

***La Otra Conquista.*** Salvador Carrasco (Writer and Director) and Alvaro Domingo (Producer). Carrasco and Domingo Film Productions, 1998. Available at Uptown Video & Música, 7046 Greenleaf Avenue, Whittier, CA 90602. Tel: 562–945–6900.

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En un juego de simulaciones, los indígenas fingían aceptar la religión de los conquistadores y los frailes fingían creerles. Los antiguos dioses sólo cambiaron de rostro, para eludir a la Santa Inquisición. (Morales, 2001, p. 87)

If the conquest was as easy and simple as the aforementioned statements, then the violence and profound effects of colonization could be dismissed as simple “games.” Although we do not think that Morales’ statements deliberately avoid the pain involved, the religious conquests between the Spanish invaders and the Mexican natives, or *indios*, was and is never ending and not just simply *un cambio de rostro*, but a more complex process. Such complexity is clearly depicted in the film *La Otra Conquista*, focusing on the tragic and intricate process of religious, cultural, and violent mutations in the context of a forceful co-existence.

The opening scene is at the *Templo Mayor* in the great *Tenochtitlan* after the bloody massacre of priests and *Mexica* nobility upon the sacred grounds. The year is 1520, just 1 year after the arrival of the Spanish invader *Hernán Cortés*. From under the treacherous massacre of bodies emerges a survivor, *Topiltzin*, an illegitimate son of emperor *Moteczuzoma*. After literally peeling himself away from under several corpses, *Topiltzin* reunites himself with his kin, only to find murder, rape, and pillage. He is faced with not only the murder of his mother, but also the active attempt to murder his people’s culture and way of life.

As a former scribe, *Topiltzin* attempts to capture in a codex his truth about the conquest and also to maintain ancient religious practices. After producing a codex, he convinces his family members to clandestinely offer in sacrifice a maiden’s heart to the goddess *Tonantzin*. Despite his brother’s attempts to dis-

suade him, *Topiltzin* arranges a sacrificial ritual that is unfortunately interrupted by a garrison of Spanish soldiers led in part by Fray Diego de la Coruña, which results in the death of his grandmother. At the site of the ritual, the stone image of *Tonantzín* is destroyed and replaced with that of the Virgin Mary, which is symbolically placed over the stone base of the Mexican image. The New Order is now in place. Fray Diego, a representative of this New World Order with a fanatical form of Catholicism, becomes obsessed with “saving” the natives through a sincere “conversion.”

After running away and hiding from the Spanish soldiers, *Topiltzin's* brother finds him and tries to convince him to cooperate with the Spaniards. *Topiltzin* refuses and calls him a traitor, prompting his brother to inform the Spaniards of his whereabouts. After his capture, *Cortés* sentences him to death. However, with the help of *Tecuichpo*, daughter and heiress of Emperor *Moteczuzoma*, concubine of *Cortés*, and *Topiltzin's* half-sister, *Topiltzin's* life is saved and he is placed under the care of Fray Diego. Fray Diego is challenged with converting *Topiltzin*, who is ironically now a captive in the *Monasterio de Nuestra Señora de la Paz*. *Tecuichpo* (renamed *Doña Isabel*) is to assist Fray Diego in *Topiltzin's* (renamed *Tomás*) conversion.

However, *Topiltzin's* conversion is only an act carried on by *Topiltzin* and *Tecuichpo* to maintain their language, beliefs, and to exert their agency through *Tecuichpo's* access to *Cortés* and *Topiltzin's* literacy. Fray Diego, skeptical of the conversion, discovers *Tecuichpo* and *Topiltzin* falsifying correspondence from *Cortés* to the King of Spain. Furthermore, Fray Diego discovers *Tecuichpo* and *Topiltzin* making love in an effort to keep their noble bloodline pure and tells *Cortés* of their deceit. Once caught, *Tecuichpo*, who is now with child and in jail, is murdered by *Cortés* himself.

*Topiltzin's* inner struggles begin once he is left without anyone from his past life. Ill with desperation, *Topiltzin* attempts to reconcile two different worlds that share some fundamental truths. Throughout his fevers and hallucinations, *Tomás* deliriously envisions Christian and *Mexica* transformations of *Tonantzín* violently becoming the Virgin Mary. This is especially so when an image of the Virgin Mary is locked up in the church sacristy and *Tomás* is not allowed in. As the fixation for the statue of the Virgin Mary takes over *Tomás*, the question of a sincere conversion becomes more obvious.

In the closing scenes *Tomás* goes into tremendous bouts in capturing the statue of the Virgin Mary. After taking off the friar robe, dressed in his *Mexica* loincloth, he manages to escape his cell, climb into the church, break into the sacristy, and take the image of Mary and child with him. In the process, the Christ Child is lost, but that does not seem to matter to *Topiltzin*. With the image of Mary in his arms he falls many feet and dies with her on top of him. The question of *Tomás's* intention remains, was he to destroy or idolize the figure?

In the end, Fray Diego places the image of Mary side by side with the lifeless body of *Topiltzin*. Perhaps partly to ensure *Cortés* of a marriage-like event of two

cultures symbolizing true *meztlizaje*? Perhaps to show *Cortés* that he had accomplished a true conversion? Perhaps to imply that with *Topiltzin*'s death, so too died the ancient Mexican beliefs?

Truly we are not movie critics by career; however, as educators we can be critical of the media in that we can question the information flow from the popular press and the flow of information free and available to all people (Kmitta, 2000). The reason why we are including the place where the movie is available is precisely because it is not easy to find. In fact, it took several days of active searching to find the movie. Ironically, we found it the day of the release of the movie *Pearl Harbor*; there were long lines of people waiting to enter the movie theater right outside the small Latino family-owned movie rental store. Of course this brings up issues of access and the value U.S. society places on alternative movies vis-à-vis new Hollywood releases or Blockbuster "hits."

Regardless, *La Otra Conquista* is a must-see. It is a film that should be incorporated in classrooms from high school to universities. It is an important film to present alternative interpretations in relation to the simple idea that syncretism is not without struggle, or that syncretism is without pain. Most important, the film illustrates the contradictions, brutality, and barbarism of the conquest while highlighting the subsequent confusion and pain embodied not just by the natives, but also by the priests who often merely functioned as the justification for Spanish soldier's brutality and avarice.

The International Movie Data Base (<http://us.imdb.com>) tagline of *La Otra Conquista* is "the spirit of a people can never be conquered," along with the resurging line throughout the film, "una conversión que nunca acaba," are both appropriate in describing the underlying theme of the movie. However, this movie is truly profound in that a great multitude of themes and interpretations are what makes it such a valuable production. If one can get beyond the treacherous process of colonization, this movie does a fantastic job of illustrating the agency of human action and, most important, the integrity of the soul in the postcolonial process.

Along the lines of a never-ending conversion, it is in a sense a double conversion that takes place between *Topiltzin* and Fray Diego. Although *Topiltzin* dies embracing the image of Mary, Fray Diego dies holding a book with a hidden piece of a burnt codex, the very same codex that *Topiltzin* produced. In addition, during an exchange between friar and native, *Topiltzin* makes the observation that they are more similar than different in their quests to "teach" each other. Most important, *Topiltzin* exclaims, "sometimes to falsify the truth is better than to destroy it," which implies that both choose to ignore what the real situation is in order to fulfill their quests. Both are locked up in a monastery, and both are really after the same thing—the sincerity of their faiths.

Throughout the film other themes emerge. Perhaps one worth mentioning is that of survival at any cost—both the survival of the physical as well as that of the spiritual being, which *Topiltzin* and his brother exemplify. His brother, called a

traitor by *Topiltzin*, is a symbol of the physical survival, even if at the cost of collaborating with the enemy. *Topiltzin's* brother, for example, warned his grandmother against the physical danger they were putting themselves in by carrying on the sacred ritual. However, *Topiltzin* reminded them of their spiritual needs and of their deities. On the other hand, *Topiltzin* symbolizes spiritual survival because the attempts at taking his spirit continuously fail. This is confirmed by a native shaman's assessment that *Topiltzin* could not be helped with any medicine for his body because he was a spirit without a body, *un espíritu sin cuerpo*. *Topiltzin* himself confirms this when he shouts, "*Santa Madre, en tus manos encomiendo mi cuerpo, mas nunca mi espíritu!*"

The theme of gender and the abuse of women as the objects of desire and their disposability as property also emerges in the film. For example, there is mention of *Cortés* giving away Doña Marina, or *Malintzin*, because "he got tired of her." In addition, his disposal and murder of the pregnant *Tecuichpo* is symbolic of such abuse. However, Carrasco is also clever to include the limited agency of native women such as *Tecuichpo*, who was instrumental in saving *Topiltzin*, attempted to reclaim lands from the King of Spain by falsifying letters, and attempted to use her body to maintain noble bloodlines.

Overall, the film is highly recommended. It does an extraordinary job of depicting the complexity of cultural genocide as well as the power of cultural resistance. Colonization and conquest is thus, truly, a never-ending process. It is a film that forces us to rethink the celebration of a "happy" *mestizaje* or of "games" in changing simply the faces of gods for saints. Most important, this film highlights the integrity of the spirit in the process of survival not only of the body, but also of the soul.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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