

John Reed in Mexico

Education of a journalist

INSURGENT MEXICO, by John Reed, International Publishers, New York, 1969; originally pub. 1914; 326 pp. Paper. \$2.95.

REED: INSURGENT MEXICO, a New Yorker Films release. Directed by Paul Leduc. Screenplay by Juan Tovar and Paul Leduc. Produced and filmed in Mexico. Time: 110 minutes. U.S. premier, Regency Theater.

New Yorker Films, 43 West 61 St., N.Y. 10023, plans to show the film in Spanish-speaking areas and in other U.S. cities. A public demand for the film might ensure its showing in your area.

By TOM FOLEY

John Reed at age 26 went to Mexico in 1913 as a journalist covering the Mexican revolution for Metropolitan Magazine and the old New York World newspaper. Out of those experiences came his 1914 book, "Insurgent Mexico."

Paul Leduc's film is a remarkably successful attempt to hew as closely as possible to the book, even using as dialogue the exact words Reed wrote.

Leduc uses a sepia-tone film which produces an effect like seeing everything as it might have appeared in the rotogravure photo section of some 1913 newspaper. Claudio Obregon, who plays Reed, bears a close physical resemblance to him. The scenes are authentic in every detail.

If Hollywood had done this film in the bad old days, it would have been in glorious Technicolor, with Ronald Reagan playing Reed and Leo Carillo as a stupid but lovable Pancho Villa always asking Reagan's advice on how to run the revolution. There would have been frightful scenes of carnage, underlining a favorite U.S. film-maker's point about how revolutions never solve anything, and we would have seen at the end, when Reagan married the beautiful feudal landowner's daughter (Maureen O'Sullivan), how the whole revolution was simply a tragic misunderstanding. Like our Civil War...

This film is not that kind of reactionary vomit, thank God. And it is easy to see why it won the 1972 Grand Prix for the best foreign film shown in France.

As I sat watching it, I had the unnerving experience of actually smelling the alkaline dust of northern Mexico's desert plains kicked up by Villa's cavalry. It was a hallucination, of course, a "memory" of that ever-present dusty smell, but the fact that this film's authenticity brought it to mind after a 20-year lapse shows something about it.

The film is so authentic, in fact, that some people raised on Technicolor Westerns may find it impossible to understand.

Hollywood films have tightly-organized, logical plots, whose development is so inevitable it can often be foreseen. Leduc's film is not logical or organized in this way at all. It is, first of all, a reproduction of what Reed wrote. And Reed wrote about the Mexican revolution as he saw it in 1913; it was not logical or tightly-organized. This is what we see, and this is what may disconcert some U.S. viewers.

Leduc's film shows many truths that could not be shown in any other way. We see the terrible injustices and oppression people are fighting to end. We see this because we see the people themselves: uneducated, hungry, with their immense dignity and their bare feet, their eyes burning with desperate hope while they themselves are deliberately nonchalant or reserved. We see that the common people are utterly, unmistakably clear on what they are fighting the revolution for—land—but that often their leaders are not. And in the process we arrive at a clearer understanding of why it is said that the masses are the real makers of history, and why revolutions often follow zig-zag courses of development. This is what John Reed saw. This is what he put in his book. This is what is in the film.

Many commentators have pointed out that Reed went to Mexico still retaining some romantic notions about what revolutions were. The experience of the Mexican revolution opened his eyes and sharpened his vision, preparing him for the political maturity he gained through witnessing the Bolshevik Revolution in Petrograd in 1917, which he immortalized in *Ten Days That Shook the World*.

There is one scene in the film not in Reed's book. It is artistically necessary, however, and is quite believable. In it, Reed is drinking tequila with his friend, Capt. Longino, and both are getting very drunk indeed.

Reed explains why he came to Mexico in the first place, hoping to overcome an—imaginary—streak of personal cowardice by active participation in events. But journalists are non-combatants. Longino tells him that in risking his life just to tell the truth about the revolution, to raise the political understanding of thousands of others, in the U.S., he is really fighting for the revolution even though he carries no



Top: Guerilla action Bottom: Claude Obregon as John Reed

gun. Reed is not convinced, but we see him painfully trying to grapple with the idea. Lenin raised this question, and answered it, when he wrote about "partisanship" in philosophy.

Leduc tries to show us here why Reed became the magnificent partisan of revolution we know him as today.

The film leaves Reed just after Villa's troops have taken the town of Gomez Palacio on the approaches to Torreon. Capt. Longino is dead, but the revolution is winning. And a narrator tells us that Reed went on to cover the October Revolution in Petrograd, to learn from Lenin and the Bolsheviks, to return to the U.S. to found the Communist Labor Party (which soon merged with the new Communist Party U.S.A.), and to die of typhus in Moscow in 1920 and to be interred as a hero of the revolution in the Kremlin Wall.

It is worth noting that when International Publishers in 1969 issued its

edition of Reed's 1914 book on Mexico, it contained a preface by Renato Leduc, described as well-known Mexican journalist who in 1913 served as a telegrapher with Villa's Northern Division. There he met Reed, whom he knew only as "Juanito."

I do not know the relationship between Renato Leduc and Paul Leduc, but the name Leduc is not common in Mexico. I suspect this is why the film sticks so closely to the book and is so accurate in detail. I think it is a reason why Leduc may know some things about Reed that Reed did not bother to set down in his book.

There is a chapter in the book called "Elizabetta," which Leduc shows in a different and convincing way. Although some Reed fans may be outraged by it, I think Leduc knows what he is presenting. He should have got the Grand Prix for this alone.



John Reed 1887-1920

TV ~~From tedium to torture—the making of a sportswatcher~~

"You see one game, you've seen them all," said Judith, my wife, when I suggested we take a look Saturday night at the ice hockey game between the Soviet Union and Team Canada.

And so I retired to the portable set, where I saw the Soviets trim the Canadians in the third game of their series, making the total score so far one draw and one victory each.

Generally I too, like Judith, fail to see much variety in sports on the TV screen. If it wasn't for Mike Jay's infectious enthusiasm over the opener in this hockey series, I would have let the Saturday afternoon go by, particularly since ice hockey is more difficult to follow than a 17th century organ fugue. The

skaters' feet are fleetier than the commentators' tongues, and the puck is faster than thought, at least than my thought.

Fortunately, the scoreboard kept up with the proceedings, and ups and downs alternated so closely as to rivet my attention throughout.

Which is more than I can say for the new situation comedies and murders crowding into my TV screen.

Adults as well as kids need protection from the fist fights, shooting and car pursuits that clog the screen and bore the brain.

Even a family comedy like the NBC Walt Disney affair last Sunday night wound up in a tedious car chase after

a bright beginning about a duck that lays golden eggs.

Tedium turned to torture that Sunday night when we turned to "Thunderball" on ABC and saw James Bond (Sean Connery) knock down young men like ninepins as he wrecked whatever story the script writer had in mind.

No wonder millions turn to sportswatching. The action there is equally fast but it isn't so bewildering. Uniforms tell us which side is which, and at the end we know the score.

This wasn't true of "Thunderball." All the young men, heroes and villains, looked like James Bond, and we never knew whether the laurels went to vice or to virtue.