

Excerpt: Itala Schmelz

Modernity à go go^[1]

Itala Schmelz

1.

Ciudad Moderna is the title of an exhibition by Terence Gower presented at the Laboratorio Arte Alameda (México City, 2005). It is also the title of the exhibition's central video work. This 6:20 minute video is a montage based on the 1966 Mexican movie, *Despedida de casada* (Hen Night for a Bride), directed by Juan de Orduña. The film itself—a manic but mediocre comedy of errors—is typical of the period, down to its choice of jazzy locations amid the emblematic works of modernist Mexican architecture: the Museum of Anthropology, a home in the Pedregal development, a functionalist building on Avenida Reforma, the Hotel Presidente in Acapulco. Gower brings background architecture and design to the fore, isolating them from the narrative flow. Through editing and digital manipulation, images are pared down to essentials, the architecture is stripped of ornament, and the superfluous, random, everyday signs of human habitation are removed.

To make this happen, Gower freezes the image at the end of a short sequence and dissolves it into a still from which both people and non-essential objects have been digitally erased, leaving us with pure architecture and interior decor. With no change of angle, a movie starring Mauricio Garcés has morphed before our eyes into what might be a photograph by Armando Salas Portugal. Now the image goes into black and white, its secondary features vanish, and the final stage is a simple, distilled line drawing. Then, driven by the sound track of the movie and its bossa nova beat, the action resumes, the characters reappear. This process occurs several times, in both directions. Thus a film with few merits of its own is stripped to the level of its secondary aspects, what today we might call 'film art', so that music, set, costumes and background trivia are shown to convey the peculiar flavour of period and class.

When different people speak of 'modernity', it is not necessarily clear what each one means by this concept. Rather than a definition, however, *Ciudad Moderna* offers a multi-layered approximation, sparking several orders of reference. I propose to approach this work from two angles: one, the link between cinema and architecture in the promotion of modernity as the central

project of western capitalism; two, the specific forms taken by modernism as it was adopted by Mexican society.

To realize this essay, I felt it was important to reconstruct the cultural and historical developments behind the video work *Ciudad Moderna*, even though they may not appear in the work. Terence Gower's work is the result of long and detailed historical research, which has allowed the artist to come to know the aesthetic and ideological entities which come together to form images of modernity. This research has also led the artist to identify and expose the peculiarities of the Mexican context. In this essay, I will discuss films and architecture which don't appear in the work of Gower, but which, housed in our cultural memory, come to life in the face of this artist's project. I believe that bringing together these various threads will enrich a reading of the video *Ciudad Moderna*.

2.

Early in the twentieth century an architectural revolution took place, introducing new styles and materials that radically transformed the look of cities. Throughout North America and Europe, and, as the century wore on, in the cities of the developing world, the prescriptions of the architectural avant-garde gave rise to airy steel and glass structures in place of thick walls and dark interiors; superfluous ornamentation was banished in favour of a clean, smooth finish, and rational geometry took over from organic caprice.

Cinema, from its earliest days, was entranced by urban environments, and the city soon became the major protagonist of experimental films. The dynamics generated by a moving camera with respect to the geometry of buildings were of compelling interest to many artists of the day in search of an urban kinetics. Pioneer film-makers from all over Europe took to the streets. The best-known and most seminal models for the cinematographic sampling of the modern city are doubtless *Berlin: Symphony of a City* (Walter Ruttmann, 1927) and *Man With a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1928).

Architects, for their part, recognized cinema's matchless potential for portraying and promoting their works. During the first decades of the twentieth century, cinema did much to infuse this new architecture with meaning. Not only did films publicize the latest aesthetics far and wide; they also made that aesthetics synonymous with a certain lifestyle, in keeping with an ethics of new, *modern*

values. The 1930s saw a surge in the production of documentaries that celebrated both the new architecture and the lifestyles that came with it. An outstanding example was Hans Richter's film *Neues Leben* (New Living), commissioned in 1930 by the first of the Swiss 'On Housing and Living' exhibitions. The structure of this piece exerted a huge influence on later documentaries. It opened with a scornful critique of traditional interiors: the bulky, impractical furniture, the unhygienic kitchens, the clutter of useless kitsch, etc., then launched into a eulogy of today's 'bright and suitable living spaces: movable or built furniture with clear lines, practical curtains and a compact laboratory kitchen.'^[2]

Le Corbusier also produced a promotional film in 1930, *Architectures d'aujourd'hui* (Architectures of Today), in which he proposed modern architecture as a "machine for living". In most films of this genre there was a desire to communicate the positive ethical values of the modern life—accompanied by its buildings, furniture, and kitchens—as a model for today, but also as a promise of the future. Many of these films are structured like a statement of principles, clearly showing the difference between positive and negative lifestyle models.

3.

Modernism made the first two thirds of the twentieth century its own. In what seemed a new era, powered by unprecedented energy, the past seemed wholly to be deplored, and the lifestyle of the future was promoted in explicit contrast to the past. Take kitchens, formerly so dirty and inconvenient. They would become a sort of scientific laboratory, gleaming with appliances that would liberate the housewife from having to do more than press a few buttons.

Such alternatives were sublimely parodied by the French actor-director Jacques Tati. His Monsieur Hulot is a comic character with something of Chaplin's tramp about him, created to satirize French pretensions and idiosyncrasies. In *Mon Oncle* (1957), Hulot comes up against the eager post-war importation of the 'American Way of Life'. By similarly contrasting the modern with the traditional, this visually impeccable movie mimics the structure of the documentary advertisements put out by the Bauhaus. But with its affectionate defense of the old world and skeptical distaste for the new, it reverses the message.

Tati caricatures the aspirations of the French middle classes with a theatrical recreation of the sets for the new bourgeois idyll. The house seems to come straight out of a fashion magazine, whereas

its occupants are a stout couple overwhelmed by their abrupt accession to the latest in good living. The furniture, with its ultra-airy lines, only highlights the discomfort of the owners. The hi-tech fitted kitchen is the occasion for hilarious gags, as the clueless Hulot presses every button by mistake.

Tati's *Mon Oncle* gently parodies the propaganda reels of modern life produced by the promoters of modern architecture. The filmmaker enhances the ideal *ad absurdum*, showing what it would be like to live inside a flawlessly modern stage set. Gower's *Ciudad Moderna* also employs a sense of humour to show off the deviations which occur when this ideal lifestyle meets reality. Between abstract model and actual facts, a gap appears. Gower's piece is an attempt to explore that gap and to extract the pure modernist architectural traces which serve as backdrops for a psychedelic-era Mexican film.

4.

The repercussions of a film, or its reception in certain quarters, may turn out to be uniquely revealing. During the late 1950s, a group of Mexican architects were featured in the magazine *Arquitectura México #65*. They devoted a special section to the recently released *Mon Oncle*. These architects had little sympathy for Tati's backward-looking nostalgia; on the contrary, they reacted to the film from the standpoint of an unquestioning pan-American modernism. As one, Gómez Mayorga, put it:

'The European nouveau riche admires mechanical gadgets but cannot get used to them, because his previous home did not have any (...) The modern, civilized city-dweller experiences none of the film characters' trouble with mechanical and automatic products (...) To us who associate our architecture with the technical, industrial world to which it belongs, the push-button world seems effortlessly natural, we use it as a matter of course, and are not assaulted in everyday life by electrical escalators, refrigerators, food mixers or telephones. We and our clients were born in the Americas, we live in a great city, and everything about today's world is ordinary and familiar to us.'^[3].

Twentieth-century Mexico produced a wealth of distinguished architects who impressed a singular twist upon the national modernizing project. Beginning well before the 1930s, figures such as Juan O'Gorman had integrated decorative or formal elements borrowed from pre-Hispanic cultures into functionalist architecture—or International Style, as it came to be known—endowing them with an

unmistakable mark of identity. It was regarded as a way to adopt modernism without abandoning Mexican roots.

From the early 1920s, in the aftermath of the Revolution, the notion of modernity had become part and parcel of political discourse. The architectural establishment was committed in return to the construction of a national identity that might justify the post-revolutionary policies of the ruling party (the PRI^[4]): 'The international Modern was thought to project the modernness of the post-revolutionary government and the hope of a future, a future that would include Mexico among the most progressive nations in the World.'^[5]

In this period, cinema also became a central factor in the production of national identity, and without doubt, the creation of a modern national image united architects and cinematographers. New architectural developments naturally became backdrops to a representation of the aspirations of the state, the new ascending classes, and in particular, city-dwellers. Modernist architectural imagery was strategically employed to "internationalize" the *modus vivendi* of these groups.

5.

As for Mexican cinema, it reached its commercial and artistic peak in the middle of the century. The classic films of Emilio *El Indio* Fernández, graced by the camerawork of Gabriel Figueroa and the performances of Dolores del Río, María Félix or Pedro Armendáriz, was chiefly concerned with creating an idealized image of mexicanity. It exported this Mexican identity as the other face of modernism: a traditional backwater, a land still undeflowered by progress.

As early as the 1940s, but especially during the 1960s, our national cinema reflected a country giddily carried away by the 'modernizing force of reality'. Nevertheless, 'to be modernized is not quite the same as to be modern'.^[6] Cinema operates as a bridge of identity; thanks to its influence, the public assimilates social roles with apparent ease; and to some extent it would be true to say that the Mexican people absorbed the requirements of modern life through their screens.

A dip into E. García Riera's *Historia Documental del Cine Mexicano* will reveal that in 1966, the year *Despedida de Casada* was made, a total of 98 feature films were produced. The author

remarks that '24 of these allude to *à go-go*, 19 claim to be modern and "worldly"... Only 12 were set in *ranchero* [rural] contexts ... Mexican cinema aspired to compete in a world market where what sold best was sex, violence and *à go-go*.'⁷ Precisely the topics of the film chosen by Gower to provide the raw material for his video.

Despedida de casada had everything Gower was looking for: 'great images of Mexican architecture, great music and great comic actors of the time.' The biggest star in the cast is Julissa, the teen vamp of her day, who made at least two other movies in 1966: *El mundo loco de los jóvenes* and *Los Caifanes*. The supporting roles taken by Ana Luisa Pelufo and Mauricio Garcés, alongside a very young Héctor Suárez, are the best of a 'pretty indigestible mish-mash'.⁸ The story follows the adventures of a pair of newly-weds who have an argument, enabling them to indulge in a certain amount of straying before they return to one another confirmed in love.

Los Caifanes, by contrast, with a screenplay by Carlos Fuentes and directed by Juan Ibáñez, was probably the best film of the year. It took a critical distance from the rich-kid movies which showed nothing but beautiful people lounging in Acapulco or rocking 'n' rolling around a private pool in the Pedregal; third-world versions of Hollywood bedroom romps. These technicolor fantasies encouraged a new, North American consumerism among the youth of the moneyed classes. Their central characters 'belong to a particular social milieu, their world is that of the society pages in the glossy magazines, with cosmopolitan pretensions (...) an illusion of progress in the midst of underdevelopment'.⁹

In pursuit of avant-garde glamour, Mexican commercial cinema of the 1960s did its best to hitch urban comedies to the wagon of modern art, beat culture and the In crowd, in the manner of the French *nouvelle vague*. A downtown pocket of 'elegance and good taste' was the Zona Rosa with its hip cafés, bars and restaurants frequented by intellectuals, artists, actors, tourists, foreign students, playboys and *juniors*; the Zona Rosa offered the perfect 'cosmopolitan' location for this kind of movie.

In a film entitled *Amor a ritmo à go go*, the hero is an Op-Art painter who meets his fiancée at a trendy art school, the Academia de San Carlos. With-it though she is, she wants to be a virgin on her wedding night: "It's a forced, fake modernity which gives in to outdated conventions".¹⁰

Marriage is once more the fundamental theme in *Despedida de casada*. The moral seems to be that once a marriage has been consummated, the divorcee has the advantage of the single miss in terms of fun, since her virginity is no longer a treasure to be guarded. Also in that year, Silvia Pinal starred in *Estrategia matrimonio*, a film whose plot makes much the same point. Another version, with Angélica María, was called *Solo para tí*; the heroine, an interior decorator, is notable for undergoing psychoanalysis as she designs an exhibition of modern art in Guadalajara; she is torn between two boyfriends, one a respectable Doctor of Literature, Physics and Biology, the other a hippie socialist painter. Such movies helplessly betray 'a somewhat uncultured notion of culture'.¹¹

They were not the only celluloid pearls of 1966. *Acapulco à go go* has a *gringa* posing nude for a painter, *Muerte en Bikini* gives us a writer of horror stories, and in *Ven a cantar conmigo*, a North American artist visits the Hospicio Cabañas and its José Clemente Orozco murals with some children, who explain: 'People call them *frescos* [fresh] but they should be dry by now.' In *Damiana y los hombres*, a commercial photographer falls in love with a dusky 'indita' from Xochimilco, takes her picture and publishes it in *Artes de México* magazine. We also see Ofelia Guilmain in full psychedelic make-up, playing a character who likes abstract art and admits to having appeared in an experimental movie.

6.

Ciudad Moderna is not solely concerned with the pioneering period of Mexican modernism; applying a further turn to the screw, it also points to a later cinematographic generation. Beyond all the implications of the advent of the talkies and technicolor, rebel youth, rockin' *à go go*, sexual liberation and the Pill, lies a nod to the critical counterculture also spawned by the Sixties: Guy Debord warning against the society of the spectacle, Roland Barthes unveiling the *Mythologies* of our time, or Jean Luc Goddard expressing a pessimistic vision in *Alphaville* (1965), in which the utopian modernist city has become a dour and affectless prison for its inhabitants.

Like many of Gower's earlier works, built around the aesthetics of advertising, department stores, pavilions and stands—efficient launching pads for the standardization of a coercively economic model of life—this video lays bare the hard-sell devices employed by a siren promise of individual well-being that turned out to be just another form of social control. Aesthetics in the service of power.

Ciudad moderna is a suggestively deconstructive piece of cultural research. It puts together the two practices that did most to shape the image of modernism, film and architecture, in order to provide a breakdown of some of the ways in which the ideology of modernism took root in the collective imagination of the last century—both internationally, and in the unique conditions of Mexico.

Through his interventions in this 1960s film, Gower ironically shows to what extent Mexican middle class aspirations were brought into the modernist houses designed by *avant garde* architects like Luis Barragán. It's as if these new occupants never really changed their way of living or their tastes, and pretended to exchange their old customs for a new image. The characters in *Despedida de Casada*, in this sense, can be compared with the obese couple of Jacques Tati's *Mon Oncle*: somehow they are mismatched with the architecture, with hilarious results. Of course in Tati's film, the joke is made consciously, while in the Mexican film, as is often the case with our productions, the humour is involuntary.

Ciudad moderna casts light on some crucial features of the stagecraft of twentieth-century modernism. The can-do mood, nurtured by faith in an ever more prosperous future; the eager embrace of new technologies of everyday life; the media-driven idealization of progress. In this latest video, Terence Gower has made contact with recent history in order to invoke its zeitgeist afresh; notwithstanding the betrayal of many of modernism's promises, the artist identifies with its avant-garde spirit and seeks to salvage some of the most telling iconography of its glory days.

[1] Not to be confused with the French sense of 'galore', *à go go* was used in 1960s Mexico to describe the manifestations of pseudo-westernized youth culture. (Translator's note.)

[2] *Op. cit.*, p. 41.

[3] Mauricio Gómez Mayorga. *Arquitectura México #65. Crítica de Ideas Arquitectónicas: Un suplemento periódico de debate y planteo de problemas #8* Mexico City, March 1959, p. 42.

[4] Institutional Revolutionary Party.

[5] Antonio E. Méndez-Vigatá. 'Politics And Architectural Language', in *Modernity And The Architecture Of Mexico*, edited by Edward R. Burian. University of Texas Press, Austin, 1997, p. 2.

6 *Op. cit.*, p. 101

[9](#) Arturo Garmendia (*Esto* magazine, 1970), quoted by García Riera in *op. cit.*, p. 8.

[10](#) *Op. cit.*, p. 91

[11](#) *Op. cit.*, p. 52