

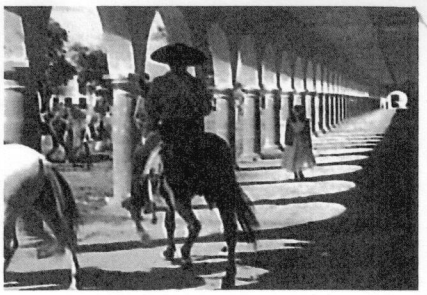


The Classical Mexican CINEMA

The Poetics of the Exceptional Golden Age Films

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filmmakers' "dangerous practice" of making films based on "themes that aren't ours."[26] He had finally directed his first film, one that was well received, but he would not rest until he discovered a way to capture *lo mexicano* on film. Fernández would direct one more film, *Soy puro mexicano* (1942), a rather odd comedy-drama about Nazi spies operating out of a hacienda thwarted by a good-hearted bandit (Pedro Armendáriz), before joining the band of collaborators and finally beginning to make films that expressed "the spirit of Mexico."

THE EDITOR

During a career that spanned four decades, Gloria Schoemann (1910–2006) was one of Mexico's most accomplished, proficient, and prolific editors. A monumental figure in Mexican cinema, she edited 221 films between 1942 and 1983. In the process, she was nominated for eleven best editing Ariels and won three; she also garnered two lifetime achievement awards: the Salvador Toscano Medal from the Cineteca Nacional (1993) and a special Golden Ariel (2004). To give a sense of Schoemann's importance in Mexican film production, it would be fair to say that the place she occupied during the Golden Age was roughly equivalent to Dede Allen's in Hollywood from the late 1950s to 2008. Just as Allen left her imprint on New Hollywood films in the second half of the twentieth century with her editing of films as varied as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), *The Breakfast Club* (1985), and *Wonder Boys* (2000), so too did Schoemann impact four decades of Mexican film, from the Golden Age to Mexico's "Nuevo Cine" (New Cinema) in the 1970s and 1980s.

Born in Mexico City, like many Mexican compatriots in the 1920s and 1930s Schoemann went to Los Angeles as a young woman to work in the movies, finding a few jobs as an extra in several productions. Returning to Mexico, she had a small role in *Hombres del mar* (*Men of the Sea*, 1938, directed by Chano Urueta), and then turned to film editing in 1942. Besides Fernández, during her long career she worked with top Golden Age directors such as Luis Buñuel, Julio Bracho, Miguel M. Delgado, Gilberto Martínez Solares, Roberto Gavaldón, Norman Foster, and Alejandro Galindo.[27]

The Mexican film production system was unlike Hollywood's in that editors were not studio employees, but independent contractors who worked film to film. At the start of her career, she edited at Films Mundiales, the production company that produced Fernández's breakthrough movies. The company was managed by Agustín J. Fink. There, projects were organized by director-teams, as she put it. "When I began at Films Mundiales," she recalled, "I was lucky to be made part of a team; well, I call it that because I always worked on the films of Julio Bracho and Emilio Fernández, all of them in general with Gabriel Figueroa as cinematographer."[28] Here is how Schoemann described the operation of Fernández's "team":

> In those days, the custom was to gather the cinematographer, the screenwriter, the director, and the editor for a script reading; we would then begin to comment on the continuity, the dialogue, and so forth. From the beginning we visualized what was necessary; in addition, the editor had the obligation to indicate which things

> [scenes, sequences] didn't add to the whole . . . or would slow down the film's rhythm.[29]

Though Fernández was known to be volatile and temperamental, Schoemann found him extremely easy to work with. "'Indio' heard all the comments," she recalled, and "was very accessible, a joy to work with." Most importantly, a healthy creative atmosphere was fostered in which "everyone respected each individual's specific talent."[30] Magdaleno also noted the unit's upbeat esprit de corps, and credited the amicable and respectful working environment to Fink. "He was a very cultured man," Magdaleno said, "a true creator of film who knew how to treat a team and keep them united."[31]

To get a fuller appreciation of the job Schoemann did, it is important to keep in mind key differences between Mexican filmmaking and the Hollywood and European systems. To begin with, as Schoemann told one interviewer, there was the fairly low standing of editors in Mexico. "In the U.S. and Europe, editors have professional status and are highly respected." In those systems, moreover, "the editor is often present during the shooting, and if she asks for an extra scene or a close-up . . . it is done." In Mexican filmmaking, the editor worked at her editing bench and never visited the set. If a Hollywood editor realized she needed extra shots during the editing process, retakes were routinely scheduled. In Mexico, on the other hand, "retakes or additional scenes never happen, so the editor has to figure out how to solve problems the best she can."[32] This put a lot of pressure on the other members of the unit: Fernández and Magdaleno must have had to write as complete, polished, and precise a script as possible, and Fernández and Figueroa had to be sure to shoot all the necessary coverage during the filming. As the final link in the creative chain, Schoemann had to assemble a coherent film with whatever footage was delivered to her, whether or not there were missing shots, omitted patches of exposition, breaks in continuity, or holes in the story's logic. Regrettably, because all we see is the final film, we will never know just how creative Schoemann's editing truly was.

THE SCREENWRITER

Mauricio Magdaleno's (1906–86) resumé is as impressive as Schoemann's. From 1933 to 1962, he wrote or cowrote fifty-five produced scripts, working alongside many major directors of the Golden Age cinema. As a young man in Mexico City, he was active in theater companies, wrote plays, and worked as a newspaper reporter. He broke into the movie business with his original story for de Fuentes's *El compadre Mendoza* in 1933, for which he was paid 65 pesos.[33] His next produced script was his first for Fernández—an adaptation of Fernando Robles's novel, *Sucedio ayer* (*It Happened Yesterday*), for the director's breakthrough film, *Flor silvestre*. In between those first two film projects, the prolific Magdaleno was busy writing plays, novels (*El resplandor*, which some consider his best novel, was published in 1937),[34] teaching literature courses, and producing radio programs for the Ministry of Education.

My best guess about Magdaleno's creative role is that he contributed to scripting Fernández's films the way Alfred Hitchcock's screenwriters did for him, that is, by sculpting a narrative out of a catalogue of favorite set pieces that the director had in mind. ("I