



Still from *One More Dinner... or a Banquet in TetlapaMUAC* courtesy of the author

***One More Dinner... or a Banquet in TetlapaMUAC* by Mónica Mayer**

Mireille Torres

One More Dinner... or a Banquet in TetlapaMUAC. Written and directed by Mónica Mayer. Video shown at Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC). Mexico City, Mexico. May 2011.

Mónica Mayer is primarily a performance artist, but she is also a feminist sociologist and—together with Victor Lerma, her husband—she has kept an exhaustive archive of news articles about contemporary art. It is for this reason that she curated the exhibition *Una visita al archivo Olivier Debroise: entre la ficción y el documento* at the “Arkheia” Documentation Center of the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) in 2011, taking into consideration the important task of reactivating Olivier Debroise’s archive. Debroise, a French citizen who lived and worked in Mexico since the age of 17, was a prolific art historian focused on Mexican art and through his research he created his own archive. Amongst the different reactivation strategies Mayer included in the exhibition was the video of a performance that seems to be nothing more than a simple dinner party amongst friends. However, on closer inspection, it proves to contain a meta-narrative related to Debroise’s own methodology of research and his passion for creating his own archive. The performance recorded in the video was titled *One More Dinner... or a Banquet in TetlapaMUAC* (2011), an allusion to Debroise’s own film, *A Banquet in Tetlapayac* (1997-1998). What we see in the video is a dinner Mayer organized with Debroise’s closest friends and collaborators. The

EMISFÉRICA

idea was to recall personal events that involved Debroise, recognizing his role as a researcher of Mexican art. Anecdotes about his youth, his homosexuality, and his Jewish background were discussed in order to understand the development of his research methodology, personal style, and the literary discourse of his novels, which included a historiographic perspective. The dinner took place at the Hotelito San Rafael, a cozy bed-and-breakfast belonging to Miguel Legaria and Cuca Valero, who also own the adjacent apartment where Debroise lived and died.

The particularity of Debroise's archive resides in the way in which it was assembled: the accumulated material allows us to see the process by which he compiled artists' photographs and personal documents, which he then used to artistic ends—such as in the writing of his novels and even as the raw material for *A Banquet in Tetlapayac*. This film refers directly to Sergei Eisenstein's film *Que viva México!* (1930-1932), but flips the original on its head. Eisenstein's film can be considered a documentary or, better yet, a "filmic archive"—Eisenstein was never able to finish editing it the way he wanted to and, therefore, we will never know what his desired final montage for the film would have been. Divided into chapters, *Que viva México!* was dedicated to the artists that inspired Eisenstein in his celebration of what he images as Mexican identity: David Alfaro Siqueiros, Jean Charlot, El Greco, Francisco de Goya, José Clemente Orozco, José Guadalupe Posada, and Diego Rivera. One of the locations of *Que viva México!* was the Tetlapayac Hacienda in Apan, a small town in the state of Hidalgo. This hacienda was one of the wealthiest during the revolutionary period but by the time Eisenstein visited its owner, Alejandro Saldivar, had seen better days. The ruined and weary *Don Alejandro* only came to life when he sat down to eat at the head of the dinner table: his eyes sparkled at the spectacle of food and drink. He shared these moments of pleasure with Eisenstein, dining on exotic dishes such as *chiles en nogada* with pecans and pomegranates, oyster soup, lobster, and *escamoles* (ant eggs). This anecdote, among many others, shows us what shaped Eisenstein's view of Mexican history as something that had been interrupted, left incomplete: the ruined old *cacique* and the humiliated *campesinos*, who had no way of claiming the rights they were entitled to, were the product of a failed revolution.

While Eisenstein focused on the folklore of Mexico, lending it a mythic quality—which critics consider symptomatic of European romanticism—but also trying to insert the country into a modernist discourse, Debroise in *A Banquet in Tetlapayac* presents an overload of constructions of the "Mexican." For his film, Debroise invited his friends to stand in for the historical characters that visited the Tetlapayac Hacienda while Eisenstein was staying there. Some of these visitors were asked to give speeches about Eisenstein, without specific dialogue; Debroise wanted his guests to base their performances on their own interpretations of the role they were playing. One of the main sequences of the film is a dinner. Twelve people sit at a table drinking *pulque* and eating *chiles en nogada* (what else?) and other exotic Mexican foods, discussing art, communism, and revolutionary icons. It was an act of reflection, adaptation, representation, revision, and even rejection of the roles they had been asked to perform. The dinner party in the film becomes an act of writing

EMISFÉRICA

history—once again fragmented, incoherent, and incomplete. This reenactment presents the eternal conflict of the representation of post-colonial national identity. According to the art critic Cuauhtémoc Medina, *A Banquet in Tetlapayac* is intentionally “a kitsch postcard of communism in Mexico,” although Debroise’s layered critical mechanisms transcend this perhaps oversimplified explanation.

In her own reenactment of the banquet, Mónica Mayer and her husband both play the role of Hunter Kimbrough, Upton Sinclair’s brother-in-law. Upton Sinclair was the Hollywood producer who provided financial support for the movie until Eisenstein sent him some homoerotic drawings instead of the film. Hunter Kimbrough was the administrator of the production’s funds, but was also a spy sent by the Soviet Union to report on the work of its filmmakers. Mayer decided to take this role in her own video because she was not in fact a close friend of Debroise’s; her role was to be the “researcher of the researcher.” In this second reenactment of Eisenstein’s dinner, Mayer is, in a subtle way, the agent of historical memory; this third banquet features the same food as the first two. However, the *chiles en nogada* here become the signifier of a substance that all the guests have in common—they refer to the guest’s shared responsibility to preserve Olivier Debroise’s archive and to promote its relevance. In recent years, Mexico City has attracted attention as a chaotic mega-city that possesses a rich cultural history, while remaining a reasonably inexpensive place to live that is no longer provincial or even nostalgically modernist but rather pluralist and plays the role of an international platform for contemporary art and aesthetics. It is, following Mayer’s reframing of Debroise’s engagement with Eisenstein, our responsibility as viewers to become aware of the links between memory, documentation, and the present within today’s global art landscape.

Mireille Torres is an independent researcher living and working in Mexico City. She holds a B.A. in Art History from the Iberoamericana University. She currently writes contemporary art reviews for mytrend.co, and has also begun a research project on the interrelation between visual art and music.