

Acropolis Cinema Presents

**LA  
ÚLTIMA  
PELÍCULA**

*A film by Raya Martin and Mark Peranson*



January 13, 2016 ~ 7PM ~ Los Feliz 3

## ABOUT THE FILM

Feverishly pillaging the depths of cinema history, *La última película* ingeniously reconstitutes the more mythical aspects of Dennis Hopper's infamous Hollywood disaster *The Last Movie* into a contemporary deconstruction of the artistic process and the vagaries of unchecked creativity. Starring Alex Ross Perry (director of *Queen of Earth* and *Listen Up Philip*) in a humorously self-reflexive role as a conceited, blindly ambitious filmmaker attempting to mount an elaborate production in the Yucatán wilderness on the eve of the Mayan Apocalypse, the film riffs lovingly on an entire lineage of cinephilic lore, and in particular on Hopper's apocryphal persona as an acid-fried savior of his own conception in the 1971 quasi-documentary *The American Dreamer*. As versed in cinema's more arcane corners as they are the material aspects of the filmmaking process itself, directors Raya Martin and Mark Peranson—commingling fact and fiction as casually as they shift between a half dozen different shooting formats—paint the end of celluloid cinema not as elegy for a bygone era, but as an invigorating reanimation of a medium too often left for dead.

88 minutes // Canada/Denmark/Mexico/Philippines // 2013



# THE END OF CINEMA

By Phil Coldiron

What comes at the end of cinema?

Not what comes after cinema—a good question for marketing gurus like Spielberg and Lucas and Cameron to lock themselves in a room and argue over until they expire, choking on their own hot air—but right there at the end, in death tranquil or terrifying or both, as the movies take stock of a lifetime of failures (and, okay, more than a few successes). As a moment, it's the end of both the particular (the last movie) and the universal (the cinema): the world-as-projector clicking senselessly onward, the projectionist long gone (or maybe never around to begin with), and the cinema-as-film caught in the stasis of perpetual motion, run through, ass-end slapping ceaselessly toward disintegration against its one true companion. When that delivery finally comes in the form of a complete formal breakdown—the comfortable order of the classical style churned into a maelstrom of frames and pixels (cf. *Film socialisme* [2010])—will the unifying force of Bazin's trusty old ontology hold? "Now, for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were." If one accepts that the cinema will come to an end before the world does (i.e., as long as there's still duration; figuring what comes after duration is the real question of what comes after cinema), then there's no reason to think otherwise—even a radically decentred cinema, one whose tatters are sent flying off in infinite directions, both analogue and digital, would still hold together around this core of mummified change. It might finally be a real big bang for the movies, which is to say that as long as there's a world, what comes at the end of cinema isn't an end at all: it's cinema.

This though still leaves questions about the particular. How will we know when we've come to the last movie? Will the last movie know it's the last movie? What will the view of cinema be from this vantage point at its end? The last movie, as both an expectation and an object, is necessarily subjunctive, a tense that Spanish handles with far more grace than English, so it's with good reason that Raya Martin and Mark Peranson have returned to *The Last Movie* (1971) as *La última película*.

Not so much a remake as an act of salvage—Hopper's film is just one among many sources scrapped and taken for parts, whether jokes or narrative beats or soundtrack choices or shot compositions—*La última película* shifts the location from the earlier film's Peru to Mexico, where Hopper first intended to make it, at another moment in which an end is not an end: the culmination of the Mayan long-count calendar, the event widely referred to in the media as The Mayan Apocalypse. Of course humanity did not come to an end on December 21, 2012, and it remains to be seen whether the New Age reading of the event as a shift between fields of consciousness in fact occurred, but regardless, one could hardly ask for a more apt site at which to situate the last movie, an object which is apocalyptic in the sense that it is, to borrow Jonathan Rosenbaum's description of *The Last Movie*, "simultaneously about many things...and nothing at all"—which could stand to be extended from "many things" to "everything" since what, after all, is the Apocalypse if not the sudden conflation of everything and nothing?

There is at least one apocalypse here that does come to pass, as Martin and Peranson retain Hopper's hazy arc of a white man drifting toward personal ruin in the Global South. (Given the fact that the film also retains *The Last Movie*'s staunch commitment to shooting on location, it's an alignment of production and narrative that inevitably recalls everything from Conrad to *Tabu* [1931] to another Hopper project directly referenced, *Apocalypse Now* [1979].) The white man here is a filmmaker played by Alex Ross Perry, who, as in *The Color Wheel* (2011), proves terribly committed to plumbing the depths of his own ego. He is the full embodiment of the interested Western liberal, and as such, fundamentally insufferable—an asshole, as the Sancho to his Quixote, local guide Gabino (Gabino Rodríguez), bluntly puts it during one early bit of ranting about the archeological authenticity of a wall and some trash in comparison to the nearby Mayan ruins.

His filmmaker spends much of the movie spouting off similar pronouncements about his own work, the cinema, and the world in general, all of which are self-serious to the point of delusion, modelled in part after Hopper's similar pronouncements in *The American Dreamer*, the 1971 "documentary" made on Hopper's Taos ranch while he was editing *The Last Movie*. There's an inability to reconcile his rigid sense of superiority—e.g., for him the Mayan pyramids are nothing more than the best movie set that anyone could ask

for—with the messy reality of this place the cinema has drawn him to, which, in an almost cosmic manner, marks him for brutal, sacrificial death. If *La última película* only concerned itself with this rending asunder of the myth of the white explorer-filmmaker illuminating dark worlds, it would at least be commendable as a corrective to a trope that remains alarmingly popular, but Martin and Peranson continually discover new avenues of thought down each of the film's many ruptures—fissures which occur both internally via its heterogeneous approach to form (the film makes use of nine different cameras and seven different shooting formats, including 16mm, Super 8mm, and a variety of standard- and high-definition digital cameras, and will ideally be presented theatrically on an eighth, 35mm) and deployment of perspective or genre (it makes use of tropes from documentary, the essay film, the historical epic, both the structural and lyrical avant-garde, melodrama, and science fiction, among others), and externally, as it calls into question many of the axioms at the heart of contemporary world cinema.

Chief among these is its injunction against the performance of culture as an essential function of the global economy, an intervention that hangs over the film from its opening images, in which a man done up in full Mayan body paint for the benefit of the tourists descending on the region stares into the camera before finally cracking a small, exhausted smile and admitting that he's tired. World cinema today finds itself in much the same place: films must dress up their culture of origin in the ways that will most appeal to the cultural elite who make up film festival selection committees and audiences, a situation which has hardened into a set of rules that are every bit as dogmatic as those kept in place to ensure that Hollywood blockbusters turn appropriate profits on their nine-figure investments. We have reached a point where the whole of world cinema seems exhausted by these demands to continue trotting out the worst aspects of their countries (drug problems, histories of intolerance, authoritarian rule, etc.), as if the only way to get a Western audience to notice their existence is by confirming that audience's fears about a place, and giving them the opportunity to feel suitably horrified—the catharsis of guilt standing in comfortably for any action. Mexico sits at the top of this list, its most lauded films showing the country as nothing but an amoral husk in the wake of the terror of its ongoing drug war. Certainly there is nothing wrong with these filmmakers attempting to expose injustice to the world, but one should be weary of a system of financing and exhibition that promotes the perpetuation of such narratives at the expense of any further engagement with the culture.

Martin and Peranson, a Filipino and a Canadian, make no bones about their status as outsiders, using this position as an opportunity to explore the contradictory, or even paradoxical, position of the tourist. On one end, there is Perry's filmmaker, the cynical tourist who claims to know a place better than the locals, and on the other, there are new age pilgrims who have flocked to Chichen Itza for the Apocalypse, naïve individuals convinced that the earnest endeavour of an all-inclusive resort stay complete with daily meditation sessions near the pyramids confirms them as enlightened citizens of the world. For both the cynical and the naïve tourist, the reality of the situation is one of exploitation: whether finding a film set or finding spiritual purity, the culture of the Other exists only to fulfill a specific need for these bourgeois travellers that isn't fundamentally any different from, say, buying organic kale at Whole Foods. When these two groups finally come into contact in the second half of the film, as Perry and Rodríguez wander the pyramids amongst groups of revellers, loudly mocking the event, Martin and Peranson most clearly open up the space that they have been working the entire time: the film is able to both side with Perry, the cynical tourist who is at least aware of his position as tourist, over these naïve tourists whose exploitation is even more insidious for its lack of awareness, while still undercutting Perry's authority as a commentator with his own well-established inability to view this place as anything other than his for the taking. This double movement of critique leaves only Rodríguez, the native, in a position of clarity, and indeed, if *La última película* is anyone's movie, it's his. This centrality is confirmed by his involvement with the film's emotional core, a match of sound and image that is, in its absolute simplicity, one of the most beautiful and moving sequences that the cinema has produced. In an early scene, while driving Perry out of town for a location scout, Rodríguez attributes his affection for the region to a set of photos of his parents in this place many years before, pictures that show them deeply in love. In the moment it seems an offhand remark, small talk between strangers to fill the time. The duo continue on their adventures until Perry finds himself thrown in jail for trespassing and the film breaks abruptly from its building narrative momentum to present these photos in a Markeresque

slideshow, accompanied on the soundtrack by John Buck Wilkin's "My God & I," rescued from the background of a scene in *The Last Movie* and returned to a place of suitable prominence. These sounds and images are the sudden swelling of an unchecked emotional force, one that obliterates both irony and sentimentality; the entire film flows out from this single rupture. The effect is not simply to permeate the whole with a deep sense of love, but to recontextualize its reflexive and disjunctive strategies as an experiment in something like radical empathy.

Among the instruments of this experiment, we might mention the presentation of serial takes as looped segments, a conceptual movement which, as in *Rivette*, collapses the distance between rehearsal and performance (i.e., the film is brought back up to the plane of the fleshy, messy everyday); various instances of filming the production itself, each of which serves to intensify the sense of historical awareness that pulses through the film (it would be hard to imagine a more concise expression of the project's simultaneous engagement with the past, present, and future than the brief shot of an assistant scrubbing fake blood off of the stone steps of a public monument site in the heart of Mérida following a staged sacrifice); and the play of formats off one another in a search not just for their unique affective qualities, but an exploration which the movie extends as an inquiry into their epistemological capacity: by playing up the fundamental inability of these many formats to capture light in a consistent fashion, Martin and Peranson underscore the ideological function of aesthetic choices. When Rodríguez sacrifices Perry in the aforementioned sequence, the moments shot on 16mm film radiate with a sort of budget magnificence built of soupy light and exaggerated reds which confirms the triumph against the northern imperialist crusader; when the same scene is shown in the flat clarity of digital, it becomes almost silly, the expressiveness of artifice now playing as jarring because of the fact that its textures will be intimately familiar to anyone who has owned a camera in the last decade, the time in which digital photography has quickened its march toward a baseline situated at the full erasure of aesthetic distance. This is not an argument for one format over the other—here I'd like to note that the claims for celluloid made on indexical grounds represent little more than the betrayal of a preference for chemistry over math—but an acknowledgement that even, or perhaps especially, the most banal of budgetary decisions must be examined as ideological concerns.

Seeing these tactics through the reverberations of this originary love, its constant infolding becomes not an acknowledgment of artifice or relativity, but an attempt at turning cinema back against the impulses, the clichés, and the dogmas that might stand in the way of a true image capable of forcing us to confront all that is other in all its complexity. It's in this confrontation that we might reasonably say that everything and nothing finally collapse into one another. Its strongest images—the world seen floating upside down, a rain of meteors on a rear-projected sky, the bustle of a street or a strip club during Christmas time, two old women perched on a pyramid in the evening sun—are both about everything that is outside of each of us, and about nothing, in the sense that they are free of discursive distance.

Or at least nearly free, since this attempt must always come up short: the cut, of which every movie must have at least two, cannot avoid introducing a perspective which is the very limit between cinema and the world, though Martin and Peranson, in their dogged commitment to chipping away any trace of bullshit from their cinema—an act undertaken in the name of love, which we might also call truth—have come as close as anyone before them, a heritage that includes Griffith and Bresson, Warhol and Costa, the Straubs and Rossellini, Hellman and Fuller, Frampton and Vertov. These are all makers of last movies, directors committed to pushing the forms of cinema toward the point where they begin to disintegrate, revealing not their artifice, but their capacity for expressing the truth of a situation. In the end, Perry's filmmaker—his fate already sealed, speaking perhaps from the afterlife, moments before embarking on a final journey into the pure intensity of red light (an ending which recalls another great last movie: *Dillinger Is Dead* [1969])—finds his way to something like clarity: "One dot could serve as the punctuation for all that has come before, and the opening salvo for all that will come after." This explosive rejection of the perpetual stasis of the neoliberal end of history in favour of an infinitely open, historically informed future—this is the logic of the last movie.

# INTERVIEW WITH MARK PERANSON

The following is an excerpt of an interview conducted by Adam Nayman with *La última película* co-director Mark Peranson, originally published at Fandor on January 10, 2015.

**Adam Nayman:** *La última película* is very much about apocalypse, and it suggests that something about cinema has ended—that it's the end of history. There's a pessimism there.

**Mark Peranson:** I wouldn't say it's un-hopeful. In terms of filmmaking, it opens up possibilities, and not just in terms of materials. There's an 'anything goes' philosophy in there, a co-mingling of materials and forms: on set we were trying everything that came to mind. In a way one can relate this to the idea of the end of the Mayan long count, which New Agers bastardized into meaning the Apocalypse. The Mayan idea is that at the end of the calendar, there would be some process, some transformation, and that it would be for the good—not just how time was counted but some actual changes about life. So with film, you have the first hundred years of cinema as being on celluloid, and then there's digital. We're poised at this precipice, and it came pretty rapidly. This isn't to say that our film is providing any answers or predicting anything, but it's important that we not forget what film was like for those first hundred years. The real danger, not just in film, but in everything, is in losing contact with history. It's true that technological advance often creates along with it a kind of nostalgia, a looking back at older forms; I suppose Miguel Gomes' *Tabu* would be the most obvious in recent years. It's true that Alex's character is holding onto the past, and mourning the loss of something, but there's a veil of irony over the whole project. So when he's running off his mouth, you shouldn't take what he's saying as being entirely on the level. I don't think you can charge Raya or myself with being nostalgic for early 1970s filmmaking, though, as neither of us were alive at the time.

**Nayman:** You mention a veil of irony. There's also a veil of cinephilia: there are so many references to other movies, and then there's the fact that Raya Martin, Alex Ross Perry and Gabino Rodríguez all bring these associations with them from their own work, on top of which some of the people watching the film will know you as the editor of *Cinema Scope*, which is a deeply cinephilic magazine...

**Peranson:** That's one level of the film. I think the film is strong enough to work without all that background knowledge, or if people don't catch all the references that we're making to all those other movies. Hopefully it can exist as a document—a fake document—of a filmmaker going to Mexico to make a movie of the Mayan apocalypse. Which is also of course what we were doing. If it doesn't succeed on that level then it doesn't succeed. A few people have compared it to postmodern literature, and that wasn't what I was thinking about when we made it but I liked that, because I have a great respect for an audience, and don't want to force feed people a narrative, and there's always something at the heart of the best postmodern literature. It's not just formal. It's a very emotional movie for me, and for Raya also, and hopefully that comes across.

**Nayman:** You've talked in other interviews about the movie being a comedy, and in *Cinema Scope* you've expressed your preferences for comedies over boring movies. I remember one of your Cannes dispatches was about that exact thing; that funny movies trump boring ones any day of the week. To some extent, by making this movie a comedy, are you practicing what you preach as a critic?

**Peranson:** There's also a veil of irony on the Cannes pieces. I would characterize both of my films [also *Waiting for Sancho* (2008)], as 'experimental comedies.' That's the genre I'm working in and not enough people do that. People either want to see comedies or they want to see experimental films, but they rarely want to see both at the same time. Comedy is a subjective thing, though. We wanted a movie that people laughed with and not at, but also in a non-traditional sense. It's rare for me to enjoy myself when I watch certain kinds of movies these days; we wanted to make something that we would enjoy and that other people would enjoy. I think that it does help to see it more than once, because once you have the structure of the film, and once you understand that not all of the things that Alex is saying are meant to be taken seriously, it becomes a very different thing.

**Nayman:** I think that at the TIFF screening, there was a conversation afterwards about annoyance: the idea that a movie can productively be annoying. Or maybe it's that a lot of the things that Alex says in the movie are annoying both because of how he says them and because they suggest things that some people—in the film and in the audience—might not want to hear about cinema, or filmmaking, or artistic endeavors in general. It can be liberating to be annoying.

**Peranson:** I find it unbelievable that somebody could watch this movie and not be annoyed at some point. The whole first reel of the film is kind of annoying. It's sort of counterintuitive to say that the point of a movie could be that it's annoying, and I don't think people could be thinking that consciously while they're making something—that the point of what they're doing is to be annoying—but there is a philosophy of annoyance. Most films that are annoying are annoying against the wishes of their creators. They're annoying for bad reasons. If you want to advance the theory that it's good to be annoying, I support that, but not to the extent that the entire film is annoying. That's taking it a bit too far.

**Nayman:** Now that you've made a feature-length comedy, would you agree with that old dictum that dying is easy and comedy is hard?

**Peranson:** If you're making a film like this, the key is casting. We had a very minimal script. There was no dialogue written. The bulk of the lines and the jokes came from the actors. We discussed things but we didn't write lines for them. One of the most staged scene was that one at the campfire, which we shot twice, and the first time was very different, and led to a certain amount of confusion as to the purpose of, well, the whole endeavor. Alex wanted something more concrete so I gave him the beats, taking off from his reactions, but all of their dialogue was improvised. So even though we had a structure on paper, a rough plan of how the film would ideally look, editing all of that together is not the easiest thing to do, no. You have to make a lot of choices, as opposed to picking the best take, so it's probably a different experience than directing a proper comedic feature of course. Alex is really funny and smart, as is Gabino, so we figured that humor would develop a result of just having them there, as we encouraged them to go in that direction. There are things we didn't expect, but that we were prepared for, like that conversation with the guy at the top of the pyramid in the first scene in the ruins. We considered having Alex go full-Borat and confront people in character, but it wasn't in the nature of the film. It's hard to keep all of the humor in the same register.

**Nayman:** On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate the experience of shooting a movie in Mexico on the eve of the apocalypse?

**Peranson:** As Dali supposedly said after visiting Mexico, 'I will not go again to a country that is even more surreal than my paintings.' There are good things about shooting in Mexico and there are bad things about shooting in Mexico. It's very cheap. We could do what we wanted. We had a short time frame, though: we shot it in seven and a half days, driving between multiple locations, sometimes for hours. One of the cameras broke when we were shooting and it was pretty hard to find another 16mm camera in the Yucatan so we had to fly it in from Mexico City. If we'd been there ten years ago there probably would have been 16mm cameras everywhere. Now all the industrial production in the Yucatan is digital. But we didn't have a choice: the movie couldn't have been made anywhere else, really, for obvious reasons. The locations are very symbolic. When they're on the beach in the darkness, that scene was shot at midnight on December 21, 2012, looking at the place where the meteor fell that supposedly killed the dinosaurs. We were in the city right next to the crater. Raya liked that, because he's more into the cosmic than I am.

**Nayman:** Has Raya Martin talked about the film as extensively as you have?

**Peranson:** It seems to have fallen to me. He showed the film a couple of times in the Philippines and was also in New York for Art of the Real last year. He's shooting next month so he's been working on other things. We worked on the film for a long time together and there were only some small things that we disagreed on. It's not an easy thing to make a movie with two directors. A film like this can't be perfect, and maybe it should be annoying at times, because it's coming from two different minds. It hit me at some point that it made sense having two directors on a movie where imperfection is interwoven into the fabric of the film. People have tried to break it down to us and say 'this part of the film is Raya' and 'this part of the film is Mark' and the fact is that they often have it backwards. ♦

## Upcoming Events

### January 28, 2016 ~ Pleats of Matter: The Films of Blake Williams

Canadian experimental 3D filmmaker Blake Williams in person for the first presentation of his work in Los Angeles.

Time: 8:00pm

Location: Automata

Address: 504 Chung King Ct, Los Angeles, CA 90012

*"Red Capriccio may be a touchstone for how I see and hear subsequent films."*  
Michael Sicinski, MUBI Notebook



### March 11, 2016 ~ Isiah Medina's 88:88

Los Angeles premiere of Isiah Medina's extraordinary feature debut.

Time: 7:30 & 9:00pm

Location: Echo Park Film Center

Address: 1200 N. Alvarado St, Los Angeles, CA 90026

*"Medina's is a cinema of the cut, of difference, of reconsidering every assumption of more than a half century's worth of filmmaking....I could say that 88:88 is a masterpiece, but masterpieces are the domain of the past; Medina has taken his first step into the future."*  
Phil Coldiron, *Cinema Scope*

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