

CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICAN CINEMA

BREAKING INTO THE GLOBAL MARKET



Edited by

DEBORAH SHAW

films of 2001, *Y tu mamá también* and *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, reveals the enormous difference in budgets, distribution arrangements, and audience figures. The Mexican film was made with an estimated \$5,000,000; it grossed \$408,091 in its opening weekend in the United States and was shown on 40 screens.⁹ The first of the *Lord of the Rings* films was made with a budget of approximately \$93,000,000; it grossed \$66,114,741 at the box office in its first weekend in the United States and was seen on 3,359 screens.¹⁰

I have questioned the term Latin American cinema in that it renders certain countries invisible, yet the term is clearly used and useful to discuss films from Latin America, not least as a marketing label. As Andrew Higson has noted in his discussion of British cinema, notions of national cinema in terms of the international and domestic marketplace are used to sell films by using national identity as a distinctive brand name.¹¹ In the international film market, Latin American continental identity has become such a brand, with popular film critics talking enthusiastically about Latin American cinema and drawing (rather forced) comparisons between films as diverse as *Cidade de Deus* and *Amores perros*.¹² Indeed, individual films may have little in common with each other and be made in countries that are geographically and culturally at some distance; it is, in fact, important to acknowledge that there are many forms of filmmaking coming from Latin America, with each director employing a unique visual style and addressing specific themes. Nevertheless, the notion of Latin American film has been useful as each success creates an opening in the market for other films, with production and distribution companies more likely to keep investing in films from the region.

Despite the wide range of approaches that lie behind such generalizing terms as Latin American cinema, there are some common points in a number of the films that have proven most successful in commercial terms. Many films released from the end of the 1990s to the present have managed to retain a social conscience, so characteristic of New Latin American cinema of the 1960s and 1970s. The most profitable films of recent times—*Cidade de Deus*, *Central do Brasil*, *Y tu mamá también*, and Walter Salles's *Los diarios de motocicleta* (*The Motorcycle Diaries*, 2004)—have a clear sociopolitical agenda. And unlike more explicitly political filmmaking of the earlier era, this agenda is filtered through a personal, intimate, character-driven focus and shares high production values and an emphasis on an entertaining plot. Party political agendas are avoided with politicians and political institutions unnamed, yet these films tackle such issues as social injustice, police corruption, political corruption, and poverty. It is also no coincidence that even though these films engage with social issues, many borrow conventions from

genre formats. *Los diarios de motocicleta* and *Y tu mamá también* share many ingredients with more traditional road movies; *Nueve reinas* is rooted within the tradition of the scam movie; and even *Cidade de Deus*, a film so rooted in the realities of the Brazilian *favelas*, owes some of its success, in part, to the fact that it could be read, erroneously in Elsa Vieira's view, from within the conventions of the gangster film. The strength of some of the most successful films from Latin America, in contrast to many (but not all) of its Hollywood counterparts, is that high-quality entertainment is produced without the loss of a socially committed agenda.

Latin American Cinema and the International Market

This collection of essays by major scholars in the field of Latin American cinema highlights the diverse strengths of some of the most important films to emerge in the first years of the new millennium and draws attention to an extraordinary period in the history of Latin American film in terms of its presence in the international market. The chapters provide readings that explore film text, social context, and production conditions to gain a fuller picture of the state of contemporary filmmaking in a range of Latin American countries. The readings in this book provide invaluable material for students and scholars of Latin American film and contribute to the growing field of research on Latin American cinema with a focus on some of the most recent films to emerge. Films such as *Nueve reinas*, *Y tu mamá también*, *Cidade de Deus*, and *Los diarios de motocicleta* are already finding their way into film-studies and Hispanic-studies programs, and this book includes readings of other films that would be fruitful texts for study both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The chapters are organized into three sections. Chapters 1 to 4 examine films that have had an unprecedented impact on a global level; chapters 5 to 8 consider films that have been exhibited principally at film festivals, in limited runs, and few theaters in other national contexts but have failed to secure widespread international distributions deals; and chapters 9 and 10 take as their subject films that have failed to attract international support, despite local interest, and look at the reasons for this. All of the essays provide in-depth analysis and are grounded in an understanding and explanation of the films' geo-historical context and show that, despite the emphasis on transnational practices of production and distribution, it is still possible to talk in terms of national cinemas in a Latin American context.

Thus the readings of the films demonstrate that, despite their relationships with the international market, they are deeply rooted in national

preoccupations. In chapter 6, David Foster examines *Kamchatka* (2002) and demonstrates the way in which the family unit acts as a metaphor for Argentine society during the time of the military dictatorship. Foster argues that despite an approach influenced by Hollywood in terms of style and narrative conventions, the film is an example of a cultural exploration of national trauma. In chapter 8, in his analysis of Juan Carlos Tabío's *Lista de espera* (*The Waiting List*, 2000), Rob Stone argues that the coach station, in which the action takes place and which is geographically situated between Havana and Santiago, comes to represent an imagined Cuba that can fulfill its Revolutionary ideals. For Stone, a critique of Castro's Cuba is combined with a faith in the founding Socialist ideals of the Revolution. In chapter 9, in her analysis of Salvador Carrasco's *La otra conquista* (*The Other Conquest*, 1999), Miriam Haddu analyzes the ongoing concern to represent Mexican history from the point of view of the indigenous population; while in chapter 1, in her analysis of *Los diarios de motocicleta*, Claire Williams explores the way in which the notion of a Pan-Latin American identity is combined with the realities of social inequality uniting diverse republics.

National contexts are important even with the films in this collection of essays that are not explicitly about a specific national issue. Jorge Alí Triana's *Bolívar soy yo* (*Bolívar is Me*, 2002) examines the role of the mass media in contemporary Colombia through the dramatization via *telenovela* of the exploits of Simon Bolívar; Peru's obsession with *telenovelas* is sent up in Alvaro Velarde's *El destino no tiene favoritos* (*Destiny Has No Favorites*, 2003), *Madame Satã* indirectly explores the heterogeneous body of Brazil through its focus on an Afro-Brazilian homosexual transvestite, who is both masculine and feminine; the diverse faces of Mexico are a constant background to the two teenage boys' adventures in *Y tu mamá también*; even *Nueve reinas*, a film that appears to be rooted in a generic tradition, has at its heart the national preoccupations of crime and corruption.¹³

These national contexts have, in many cases, proven no obstacle to spectators' enjoyment of the films in other countries, and many of the essays in this collection examine the relationship between films and the international market and analyze the forces behind international hits. In chapter 5, Lisa Shaw considers *Madame Satã* and, among other aspects, reflects on how a film that focuses on a fascinating marginalized character from the Brazilian underworld struck a chord with both national and foreign audiences. In chapter 2, Nuala Finnegan's study of *Y tu mamá también* examines the relationships between the local and the global in the film, and she reveals the ways in which the two concepts coexist. The chapter highlights the way in which the film speaks to national concerns and simultaneously presents and

undermines a tourist vision of Mexico. In a related approach, in chapter 4 in my study of *Nueve reinas*, I argue that different readings of the film are encouraged through the marketing processes depending on the national context in which it is seen. *Nueve reinas* can be read as a generic scam movie, or it can be viewed as an Argentine film rooted in a national tradition and concerned with contemporary sociopolitical issues. In this way, I explain how both national and international markets have embraced this film. In chapter 1, Williams demonstrates how romantic representations of the iconic figure of Che Guevara as a young idealistic student, coupled with spectacular scenery of Latin American landscapes, provide an example of an approach to filmmaking that is bound to secure commercial success and critical acclaim. Likewise, in chapter 3, Else Vieira hails the extraordinary success of *Cidade de Deus*; she argues that it has been enormously influential in terms of innovations in style and demonstrates how it has both contributed to the internationalization of Brazilian film and helped to provide a new language for the social film while renovating generic traditions associated with Hollywood.

A darker, often untold side to Latin American cinema is that of the commercial failures and films that never make it to our screens. Several of the chapters in this volume provide fascinating explanations for this and consider the difficulties faced by filmmakers, particularly in terms of distribution. In chapter 10, on *El destino no tiene favoritos*, Sarah Barrow looks at the importance of mechanisms of support for filmmakers in the Peruvian context and presents a detailed analysis of the failings in terms of financial and marketing support for national filmmakers. The chapter demonstrates that *El destino no tiene favoritos* is a film with great commercial potential; but the aforementioned failings mean that this potential cannot be exploited. In a similar vein, Haddu's study of *La otra conquista* and its failure to secure an international distribution deal, despite its success in national terms, points to a worrying side effect of the reliance on international finance: the failure of filmmakers to take risks on less glossy, less Europeanized, viewpoints on national identity. Stone's chapter on *Lista de espera*, rather than lamenting the lack of international recognition awarded to the movie, demonstrates the value of a more local approach to filmmaking. This is a film that is specifically Cuban in its focus and aims to appeal to national audiences or to those with a particular interest in Cuban culture. It is, in Stone's words: "an insular work in subject and theme that offers a self-diagnosis of Cuban cinema as a self-reflexive national cinema that is neither intended nor intelligible for international audiences" (p. 135–36). It is important to argue for a space for this kind of cinema in these profit-driven times of globalized film markets.

Another linking theme seen in a number of chapters is the exploration of new forms of representation that run counter to more traditional forms seen in previous films. The chapters by Shaw and Haddu highlight such new departures. In her analysis of *Madame Satã*, Shaw provides an insightful reading of the film's central figure, Joao Francisco de Santos (Madame Satã), a black homosexual transvestite who defies easy categorization and transcends traditional understandings of racial identity, masculinity, and femininity. Haddu focuses on the way in which *La otra conquista* departs from the dominant filmic representations of Europeanized, middle-class Mexicans, and foregrounds the experiences of the indigenous *mexica* during the period of the conquest of Mexico.¹⁴

Vieira also explores marginalized groups and demonstrates how they are placed center stage in her reading of *Cidade de Deus*. She highlights the ways in which professional actors are largely bypassed in the attempt to represent life in the favelas from the point of view of the favela population. In chapter 7, Geoffrey Kantaris is also concerned with other issues relating to representation; in his reading of the Colombian film *Bolívar soy yo*, he focuses on postmodern questioning of notions of reality in favor of representation. The chapter highlights the way in which the great champion of independence, Bolívar, is seen through a comic filter and used as a vehicle to parody mass media entertainment, principally the telenovela.

Taken together, the chapters in this collection demonstrate the vitality of much contemporary Latin American film culture, both in terms of film production and scholarship. While there are common threads, there are a range of styles, approaches, and themes that speak of a rich and varied culture of filmmaking. This book aims to contribute to this culture by both helping to disseminate knowledge of these important films to a wider audience and offering interpretations that will help fans and researchers gain a deeper understanding of the films.

Notes

1. Antonio Skármeta, "Europe: An Indispensable Link in the Production and Circulation of Latin American Cinema," in *New Latin American Cinema*, vol. 1, *Theory, Practices and Transcontinental Practices*, ed. Michael T. Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 263–269, 267. I would like to thank Sue Harper for her helpful comments on the draft of this introduction.

2. Cuáron directed *A Little Princess* (1995), *Great Expectations* (1998), and *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004), shot in the United Kingdom, and starring mainly British actors but produced by Warner Bros. Del Toro directed the Hollywood films *Mimic* (1997) and *Blade II* (2002), and Iñárritu directed *21 Grams* (2003).

3. A number of films funded by this program have been successful; these include: Carlos Carrera's *El crime del padre Amaro* (*The Crime of Father Amaro*, 2002) from Mexico, Lucrecia Martel's *La ciénaga* (*The Swamp*, 2001) from Argentina, and Beatriz Flores Silva's *En la puta vida* (*In This Tricky Life*, 2001) from Uruguay. For more information, see www.programaibermedia.com/esp/htm/home.htm.

4. Information taken from Tamara Falicov, "Ibermedia: The Strengths and Pitfalls of the Ibero-American film Co-Production Fund," paper presented at the New Latin American Cinemas: Contemporary Cinema and Filmmaking Conference, University of Leeds, June 2005.

5. For further discussion on the changing relationship between filmmaking that is supported by the state and privately financed in Latin American contexts, see my conclusion in *Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Ten Key Films* (London: Continuum, 2003), 183–185.

6. Recent monographs and edited volumes on Latin American cinema include: Marina Díaz López and Alberto Elena, eds. *The Cinema of Latin America* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003); Stephen Hart, *A Companion to Latin American Film* (Ipswich, England: Boydell and Brewer, 2004); Lúcia Nagib, *The New Brazilian Film* (London: Tauris, 2003); David William Foster, *Queer Issues in Contemporary Latin American Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003); Deborah Shaw, *Contemporary Cinema of Latin America: 10 Key Films* (London: Continuum, 2003); Lisa Shaw and Stephanie Dennison, eds. *Latin American Cinema Modernity, Gender and National Identity* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2005).

7. Michael Chanan, "Contemporary Documentary Currents in Latin America," paper presented at the New Latin American Cinemas: Contemporary Cinema and Filmmaking Conference, University of Leeds, June 2005. Chanan focuses on the work of the Brazilian filmmaker Eduardo Coutinho and *cine piquetero*, which are the works of Argentine filmmakers that documented the financial and political crisis of 2001.

8. Michael Chanan writes of the indigenous groups in Brazil who are making videos to document their traditions and struggles, "Contemporary Documentary Currents."

9. Internet Movie Database (IMDB), Business data for *Y tu mamá también*, www.imdb.com/title/tt0245574/business (accessed October 10, 2005).

10. IMDB, Business data for *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, www.imdb.com/title/tt0120737/business (accessed October 10, 2005).

11. Andrew A. Higson, "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema," in *Cinema and Nation*, eds. Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie (London: Routledge, 2000), 69.

12. For example, Peter Bradshaw, the respected film reviewer for the *Guardian*, draws a comparison between the two films that is, at best, tenuous. He writes, "Amores Perros—increasingly the touchstone of the Latin new wave—began with a car chase and a dead animal. Director Fernando Meirelles's *City of God* [. . .] has something similar, but invests his images with more overtly mythic qualities, irresistibly potent from the very beginning." Peter Bradshaw, "Cidade de Deus and Amores

Perros," film.guardian.co.uk/News_Story/Critic_Review/Guardian_Film_of_the_week/0,4267,867669,00.html (accessed October 15, 2005).

13. There may appear to be some omissions in this book relating to other recent landmark films; there is for example no chapter on either of the two highly influential films by Lucrecia Martel (*La ciénaga* and *La niña santa*), and there is no chapter on *Amores perros*. The reason for these omissions in both cases is that there are other excellent studies either existing or about to be published. The study on Martel's films is included in Joanna Page's *The Aesthetics of Survival: Cinema and the Argentine Crisis* (forthcoming); for an excellent study of *Amores perros*, see Paul Julian Smith's volume in the BFI Modern Classics Series, *Amores perros* (London: BFI, 2003).

14. *La otra conquista* is the only film to be released before 2000; it was first shown in Mexico in 1999, just one year before this period and is included as it offers a counterpoint to the more commercial forms of filmmaking associated with films such as *Amores perros* and *Y tu mamá también*.

CHAPTER ONE



Los diarios de motocicleta as Pan-American Travelogue

Claire Williams

Walter Salles's film *Los diarios de motocicleta* (*The Motorcycle Diaries*, 2004) is a truly pan-American film. It was put together with funding from Argentina, Chile, Peru, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States; the screenplay was written by a Puerto Rican, José Rivera; it was directed by a Brazilian; and it starred the Mexican actor Gael García Bernal and Argentine actor Rodrigo de la Serna. Furthermore, the project involved local crews and production companies and used actors from across the continent to work in the eleven main locations.¹ And the biggest stamp of approval came from Hollywood royalty in the shape of the executive producer Robert Redford. When Redford invited Salles to direct the story of the young Ernesto "Che" Guevara's travels round Latin America in 1952, the Brazilian reputedly jumped at the chance, even though this would be his first experience of filming in Spanish rather than Portuguese. Guevara's revised version of diaries and letters chronicling the trip, together with the volume published by his co-adventurer (and owner of the motorbike), Alberto Granado, would be the basis of Rivera's script.²

The film can be read on many levels: as a road movie, a voyage of self-discovery, a historical travel documentary, a travelogue and guide to sites of symbolic or tourist significance (the lakes of Bariloche, the largest open-pit copper mine in the world at Chuquicamata, the Inca fortress of Machu Picchu, the Amazon jungle), and a representation of two young men's rites of passage as they mature emotionally and politically, learning from the people they meet along the way. This chapter will analyze these various dimensions

CHAPTER NINE



The Power of Looking Politics and the Gaze in Salvador Carrasco's *La otra conquista*

Miriam Haddu

Many of the filmmaking tendencies of the 1990s in Mexico were concerned with reestablishing a sense of national identity on the screen. Tired of celluloid images that reflected a bygone era of revolutionary nationalism, contemporary Mexican filmmakers during the last decade of the millennium began to look within, to redefine what is meant by *lo mexicano*, or a sense of Mexicanness. Crucial to the transnational commercial success stories of recent cinema from Mexico, such as Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Amores perros* (*Love's a Bitch*, 2000) or Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también* (*And Your Mother, Too*, 2001), lies the self reflective and introspective period of filmmaking witnessed during the 1990s.¹ The cinematic work conducted during the 1990s allowed for the progression and growth of an industry that had, toward the late 1980s, looked considerably threatened. To address this problem, during the late 1980s the ex-president, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, consolidated the Mexican Film Institute (IMCINE) as an independent body. At the core of the reconfiguration of IMCINE lay the attempt to instill a sense of autonomy among the Mexican filmmaking community, with the aim of encouraging the growth of an independent national cinema. Strategic to this scheme was the implementation of a cofinancing policy for new and prospective projects, which gave way to the flourishing of ideas, alongside a focusing on the task of fundraising on behalf of the filmmakers. On completion, such efforts translated themselves into cinematic success stories, paving the way for one of the most fruitful periods of domestic filmmaking since the Golden Age. Moreover, during the 1990s, films such as Alfonso Cuarón's *Sólo con tu*

pareja (*Love in the Time of Hysteria*, 1991), María Novaro's *Danzón* (1991), Dana Rotberg's *Ángel de fuego* (*Angel of Fire*, 1991), Alfonso Arau's *Como agua para chocolate* (*Like Water for Chocolate*, 1992), and Guillermo del Toro's *Cronos* (*Chronology*, 1993), set in motion a period that would be characterized by international and national critical acclaim, as well as a growing interest in Mexican cinema as a viable industry. Furthermore, the filmic success of the 1990s, headed by a generation of young and dynamic directors, put Mexican cinema on the international map by gaining recognition in the form of positive reception and awards and thus securing distribution for acclaimed films. The films of this period are linked thematically by a search for a contemporary sense of Mexican identity on the screen, with its multiple cinematic visions and a fragmented sense of self. As a result, during the 1990s moviegoers saw a multiangled interpretation of Mexican identity projected onto their screens as revealed by the industry's newest arrivals. Further, what this new generation of filmmakers also sought to reevaluate were the archetypal representations of *mexicanidad* as articulated in the cinema of the Golden Age and to reflect the sociopolitical and economical changes that Mexican society had witnessed in the past forty years. Thus a reassessment not only of past cinematic identities, such as the Mexican macho or the archetypal female role, took place in the cinema of the 1990s, but also a reconsideration of both historical and previously unrepresented histories took narrative form. Moreover, the evaluation of important historical events took shape in several significant filmic narratives from the 1990s and produced the history genre in contemporary Mexican filmmaking.

The shifts in representation that was observed in the filmmaking tendencies of the 1990s allowed for the progression and development of a confident, multigeneric and complex cinema that continues advancing well into the twenty-first century. In addition, a critical evaluation of the cinematic productions of the 1990s is necessary to formulate an accurate picture of the filmmaking arena in contemporary Mexico and also for a specific contextualization of Mexican cinema's recent success at home and abroad seen in the aforementioned *Amores perros* and in *Y tu mamá también*. Despite the obvious positives of the success of both Iñárritu and Cuarón's films (in terms of highlighting Mexican cinema as a world player within the international filmmaking arena) back at home, the increasing awareness of the potential gains stemming from commercially successful films ran the risk of affecting the decision-making tendencies behind the financial support and backing of proposed future projects. An inclination toward this line of thinking can be seen to have developed toward the latter part of the 1990s, when Mexican cinema witnessed an increase in the production of films that projected an interna-

tionalized vision of Mexican society, witnessed, for example in *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* (*Sex, Shame and Tears*, 1999) directed by Antonio Serrano (a film that incidentally was the first contemporary Mexican film to be taken up by Twentieth Century Fox). *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* proved to be the result of a potentially winning formula for commercial success, originally devised in the mid-1990s by Rafael Montero's *Cilantro y perejil* (*Recipes to Stay Together*, 1994), a production that enjoyed considerable popularity in Mexico. Films imitating both *Cilantro y perejil* and *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas*, pretexts for exploring gender divisions in contemporary Mexican society, saw an increase in production toward the latter part of the 1990s, exemplified in Fernando Sariñana's *Todo el poder* (*Gimme Power*, 1999), and later in Nicolás Echevarría's *Vivir mata* (*Living Kills*, 2002). These films sought to rework the gradually becoming familiar picture of metropolitan life as seen from the point of view of the young, professional members of society. Heavily influenced by the Hollywood studios' offerings of modern life's twists and woes, alongside the indisputable flavoring of satellite television's projections of young *Friends*-type urban living, Mexican cinema dutifully borrowed techniques, frameworks, and stylistics from its northern neighbors to represent its own up-and-coming youth, thus giving form to the romantic comedy genre, a development unique to the contemporary period of filmmaking. However, almost as an antithesis to the above romantic settings lies the work of artists who continued, in a diversity of ways, to penetrate beyond the façade of modern living, to explore the roots of the current Mexican nation, a task that had also begun during the early 1990s. This quest for a contemporary sense of national identity took on several representative avenues and was shaped by various contexts and locations. Women directors, more prominent in the contemporary period than ever before in the history of national cinema, took the search for a sense of feminine realities in Mexican society one step further, by providing visions and cinematic constructions specifically framed from female points of view, seen for example in the work of María Novaro, Maryse Sistach, Dana Rotberg, Busi Cortés, and Guita Schyfter, to name but a few. The emergence of women's narratives in contemporary Mexican cinema relocates the thematic search for *lo mexicano/a*, from a gendered vacuum, to a multiplicity of representative spaces.

Whereas many directors took on board the changing nature of gender discourse in modern society and explored these on the screen, others chose to observe important moments in Mexican history as points for departure for further cinematic explorations of identity. These narratives looked to the past for explanations of the current nation state and attributed the modern condition to specific figures, moments, and events from Mexican history. An

analysis of these explorations is thus vital to an understanding of this filmic search for identity undertaken by contemporary Mexican filmmakers. Therefore this chapter will center on an example of the cinematic quest to explore the origins and fragments of Mexican identity, so crucial to the investigations taking place during the filmmaking of the 1990s. Discussions in this chapter will focus on one of the highest grossing Mexican films in the nation's recent cinematic history, and the analysis will seek to explore some of the issues raised by the film and by its reception. Salvador Carrasco's *La otra conquista* (*The Other Conquest*, 1998), a highly acclaimed *opera prima*, highlights both in its narrative content and in its reception, one of the primary concerns for representing a cinematic Mexico and turns its attention to a crucial episode in Mexican history to find answers to national cinema's quest for identity on the screen. Carrasco took six years to complete his project (which began filming in 1992) because of the financial burdens of seeing through an ambitious project with limited funding. Notwithstanding the financial constraints, in 1999 the film was screened in Mexico City and then in 2000 in Los Angeles to packed theatres. Yet despite the success of *La otra conquista*, Carrasco's film has failed to attract adequate distribution and awaits nationwide release in the United States. Furthermore, the case of *La otra conquista* raises interesting questions regarding the role of distribution and its impact on the possible shelf life of a film, regardless of its commercial or artistic value. The polemics of representation witnessed by Carrasco's film both because of its subject matter (the narrative of which is set against the backdrop of the Spanish conquest of Mexico) alongside the (perceived) challenges the film provides for commercial reception, also opens the debate regarding the boundaries and restrictions governing transnational success.

Contextual Frameworks (Re)Vising 1992

During the early 1990s, echoing a growing interest in the subject matter of the Conquest, contemporary Mexican cinema produced films such as Juan Mora Catlett's *Retorno a Aztlán* (*Return to Aztlán*, 1990), Sergio Olhovich's *Bartolomé de Las Casas* (1992), and later, Felipe Cazals's *Kino* (1993). In addition, Nicolás Echevarría's contribution to the trend culminated with his prize-winning *Cabeza de Vaca* (1992), the story of a spiritual and geographical journey undergone by the Spanish conqueror of the same name. A few years later, Salvador Carrasco's *La otra conquista* portrays the Conquest as seen from the perspective of the conquered peoples of the Mexican central valley. Here Carrasco's narrative delves into the mind of the *mexica* nation, personified in the character of Topiltzín, an Indian struggling to make sense

of the loss of his ancient world, while attempting to find a space amid the "New World" that has been thrust on him. Independently made, Carrasco's feature film addresses an area of Mexico's past that is significant to modern day notions of national identity.

October 12, 1992 signaled the 500-year anniversary of the controversially termed "Discovery of the Americas," a date that in Spain saw the propelling of a series of commemorative events to mark the occasion. However, such proceedings ignited a wave of protests from Latin American voices from the region, where the validity of Spain and Portugal's past claim of sovereignty over the territory was brought into question. Here criticisms were also made on the use of exploitation and violence as a means of control during the ensuing Colonial period. In addition, the year 1992 marked the 500-year anniversary of indigenous resistance in the Americas, which called for a celebration of Native American cultures across the continent, and highlighted the perceived injustices and marginalization suffered by such communities since the Conquest.

In the international filmmaking arena, and in accordance with the transatlantic commemorations, Hollywood's mainstream cinema reflected the need to capitalize on and represent those symbolic first European steps on American soil. Keeping in line with these events the studios delivered blockbuster features with their visions of Columbus' historic crossing, seen for example in Ridley Scott's *1492* (1992), starring Gérard Depardieu as Christopher Columbus. Further conventional readings of history were adopted with John Glen's *Christopher Columbus: The Discovery* (1992). By contrast, Michael Mann directed the more culturally sensitive *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992) starring Daniel Day-Lewis.

Contemporary Mexican cinema, like much of Latin America's indigenous and mestizo population, took a different view of events. *Retorno a Aztlán*, in which the dialogue is conducted entirely in Nahuatl (with Castilian subtitles) perhaps marks the first significant shift toward an attempt at the rewriting of history on the contemporary screen. In turn, *Bartolomé de las Casas* pays homage to the humanitarian friar of the same name. Moreover, *Kino* explored an alternative view of the Spanish Friars in the Americas, by moving away from traditional notions of such friars as being indifferent to Indian suffering and solely driven by missionary ambitions. Here Padre Kino is portrayed as an adventurous missionary who combines the fearless qualities of the conquistador with the piety characteristic of a man of his vocation. Situated within this series of quincenary films, *La otra conquista* takes its place as a prime example of a much wider cinematic project at the forefront of Mexican filmmaking during the 1990s. Such a project, as highlighted

previously, sought to re-present important historical events on celluloid to re-define the present national condition. However, the release of *La otra conquista* caused a stir in the media, which found critics divided in their responses and subsequent analyses of the film. What was predominant and consistent however, was the audiences' positive response to the work, which translated itself into record-breaking box-office success. Whereas some saw the project as being overambitious because of the film's subject matter, others appreciated it as a step toward responding to a cinematic need that had been inherent in Mexican filmmaking for decades. This need saw the desire for representation on the screen in contexts that mattered most to the Mexican public.

The overwhelming public response to Carrasco's film articulated the Mexican nation's thirst for self-representation on the screen in a manner, context, and framework that was relevant and important to its audience. Carrasco's film, therefore, filled the gap in a cinematic area that had been significantly lacking in representation. As film critic Arturo Arredondo notes in his review of *La otra conquista*:

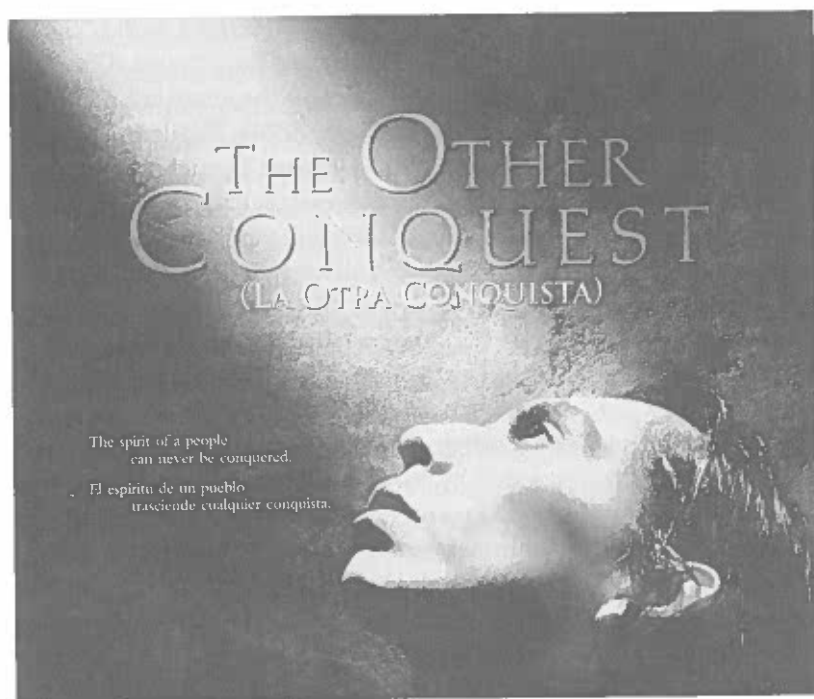
It is now time to create films set in this period [the Conquest], without fear or doubts, even without money. Only by wasting does one learn and in this portion of historical cinema we have a lot to waste, and a lot more to learn. Welcome therefore *The Other Conquest*, since it opens a space in the horizons of a Mexican cinema in much need of bravery and inventions.²

Moreover, the Conquest, which is understood to be the crucial event in Mexican history that gave form to the current infrastructure and character of the nation, has surprisingly received little attention in Mexican cinema. It was this need for a filmic interpretation of the events and effects of the Conquest that both drove Carrasco to finalize his project and saw the flocking of Mexican moviegoers to the theatres, where, during the film's four-month run *La otra conquista* drew in an audience of more than one million.³ Contrary to other generically defined success stories of contemporary Mexican filmmaking, such as the mid-1990s romantic comedies set in the city mentioned previously or the gangster films depicting the violent nature of the nation's capital made in the late 1990s, *La otra conquista* appealed to a cross-section of Mexican society, who, regardless of creed, race, or gender attended cinemas to witness a section of their past being re-presented on the screen.

The Other Conquest

Carrasco's film provides an insightful reflection on the effects of the Conquest on the conquered Mexican people, who were in a short space of time

faced with the destruction of their spiritual and material worlds. The narrative tells the story of Topiltzín, the illegitimate (and fictional) son of the Aztec emperor Moctezuma, who lives to witness the eradication of his family, their possessions, and eventually their way of life. Topiltzín is spared his own life through the intervention of his half-sister Tecuichpo, now Hernán Cortés's new mistress.⁴ Tecuichpo recognizes Topiltzín during his trial in the presence of Cortés. In this scene Topiltzín stands accused of attempting to take the life of a man of God. His alleged victim is Fray Diego de la Coruña, a gentle monk deeply troubled by the aggressive tactics of his fellow countrymen. The assault in question occurred during an incident involving the capture and subsequent escape of Topiltzín from the Spaniards, after his arrest for heresy. Having been discovered performing the act of human sacrifice in honor of Tonantzín, the mother goddess, Topiltzín and his family are attacked and arrested by Spanish soldiers, who are accompanied by the observant Fray Diego. In an effort to escape from the Spaniards, Topiltzín simulates an enchantment with the icon of a fair Virgin Mary, the latter accompanying the Spaniards and the friar on their journey. However, instead of falling prey to her charms (as the friar hopes) Topiltzín begins to throw stones at his oppressors, injuring the friar and thus causing enough commotion to enable him to flee into the dark night. Following his escape spectators see Topiltzín living in isolation in the jungle, in an attempt to secretly continue his pre-Hispanic way of life. He is, however, betrayed by his half-brother, Alanpoyatzín, and is arrested once more by the Spaniards. And it is because of his past attack on Fray Diego that Topiltzín now finds himself before Cortés, standing trial for assault. Under the influence of Tecuichpo, however, Cortés sentences Topiltzín to the lesser punishment of a public lashing (rather than being burned at the stake), and a forced conversion to Catholicism. Cortés also orders that Topiltzín's spiritual welfare be entrusted to Fray Diego. A firm believer in the willing conversion of the natives as the only true way to convert, Fray Diego takes Topiltzín under his wing and makes the Indian's spiritual conversion his main mission in life. Thus Topiltzín is renamed Tomás and is sent to live in the fictional monastery of Our Lady of Light. Here Topiltzín finds refuge within the monastery walls and returns to his vocation as a scribe, a trade for which he was admired in pre-Hispanic Tenochtlán. In addition, Tecuichpo has been instructed to teach her half-brother the colonizers' tongue, Castilian, and it is during these classes that the siblings bond, rekindling an affection for one another that will drive the two toward incest in a desperate attempt to continue the Moctezuma (and pre-Hispanic) lineage with their planned offspring.



Topiltzín/Tomás (Damián Delgado) is illuminated by the sun. Photo by Andrea Sanderson, courtesy of Carrasco & Domingo Films.

The Spiritual Conquest

The narrative of *La otra conquista* deals with the struggles associated with the process of hybridization, embodied in the image of Topiltzín, and to a certain extent, in Fray Diego. However, *La otra conquista* aims to delve deeper than other Conquest-themed films from Mexico, attempting to penetrate the mind of the conquered peoples and thus decipher the psychological implications of a cultural and so-called “spiritual conquest.” Through the character of Topiltzín, Carrasco examines the effects of the process of conquest, assimilation, and finally, hybridity on the mexicas, from a cinematically unexplored angle. Coinciding with the 1992 commemorative projects, Carrasco’s film seeks to interpret the roots of the current Mexican nation by examining the spiritual conquest of a people, which in many ways was more devastating to the Aztec empire than the territorial invasion itself. His film marks a turning point in the Conquest debate on celluloid, by representing his mexicas in a nonvictimized form and by casting doubts on an essential spiritual conquest

having taken place in Mexico. Instead Carrasco seeks to ask “who conquered whom” within the process of conquering, rebuilding, and consolidating the New Spain.⁵ This query is relayed in the film’s title and then answered in its tagline: “The spirit of a people can never be conquered.”

Carrasco situates his narrative ten years before the recorded apparition(s) of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico. Such apparitions to an Indian boy, Juan Diego, in 1531, significantly advanced the purported spiritual conquest of the nation that was initiated during the early 1520s by the Spanish clergy in the current Mexico. At the core of Carrasco’s filmic exploration lies the relationship between his main character, Topiltzín, and the image of the fair Madonna brought over from Spain by the friars. Topiltzín’s relationship with the Virgin, which begins with resentment and rejection, progresses onto curiosity, fascination, and then appropriation, disclosing the process of hybridization that occurred on Mexican soil at the time of the Conquest. The Indian appropriation of Christian icons through the process of interpretation and cultural translation paved the way for the creation of a hybrid spiritual belief system in post-Conquest Mexico. The image of the Virgin of Guadalupe thus encapsulates this spiritual hybridity. Her brown skin (mirroring the skin color of the indigenous Mexicans) and her chosen apparition to an Indian confirm the Virgin’s symbolic embracing of the indigenous population as her own. Furthermore, the Virgin appeared to Juan Diego at the site where the Aztec mother goddess, Tonantzín, was once worshipped. The symbolic nature of such an event is crucial to an understanding of the process of assimilation inherent in the aforementioned “willing” spiritual conversion of the conquered mexicas. The mothering roles of Tonantzín and the Virgin are thus united as one in the mexica psyche, and Carrasco chooses to focus the intellectual thread of his film on this process of appropriation of the Virgin Mother, the most influential icon in Mexico today.

The Mother

At the beginning of the film the viewer is told that after the Conquest the mexica nation was left in a state of orphanage. Indeed the viewer sees an empire in tatters, with its central city, Tenochitlán, deserted in the aftermath of the Templo Mayor massacre. The city-state is thus embodied in Topiltzín, whose desolate figure is shown rising from a heap of bodies. In a desperate attempt to free himself from the destruction around him, Topiltzín climbs to the top of a nearby pyramid, from where he is able to view the extent of the destruction below, and from there cries out to the sun god Huitzilopochtli, bemoaning the deity’s abandonment of his people. The narrative commences with a tragedy and ends with the “miracle” of acceptance seen in the image

of a lifeless Topiltzín embracing the statue of the fair Madonna. The journey from despair, abandonment by the gods, and acceptance of a new way of life and belief system is the central theme of the film, whereby Topiltzín serves as the vehicle both for questioning the new religion being forced on him and as a mouthpiece for a past way of life at risk of becoming destroyed. His talent as a scribe further propels Topiltzín toward using his vocation to represent the lost world of the mexicas and their experiences by creating codices that narrate their histories.

La otra conquista not only attempts to portray an endangered pre-Hispanic way of life on film but also proposes alternative forms of reading history on the screen. Carrasco positions the moral spectrum of both sides of the cultural clash within easy access for the viewer. He displays a critiquing of both Spanish brutality from the viewpoint of the Indian and in turn, shows the sometimes violent nature of human sacrifice as seen from a Spanish perspective. The element of human sacrifice, a much-debated topic within studies of pre-Hispanic civilizations, was a convincing motive behind Spanish condemnation of the "savage" nature of the mexicas. It was also significantly used by Spanish friars in their criticism of the worship of Aztec deities; blood sacrifices were considered especially "barbaric." Carrasco plays with our perceptions of the barbaric and the savage by allowing both Aztecs and Spaniards to call one another by these terms. In one of the early scenes in the film, which depicts Topiltzín at home with his grandmother, Nanahuatzín and half-brother, Alanpoyatzín, the latter refers to the Spaniards as "barbarians" when discussing the family's plans to make an offer to Tonantzín, the mother goddess. Later, when the Spaniards stumble on the human sacrifice being carried out in the secrecy of an internal chamber in an abandoned pyramid, they refer to the ceremony as "an act of barbarity," with Fray Diego's observation "you really do come from another world" underlying the narrative questioning throughout the film. The juxtaposition of ideologies is paralleled in the film with the contrasting of images, in an attempt to paradoxically highlight the similarities of both cultures. An acknowledgment that the current spiritually hybrid state of Mexico would have been impossible without the presence of parallel ideas linked to religious icons constitutes the driving force behind Carrasco's exploration of the meaning of the spiritual conquest. Such a notion is symbolized in the image of the fair Madonna with whom Topiltzín engages in an all-consuming obsession. His first "vision" of her occurs after the Spaniards have destroyed the statue of Tonantzín, following their discovery of the forbidden practice of human sacrifice. After a struggle in which several members of the party are killed (including Topiltzín's grandmother), Topiltzín witnesses the replacement of

their deity with the image of the fair Madonna. This image he finds alien, yet alluring, and his curiosity is aroused by Fray Diego's reassurance, "Yes, yes, take a good look at her. That lovely woman is Mary, Mother of God. Yours is nothing more than a handful of stones." Fray Diego misinterprets the Indian's perplexity before the image for what he believes to be Topiltzín's emotional engagement with the icon. The irony contained within Fray Diego's words is that the replaced mothering icon is, of course, a statue also.

The War of Images

In his seminal study of the role of images in the conquest of Mexico, Serge Gruzinski notes that the territory which the Spaniards fought to conquer was not only ripe for the picking because of internal political disputes between the Tlaxcalans (who sided with Hernán Cortés in his battles to defeat the Aztecs) and the powerful Triple Alliance of the Aztec empire but also that the mexica state was a nesting ground for a subsequent clash in images that would mould the current character of the nation. As Gruzinski acknowledges, both Spaniards and Aztecs belonged to a highly visual culture in which icons dominated their spiritual ways of life. Such fervent support of icons would nourish the process of hybridity and would help feed the public imaginary in the formation of a dual deity embodied in the Virgin of Guadalupe, the proclaimed Mother of all Mexicans. Thus the process of appropriation of Spanish icons by the indigenous raises questions as to the accurateness of using the term "spiritual conquest" in relation to the Mexicans, because it is also possible to see the current hybrid belief system as the result of an indigenous "conquest" (and thus adoption) of Christianity. The ending of *La otra conquista* points toward this conclusion, whereby Fray Diego construes Topiltzín's physical appropriation and replacement of the Virgin in his cell, as a "miracle." In this scene the friar interprets the vision of Topiltzín embracing the Virgin as a further example of the possibility of a new race emerging from the chaos, helped by the application of love and tolerance.

Gruzinski makes a further observation on the role of the visual in the conquest of Mexico when he analyzes the importance of the gaze in this setting. Here he reflects on the positioning of the gaze in the process of rejection or appropriation of religious icons from the perspective of both parties. From the point of view of the Indian, the crucial moments of "seeing" the conqueror's icons constituted the first step toward the fragmentary appropriation of a different belief system and way of life. Furthermore, during the Conquest the "matter of images played such a role in the Spanish strategy that the Indians could not help closely associating, even identifying, the invaders with their practices, which were alternately idoloclastic and iconophilic."⁶ For the

Spaniards however, the vision of Indian idolatry constituted the epitome of evil:

Endowed from the very beginning with a demonic identity, function, and form, the 'evil and lying,' 'dirty and abominable' idol could only exist in the gaze of the one who discovered it, was scandalized by it, and destroyed it.⁷

Gruzinski further notes that the gaze played a significant role in the concretization of a hybrid spiritual belief system whereby the "cross and the images of the Virgin were commonly mixed with the [Indian] 'idols' . . . thus prophesizing a future religious syncretism that continues to exist in present-day Mexico."⁸ The juxtaposition of images combined with the subsequent iconoclastic measures adopted by the conquerors during the process of conquest reveals not only a clash of ideals represented in the images harbored by both Spaniards and mexicas but also a war of images that would lead to the fusion deity embodied in the current Virgin of Guadalupe. This ideological cross-fertilization, which led to eventual mass conversion, is the topic for Carrasco's psychological exploration of the "conquered" nation, ventured through Topiltzín's mind. The impetus for the director's intellectual enquiry was heightened by what he saw as a considerable lack of academic investigation into the years between 1521 (dating the fall of the Aztec Empire) and the year 1531, when the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe to Juan Diego is reported to have occurred:

[I]n all of my research I found quite a bit of literature until August 13th 1521, when Cuahutémoc surrendered. Then [suddenly] there's a black hole of ten years. There's very little [written] on what happened in the following ten years . . . I thought . . . what happened the morning after? We all know how it ended when Cuahutémoc surrendered, but imagine the psychological and emotional scars.⁹

Thus Carrasco saw the filling of this historical void as a "creative challenge," and it is for this reason that the director chooses to set his narrative in the years leading up to the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe, commencing his tale in 1521, after the Conquest.¹⁰

The encounter between polar images described above is represented in the film on two levels. Firstly, the icons of Tonantzín and the fair Madonna are constantly juxtaposed, their images eventually fusing into one during a sequence in one of Topiltzín's delusions. Secondly, the hallucinations experienced by both Topiltzín and Fray Diego provide an insight into the characters' tormented minds, as well as serving to articulate the process of

hybridization experienced by both the Indian and the friar. Contextualized within the hallucinations, the images of the Aztec and Catholic icons take center stage, revealing a conflict of images, which wrestle for visual supremacy contained in the realms of the imaginary. In the case of Topiltzín, the hallucinations suffered after the arrest and imprisonment of his half sister, Techuichpo, reveal a struggle between his yearning for the mother goddess, who at first appears as the fair Madonna, and his rejection of the new theology being imposed on him. Within this delirious setting the rebellious Topiltzín takes it on himself to sacrifice the Catholic icon to the Aztec gods, helped by the presence of his deceased grandmother and Tecuichpo, alongside two other women. In this setting Topiltzín takes center stage and replaces the Aztec priest as performer of the sacrifice, only to recede once the fair Madonna metamorphoses into the image of Tonantzín. This is not the first time the two mothering deities have met in the film; after the Spaniards have ransacked the scene of the human sacrifice in honor of Tonantzín earlier in the film, the Spanish soldiers place a covered Madonna next to the statue of the Aztec mother goddess. Once the Spaniards have destroyed the icon of Tonantzín, and she is nothing more than "a handful of stones" on the floor, the conquerors replace her image with the icon of the fair Virgin, brought over from Spain for Cortés' palace. A distressed Topiltzín begs forgiveness from his mother goddess, now a shattered mass of rubble, of which nothing survives except for the mask that reveals her dual features of life and death. As soon as the Virgin is unwrapped, Topiltzín is captivated by her image, pertaining more to curiosity than fascination, yet at this point in the narrative the Virgin's gaze does not return Topiltzín's own uninterrupted stare. It is only at the moment of Topiltzín's excruciating pain under torture that their eyes connect, and the Virgin's gaze returns Topiltzín's own desperate look. At this moment in the film, assisted by the camera angles, the Virgin loses her aloofness and responds to Topiltzín's suffering with a wistful expression on her until-then-inexpressive face. And as if answering Topiltzín's call and sharing in his grief, the camera frames a single teardrop released from one of the Virgin's observant eyes. From there forward in the narrative Topiltzín becomes fascinated with this mothering deity, and in his mind he questions the Virgin's capacity to both physically and spiritually replace the image of Tonantzín. The end result of this struggle sees a harmonious framed image of Topiltzín and the Virgin lying side by side, after the former has become reconciled with his hybrid state and has appropriated the icon as his own, shown at the end of the film.

Hallucinatory images also trouble Fray Diego; they appear in the form of nightmares whereby the clash of images is played out in the realm of his

subconscious state. Tossing and turning under the crucifix hung on the wall above his bed, Fray Diego is haunted by the image of Tonantzín. As we follow his nightmare, the camera enters the interior of a cave, zooming in to a wall covered in dry grass, the blades of which invite the viewer's gaze by opening up like curtains, to reveal the dual face of life and death of the Aztec mother goddess. The friar awakens from his nightmare with a sense of impending doom and orders the Spanish soldier, Rolando, to guard Topiltzín's cell for the remainder of the night. The hallucinations return toward the end of the friar's life, which in narrative terms is situated at the beginning of the film. These images convey the shadows on the wall of what appears to be Fray Diego converting an Indian, then an Indian mirroring the gestures of the friar's benediction, "converts" Fray Diego. His willingness to die (since his return from New Spain the friar has not uttered a word and has stopped eating) suggests an element of guilt on the part of Fray Diego for his role in the conversion of Indians. It also indicates recognition of the Indian spiritual belief system (through the role reversal of the conversion in his hallucination) and the possible introduction of doubt on the validity of the friar's own religion. On his deathbed, the friar mutters the words "a last journey" leading his companions to believe that he is describing a glimpse of the afterlife. When asked to explain where this last journey will take him, the old friar simply replies, "where all mortals go" thus refusing to elaborate on his thoughts and discrediting his vocational belief in absolutes.

Indications of the process of hybridization between Fray Diego and Topiltzín being reciprocal are reinforced when after the latter's death, Fray Diego speaks to Topiltzín's lifeless body in Nahuatl, acknowledging with his words and their contents, the possibility of a new race emerging from the encounter between the two apparently different worlds. Such actions contradict the friar's earlier position regarding the merging of both cultures, which he saw as impossible because of the perceived fundamental differences between the two. In a scene shared with Topiltzín, the friar lectures his protégé on the impossibility of a fusion of both cultures and urges Topiltzín to adapt to the new world being forced on him, because, unfortunate for his culture, this is the reality facing the mexicas. In this scene the camera visually divides the two parties, representative of both worlds and ideals, by locating each character on either side of the frame. However, bridging the two men stands the statue of a smiling cherub, a direct replica of the cherub at the foot of the Virgin of Guadalupe, prophesizing a future mestizo nation and undermining the friar's words.

Reversing the Negative Paradigm

In addition to his exploration of the effects of the so-called spiritual conquest on the mexicas, Carrasco's innovation in his cinematic portrayal of post-Conquest Mexico lies in his treatment of the women in the film. In line with his deliberate antivictimhood stance regarding the representation of the mexicas, Carrasco portrays his filmic women as strong, independent, and intelligent participants in the process of the Conquest and the subsequent formation of a new state under Spanish sovereignty. Just as he reverses the effects of conqueror and conquered in the depiction of Fray Diego and Topiltzín and their struggles to reconcile a newly hybrid state of being, Carrasco reverses the negative paradigm maintained through the image of *La Malinche* or Doña Marina with his portrayal of the Aztec princess-turned-Colonial-governess found in Tecuichpo. In the film, Tecuichpo stands as the antithesis to *La Malinche*, Cortés's first Indian mistress, who assisted the conqueror during his travels in Mexico, acting as his interpreter and companion and who, toward the end of the relationship, bore him a child. According to sources, Malinche's firstborn, the mythologized first Mexican mestizo, represents the current nation state. The Mexican poet and essayist Octavio Paz notes in his essay, "*Los hijos de la Malinche*" (*Sons of La Malinche*), that the root of Mexican machismo lies at the heart of what he sees as a complex relationship with the two mothers: the Virgin of Guadalupe, the virtuous, all nurturing mother, and *La Malinche*, the betraying, blemished woman who offered herself voluntarily to the oppressor.¹¹ *La Malinche* thus embodies the biological mother of the Mexican state, and her binary opposite is to be envisaged in the Virgin, the nation's spiritual mother. Paz suggests that the Mexicans blame *La Malinche* for the fall of the Aztec Empire, because her interpreting skills were put to great use during Cortés's ventures into the central valley. Indeed Aztec codices depicting the encounter between Cortés and Moctezuma demonstrate an actively involved Malinche at Cortés's side, providing the latter with verbal assistance. She did not only just act as Cortés's interpreter, however; historians believe that in many ways *La Malinche* was Cortés' gateway to understanding the Aztec psyche in that she was also able to translate indigenous beliefs, customs, and fears to Cortés for his use during the Conquest. On the other side of the debate, feminist analysis reclaims *La Malinche* from historical oblivion and proclaims her a victim of the patriarchal order.¹² Such arguments condemn what is seen as a demonization of *La Malinche*'s image and forward this as an example of the elaborate powers of male-dominated discourse at play. Her marginalization from Mexican history

and the condemnation of her role in the Conquest have, feminists argue, contributed toward the oppression of women in Mexico and the repression of female sexuality, with the belief held that La Malinche's greatest sin was that she "gave" herself voluntarily to the conqueror. Historical data however, sheds doubts on such claims of sexual abandonment because La Malinche was originally sold to Cortés for his pleasure, and once discovered, her interpreting abilities were later put to great use. In his film, Carrasco chooses to move away from polarized visions of La Malinche, offering instead a nonvictimized, nonglorified, and nondemonized replica of the paradigm in his interpretation of Tecuichpo's persona. Here he projects an image of a complex, intriguing character who is tormented by the memory of her late father, Moctezuma, and murdered husband, the Aztec rebel warrior, Prince Cuahutémoc. Her choice to remain by the side of Cortés, her late husband's enemy, is made out of a combination of necessity (because she is now alone after the fall of the Aztec Empire), political ambition, and a thirst for revenge. She is not however, a victim. Tecuichpo is portrayed as a strong woman who endures both sexual and psychological harassments from Cortés on a regular basis. Emotionally and spiritually, however, she maintains the upper hand over the conqueror, because she does not return Cortés's affections and sustains an enduring affinity with her half brother, Topiltzín. Along with Topiltzín, Tecuichpo embodies the underlying narrative thread of the film, which concludes that the spirit of a people cannot be conquered. Indeed, toward the end of the narrative Cortés begrudges Tecuichpo's indifference toward him and laments his inability to "reach" her.

This is My Body, This is My Blood

Our first encounter with Tecuichpo in the film immediately recalls the Malinche paradigm, as she steps in from the shadows and reveals her face to a surprised Topiltzín, who is kneeling before Cortés while awaiting his sentence. Tecuichpo takes her place by Cortés's side, recalling Aztec depictions of her predecessor, and when she begins to interpret Cortés's words to Topiltzín, initial preconceptions of the negative paradigm seem confirmed. However, Tecuichpo's first words in the film are conducted in Nahuatl, and their contents beg Topiltzín to spare her his judgment. It soon becomes apparent that Tecuichpo is Cortés's interpreter in the true sense of the term, paraphrasing his words according to her interpretation of the events. The relationship between Tecuichpo and Cortés appears tense and confrontational. The power struggle occurring between the two continues to dominate their relationship until the end of the film, when a heavily pregnant and impris-

oned Tecuichpo turns the tables on Cortés and reveals that the child she is carrying is not his. Cortés appears to be consumed with the desire to possess Tecuichpo both in mind and body. However, although Tecuichpo "surrenders" herself physically to her "lord" she remains spiritually unmoved and psychologically untouched by him. His forceful attempts to possess and break her will ends in his frustration, and this obsession haunts the conqueror until the end of the film. Tecuichpo, on the other hand, although not officially recognized as Cortés's spouse, will manipulate her political position and emotional domination over Cortés to enable a lesser sentence to be passed on to her half brother. Later in the narrative we see her plotting to avenge her father and husband's death by falsifying Cortés's signature in a politically harmful document destined for the King of Spain. Carrasco's Tecuichpo is well aware that her "condition" as a woman has meant that she was bypassed as the rightful successor to her father's empire, and thus adapts to her current situation by capitalizing on her position as the object of Cortés' desire. From there she is able to guarantee the safety of Topiltzín both at the time of his sentencing and by calling a halt to his torture when she implores Fray Diego to intervene. Rather than being a passive victim of the new regime in place, Tecuichpo quickly adapts to the new society and its norms (note her change of attire within the space of a few years), while at the same time secretly plotting the continuation of the pure Aztec race through her sexual relation with Topiltzín. Despite the repeatedly unsolicited possessions of her body by Cortés, Tecuichpo is able to confront her lord one last time from her cell in the dungeons of his palace, and thus reenforces her control over her own body and the conqueror's lack of control over Tecuichpo's mind. Her words in response to Cortés's accusations, firstly spoken in Nahuatl, and then repeated in Castilian, "this is my body, this is my blood," confirms Tecuichpo's sense of autonomy. Tecuichpo, despite the threat of violation and death, chooses to protect her own blood and ensure its continuation. Her words uttered in defense against Cortés's accusations, are directly lifted from a previous scene in the film involving Topiltzín's public torture and forced conversion to Catholicism. Here, while Topiltzín is being lashed in front of a crowd of Indians, the camera frames the intimate moment being shared between a young indigenous mother and her white-skinned baby. A nearby Spanish soldier is moved by this image of maternal tenderness, as the unnamed Indian mother whispers soothing words in Nahuatl to her newborn, "this is my body, this is my blood. Even though your skin is white, I will never abandon you." Indications of a new race being born as a result of violent means are held here, however, the resulting offspring of the aggression rather than being rejected, is being met with love and acceptance.

National and International Reception

Although domestic and U.S. moviegoers alike responded positively to the film, in Mexico, official bodies, including the well-regarded IMCINE, were less supportive of the project. Not content with disclaiming the film's worth during and after production, a number of officials publicly set about discrediting Carrasco's film. Such reactions to the film reveal a politics of production that is at the heart of the current conflict of representation experienced within Mexican filmmaking. How to or how not to represent Mexico and its inhabitants constitutes the fundamental preoccupation behind the fundraising and promotional activities of the filmmaking community. Intent on representing a modernized, internationalized, and therefore, commercially successful film at home (which in turn constitutes an art house movie abroad), national cinema is experiencing limitations on how Mexico should be represented on the screen. Furthermore, as revealed in the introduction to this chapter, such limitations are beginning to creep onto the decision-making agenda, thereby curbing the possible future success and therefore, transnationalization, of films that contain a specific cultural context within their narratives. That said, the recent *Amores perros*, along with *Y tu mamá también*, although specifically Mexican in context, are able to transcend national frontiers because of both the independent nature of their funding, and through the intensive and highly successful marketing strategies employed in the "selling" of the films. Somewhat paradoxically, after completion, *La otra conquista* was adopted by Twentieth Century Fox and duly distributed under their Latin American wing in Mexico and in Los Angeles, however when it came to a national U.S. and subsequent worldwide release, the company dropped the film. Despite it being the highest grossing Latino film in U.S. box-office history (prior to *Amores perros* and also *Y tu mamá también*), *La otra conquista* at the time of writing has yet to receive a worldwide release date, seven years after its opening in Mexico and in Los Angeles. The case of *La otra conquista* raises questions as to how Mexico ought to be and is represented on the screen. In the aggressively competitive world of filmmaking, a concern with the film's protagonist's racial origins and therefore, the potential (or otherwise) commerciality of his image, point toward a distinctive desire to leave behind the country's Indian roots in an increasingly uniform cinematic Mexico. Long gone are the days when Mexican cinema turned to the image of the Indian as exemplary of the roots of the nation, witnessed in the Gabriel Figueroa/Emilio Fernández productions from the Golden Age. What seems to be largely popular, and therefore, commercially successful, are cinematic images of a predominantly cosmopolitan, modern, and international-

ized Mexico, recognizable and identifiable to audiences everywhere. A filmic narrative mainly conducted in Nahuatl, such as occurs with *La otra conquista*, and which speaks of a 500-year-old conflict, was not, in many eyes, a commercially viable investment to make. These fears however, proved unfounded, as Carrasco was able to show through the unprecedented success of his first film. The question of a cinematic representation of contemporary Mexico, raised through Carrasco's decision to proceed with an indigenous protagonist contributes toward the debate that sees the multiple-angled interpretation of the nation on the screen. However, independent films, such as the Mexico-Spain coproduction, *Aro Tolbukhin*, *En la mente del asesino* (*Aro Tolbukhin*, in *the Mind of a Killer*, directed by Isaac-Pierre Racine, Agustí Villaronga, and Lydia Zimmermann, 2002), or Jesús Magaña's *Sobreviviente* (*Survivor*, 2003), both of which, although critically acclaimed and with successful attendance at home, failed to make it as far as mainstream screening abroad. That Mexican filmmakers who venture to interpret a less glossy version of the country in their films should be penalized with poor distribution and therefore, the noninternational exposure of their work remains a much-needed point for revision within Mexican cinema and provides critics with food for thought regarding the future of the nation's truly independent cinema.

Notes

1. This chapter is also published (in a revised form) in Miriam Haddu, *Contemporary Mexican Cinema: History, Space and Identity (1989–1999)* (Lewiston, N. Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007).
2. As the films are known and were released under their Spanish titles, I have made reference to the Spanish titles in the case of both these films.
3. See Arturo Arredondo, "La Otra Conquista, de Salvador Carrasco," *Novedades* 16 April 1999, 4 (N). "Es tiempo ya de crear las películas de esta época [la conquista], sin miedo sin temores, aun sin dinero, sólo echando a perder se aprende y en este renglón del cine histórico tenemos mucho que 'echar a perder' y mucho que aprender. Bienvenido 'La Otra Conquista' porque abre una brecha en los horizontes del cine mexicano, tan necesitado de inventos y valentías."
4. Judith Michaelson, "Conquista Conquering" *Los Angeles Times* March 25, 2000, 2–4.
5. Tecuichpo or Doña Isabel, is in fact a real historical character. She was Hernán Cortés's lesser-known mistress, whom, it is believed, replaced Malinche or Doña Marina as the conqueror's aide and translator. In the film, Hernán Cortés proclaims Tecuichpo governess of the kingdom of Tacuba.
6. Salvador Carrasco in an unpublished interview with the author conducted on August 13, 2004, Hollywood, Los Angeles, California.

7. See Serge Gruzinski, *Images at War: Mexico from Columbus to Blade Runner (1492–2019)* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001).
8. Gruzinski, *Images at War*, 39
9. Gruzinski, *Images at War*, 42
10. Gruzinski, *Images at War*, 39
11. Carrasco, unpublished interview with the author.
12. See Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad*. (Madrid: Cátedra Letras Hispánicas 1995), 202–227.
13. See for example Ann Marie Remley Rambo, “The Presence of Woman in the Poetry of Octavio Paz,” in *Woman as Myth and Metaphor in Latin American Literature*, eds. Carmelo Virgillo and Naomi Lindstrom (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985), 94–107. See also Sandra Cypress Messinger, *La Malinche in Mexican Literature: from History to Myth* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 2. See also Jean Franco, *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* (London: Verso, 1989), 129–147.

CHAPTER TEN



Peruvian Cinema and the Struggle for International Recognition Case Study on *El destino no tiene favoritos*

Sarah Barrow

Throughout its history, Peruvian cinema has been badly affected by a lack of infrastructure and proper support from business and political sectors. Yet, since the first moving images were screened to admiring audiences in Lima, constant efforts have been made to emulate the critical and commercial successes of filmmakers elsewhere in the world. While the number of significant achievements in this regard is limited compared to those of countries such as Brazil and Mexico there have been some memorable Peruvian films and filmmakers during the medium's first century of development, and the desire to create films remains, it seems, as strong as ever despite the challenges. This chapter will provide an overview of some of the important breakthrough moments in recent Peruvian cinematic history and explore attempts by emerging national filmmakers to break into the international market. Through a detailed analysis of one such director's first feature, Alvaro Velarde's *El destino no tiene favoritos* (2003), this chapter highlights and explores some of the reasons for Peru's continuing position on the margins of international cinematic recognition.

In doing so, special regard needs to be paid to the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural contexts of the 1990s when President Alberto Fujimori (1990–2000) instituted a number of changes that dealt a severe blow to the slow but steady progress of national cinematic practices. For example, by deciding to abolish rather than to revise a cinema law that had benefited national filmmakers via tax incentives and guaranteed screenings, Fujimori's regime in effect wiped out the flawed yet supportive infrastructure that had

"Again and again, these essays strip away the masks to reveal Latin American cinema as it really is: specific and local, national and historical, not a homogeneous product lately discovered by the United States and Europe as a marketable commodity. A valuable compendium for anyone who wants to know what's up with cinema in Latin America today."

—**B. Ruby Rich**, University of California, Santa Cruz; author,
Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement

"The great merit of this book is to acknowledge current Latin American cinema's international success as an aesthetic achievement, as well as a commercial one. Through in-depth case studies, it contributes a fascinating new chapter to world cinema history."

—**Lucia Nagib**, University of Leeds

"With an eye to the national and international contexts of production and reception of contemporary Latin American cinema, essays in this exciting collection focus on international blockbusters as well as introduce readers to lesser known films. A welcome and valuable addition to the growing scholarship on the cinemas of the region."

—**Andrea Noble**, Durham University

This engaging book explores some of the most significant films to emerge from Latin America since 2000, an extraordinary period of international recognition for the region's cinema. Each chapter assesses an individual film, with some contributors considering the reasons for the unprecedented commercial and critical success of movies such as *City of God*, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, *Y tu mamá también*, and *Nine Queens*, while others examine why equally important films failed to break out on the international scene.

Written by leading specialists, the chapters not only offer textual analysis but also consider the films' social context and production conditions, as well as critical national and transnational issues. Their well-rounded analyses provide a rich picture of the state of contemporary filmmaking in a range of Latin American countries. Nuanced and thought-provoking, the readings in this book will provide invaluable interpretations for students and scholars of Latin American film.

Contributors

Sarah Barrow, Nuala Finnegan, David William Foster, Miriam Haddu, Geoffrey Kantaris, Deborah Shaw, Lisa Shaw, Rob Stone, Else R. P. Vieira, Claire Williams

About the Editor

DEBORAH SHAW is senior lecturer in film studies at Portsmouth University.

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City of God/Cidade de Deus (2002). Photo: British Film Institute.
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