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# Strata

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# MYTHOPOESIS FROM TENOCHTITLÁN

Annalisa D. Quagliata Blanco's  
*¡Aoquic iez in Mexico! /  
¡Ya México no existirá más!*

BYRON DAVIES

Has Mexican experimental film come full-circle, found its “secret formula”? In the catalog for *Cine Mexperimental*, a foundational 1998 traveling program, Rita González and Jesse Lerner describe Rubén Gámez’s 1965 baroque anti-gringo filmic poem *La fórmula secreta* as tracing a critique of twentieth-century discourse about *lo mexicano*, taking to absurd excess those supposedly Mexican traits (“stoicism, solitude, fatalism”) mined by authors like Octavio Paz and Samuel Ramos. González and Lerner mention the film’s anticipations of Roger Bartra’s 1987 critique of that discourse, as indeed a form of mythmaking expressive of “a powerful nationalist will bound to the unification and institutionalization of the modern capitalist state.”<sup>1</sup>

An impasse thus sets in whenever approaching the concept of “Mexicanness”—a swing between essentializing reductions and remarks on their character as such. This is particularly pertinent as ever today at the end of Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s presidential term, characterized by rhetoric of national sovereignty and rejuvenation (“Mexican humanism,” “the Fourth Transformation”) put to progressive ends. It cannot be an accident, then, that there now emerges the most brilliant experimental feature about *lo mexicano* since Gámez’s *La fórmula secreta* and *Tequila* (1992). After all, the “secret” of Annalisa D. Quagliata Blanco’s much-anticipated and discussed *¡Aoquic iez in Mexico! / ¡Ya México no existirá más!* (*Mexico Will No Longer Exist!*, in production since 2017, premiered June 2024) is to undertake a film about the very ideas of time employed in modern Mexican mythmaking. Here national icons like Quetzalcóatl and the Virgin of Guadalupe circulate in the same wheel of diurnal-nocturnal cycles of the fall and “rebirth” of Mexico City-Tenochtitlán as the “experimental Mexica” rock band Los Cogelones. The Conquista, or Spanish Conquest of the Americas, becomes a daily, indeed

nightly, event in Quagliata’s Mexico City—manifesting as deeply as queer sexuality and punk tattoos of the Mexica civilization’s gods.

Many of Quagliata’s terms for navigating this impasse derive from the rhetoric of the classics of experimental and avant-garde cinema: what P. Adams Sitney regarded as the transition from the “trance” to the “mythopoeic” film is not exactly a dateable historical event, but rather yet another node in a cyclical process of mythmaking. Born in 1990 in the state of Veracruz to Mexican and Italian parents, Quagliata was immersed in the U.S. avant-garde in her education at the Massachusetts College of Art, where until 2015 she studied with Saul Levine and Luther Price; in conversation she has embraced comparisons of certain elements of *Aoquic iez* with Maya Deren and Gregory Markopoulos. Beyond that, while making the film she was reading the notes and diaries of both Dziga Vertov and Teo Hernández (who himself once imagined a film of Quetzalcóatl and the Virgin of Guadalupe).<sup>2</sup>

At stake in Quagliata’s adoption of “classical” avant-garde rhetoric is how to approach the very idea of “inexistence” invoked in the film’s title. This is derived from Book Twelve of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century *Florentine Codex*, compiled by Friar Bernardino de Sahagún, which recounts how sorcerers sent by Moctezuma Xocoyotzin to cast spells on the Spanish came upon a drunk in disguise—revealed to be the young god Tezcatlipoca (one of the most important deities of the Nahuatl cult until the Conquista). Tezcatlipoca scolded the sorcerers, “What is the use of you coming

ALL IMAGES Annalisa D. Quagliata Blanco,  
*¡Aoquic iez in Mexico! / ¡Ya México no existirá más!* (2024),  
frame enlargements. Courtesy the artist.

here? Mexico will never exist again, it [is gone] forever,” and rendered to them visions of the future burning of Tenochtitlán.<sup>3</sup> The notion of “non-existence” or “non-being” was also significant to yet another contributor to conceptions of *lo mexicano*, philosopher Emilio Uranga in his 1949 phenomenological “Essay on the Ontology of the Mexican,” who claimed: “Fragility is the quality of always being threatened by nothingness, by the threat of falling into non-being. The Mexican’s emotive life psychologically expresses or symbolizes this ontological condition.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus, again, Quagliata is not interested in “inexistence” in the sense of going out of existence at a dateable moment (not even the dateable fall of Tenochtitlán in 1521), and even less in the sense of “non-being” or ontological fragility important to Uranga. Rather, she is interested in the state of being outside of time proper to mythmaking: the transtemporal needs and desires that sustain the telling of myths. Thus, in her editing methods and superimpositions, multiple time periods (including youth, middle age, and old age) coexist, and synchronized physiognomies, as opposed to diachronically traceable changes, become the principle for discriminating sameness and difference.<sup>5</sup>

“Real” time does re-emerge in *Aoquic iez*, but it is instead the cyclical working day of Marx’s *Capital*, Volume 1, Chapter 10, and Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera*, which converges with what Tzvetan Todorov regarded as the cyclical narrative style of most of the *Florentine Codex* (only then giving way to European, linear narrative with its account of the fall of Tenochtitlán).<sup>6</sup> Hence Quagliata’s embrace of Sitneyean mythopoeisis, derived from Harold Bloom’s formulation of when “myth, quite simply, is myth: the process of its making, and the inevitability of its defeat.”<sup>7</sup> Except that in Quagliata’s Tenochtitlán, making and defeat are re-lived every day.

This point matters to Quagliata not just as a *Mexican* but also as a Mexican *experimental filmmaker of her generation*, that is, the generation of those filmmakers in their 30s, 40s, and early 50s who have associated with Mexico City’s Laboratorio Experimental de Cine (LEC) since its founding in 2013, and many of whom appear in the credits of *Aoquic iez*. LEC co-founder Elena Pardo assisted with the film’s camerawork, as did Don Anahí (with whose work on queer sexuality the film is in conversation, especially in its third part) and Jael Jacobo (whose 16mm *Macuil*

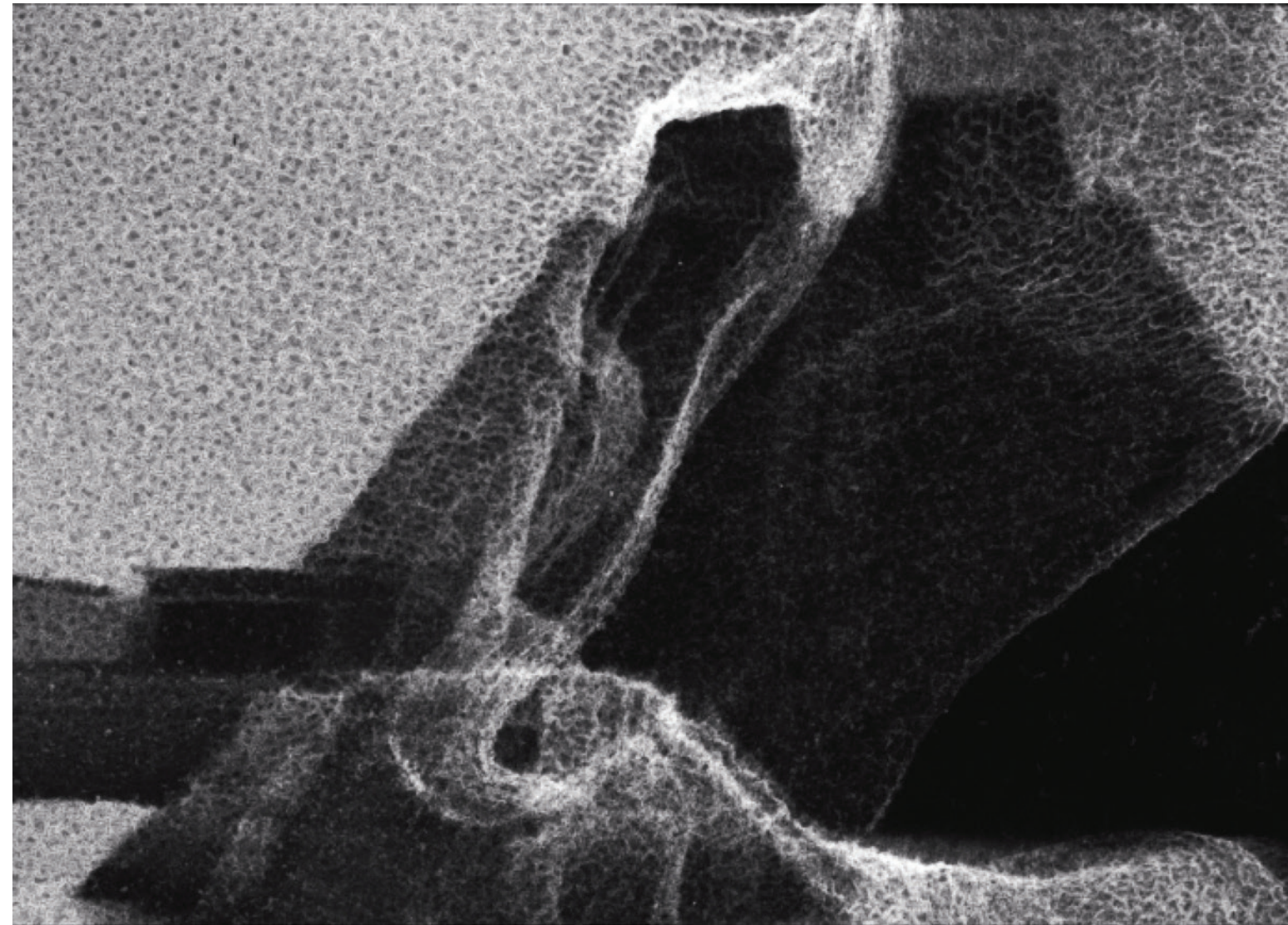
[2019] is a natural companion to Quagliata’s *Xochipilli* [2018], snippets of which also appear here). Significant filmmakers like Bruno Varela and Pablo Martínez-Zárata appear in a sequence on how Mexican history survives inscribed as tattoos on skin, as does Quagliata herself (also later seen, Mikhail Kaufman-like, filming with a Bolex on a motorbike).

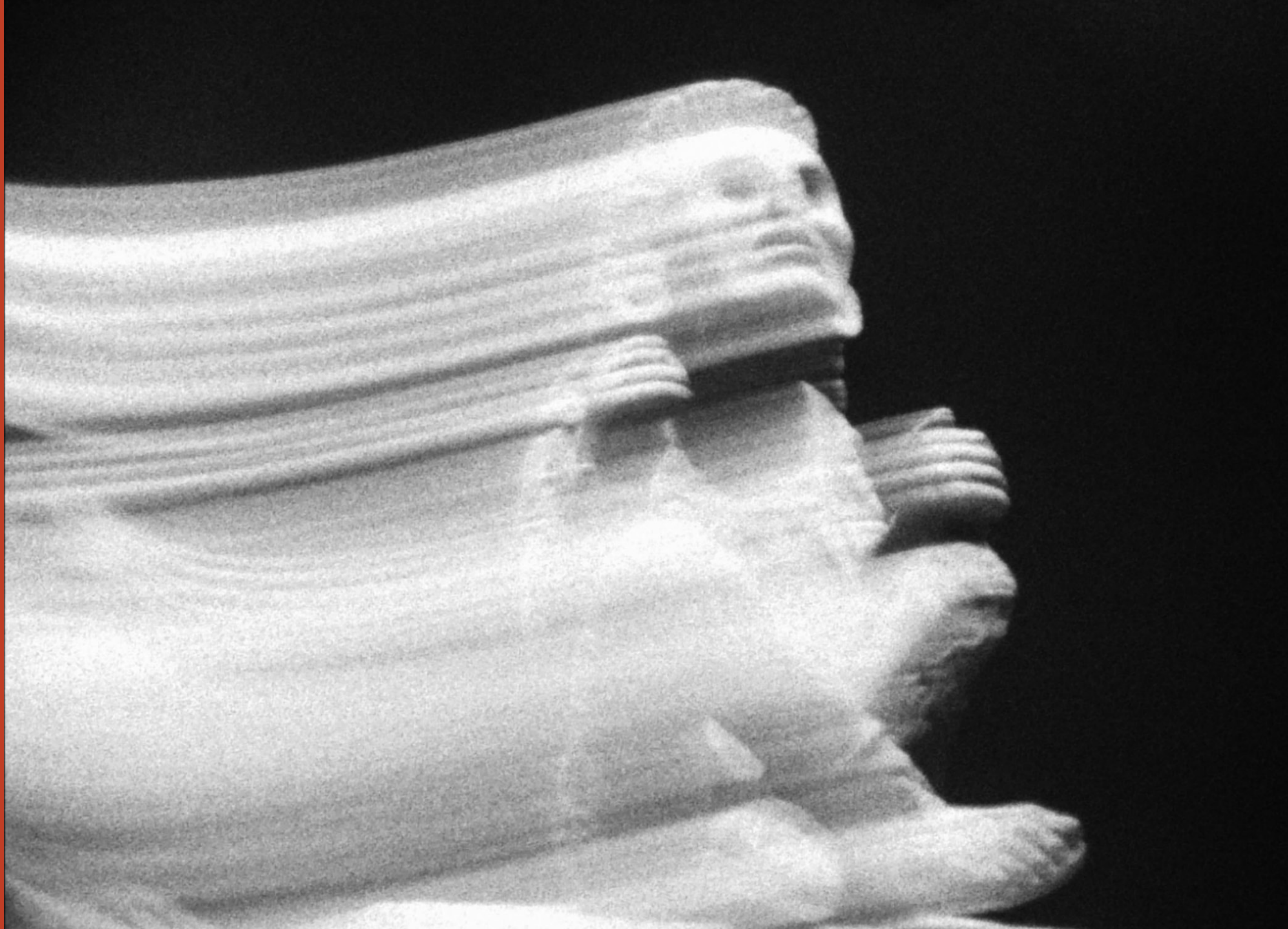
We are additionally faced with the passing of an earlier generation: Quagliata’s older mentors, and pioneers of punk filmmaking in Mexico, Sarah Minter and Gregorio Rocha, died in 2016 and 2022, respectively. Quagliata filmed a sequence at Anarchivia (Rocha’s now-defunct film archive/anarchist squat inside the historic Estudios Churubusco), and before his death Rocha “baptized” Quagliata with a bottle of Peñafiel at a screening of a rough cut of *Aoquic iez* at La Cueva (the already-storied micro-cinema in Mexico City that Quagliata co-founded in 2018 with Minter and Rocha’s son, filmmaker Emiliano Rocha Minter). With the passing of generations, and even with the creative flourishing of a current generation, the impulses behind mythmaking (as well as its defeat) become re-excavated.

Originally conceived of as separate short films, *Aoquic iez* raises the question of why major avant-garde explorations of *lo mexicano* have typically been structured episodically, like *La fórmula secreta*, *Tequila*, and even in its own exoticizing way Eisenstein’s *¡Qué Viva México!* (1932). Divided by beaming dots (adaptations of the Mexica numerical system and implicitly revealing the distance of Quagliata’s concerns from the flashing Coca-Cola bottles that separate the parts of *La fórmula secreta*), the episodes or chapters are as follows (the titles are my own, while in brackets I present with permission Quagliata’s “private” titles, preserving her use of phrases in Nahuatl):

### **Chapter 1 (Morning/Mourning): Conquista [The Appearance of Tezcatlipoca]**

We begin with the idea of the Conquista not as a single event but rather as a pervasive colonial violence, which informs Quagliata’s continuous use of washing soda-distressed 16mm black-and-white footage (a process she read about in Kathryn Ramey’s 2015 book *Experimental Filmmaking: Break*





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*the Machine*).<sup>8</sup> This is footage filmed from screens, beginning with transitions between superimposed maps: from Hernan Cortés's map of Tenochtitlán to Antonio García Cubas's map of nineteenth-century Mexico City, to Google Maps' version and the city's Metro map. The latter's minimal station icons become the principle for organizing signs of "officially" recognized Indigeneity in Mexico: the Mexica warrior's shield, the nopal, the chapulín (grasshopper), the tepalcate (shard), the maguey, the serpent, Moctezuma's headdress, the shrine to the god Ehécatl at the Pino Suárez station, etc., up until the sharp break constituted by the Spanish Conquistador's helmet (at the Villa de Cortés Metro station).

With that break, Quagliata turns to images of Moctezuma's first meeting with Cortés and computer-generated 3D models of Tenochtitlán, all derived from a 2006 History Channel program on Aztec engineering, whose artificiality the washing soda distressing process paradoxically negates. We also hear, read in Nahuatl (by poet and translator Fausto Aguilar), the story of the sorcerers' encounter with Tezcatlipoca and his assurance that Mexico already no longer exists. Indeed what remains of that artificiality, and the reduction of Cortés to a repeatable historical type (just as, on some contested accounts, Moctezuma took Cortés to be the return of Quetztlcoatl), also serves to fetter the emergence of non-repeatable, linear elements of European narrative that Todorov thought characterized the conclusion of the *Florentine Codex*.

### Chapter 2 (Noon/Wakefulness): Tattoos [In Tlilli In Tlapalli (Black Ink, Colorful Ink/Wisdom)]

Portraits of Mexico City's inked punks (tattoos of the gods Quetzalcóatl, Tezcatlipoca, Coatlicue, Coyolxauhqui, Mictlantecuhtli, etc.), are cross-cut with a sweat-drenched slam by the band Los Cogelones, filmed inside Gregorio Rocha's Anarchivia, as well as with moments of Quagliata's *Xochipilli* (footage conceived of as part of *Aoquic iez*, but given earlier release in 2018), of a statue of the Mexica god of love and flowers inside the National Museum of Anthropology. Following the Conquista, these fading, rapidly passing images are how the ancient gods survive and are reborn. Indeed, Quagliata has spoken publicly of her fascination with the material and etymological connections between film (*película*) and skin (*piel*), and of film as a great memory-containing (second) skin, occasioned by her drawing the cover of scholar and poet Hubert Matiúwà's 2022 study of his own Mè'phàà (Tlapanec) people in Guerrero, *Xó*

*nùnè jùmà xàbò mè'phàà | El cómo del filosofar de la gente piel* (*The How of the Philosophizing of the Skin People*). Matiúwà's scholarship explores the Mè'phàà connections between *skin* and *being, scars* and *memory*.<sup>9</sup>

Though the song heard here is not by Los Cogelones (but is rather the ode to the goddess of fertility Coatlicue by the band Hospital de México), in the filming of this sequence—as Quagliata put it in a Facebook memorial tribute to Rocha—"the histories of Mexperimental cinema and rock in Neza continued to intersect," referring to Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, State of Mexico, as both the origin of Los Cogelones and the setting of Rocha and Minter's crucial punk films *Sábado de mierda* (1988) and *Nadie es inocente* (1987), respectively. The reference to present-day State of Mexico emphasizes the porous and shifting identity of the "Mexico" referred to in "Mexico will not exist again." The cycles of mythmaking and defeat important to Quagliata correspond to Mexico City's cycles of expansion and contraction—inscribed in the title's ambiguity between Mexica civilization and modern Mexico—and even include the cycles of working-day movement between State and City.<sup>10</sup>

### Chapter 3 (Evening/Erotics): Tlazoltéotl [Tlazoltéotl, Eater of Filth]

We then arrive at a domestic scene filmed even further outside of Mexico City, in Cholula, Puebla (a town closely associated with the feathered serpent god Quetzalcóatl as well as with the Conquista, specifically Cortés's 1519 massacre there). In a kitchen a family's daughter (Lizzeth Tecuatl Cuaxiloa) and the Mexica goddess of lust Tlazoltéotl (Marcela Vásquez) are eating tamales as two cooks (Cony Acevedo and Yax Acevedo) look on. Tlazoltéotl's discovery of a tiny serpent in her tamal, stressed by the sound of a boiling kettle, instigates a powerful, progressively erotic montage of images of filth-eating, moonlight, pregnancy and childbirth, tamal- and mole-making, as well as care between lovers and generations, where Tlazoltéotl masturbating, the re-emergence of the serpent (including as wall ornament), and the flooding of a room are the strikingly archetypal figures for the daughter's queer sexual awakening.

Quagliata compensates throughout the film for what Todorov regarded as Sahagún's embarrassment about sex and eroticism in compiling the *Florentine Manuscript*.<sup>11</sup> Stanley Cavell wrote, "It is a poor idea of fantasy which takes it to be a world apart from reality."<sup>12</sup> The difficulty of detecting the locus of fantasies in this section of *Aoquic iez* suggests an intersubjective



corollary to that thought: it is a poor idea of fantasy which takes it to be apart from the fantasy of another.

This section moves between individual psychology, intersubjective erotics, and collective myth, where its characteristics of somnambulism sit uneasily with the strict criteria of the “trance” film, principally because it features two protagonists. (As Sitney noted, a similar issue arises for the two women protagonists of Maya Deren’s *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, 1946.)<sup>13</sup> And yet this section is a conscious homage to (in Quagliata’s words, a “cover” of) Markopoulos’s mythopoeic *Twice a Man* (1963). We have a queer romantic dyad, a mythological figure in a contemporary setting (Tlazoltéotl in place of Markopoulos’s Hippolytus), the simultaneously nurturing and ominous soundtrack of rain and

thunder, and a hovering matriarch who shifts between youth and old age: in this case, the mother (Ana María Tecuatl Cuaxiloa) and grandmother (Petra Cuaxiloa Ocototxle) identified via match cuts.

Indeed, with those rapidly alternating match cuts, the organization of time in this section operates according to principles similar to the condensation of past, present, and future in *Twice a Man* remarked on by Ken Kelman in an early essay on that film—except that for Quagliata the occasion for such ruptures in linear time is the discovery of a broken clay pot.<sup>14</sup> The tepalcate (shard) and the serpent are figures for both sexual awakening and looped movement in time. Desire is also cyclical.

#### Chapter 4 (The Long Night/Fiesta): Xochiquétzal [In Xóchitl in cuicatl (The Flower, the Song/Poetry)]

Evening turns to the long night in the most protracted and only color section of the film, where actress Marcela Vázquez re-emerges as Xochiquétzal, Mexica goddess of flowers, traipsing and sprinting through the Jamaica flower market and the Tacuba Metro Station. This is also the section most evocative of early 1960s underground cinema, especially Ron Rice: Xochiquétzal as Flower Thief. The riveting soundtrack of radio-station switching (snippets of cumbia, Mexican rock, reggaeton, mambo, son jarocho, and on-air dialogue separated by static) recalls the radio sounds atop the helicopter shots of Mexico City that open

Gómez’s *Tequila* (1992), just as the linking of radio and the Metro recalls Bruno Varela’s rendering of Metro stations as TV stations in his *Línea 3* video series (2010-11).

The flower becomes the icon for organizing all the long night’s games, festivals, and cults of adoration: the piñata, the game of lotería, the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe (including in the shape of a vagina, and a slowed-down version of the song “Buenos días Paloma Blanca”); the stone serpent at Los Pochotes (Chimalhuacán); fireworks and toritos superimposed over Xochiquétzal revolving an incensory (evocative of Teo Hernández’s *Graal*, 1980); celebrations of the Battle of Puebla (5 de Mayo) in San Juan de Aragón, Mexico City. And of course the cult of death: audio of a drunken eulogy at a friend’s funeral



by iconic comedian Cantinflas and Don Edelmiro (Chino Herrera) derives—appropriately, for this section of *Aoquic iez*—from Cantinflas’s first Mexican color film, *El bolero de Raquel* (Miguel M. Delgado, 1957), and accompanies shots of the funeral of Gregorio Rocha, thus emphasizing the indelibly ludic character of that filmmaker-mentor. Quagliata’s vigorously hand-painted 16mm film (arranged to allow faint impressions of flower petals and leaves) underscores the conception of nightlong *fiesta* operating in this section: it is precisely the opposite of what twentieth-century Mexican phenomenologist Jorge Portilla called *relajo*, since it is not the suspension of value and seriousness but rather their joyful affirmation.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, here the burning of images of the Virgin and Coatlicue are not iconoclastic, but rather the effect of fervent adoration. Correspondingly, the visible melancholy on the face of a quinceañera (Estefani Victoria Fera García)—shot in velvety MiniDV while being lifted up by young men in suits, echoing earlier shots of a statue of the Virgin in the Parque Tepeyac—is tied less to a critique of that tradition than it is to an “economic” exhaustion from the natural rhythms of *fiesta*, slowly bringing the long night to its end.

#### Chapter 5 (Morning Again/Rebirth): Quetzalcóatl [Nahui Ollin (Fourth Movement, the Fifth Sun)]

The final section is the revival from that night: Quetzalcóatl (Brian Espitia) awakening in the urban ditch of the underworld known as Mictlan, lined with the bones of previous races of humankind (of the previous four suns, all victims to apocalypses). In a direct enactment of this legend of humankind’s most recent incarnation, a second version of the god (Víctor Hugo Sandoval García, belonging to Los Cogelones, like most actors in this sequence) sticks a maguey thorn into his penis and directs the blood into the bone-drawn dough kneaded by Cihuacóatl (Rocío García García)—an echo of the black mole mixed into Chapter 3’s tamales. This act generates the faintly visible “Man”/Tlacatl (Gabriel Trinidad Sandoval García) and (in Quagliata’s conscious mixing of different Mesoamerican myths) provokes the rising of the Fifth Sun.

The beginning of this new day/era is also marked by Quetzalcóatl’s giving corn to humankind, as well as the setting in motion of machines, where the mechanical tortilla-making

machine (*tortilladora*) is Quagliata’s equivalent to Vertov’s editing machines and electric looms. (It is additionally serendipitous that *Aoquic iez* has premiered the same year as Bruno Varela’s *tortilladora*-themed found footage project *La máquina de futuro*, 2024.) As with this machine, the morning declares its cycles by literal spinning: of a Mexica dancer (Jesús Adrián Sandoval García), Chinelo dancers, and *voladores*. Two opposed lateral movements cut against those rotations: from right to left, runners (José Alberto Adrián Sandoval García and Marco Antonio Sandoval García) in a revival of the ceremony of the Fuego Nuevo (New Fire) in Iztapalapa, initiating a new cycle of life; from left to right, marchers (caught on Super 8) protesting the September 26, 2014, forced disappearance in Iguala, Guerrero, of forty-three students of the Teachers’ College in Ayotzinapa.

It may be only evident once this spinning reaches its climax with the clearly ejaculatory tossing of corn seeds on a petate (palm bedroll) how self-reflexively *Aoquic iez* conceives of ritual. This shot evokes the corn divination ritual as well as an image in the *Codex Borbonicus* of the gods Oxomoco and Cipactónal, creators of time and the calendar, and yet there is also a vague suggestion in the film that, like the blood of the penis, it might be drawn from Quetzalcóatl, giver of corn.<sup>16</sup> Filmmaking becomes a metaphor for the rising of the sun, just when its rising can only be secured by ritual.

From the Conquista to Ayotzinapa. Quagliata’s provocation in thus framing her diurnal-nocturnal cycle is to suggest, on the cusp of the tenth anniversary of the forced disappearance of the forty-three students, that they have already been rendered as just another national myth. How far is that provocation from twentieth-century formulas of *lo mexicano* and their indulgences in the excesses of national types? For Quagliata, excess is what opens up the space for a kind of inexistence—a way of being outside of time—which is precisely the turbulent space of critique. The only space proper to a Mexico that already does not exist.

References are online at:  
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