cinema, documentaries, and children's films. The Cineteca programs two yearly festivals, the Muestra Internacional de Cine and the Foro Internacional de la Cineteca. The former was started in 1977, happens in the spring, and was created to highlight the best of international cinema. The latter started in 1980, occurs in the fall, and was created to act as a balance to the Muestra by focusing more on independent, documentary and avant-garde films<sup>41</sup>. Over time the difference between the two seems to have lessened and now both reflect the mode of cinema of other international film festivals – Toronto, Cannes, Berlin, etc. These screenings attract 1500 people per day to the Cineteca's eight theatres; attendance was up 15% in 2008 over the previous year<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> "Quienes somos."

<sup>38</sup> Mora, 155.

<sup>39</sup> Acosta, Magdalena, Phone Interview, 11 Mar. 2009.

<sup>40</sup> "Acervos," Cineteca Nacional Mexico, Cineteca Nacional, 23 Apr. 2009  
<<http://www.cinetecanacional.net/institucion/?cont=ACER&option=1>>.

<sup>41</sup> "Difusión y Programación," Cineteca Nacional Mexico, Cineteca Nacional, 23 Apr. 2009  
<<http://www.cinetecanacional.net/institucion/?cont=DIFU&option=2>>.

<sup>42</sup> Badillo, Juan Manuel, "Cineteca, la mejor sala para ver cine nacional," El Economista, 17 Dec. 2008, 23 Apr. 2009.  
<<http://eleconomista.com.mx/notas-online/entretenimiento/2008/12/17/cineteca-mejor-sala-ver-cine-nacional>>.

The programming is popular enough that ticket sales provide 45% of the Cineteca's budget<sup>43</sup>.

In 1998 a law was passed declaring the Cineteca as the steward of Mexico's film heritage, specifically mentioning the archival importance of the film negative<sup>44</sup>. This is rather interesting because it inadvertently highlights the major problem with Mexico's law of deposit. The law only requires that a film print is to be donated, not a negative or other printing elements. Even worse for the state of the collection, up until 2001 when the law was refined to specify that the print must be newly struck, there were no standards on the quality of the prints donated. Unsurprisingly, film producers in a cost saving measure usually delivered show prints that, depending on the vicissitudes of theatrical runs, were at best in a less than pristine shape. Legal deposit has left the Cineteca Nacional with a collection of over 13,000 films, but with very few negatives or original elements (only in recent years and from private donations) and a majority of positive prints unacceptable for anything but on-site screening. The archive is burdened with the responsibility of preserving these prints, but lacks access to the elements they need to properly do so – all the while paying huge costs for storing the films. The 2001 ruling went some way in ameliorating the situation, but even then it didn't require the donation of negatives (a position sure to encounter resistance from producers averse to relinquishing control over their works). In addition to revealing the disadvantages of deposit laws, this composition of the collection – few printing elements, many prints in poor shape – has shifted the direction of the work done at the Cineteca away from film

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<sup>43</sup> Acosta, Interview.

<sup>44</sup> Acosta, "Legal Film Deposit," 57.

restoration and towards prioritizing the programming and publishing arms of the institution. Not that the archive shirks its role in conserving the holdings in its purview, but the lack of a lab for restoration work and few original elements leaves much of the work of creating new prints of archival Mexican films to Cineteca's sister archival institution, the Filмотeca UNAM<sup>45</sup>.

The poor state of its collection seems to be at the heart of another scandal involving the Cineteca and a misunderstood destruction of a number of its holdings. In the fall of 2000, the Cineteca – with the expressed permission of the federal agency which with it was then part of – de-accessioned an apparently large amount of film and magnetic tracks suffering from advanced vinegar syndrome. Most of the effected elements were being shipped to an outside storage, but a percentage was destroyed. Though a complicated chain of connections word got to a Canadian newspaper, *Le Devoir*, which reported that the Cineteca was secretly destroying priceless cultural heritage without mentioning the reason, vinegar syndrome, or that no original elements were removed, only duplicates<sup>46</sup>. This is a cautionary tale for other moving image archives, both in accepting items in poor shape and the risks of de-accessioning holdings.

Another difficulty the Cineteca faces is that, as a consequence of Mexico's lack of a civil service where with every new president comes a new bureaucracy, every six years it has a new director. As shown earlier, new administrations bring new directions to the

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<sup>45</sup> Acosta, Interview.

<sup>46</sup> Vértiz, Columba, "Cineteca Nacional: No Film Heritage was lost," *Processo*, 22 July 2001, 23 Apr. 2009 < [http://74.125.93.132/translate\\_c?hl=en&sl=es&u=http://www.articlearchives.com/337381-1.html&prev=/search%3Fq%3Dmagdalena%2Bacosta%2Bcineteca%2Bnacional%26hl%3Den%26client%3Dsafari%26rls%3Den-us%26sa%3DN%26start%3D30&usg=ALkJrhjNAJoOsjXTELJZXGCZeYbwbrLBqg](http://74.125.93.132/translate_c?hl=en&sl=es&u=http://www.articlearchives.com/337381-1.html&prev=/search%3Fq%3Dmagdalena%2Bacosta%2Bcineteca%2Bnacional%26hl%3Den%26client%3Dsafari%26rls%3Den-us%26sa%3DN%26start%3D30&usg=ALkJrhjNAJoOsjXTELJZXGCZeYbwbrLBqg)>.

film industry as a whole which the Cineteca must react to. More specifically to the Cineteca, a new director and the new staff members he or she brings with them means breaks in continuity, shifts in emphasis, periods of learning the ropes, etc. Obviously, all moving image archives must reflect/react to larger economic and political trends, and new directors always enact institutional transformation. The difference with the Cineteca is the regular and often drastic cycle with which this occurs and its political nature. For example, while announcing the new director of the Cineteca in December 2006, the head of the National Arts Council that controls the archive stated that Leonardo Garcia Tsao will “offer a more contemporary view of what is happening within the film world” implicitly critiquing the term of outgoing director Magdalena Acosta. While praising the administrative skills of Ms. Acosta<sup>47</sup> the dismissive tone of the quote points to the partisan mood of a transition between directors. Looking at the previous experiences of Mr. Tsao and Ms. Acosta, film critic and a production background with public television respectively, shows that the political nature of the appointment favors connections over a precise knowledge and experience in film preservation – not that either weren’t appropriate or highly skilled candidates just that there was surely a time period in which they had to educate themselves on the specifics of the field.

Examining programs that were instituted during Acosta’s directorship and either were or were not continued under the current administration of Tsao allows for a study of the effects of a regular change of leadership for the Cineteca. Under Ms. Acosta, who

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<sup>47</sup> Lemus, Gustavo Mendoza, “Avala Roberto Escamilla designación de García Tsao a frente de la Cineteca Nacional,” *El Porvenir*, 21 Dec. 2006, 23 Apr. 2009  
<[http://www.elporvenir.com.mx/notas.asp?nota\\_id=103024](http://www.elporvenir.com.mx/notas.asp?nota_id=103024)>.

served as director from 2000-2006 with the Vicente Fox presidency, the Cineteca created a comprehensive database that merged the various non-relatable departmental catalogs: excel spreadsheets, paper inventories and open source databases. The Cineteca created an on-line database of Mexican filmmakers and film magazines. Ms. Acosta collaborated closely with Filmoteca UNAM on preservation and programming projects based on a previous working relationship with the then director of UNAM. She also worked to create interest in amateur film and home movies which the archive, with its focus on the classics of narrative world cinema, had previously ignored. Ms. Acosta broke with previous directors and decided to keep on the archival staff to create a continuity of care for the collections. Mr. Tsao, serving under the current Calderón administration, followed Ms. Acosta's lead in keeping on the archival staff and the new computerized database. Since he has a less direct relationship with the new director of UNAM, the two archival institutions collaborate more infrequently than under Acosta. Also, since his focus is more on programming, especially with an international festival circuit bent, the Cineteca has de-emphasized the database of Mexican filmmakers and efforts to promote amateur films<sup>48</sup>. Of course, the Cineteca should change to reflect Mr. Tsao's direction as it likewise adapted to Ms. Acosta's influence. However, allowing the director to remain longer than six years and removing the position from the fiery world of politics would allow the Cineteca the benefit of preserving and promoting Mexico's cinematic heritage without the regular disruption of governmental transfer of power.

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<sup>48</sup> Acosta, Interview.



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