

Rescue of a cameraman: The lost images of Eustasio Montoya

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Film archeology is a practice whose theory is in the process of being defined, on the basis of its achievements and failures and the peculiar circumstances of its development in our country. Standing in its favor are the efforts (not always recognized, to be sure) of those rare specialists in this field who have faced obstacles and challenges in order to promote the work of rescuing and preserving motion pictures. In all justice we must also mention the contributions of the skilled personnel, infrastructure and technology available in Mexico.¹

For our purposes old movies are those produced between 1896, the year that cinematography arrived in Mexico, and 1931, the year when the formal beginning of "talking" pictures was marked by the appearance of the second version of the movie *Santa* (Saint), directed by Antonio Moreno.

A more detailed version of this article will appear as a Renato Rosaldo Lecture Series Monograph, Mexican-American Studies and Research Center of the University of Arizona, Tucson.

¹ Fernando del Moral González, "Arqueología cinematográfica," in the film journal *Nitrato de plata*, No. 14, Mexico City, 1993, pp. 59-60.

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Eustasio Montoya, Mexican-Texan cameraman and photographer.



The arrival of Manuel Acuña's remains at Saltillo, Coahuila, November 2, 1917.

More than 90 per cent of Mexican films from this period have been lost. This is a lamentably high figure if we consider that the nation did not produce nearly as many movies as other countries which had a powerful film industry but nevertheless suffered considerable losses. In France and the United States, 80 to 85 per cent of films from the 1895-1918 period have been lost, while the figure for 1919-1929 is approximately 75 per cent, as the French specialist Raymond Borde reports in his book *Les cinématèques*.²

The main cause of these losses was the fact that at that time cinema was not viewed as having cultural value and being a testimony to contemporary society. Shortly after cinematography was unveiled by the brothers Lumière in Paris in 1885, the Polish cameraman Boleslas Matuszewski stated, in his visionary article "A New Source of History: The Creation of a Storehouse of Historical Cinematography,"³ that movies should be conserved because of

their documentary and social value. The year was 1898 and the idea was quickly forgotten.

The oldest film salvaged in Mexico during the 1980s was *La Decena Trágica en México o Revolución Felicista* (Ten Tragic Days in Mexico or the Felicista Revolution), made in 1913. The film describes the coup d'état which overthrew the constitutional government of Francisco I. Madero, in which the nation's capital suffered the only bombardment it has undergone in the 20th century. I had the privilege of salvaging this film, succeeding in carrying through to a happy ending the work of cinematographic conservation which, in 1985, saved this invaluable historical document from destruction.⁴

I was unaware that shortly thereafter, in 1987, I would have to undertake a new project, also related with film preservation but technically much more difficult and complex. This was an interdisciplinary effort to assist in the restoration and preservation of a set of movies, photos and documents by an unknown

pioneer of documentary film-making in Mexico and the United States. This man, about whom we knew nothing at the time, was Eustasio Montoya. He had worked as a photographer and cameraman recording the history of northeast Mexico and part of south Texas, from 1914 to 1921.⁵

We found these items in a truly lamentable state that called for urgent salvaging; in addition to chemical deterioration, they had suffered the depredations of rodents and other external agents as well as the ravages of time. We were faced with almost fifty rolls of film which were almost unrecoverable because of the degree of their decomposition, approximately one hundred photographs which were partially destroyed or in the process of fading, and about fifty rather badly deteriorated documents.

The preservation project came to an end in 1988 after three and a half years of patient labor and an expenditure of 25,000 dollars. The cost would have been higher had it not been for the assistance of UNAM's Centro de Estudios sobre la Universidad (Center for University Studies—CESU/UNAM), which took on the task of restoring Eustasio Montoya's photographs and papers by means of a method developed by the experts Nicolás Gutiérrez and Roberto Montores.

When we examined these documents we found that, already in 1938, the Mexican consul in Laredo, Texas—where Montoya was living—had informed the Secretary of Foreign Relations⁶ of Montoya's efforts over the preceding year to have the Mexican government (via the

² Éditions L'Age d'Homme, Lausanne (Switzerland), 1983, pp. 22-23.

³ This article was originally published on March 25, 1898, in the Parisian newspaper *Le Figaro*. It was translated into Spanish and published by Margarita De Orellana in her book *Imágenes del pasado. El cine y la historia: una antología* (Images of the Past. Cinema and History: An Anthology). Premiá Editora, Tlahuapán (Puebla, Mexico), 1983, pp. 29-33.

⁴ Fernando del Moral González, "La Decena Trágica en México 1913. Un caso de preservación cinematográfica," in *Ala* No. 2, April-June 1987, Asociación Latinoamericana de Archivos, Mexico City, pp. 40-52.

⁵ Fernando del Moral González, "Eustasio Montoya: imágenes perdidas. Una experiencia interdisciplinaria en la preservación de documentos históricos" (lecture). II Seminario de Conservación y Restauración, Centro de Estudios sobre la Universidad, UNAM, Mexico City, 1991.

⁶ Consul Efraín G. Domínguez to the Secretary of Foreign Relations, Laredo, Texas, January 8, 1938.

Secretariat of the Interior) acquire his films—which at that time totaled 45,000 feet (ten hours of projection time at the then-current speed of 24 frames per second).

More than an offer, this was the entreaty of a man during the twilight of his life:

... I traveled through different parts of Mexico, going without many things and exposing myself to grave dangers, having twice escaped being shot. As you will understand, throughout the period of the Revolution, and at risk to my life, I filmed all of the important things that I could. What I seek is reasonable, as the price of the aforementioned negatives; that is, that I be paid the value of what I paid, as noted in this letter, and that the Government consider what might be the just value of my photographic work, taking into account the eight years I spent in order to acquire all this. For these reasons, I leave to the Government's consideration the compensation it judges to be adequate. Since for some time I have found myself in very difficult economic circumstances, and given that these films are all the capital I possess for maintaining my existence and that of my children, I wish to sell all of it for the considerations mentioned above. I am willing to accept any offer that our Government makes me and hope it will be reasonable. I am old now, and without money, and hope to receive some remuneration or consideration from the Government of Mexico.⁷

To make a long story short, Montoya spent eleven years, starting in 1933, in useless appeals to the government bureaucracy. Thirty years after his death, there appeared a Señor Servando Arael Escobedo, in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, who had struck

up an acquaintance with the photographer's son, Simón Montoya.

Escobedo was in possession of a box containing what remained of the unfortunate cameraman's materials and did his best to get the attention of functionaries from Mexico's Secretariat of Public Education (SEP). This time they did pay attention and showed an interest in the films, subsequently financing the preservation project through what was at that time the Subsecretariat of Culture.

More than fifty years had passed since Montoya's first efforts, and when his films began to be salvaged in 1987 the irreversible process of decomposition which affects old nitrocellulose-based films had almost destroyed these treasures.

Great technical efforts made it possible to salvage about 10 per cent (around 20 minutes of current projection time) of the approximately 12,000 feet that remained out of the original 45,000 feet. Nevertheless, this 10 per cent included historical images which, albeit fragmented, give us an idea of the invaluable work carried out by this pioneer of cinematography in Mexico and the United States. Thus, Eustasio Montoya's images have not

been entirely lost to the history of the 20th century.

The first thing we were able to project on the silver screen, in order to reflect part of the historical rescue operation, were segments of *La batalla de Villaldama, Nuevo León* (The Battle of Villaldama, Nuevo León [1915]), a clash which while little known was of strategic importance for the Constitutionalist faction in the Mexican Revolution, since it aimed to cut the Francisco Villa faction's rail links to the border at Laredo, Texas.

At the same time, I was carrying out documentary research on the basis of the information contained in Montoya's logs, his images, photos and papers. But this was far from sufficient. Servando Arael Escobedo reported that Montoya's son Simón was living in Laredo. I thought it would be important to interview him and record his testimony.

In addition, the scarcity of references to the Battle of Villaldama in works on the Mexican Revolution motivated me to visit this town about 27 miles north of Monterrey, Nuevo León, in search of more information, as well as to interview Señor



Film subtitle on the Battle of Villaldama, Nuevo León (1915).

⁷ Eustasio Montoya to Consul Efraín G. Domínguez, Laredo, Texas, January 5, 1938. Quoted by Domínguez in his letter to the Secretary of Foreign Relations.

Escobedo in Nuevo Laredo, in the neighboring state of Tamaulipas.

Then it occurred to me: why not use all this to make a documentary which would publicize the work of Eustasio Montoya, on the basis of the salvaging of his images, lost to us for so long, and which at the same time would stress the importance of conserving our historical cultural legacy?

The cinematographic project was expanding. My idea was well-received and there was no objection to my taking on the work of historical research, the script and direction of the movie, at the same time as coordinating the preservation project which was under my technical supervision. These efforts would be a vindication of the memory of Eustasio Montoya, whose work had never received recognition and remained a blank spot in the history of the cinema, both in Mexico and the United States. So nothing would be better than to present his contributions through the medium of film itself, using his own images to describe his life and work.

I found Simón Montoya in precarious health due to his advanced

age. His memory was not always clear, but he was firm and serene when interviewed in front of the camera. He remembered when he and his father worked together showing films as they traveled through Texas and Tamaulipas, as well as details of their work in preparing movies. He referred to a documentary film that compiled episodes of Mexico's history from 1900 to 1920, which Eustasio Montoya had allegedly made; however, the logs we found indicate that the film never went beyond the script-writing stage.

Although Escobedo became very nervous while we were filming his recollections, his view of Montoya is quite significant. His final comment on the film maker was "Justice should be done to him for his work, his courage and his merit."

In Villaldama we dusted off the municipal archives, but in the records for 1915 there is no reference to the battle that occurred there on April 27 of that year. I interviewed possible informants without results until I found exactly the one I needed: Señor Luis Pérez Pérez, 87 years old, who had been a civilian witness to the

battle. We filmed his brief, concise and lucid description of the fight for the town plaza that pitted followers of Villa against followers of Carranza on that day so many years ago. Unfortunately Pérez died shortly thereafter and was unable to see how his testimony became part of the film.

The testimony received in face-to-face interviews was crucial in providing the background to Montoya's images. The testimony of Escobedo, as custodian of the historical materials and a decisive factor in their salvaging, is presented right before a prologue explaining the importance of conserving images of this kind:

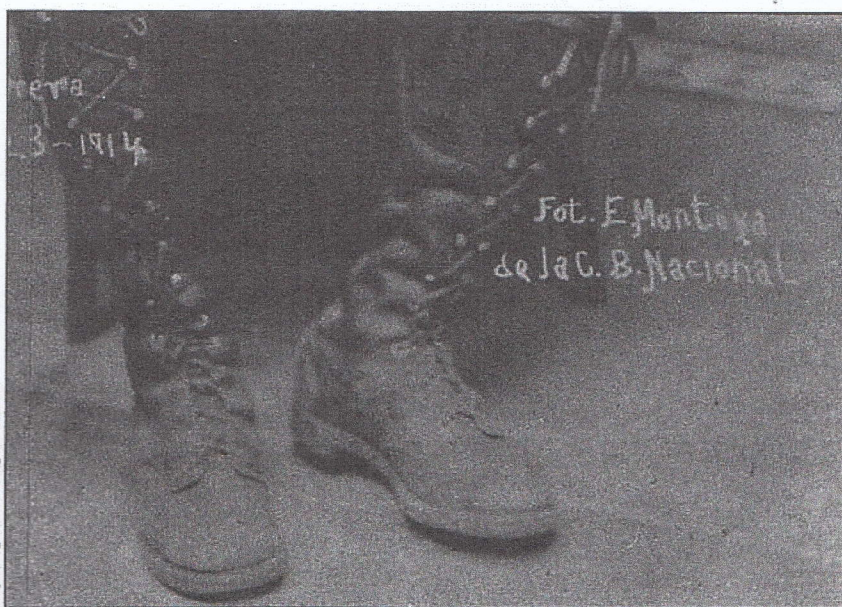
When a roll of film is destroyed, part of cinema is lost and a fragment of our history is destroyed.

When an image is not adequately conserved it deteriorates very quickly, and if it is abandoned it will almost certainly be destroyed.

The preservation of images in motion which are in danger of being lost forever is an urgent necessity as part of salvaging the cultural testimony of our contemporary era. This is possible only through the combined work of technicians and cinematographic specialists as well as experts in restoration and conservation of historical documents, joining efforts to prevent the disappearance of these materials.

The images filmed by Eustasio Montoya belong to the archeology of cinema, and have survived, like many ancient ruins, in a fragmented state, like parts of a statue which is missing the arms or the head.⁸ So while these

⁸ Shortly before writing the script for the documentary, I read a very interesting book by the cameraman Néstor Almendros (1930-1992): *Días de una cámara* (The Days of a Camera, Seix Barral, Barcelona, 1982). On page 26, in the section entitled "Some Considerations on My Profession," I found a passage which helped provide a key to Montoya's images: "I like silent movies enormously. I am fascinated by the magic of silence. I know now that those pictures were not originally completely silent. They were



Eustasio Montoya's photo credit (1914).

images have felt the imprint of time, what has remained of them helps us discover hitherto unknown testimony about social, political and cultural life, in the latent time of circumstances brought to life by film.

Simón Montoya's testimony is also key in providing an idea of his father's activities in the fields of photography and cinema as well as pointing out that he originally came from San Antonio, Texas, where he is buried.

The testimony of Luis Pérez Pérez furnished precise references on the Battle of Villaldama, which were not to be found in any of the books on the Mexican Revolution that I was able to consult. It was extraordinary to observe how Señor Pérez had retained the memory of events that occurred 72 years previously. Having been obliged to witness that bloody 27th of April, 1915, he remembered it without hesitation at the time of the interview, without the questions and answers being worked out in advance.

The documentary closes with the image of General Pablo González's victorious troops parading through one of Villaldama's main streets, followed by scenes of that same street today, while on the sound track we hear the sounds of the revolutionary cavalry's parade, like an echo of historical time.

The historical time of Eustasio Montoya's images is that of the military and political predominance of Venustiano Carranza in the Mexico of 1915-20, after Carranza's forces defeated Francisco Villa's army at Celaya. Other key events during this

always accompanied by piano or orchestra music. Still, I like the way they are now, without music and in high-contrast contratype copies. A bit like the beautiful ruins of antiquity, like the Greek statues which now consist only of remains, without arms or head, without their original varied colors. I am hypnotized by these characters who gesture, who mouth words without a single sound being heard. There is something dreamlike and strange about them that I find fascinating."



Members of the National White Cross, photo by Eustasio Montoya.

period included the last U.S. military intervention in Mexico—the so-called "punitive expedition" led by General John "Black Jack" Pershing in 1916, which did not succeed in its objective of capturing Villa as punishment for his troops' incursion at Columbus, New Mexico—as well as the Constituent Congress held in 1917.

As a free-lance documentary film maker, Eustasio Montoya thought it important to record the political, military and diplomatic events he had the opportunity to capture with his camera.

The documentary we made is structured around the testimony of Servando Arael Escobedo, Simón Montoya and Luis Pérez Pérez, together with four events which the movie reconstructs organically. In order of their appearance in the documentary, they are (using the titles of original works by Montoya): *La llegada de los restos de Manuel Acuña a Saltillo, Coahuila* (The Arrival of Manuel Acuña's Remains at Saltillo, Coahuila [1917]), *Gran desfile en Laredo, Texas* (Big Parade in Laredo, Texas [year unknown]), *Entrevista Carranza-Ferguson* (The Carranza-Ferguson Interview [1915]) and *La batalla de Villaldama, Nuevo León*

(The Battle of Villaldama, Nuevo León [1915]).

The Carranza-Ferguson interview was an important foreign policy event during Carranza's regime. While it was unfortunately impossible to recover all of Montoya's footage due to the chemical decomposition of much of the film, we were able to reconstruct the event using remaining fragments from another border meeting between Mexican and U.S. officials, and thanks to the resemblance of Nicéforo Zambrano, then governor of the state of Nuevo León, to Carranza. In fact Zambrano could have been Carranza's double, except for being a bit shorter, as seen in a photo related to the original interview which was inserted together with a photo of Ferguson.

As described in the documentary, there were other crucial events which recent historical research has helped unveil.⁹

On November 23 at the Nuevo Laredo international bridge,

⁹ See especially "Border Raiding and the Plan of San Diego," chapter 4 of Don M. Coerver and Linda B. Hall, *Texas and the Mexican Revolution: A Study in State and National Border Policy, 1910-1920*. Trinity University Press, San Antonio, Texas, 1984.

Carranza—whose government had just received de facto recognition from the United States—met with the governor of Texas, James Ferguson, for the purpose of normalizing relations in this border area, which had seen a number of armed clashes and furtive incursions originating on both sides of the Rio Grande. In 1915 the government of the state of Texas had discovered a revolutionary plan, the Plan of San Diego, which aimed at winning independence for California, Arizona and New Mexico and ultimately creating a Republic of Texas which would include the territories Mexico lost after the U.S. invasion of 1847. The Plan of San Diego was promoted by Americans of Mexican origin and apparently had some support from Mexican revolutionary groups. In the Laredo discussions, Governor Ferguson received assurances of Carranza's collaboration in watching over the border area and restoring order. Transgressors would be classed as bandits and the attempt would be made to punish them. The United States had in turn allowed pro-Carranza troops to cross U.S. territory in order to attack Villa in Sonora. In terms of maintaining stability along Mexico's northern border, the diplomatic success of the Laredo talks did not last for long. The balance was broken soon enough when Francisco Villa's forces launched their surprise attack at Columbus, New Mexico on March 9, 1916, provoking the punitive U.S. Army intervention at Chihuahua.

When discussing the documentary's structure, mention must be made of the music which flavors this "stew" of images. The composer Antonio Avitia wrote the score using a number of genres characteristic of those times: a "schottische," a march and a *corrido*, evolving progressively from expository to epic style.



Portrait of a revolutionary on horseback by Eustasio Montoya.

If films had sound during their "silent" years it was thanks to a musical structure which accompanied them, and this was an important ingredient in bringing back to life the images of Eustasio Montoya, which up until this point had never been brought to the public as part of an integrated whole. The composition of special music for this presentation reflected our desire to give recognition to Montoya's work.¹⁰

I had suggested that the movie be titled "Rescue of a Cameraman: The Lost Images of Eustasio Montoya." But officials at the SEP chose a shorter title—*Eustasio Montoya: imágenes perdidas* (Eustasio Montoya: Lost Images).

In all, 75 people, half of them skilled technicians, participated in the Montoya Project: 15 devoted to restoration and preservation, 26 to the documentary film, and 34 carrying out

functions which complemented these areas of the project's work.

The restored documentation included 49 photos. Those dated July 23 and 30, 1914, San Luis Potosí, with the credit "Phot. E. Montoya of the National C.B.," helped establish a key date which might mark the beginning of Montoya's activities documenting the Mexican Revolution.

The photographer's papers include five letters bearing dates from 1915 to 1944, a memorandum and three typewritten and handwritten lists; an untitled screenplay for a historical documentary film—the one his son Simón referred to in the interview—and an unidentified newspaper clipping, coming to a total of 56 sheets.

Once their restoration was completed, Eustasio Montoya's photos and papers were deposited in the Constituyentes Museum (Carranza House) to be cared for as a historical collection. The cinematographic materials preserved on security film, as well as the negatives of *Eustasio Montoya: imágenes perdidas*, were stored in the special warehouse for

¹⁰ The music composed by Avitia was complemented by the march "La Filomena," interpreted by the Municipal Band of Torreón, Coahuila (Disco INAH, DF-22 1978), which we used for the scenes of the "big parade" in Laredo, Texas.



Fernando del Moral (right) interviews Luis Pérez Pérez in Villaldama, Nuevo León (1988).

original negatives at the Churubusco-Azteca Studios. Both institutions, headquartered in Mexico City, are affiliated to the National Council for Culture and the Arts, which is part of SEP.

I submitted the work of salvage and preservation of works by this master of cinema to the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH). INAH awarded us the Paul Coremans Prize,¹¹ the highest distinction in the field of "salvaging, restoration, conservation and dissemination of materials"—in this case cinematographic materials of cultural importance—giving our work group as a whole a diploma and gold medal. The diploma features the name of Eustasio Montoya—the first

posthumous recognition given to the film maker. When Montoya's son Simón saw the documentary, including his own testimony, with a mixture of enthusiasm and emotion he said "It's very well told." He was given a copy of the diploma, in which his own name naturally appeared as well.

Eustasio Montoya: imágenes perdidas was shown publicly for the first time at the 16th International Cervantine Festival in the city of Guanajuato on October 21, 1988. Since then it has been shown to specialized audiences among the cinematographic community, at universities, institutions and as part of cultural programs, both in Mexico and the United States.

In the United States the appreciation of Eustasio Montoya began in 1992. The historian Antonio

Ríos-Bustamante became interested in Montoya and referred to the film maker in his work on the contributions of Latinos and people of Mexican origin to U.S. cinema during the first half of the 20th century.¹²

The first U.S. showing of *Eustasio Montoya: imágenes perdidas* in an academic framework took place on March 10, 1993, under the auspices of the Mexican-American Studies and Research Center of the University of Arizona, Tucson.

At the Second Meeting of Chicano and Mexican Film and Video Makers, held in Mexico City in May 1993, colleagues from north of the Rio Grande discovered in Eustasio Montoya—whose moving images continue to be unique today—the oldest pioneer of movies made by Mexican-Americans.

As Ríos-Bustamante has demonstrated through his historical research, Montoya's work can be compared only with that of another forerunner: Frank Padilla, a photographer and cameraman from the northern part of California. Padilla worked for the California Motion Picture Corporation from 1914 to 1920. Unfortunately, only a handful of photos have survived to document his work.

Meanwhile, *Eustasio Montoya: imágenes perdidas* crossed the Atlantic for the first time when it was shown in Spain—on its way to other countries—as part of the great Chicano Film Retrospective during the International Film Festival in San Sebastián.¹³

The lost images of Eustasio Montoya have found their place in the world.

¹¹ Named in honor of Paul Coremans, director of the Royal Institute for the Artistic Patrimony of Belgium and UNESCO representative during the 1960s. In Mexico, Coremans promoted the creation of a Latin American Center for Study and Training in the Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Materials, with the participation of INAH.

¹² Antonio Ríos-Bustamante, "Latino Participation in the Hollywood Film Industry, 1911-1945," in Chon A. Noriega (ed.), *Chicanos and Film, Representation and Resistance*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1992, pp. 18-28.

¹³ *Eustasio Montoya: imágenes perdidas* (35 mm., 27 min.) is a non-profit film whose distribution is promoted by Arqueología Cinematográfica, A.C., a Mexican cultural organization. Interested parties should write: Fernando del Moral González, Director, Apartado Postal 76-062, México, D.F., 04201, Mexico.