

Reinterpreting Death in The Other Conquest  
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Visually stunning and intellectually provocative, *La Otra Conquista* explores the foundational myth of Mexican national identity --that of mestizaje--, and creatively imagines a pre-history for the emergence of one of the most fascinating cases of cultural syncretism in all of Modern History, the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The film is set in Tenochtitlan, the capital of the vast Aztec Empire, in the immediate aftermath of the fall of Moctezuma. With the complex process of conquest and colonization of Mexico's indigenous population as the background, the film homes in on a personal confrontation between a recalcitrant Aztec scribe, Topiltzin, and the Spanish priest charged with converting him to Christianity and civilization, Friar Diego. The death scenes of these two characters frame the film's narrative.

The movie opens with a flash forward: Friar Diego, now an old man back in his native Spain, dies an apparently good Christian death, clutching a Bible and having received the last rites.

The movie ends with an apparently serene and emblematic scene of syncretism and mestizaje, as Friar Diego presides over a kind of marriage between the dead Topiltzin and a statue of the Virgin Mary --a haunting icon that the Spaniards laboriously cart around throughout the movie and that is eerily present at each of the key moments in Topiltzin's troubled trajectory. Topiltzin, overwhelmed by a sense of loss and by the predicament of his people's orphan hood, has become obsessed with the statue; he manages to steal the icon from the chapel of the monastery, though back once again in his cell with the stolen image, he dies from the effort, or rather, he wills his own spiritual death.

Both of these good, simple deaths, however, are thoroughly problematized for the attentive spectator. Indeed, throughout this film, far from being some kind of transparent, unambiguous endpoint, death is consistently represented as a site of interpretation, textualization, cultural and ideological work, *mise-en-scene*. The narrative and cinematographic exploitation of this insight about death is, I think, one of the film's greatest achievements.

Read retrospectively --from the end of the film-- the Friar's death is anything but unambiguously holy. He dies saying that he is about to undertake the final journey to where all mortals (nota bene: not all Christians) go. Seconds later, in a beautiful narrative and visual touch, while the monastery bells toll for the soul of Friar Diego, a puzzled monk discovers a piece of Topiltzin's last codex pressed between the pages of Friar Diego's copy of the Book of Revelation. By the end of the film, the spectator knows how to interpret Friar Diego's long silence --we are told in this opening scene that, after returning from the New World, Friar Diego never spoke again-- and how to read the priest's deathbed hallucination --in which Topiltzin converts him. Notwithstanding all the trappings of an exemplary Christian death, Diego's encounter with Topiltzin and with the devastation of the Conquest has led him far away from anything resembling an orthodox Christian faith. Most importantly, by the end of the film, the spectator knows that Topiltzin's death beside the icon can only be seen as a placid scene of acceptance and conversion after Friar Diego's meticulous rearranging of the set. Friar Diego literally takes charge of a *mise-en-scene*, staged for the ultimate spectators --the conquistador Hernan Cortes, and through him, the King of Spain. He rearranges the inert bodies of Topiltzin and Maria, and rewrites a thoroughly unreadable and violent act --did Topiltzin plan to possess, rape, sacrifice, destroy or adore the sequestered image of the Virgin? --as a kind of chaste and harmonious betrothal of two cultures.