THE POWER OF LOOKING: POLITICS AND THE GAZE IN SALVADOR CARRASCO'S *LA OTRA CONQUISTA* / *THE OTHER CONQUEST* (MEXICO, 1998)

Miriam Haddu

Royal Holloway, University of London

Many of the filmmaking tendencies of the 1990s in Mexico were concerned with re-establishing 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, in order 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 Cuaróñ's *Y tu mama también* / *And Your Mother Too* (2001), lies the self reflective and introspective period of filmmaking witnessed during the 1990s. The cinematic work conducted during the 1990s allowed for the progression and growth of an industry that had, towards the late 1980s, looked considerably threatened. In order 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 laid the attempt to instill a sense of autonomy amongst 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 co-financing 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. Upon 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 *Angel de fuego* (1991), Alfonso Arau's *Como agua para chocolate* / *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992), and Guillermo del Toro's *Cronos* (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 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. Thematically linking the films of this period lies 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 multi-angled 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 re-evaluate were the archetypal representations of *mexicanidad* as articulated in the cinema of the Golden Age, and, to reflect the socio-political 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, multi-generic 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 in order 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 *Love's a Bitch* and in *And Your Mother Too*. 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 towards this line of thinking can be seen to have developed towards the latter part of the 1990s, when Mexican cinema witnessed an increase in the production of films that projected an internationalized 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). *Sex, Shame and Tears* proved to be the result of a potentially-wining 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 *Recipes to Stay Together* and *Sex, Shame and Tears*' pretext for exploring gender divisions in contemporary Mexican society saw an increase in production towards 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 re-work 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 in order to represent its own up and coming, 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, in order 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 reality in Mexican society once step further, by providing visions and cinematic constructions specifically framed from a female point 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 re-locates 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

key 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 in order 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) due to the financial burdens of seeing through an ambitious project with limited funding. Notwithstanding the financial constraints, in 1998 the film was screened in both Mexico City and then in Los Angeles to packed out theatres. Yet despite the success of *The Other Conquest*, Carrasco's film has failed to attract adequate distribution and awaits nationwide release in the United States. Furthermore, the case of *The Other Conquest* raises interesting questions regarding the role of distribution and its impact upon the possible shelf life of a film, regardless of its commercial and/or artistic value. The polemics of representation witnessed by Carrasco's film both due to 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 *The Other Conquest* (1998) 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, whilst attempting to find a space amidst the 'New World' that has been thrust upon him. Independently made, Carrasco's feature film addresses an area of Mexico's past that is significant to modern day notions of national identity.

12th October, 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 upon 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 towards an attempt at the re-writing 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 Quincentury films, *The Other Conquest*, takes its place as prime example of a much wider cinematic project at the forefront of Mexican filmmaking during the 1990s. Such a project, as highlighted above, sought to re-present important historical events on celluloid in order to re-define the present national condition. However, the release of *The Other Conquest* 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 over-ambitious due to the film's subject matter, others appreciated it as a step towards 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 *The Other Conquest*:

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. [1]

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 *The Other Conquest* drew in an audience of more than one million.[2] Contrary to other generically-defined success stories of contemporary Mexican filmmaking, such as the mid 1990s romantic comedies set in the city mentioned earlier, or the gangster films depicting the violent nature of the nation's capital made in the late 1990s, *The Other Conquest* appealed to a cross-section of Mexican society whom, regardless of creed, racial make up, or gender, attended cinemas to witness a section of their past being re-presented on the screen.

THE OTHER CONQUEST

Carrascos' film provides an insightful reflection on the effects of the Conquest upon the conquered *mexica* 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' new mistress.[3] Tecuichpo recognizes Topiltzín during his trial in the presence of Hernán 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 due to 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 re-named 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 Tenochitlán. 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, re-kindling an affection for one another that will drive the two towards incest in a desperate attempt to continue the Moctezuma (and pre-Hispanic) lineage with their planned offspring.

THE SPIRITUAL CONQUEST

The narrative of *The Other Conquest* 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, *The Other Conquest* 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 non-victimized 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, re-building and consolidating the New Spain.[4] 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 Indian boy, Juan Diego, in 1531 attributed to advancing significantly 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, discloses 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 role 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 we are told that after the Conquest the *mexica* nation was left in a state of orphanage. Indeed we see 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 upon him, and as a mouthpiece for a past way of life at risk of becoming destroyed. His talent as a scribe further propels Topiltzín towards using his vocation in order to represent the lost world of the *mexicas* and their experiences, by creating codices that narrate their histories.

The Other Conquest not only attempts to portray an endangered pre-Hispanic way of life on celluloid, 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 spectator. 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 to justify the inhumanity of Aztec deities,

branding the latter's requests for the sacred liquid as '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 upon 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 acknowledgement 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 Topitlzín 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 due to 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.[5] As Gruzinski acknowledges, both Spaniards and Aztecs belonged to a highly visual culture where 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, since 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 *The Other Conquest* points towards this conclusion, whereby Fray Diego construes Topiltzín's physical appropriation and re-placement 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.

Gruzinki 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 towards 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 very 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 very images harbored by both Spaniards and *mexicas*, but 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:

[…] in 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 very 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 upon him. Within this delirious setting the rebellious Topiltzín takes it upon 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 Topiltztin 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 both 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, appearing 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 spectators' 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 towards 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 upon the validity of the Friar's own religion. At 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 due to 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 upon him, since, 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' upon 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 anti-victimized 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' first Indian mistress, who assisted the conqueror during his travels in Mexico, acting as his interpreter and companion and who, towards 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. 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, since her interpreting skills were put into great use during Cortes' ventures into the Central Valley. Indeed Aztec codices depicting the encounter between Cortés and Moctezuma demonstrate an actively involved Malinche at Cortés' side, providing the latter with verbal assistance. She did not only just act as Cortés' 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 towards 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 since 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 non-victimized, non-glorified, and non-demonized replica of the paradigm in his interpretation of Teciuchpo'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 Cortés' side, her late husband's enemy, is made out of a combination of necessity, (since 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, since she does not return Cortés' 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, towards the end of the narrative Cortés begrudges Tecuichpo's indifference towards 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 whilst awaiting his sentence. Tecuichpo takes her place by Cortés' side, recalling Aztec depictions of her predecessor, and when she begins to interpret Cortés' words to Topiltzín, initial pre-conceptions 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 Techuichpo is Cortés' 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 imprisoned 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' 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' 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 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), whilst 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 re-enforces her control over her own body and the conqueror's lack of control over Tecuichpo's mind. Her words in response to Cortés' 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' accusations, are directly lifted from a previous scene in the film involving Topiltzín's public torture and forced conversion to Catholicism. Here, whilst 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 solider 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 US 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, trans-nationalization of films that contain a specific cultural context within their narratives. That said, the recent *Love's a Bitch*, along with *And Your Mother Too*, although specifically Mexican in context, are able to transcend national frontiers due to 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, *The Other Conquest* 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 US and subsequent worldwide release, the company dropped the film. Despite it being the highest-grossing *latino* film in US box-office history (prior to *Love's a Bitch* and also *And Your Mother Too*), *The Other Conquest* 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 *The Other Conquest* 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 towards 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 internationalized Mexico, recognizable and identifiable to audiences everywhere. A filmic narrative mainly conducted in Nahuatl, such as occurs with *The Other Conquest*, and which speaks of a five hundred 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 towards the debate that sees the multiple-angled interpretation of the nation on the screen. However, independent films such as the Mexico-Spain co-production, *Aro Tolbukhin*, *En la mente del asesino /Aro Tolbukhin in the Mind of a Killer* (dir. 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 beyond 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 non-international 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

- 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.'
- Judith Michaelson, 'Conquista Conquering' *Los Angeles Times* March 25, 2000.
- Tecuichpo or Doña Isabel, is in fact a real historical character. She was Hernán Cortés' lesser-known mistress, whom it is believed, replaced Malinche or Doña Marina, as the conqueror's aid and translator. In the film, Hernán Cortés proclaims Tecuichpo governess of the kingdom of Tacuba.
- Salvador Carrasco in an unpublished interview with the author conducted on 13 August 2004. Hollywood, Los Angeles, California.
- See Serge Gruzinski, *Images at War: Mexico from Columbus to Blade Runner (1492 – 2019)* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001).
- Gruzinski, *Images at War*, 39
- Gruzinski, *Images at War*, 42
- Gruzinski, *Images at War*, 39
- Carrasco, unpublished interview with the author.
- Carrasco, unpublished interview with the author.
- See Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad*. (Madrid: Cátedra Letras Hispánicas 1995), 202-227.
- 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*, ed. 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.

Bibliography

- Arredondo, Arturo, '*La Otra Conquista*, de Salvador Carrasco', *Novedades* 16 April 1999.
- Ayala Blanco, Jorge, *La eficacia del cine mexicano*. Mexico, D.F: Grijalbo, 1994.
- Díaz del Castillo, Bernal, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*, Mexico, D.F: Porrua, 1964.
- Franco, Jean*, Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico*, London: Verso, 1989.
- Gruzinski, Serge, *Images at War: Mexico from Columbus to Blade Runner (1492 – 2019)*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001.
- Haddu, Miriam, *Interview with Salvador Carrasco*, Unpublished, 13 August 2004.
- Hershfield, Joanne and Maciel, David R., eds. *Mexico's Cinema: A Century of Film and Filmmakers*. Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, Inc, 1999.
- Lafaye, Jacques, *Quetzalcóatl and Guadalupe: The Formation of Mexican National Consciousness 1531-1813,* Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1976.
- León Portillo, Miguel, *Visión de los vencidos*. Boston Massachusetts:Beacon Press, 1992.
- Ludmer, Josefina, ed. *Las culturas de fin de siglo en América Latina.* Argentina: Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 1994.
- Michaelson, Judith, 'Conquista Conquering' *Los Angeles Times* March 25, 2000
- Paz, Octavio, *El laberinto de la soledad,* Madrid: Cátedra Letras Hispánicas 1995.
- Remley Rambo, Ann Marie, "The Presence of Woman in the Poetry of Octavio Paz" pp. 94 -107 in *Woman as Myth and Metaphor in Latin American Literature*, edited by Carmelo Virgillo and Naomi Lindstrom. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985.

- Taylor, William B. “Virgin of Guadalupe in New Spain: An Inquiry into the Social History of Marian Devotion” *American Ethnologist*. 14, (1987): 9-33.
- Todorov, Tzvetan, *The Conquest of America, The Question of the Other*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1982.