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From the Battlefield to the Box Office: Pancho Villa’s Manipulation of His Own Image in Cinema and the Press

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Few participants had as massive an impact on the course of the Mexican Revolution as Chihuahuan general Francisco “Pancho” Villa. In spite of his forces’ fierce guerrilla fighting style and the brutality with which he often struck, from the very outset of the revolutionary period Villa was perhaps the most media-ready figure embroiled in the military and political chaos. Though his physical war was fought (almost) entirely on Mexican soil, Villa saw a different approach to attaining a place in the most influential echelons of Mexican politics and government: wooing observers, civilian and governmental, in Mexico’s neighbor to the north.

During and after the revolutionary period, Villa became one of the most recognizable public faces amid the many assorted political and military factions battling for power in the Federal District and beyond. Though his assassination in 1923 snuffed out his political career relatively early in the revolution, the man born Doroteo Arango had plenty of time to make a large splash in the course of the political turmoil, in the eyes of both domestic audiences and audiences in the United States.

One of the primary methods by which Villa tried to rise to such prominence was by carefully taking advantage of the burgeoning mass media—not just print news, but also the growing cinema industry. For much of the last decade of his life, Villa sought, with varying degrees of success, to saturate U.S. news and entertainment media with his image in an attempt to sway international public opinion in his own favor. Much of his notoriety among U.S. media outlets stemmed from his ready availability as an avatar of the fighting going on in Mexico. However, as scholars Margarita de Orellana, Zuzana Pick, Friedrich Katz, and Mark Cronlund Anderson point out, Villa played perhaps the largest role in the cultivation of his own image, primarily for audiences in the United States. By and large, his manipulation worked, and convinced U.S. audiences of his status as a brave revolutionary figure, living a romanticized life of banditry and fighting for the people—until his attack on the border town of Columbus, New Mexico, which turned U.S. audiences squarely against him. Domestically, meanwhile, the often cutthroat methods Villa used to win regional power at least slightly blemished his
reputation. Mexican cinema - particularly 1936’s *Let’s Go with Pancho Villa*, which offered a more nuanced and, at times, even less favorable view of Villa’s time on the battlefield than even other Mexican films on the revolutionary—struggled in a somewhat more balanced manner with his experiences and actions than did U.S. filmmakers.

A massive, multi-decade series of conflicts and intra-government struggles, the Mexican Revolution began in earnest in 1910, following three decades of unopposed rule by President Porfirio Díaz. Challenged in the general election by Francisco I. Madero—an eccentric member of one of Mexico’s wealthiest landowning families—Díaz handily won re-election, thanks to massive electoral fraud. Madero promptly issued the Plan of San Luis Potosí, calling for the forcible overthrow of Díaz; the following May, Díaz resigned and fled to France to live in exile. A string of vicious coups followed: Madero was overthrown and killed by army general Victoriano Huerta just two years later in a counterrevolution, followed by Huerta’s own deposition the following year. Villa, alongside General Venustiano Carranza, took part in Huerta’s defeat, besting Huertista forces (those loyal to Huerta) on the battlefield.

To be certain, to have any sort of foothold in revolutionary politics in Mexico, one had to be ready, willing, and able to accrue as much attention and sympathy from the public as possible. Villa certainly had the drive and charisma to earn the attention of domestic observers, and likely would have even garnered some attention from international (particularly U.S.) observers and media as well, simply because of his very involvement in the conflict. What, though, drove Villa to pursue even more massive amounts of attention through such then-untested means as film? The answer seems to be split between the attainment of his own dreams and the prevention of others’ plans from coming to fruition—particularly those of Carranza, his primary political and military competitor, who came from a far more privileged background.

Villa’s own desires for what he viewed as an ideal Mexican society certainly played no small part in compelling him to make a name for himself in politics. In an ultimately unpublished memoir believed to have been penned in 1913, Villa described his dream for a perfect life for the Mexican nation:

> And I see that orderly grouping of little houses in which soldiers/farmers live: clean and white, smiling and hygienic, the true homes for which one really fights with courage and for whose
I see these luxurious fruit orchards, these abundant vegetable gardens, these sown fields, these corn fields, these alfalfa fields which not only a large landowner harvests and accrues benefits from but rather an entire family cultivates and gathers, cares for, and harvests...

Oh, if life will only permit me to live long enough to see this dream realized! ...The true army of the people, which I loved so much, dispersed throughout the entire land, plowing the soil, making it respectable and respected! Fifteen years! Twenty years, perhaps! And the sons of my soldiers, who will bring this ideal to fruition will know with what tenderness I caressed this dream of my soul. And they will not suffer, they will not have the threat of suffering, which I endured in the fullest years of my life, which formed my youth and my entire maturity. (Villa, from Wasserman 40)

Villa did not necessarily envision a life of particular luxury for the peasantry and working class of Mexico, but rather at least hoped they would have a fair chance to benefit from their own agricultural handiwork. At the time, much of Mexico’s rural working class survived by performing backbreaking labor for hacendados, or wealthy landowners, in a near-feudal system that left peasants with no economic or political power. Taking on the Huerta government—which was in favor of maintaining that very status quo—was key to ensuring Villa’s vision would become reality.

In later years, however, Villa was driven not just by his own vision for Mexico’s future, but also by his personal disagreements with some of his contemporaries. Chief among those with whom he feuded in the mid-1910s was General Carranza. Though the pair were tenuously aligned with each other at first, by the early 1910s, as Carranza began attempting to win the loyalty of Villista troops (those loyal to Villa) themselves (including Generals Manuel Chao, Carranza’s onetime nominee for governor of Chihuahua, and Maclovio Herrera) (Katz 297), Villa’s patience with Carranza all but ran out. For much of the decade, Villa allegedly either watched with glee or actively lent a hand as press outlets across the U.S. smeared Carranza as a physically violent, ideologically weak, wannabe dictator. Carrancista forces (those loyal to Carranza) quickly aimed the blame at Villa and his propaganda machine, both in Mexico and the United States: “[a]s early as January 1914, allegations surfaced in the Carranza camp that
Villista agents in the United States actively sought to discredit the First Chief [Carranza] and promote Villa” (Anderson 91-92). As the feud between Villa and Carranza grew, so did the need (and, with the progression of the revolution, the opportunity) for Villa to promote himself in the mass media. While Villista forces and their allies established and operated plenty of propaganda publications based on both sides of the border, equally important was Villa’s (at least attempted) manipulation of existing mass media infrastructure, particularly cinema.

In the 1910s, the U.S. press and the film industry were just beginning to expand rapidly, and conglomerates were searching for any opportunity that they could find to impress viewers, eager to capitalize on the medium’s new capability for capturing action, intrigue, and the heat of battle in ways previously only imaginable. The Mexican Revolution proved to be the perfect opportunity for a number of media outlets, both those affiliated with the press and those simply seeking to entertain more casual viewers, to establish themselves; as such, “Villa understood not only the importance of favorable coverage by newspapers for his movement but also the impact that an entirely new medium, the movies, was beginning to have on U.S. public opinion” (Katz 324).

From the earliest days of his campaign against then-President Huerta, Villa welcomed (largely U.S.-based) press contingents along with him on his travels to cover the battles he fought and the platform he promoted: “Among them were reporters from the El Paso Times, from Associated Press; photographers like Robert Dorman; and the cameramen from the Mutual Film Corporation” (de Orellana 36). Villa, knowing earning the attention of viewers in the United States would go a long way toward winning the greater battle for influence in the revolution, strove from the beginning to make himself “the most filmed leader of the Mexican Revolution” (de Orellana 36).

Before correspondents and cameramen could even set up their equipment or put pen to paper, they were presented with decidedly plush accommodations, courtesy of Villa and his forces. “Villa’s men had furnished their railway carriage. There were bunks, a kitchen, a stove and a large table where they ate and wrote. They also had a Chinese cook called Wong” (de Orellana 37). Being treated to the good life while on the job gave many U.S. press correspondents incentive to report quite favorably on Villa’s doings, particularly one of Villa’s closest press confidants, John Reed. After following Villa on his 1913 campaign against Victoriano Huerta, Reed compiled his previously
serialized reporting on the campaign into *Insurgent Mexico*, a volume released the following year.

Throughout *Insurgent Mexico*, Reed portrayed Villa as a thoughtful, well-prepared general, who cared about his soldiers and their well-being while simultaneously maintaining a ruthless edge in combat. He credited Villista forces with maintaining “the only field hospital of any effectiveness that any Mexican army has ever carried”; he declared that “[t]he common soldiers adore [Villa] for his bravery and his coarse, blunt humor”; he even took care to note Villa’s near-mockery of Hague Convention rules of warfare, quoting Villa as asking, “What is the difference between civilized war and any other kind of war?” (Reed, from Wasserman 52-53). This sort of overtly positive characterization of Villa, encouraged by the benefits correspondents received while covering his campaigns, was an important tool in Villa’s public relations arsenal.

Beyond print news, however, Villa took the opportunity to obtain some screen time with audiences in the United States as well. He struck a deal with the Mutual Film Corporation, a now-defunct Los Angeles-based film production company best known for some of Charlie Chaplin’s most well-known films. Before the Little Tramp won even a second on the screen, however, Mutual spent much of the mid-1910s capturing Pancho Villa’s travels. Indeed, notes Pick:

On January 5, 1914, following the occupation of Ciudad Chihuahua by the troops of Pancho Villa, the *New York Times* reported the signing of a contract between Harry E. Aitken of the Mutual Film Company and the Mexican revolutionary. The *Times* described it as a business partnership whereby Villa would facilitate the production of films “in any way that is consistent with his plans to depose and drive [General Victoriano] Huerta out of Mexico and the business of Mr. Aitken”... (Pick 39)

Almost before the ink had dried on his new contract, Villa was in frame on Mutual’s cameras, shooting what was to be “a seven-reel film titled *The Life of General Villa* that combined actual combat with dramatic scenes” (Pick 40). The film, though now lost, marked the peak of Villa’s influence over U.S. cinema. In the film, “instead of being sharecroppers working on a hacienda, Villa’s family are transformed into relatively well-to-do independent ranchers with land of their own” (Katz 325). When a pair of federal officers kidnaps and rapes one of Villa’s sisters, he
takes revenge, killing his sister’s rapist and swearing to catch the rapist’s companion; “[i]t is in the battle of Torreón that he finally encounters and shoots him—the climax of the film” (Katz 325).

*The Life of General Villa* combines fictionalized events with “actual newsreels of the battles of his army” (Katz 325), though the plot of the film itself is wholly fiction. It completely dispenses with any semblance of accurate reporting regarding the revolution or the underlying sociopolitical crises that helped spark it. No key events or figures like the Plan of San Luis Potosí, Madero, Huerta, even Villa’s rival Carranza receive any attention or consideration over the film’s runtime. Villa stars as himself for much of the movie, with U.S. actor Raoul Walsh playing a younger Villa in the film’s earlier scenes. According to Katz,

Villa had no objection to this embellishment and “gentrification” of his early career. He was willing to accommodate Mutual Films in other ways as well. When the producers felt that his regular dress, a slouch hat and a sweater, detracted from his prestige as a military man, he was ready to wear a uniform provided by Mutual Film Company, which continued to be the property of the filmmakers. (Katz 325)

Villa was aware that earning the goodwill of audiences in the U.S. would be a crucial political asset. Then-U.S. President Woodrow Wilson had previously opposed Huerta’s government, leaving Villa and Carranza to fight over which of them would be recognized by Wilson as the legitimate leader of Mexico. To this end, Villa was more than willing to do whatever it took to win the attention of audiences in the U.S. as a means of earning broader international support, even if it meant bastardizing his own image; obliging Mutual’s desires for a screen-friendly appearance lent to that very success.

That relationship soured immediately following one of Villa’s riskiest moves during the revolution: the 1916 invasion of the border town of Columbus, New Mexico. Though the attack “brought him enormous popularity among Mexicans,” it also “led to a violent reaction from the Americans, who were scandalised that 1,500 Villistas had not only killed several Americans but also destroyed the whole town” (de Orellana 78). In direct response to Villa’s attack, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson dispatched military forces, led by General John J. Pershing, to northern Mexico to hunt Villa down. Though Villa escaped capture by the U.S. forces, he could not escape the ill will he generated among the U.S. public.
as a result of his attack.

The Villista attack on Columbus immediately flipped the nature of Villa’s relationship with the U.S. media outlets; now it was their goal to see him brought to justice. Leading the way in promoting much of the new anti-Villa sentiment was the *Hearst-Vitagraph News*, which claimed to have footage of the killings perpetrated in Columbus, and whose parent corporation, the Hearst Company, “[a]t every opportunity...called for ‘necessary’ American intervention in Mexico” (de Orellana 80). Villa’s approval in the eyes of the U.S. media had immediately slid to the opposite end of the continuum with his attack on Columbus. Not until years after his death, in the 1930s, would a rather fictionalized version of Villa reemerge as a popular character in U.S. cinema.

Villa’s antagonizing act against the U.S. would come back to haunt him on the battlefield in 1918, when U.S. forces helped Carranza deal him a crushing blow at Ciudad Juárez, “mark[ing] the end of his career as a fighter” (Braddy). Two years later, he gave up politics altogether and retired to the outskirts of Parral, Chihuahua, where he lived a quiet life until his assassination in 1923, at the age of 45.

Within a decade of his assassination, Villa’s image had largely begun to be rehabilitated in the U.S. cinema industry. As the memory of the Columbus attack began to fade, more positive images of Villa began to appear in films produced north of the border. Chief among these was 1934’s *Viva Villa!*, in which Oscar-winning actor Wallace Beery played a rather sanitized version of Villa. The film even bore a title card at its beginning that read, “This saga of the Mexican hero, Pancho Villa, does not come out of the archives of history. It is fiction woven out of truth and inspired by a love of the half-legendary Pancho and the glamorous country he served” (Pick 72). Much like *The Life of General Villa* before it, *Viva Villa!* presented an openly fictitious backstory for Villa that involved childhood trauma driving him to fight in the Mexican Revolution—in this case, the assassination of his father after protesting “a government’s order that community land be turned over to hacendia owners” (Pick 72). Rather than the bloodthirsty enemy the Hearst Company spent much of the late 1910s portraying Villa to be, *Viva Villa!* wholly neutered any negative aspects of Villa’s campaigns and political maneuvering; “by the closing scene of his assassination just about all the social, political, and psychological elements that give factual validity to the plot have vanished” (Pick 72).
While U.S. films about Villa in the 1930s were largely scrubbed of the anger and hatred he had earned with his attack on Columbus, then-contemporary Mexican films about Villa attempted to take on a more troubling legacy of Villa’s part in the Mexican Revolution. One such film designed to stand in stark contrast to Villa’s typical portrayal, at the time, as a mere semi-heroic swashbuckler was 1936’s *Vámonos con Pancho Villa* [*Let’s Go with Pancho Villa*]. The film achieves its goal in part by shifting the focus away from Villa himself and onto ordinary members of the Villista forces - the Leones of San Pablo, a group of friends who join Villista forces on the battlefield, only to experience the true horrors of war on a close and personal level. Pick notes that the film “adopts a critical stance in regard to popular narratives bent on preserving the rebel *guerrillero* image and government efforts in the 1930s to recuperate Villa as an embodiment of the *macho* ideals of the revolution” (Pick 86). Rather than feed a heroic narrative, as U.S. media were doing at the time, Mexican cinema, with its closer view of Villa’s life and campaigns, treated Villa with more nuance. Equally as important to this end as the shifting of focus away from Villa was the portrayal of Villa himself, by actor Domingo Soler. Pick describes one of the more troubling scenes:

... an officer conveys a message from General [Tomás] Urbina to Villa. To the question of whether a band of captured musicians should be executed, Villa responds, “No, man, how barbaric. Poor musicians, why should we shoot them?” Yet the fate of the prisoners is determined by military efficiency, not empathy. Informed that all units already have a band, he reverses the order: “Well, then shoot them. Why are you bugging me with this?” The objective point of view and Soler’s sober performance in this scene may have unsettled film viewers in the 1930s. (Pick 89)

Though *Let’s Go with Pancho Villa* ended up being a “commercial failure” (Pick 89), it still represented some of the first larger-scale resistance to the near-Disneyfication of Villa’s image that other Mexican and U.S. films of the revolutionary period presented. The Villa shown in *Let’s Go with Pancho Villa* “is built around the contradictory combination of attributes admired by the public, [while] the acting detaches the character from the mythical subject” (Pick 89). Rather than holding Villa up as a star figure, the film not only shifted the focus away from him, but denied him a solely positive outlook, trading
commercial concessions for more honest storytelling.

From the earliest days of his involvement in the Mexican Revolution to decades after his murder, Pancho Villa was, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the most well-known media personality of the revolutionary period, a position he maintains to this day. While some aspects of that image were naturally forged, Villa himself played no small part in its cultivation, plying U.S. news correspondents with luxurious accommodations and freely bending his image to fit the will of U.S. film studios looking to cash in on his campaigns. Although his raid on Columbus, New Mexico temporarily soiled his image among U.S. audiences, by the 1930s those same audiences were already viewing Villa through rose-colored glasses once more, seeing him again as a romanticized rebel, despite the more balanced, less glowing portrayals he was receiving in his homeland.

References


**About the Author**

A transfer to BSU, Matt Donohue is a senior Political Science major in the American Politics concentration, as well as a Music minor. (What those two have to do with each other, he doesn’t know, but he loves them both dearly.) He wrote this paper in Spring 2019 under the mentorship of Dr. Erin O’Connor (History), as part of an Honors Second-Year Seminar, HIST 299, on the Mexican Revolution. Matt hopes to eventually pursue a Ph.D. in Political Science, and to someday teach at the post-secondary level.