

The Other Conquest: The Story of the Mother Goddess By Eduardo Subirats (May 16, 1999)

Salvador Carrasco's film, titled --in an ingenious play on words-- THE OTHER CONQUEST (LA OTRA CONQUISTA), offers a direct, profound and serious look at the Spanish Conquest of Mexico and the symbolic construction of colonial and modern Mexico. It does so by using imagery to highlight the shared roots and close ties between the military and political process of the Conquest and the so-called spiritual conquest -- that is to say, the forced and violent conversion of historic American civilizations to the Roman Catholic credo.

Carrasco's script covers an artistically and intellectually ambitious story: the biography of a conversion. This conversion is a sort of precedent, in both religious and political terms. It is a precedent first because it takes place under the guidance, simultaneously warm, protective and violently Inquisitorial, of one of the intellectual leaders of the so-called "eradication of idols", represented by the figure of Friar Diego de La Coruña. Second, it serves as a model because the convert, who has the dual Aztec/Christian identity of Topiltzin/Tomás, is a prominent Aztec priest. His story travels with the rigor of a true initiation rite through the stages that traditional American civilizations actually passed through under the Christian Empire.

Carrasco's film shows us Topiltzin as a noble, tied by blood to Emperor Moctezuma and dedicated to the spiritual tasks of the sacrificial cult and of the Conquest. Topiltzin appears in the film's first scenes as a surviving eyewitness to one of the genocidal events that most perturbed the Reformist European consciousness of the era: the indiscriminate slaughter of Aztec nobility and priests during a ritual celebration in the Great Temple (Templo Mayor) in May 1520. In later scenes, this figure is stylized to a spiritual level of prophetic characteristics, which at some points makes us think of the Messianic nature of Quetzalcoatl himself.

We see Topiltzin at the moment at which he is celebrating the ritual sacrifice of a young virgin on the altar of a goddess who vaguely represents some of the distinctive attributes --cosmic and earthbound-- of the dualistic goddess Coatlicue. Later, we see the protagonist brutally taken prisoner by Cortés' soldiers, led by Captain Cristóbal Quijano, and submitted to the routine procedures of torture as a means of imposing the True Faith. At the end, this character's dramatic biography closes with a synthesis between the visionary, delirious Aztec female divinity dedicated to life and death --the Mother Goddess responsible for the order of the cosmos and the reproduction of nature-- and the Christian version of the Mother of God and Men.

Destruction, violence, conversion... and, finally, the Virgin of Guadalupe (the dark-skinned, Indigenous Virgin Mary who is the patron saint of Mexico and the rest of the Americas) as the culminating, synthesizing, and reconciling figure of this colonization process: this is the golden thread running through Carrasco's film. *The Other Conquest* leaves the spectator with a deeper impression than a simple narrative reconstruction of the conflicts that cross the political-religious history of the conquest and colonization of ancient Mexico. Certainly, Salvador Carrasco's film develops the problematic of Mexico's foundational violence: it exposes a naked view of the Church's complicity with the violence of the colonizers; it shows without embarrassment the cruelty at the heart of the conversion of an entire civilization to a foreign God. At the same time, though, this film throws some light on a vision of a much deeper reality. Carrasco confronts us here with one of the most fascinating and mythical figures of colonial and contemporary Catholicism, and especially of Mexican culture: the Mother Goddess.

I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say that, at base, the protagonists of Carrasco's film are the diverse representations of this feminine goddess of love and maternity, who simultaneously regulates life and death, interacts with the lower world and the heavens, is a lover and a protector but is also intimately connected to war, and governs the regenerative processes of nature and the land as well as the cosmic equilibrium; this goddess who travels through pre-Roman Mediterranean cultures, who is personified in Mary's many faces, the Christianized Jewish mother who is also found in the mythological figure of Coatlicue and in feminine Aztec deities associated with her --like Tonantzin, herself no less powerful an expression of this presence.

It is fascinating to view the brilliant cinematic construction of this mythical figure, so central to the configuration of colonial and modern Mexican culture. I think we can even speak of Carrasco's film as a classic, a true mythological construction and reconstruction in segments dealing with the sacred figure of Guadalupe. First, and in the midst of scenes of devastation the proportions of which are quite contemporary (which the European consciousness has, in every case, and with very few exceptions, been able to accept or comprehend), the camera transports us to an expressly underground cult of a mythical figure with features that recall both Coatlicue and Tonantzin. We attend an impressive sacrificial scene, in which the experience of death is surrounded by a delicate tenderness and is also seen in one of the most intensely erotic expressions of the entire movie.

The Spanish soldiers' desecration of the sanctuary, and their rape and assassination of the women participating in the ritual, give this sacrifice a special significance. The blood humans share with the gods through ritual sacrifice, in accord with the ancient Aztec religious sentiments, was associated with the sun and with a concept of war as a sacred act. A mysterious image of the sun, an immutable sun which is always exactly the same (except at the end, when Friar Diego acknowledges it, paradoxically, through the Christian notion of "Unum Deum"), also introduces a counterpoint, a secret, magical rhythm, throughout Carrasco's film.

This positive view of sacrifice is clearly related, in *The Other Conquest*, to the Indians' resistance to the colonizer, to the desire of the Aztec race to survive and not, in the end, to the illuminated vision of sensuality and sexuality which exemplifies this scene.

Ritual sacrifice and its messianic message are reiterated at another crucial moment of the film: the sexual embrace of Topiltzin and Tecuichpo/Isabel, wife of Cuauhtemoc, the last Aztec emperor. Cuauhtemoc is assassinated by Cortés, who takes Tecuichpo as his lover. The amorous images of this scene, the tenderness and re-consecration of an eroticism that is plainly taboo, contrast with the brutality that surrounds the life of both lovers. But this second episode also repeats central aspects of the first ritual sacrifice. Doña Isabel's figurative death, which the film relates to the violent love Cortés feels for her, is tied directly to the birth of a son, the result of the prohibited union with Topiltzin. In other words, it serves as a symbol of survival and endurance in the midst of misery. The story of this second sacrifice nonetheless introduces a new dimension in the ancestral figure of Mother Earth, tied to death and resurrection: Tecuichpo the lover, the mother protector, the restorative and regenerative mother, also takes on a pagan ideal of beauty and fecundity. She is adored by Cortés as a Venus (she receives a gold necklace, an example of delicate Judeo-Spanish jewelry, as an offering). Both dimensions bring her closer to the mythological undercurrent of the Christian cult of the Virgin, heiress, in the final analysis, to many of the powers that once accompanied representations of Mediterranean goddesses of beauty and fertility.

The conflict between the Roman Church's Trinitarian dogma and the popular cult of the Mother Goddess constitutes, even today, one of the most confusing chapters of European religious and cultural history. Its teleological manifestations are as fascinating as its artistic expressions, as seen --among many other examples-- in Titian's *Assumption in Venice*. *The Other Conquest* describes these very religious, sexual, and political conflicts, the same integrative capacity and associative power that come into play in the myth of the Divine Mother, Tonantzin, in the context of the clash of civilizations in which colonial and modern Mexico are created.

The last scene of this film is purely mythological. Topiltzin/Tomás, the Aztec priest, the Christian convert, the rebellious yet conciliatory protagonist, both warring and prophetic, conquers the Divine Mother: Coatlicue/Tonantzin/Aphrodite/Virgin Mary; he is sacrificed and becomes one with her. This is the sacred moment of the birth of Guadalupe --the other conquest, if you will, of the human spirit.

This union serves as the culmination of a series of baroque vicissitudes mixing the sublime with the exquisitely grotesque. It can be seen as a schizophrenic delirium, and it denotes a clear touch of surrealism in Carrasco's film. To classify this poetic sensibility under the label of "magical realism" would be, in effect, an insult, since that category identifies a certain literary and artistic kitsch used for commercial purposes. A comparison of Carrasco's visual style with the imagery of Luis Buñuel would seem more appropriate to me. In a final analysis, the Spanish director also sought out the pagan foundations beneath the myths of Baroque Spanish Catholicism.

Carrasco's film has a powerful historical and contemporary dimension to it. It is a personal, innovative reflection on the Spanish Conquest, on the development of colonial Mexico, and on the identity of modern Mexico. It is a reflection that crosses the thresholds of memory, of the borders between dogma and delirium, between myths and the most deeply buried personal experiences. This mythical, psychological take on the construction of the Mexican religious conscience explains the meaning of the film's title: the other side, the hidden face of the Conquest, the secret history of the peoples that comprise the cultural mosaic of today's Mexico.

The great majority of spectators will gain awareness of the present-day relevance of *The Other Conquest's* portrayals of corruption, cruelty and despotism. It is, without a doubt, a film that seeks a certain reconciliation. In other words, Salvador Carrasco's imaginary exploration seems to offer, through this historic look at the often-forgotten landscapes of our collective unconscious, a solution to the dilemmas of our own time: a solution through conflicts and dialogue, a solution through artistic expression.

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