

**To Die To Live:**  
**Death as the Harbinger of Memory in**  
**"The Other Conquest"**

**By Salvador Carrasco**  
**Santa Monica College**

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Good morning, my name is Salvador Carrasco, I am a film director and the Head of the new Film Production Program at Santa Monica College in Santa Monica, California. I am here today to talk about my feature film, *La otra conquista* (The Other Conquest), which explores the foundational myth of Mexican national identity by imagining 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 indigenous version of Mary-mother-of-Christ, and reincarnation of the goddess Tonantzin as surrogate mother of the mestizo nation that was born from the trauma of the 1521 Spanish Conquest of Mexico.

The Other Conquest is set in Tenochtitlan, the capital of the vast Aztec Empire, during the immediate aftermath of the fall of Emperor Moctezuma. With the complex process of conquest, colonization, and resistance of Mexico's indigenous population as its background, the film focuses on a personal confrontation between a recalcitrant Aztec tlahcuilo or 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.

Both of these allegedly good, simple deaths are problematized for the audience member who takes the trouble to be a willing participant. Indeed, throughout the film, far from being some kind of transparent and unambiguous endpoint, death is consistently represented as a site of interpretation, textualization, cultural and ideological work, and mise-en-scène. The narrative and cinematic exploitation of this insight on death constitutes the film's undercurrent, which explores the rebirth of a nation forced to wear a mask and understandably hesitant to look in the mirror, afraid of what it may find. This traumatic memory is as much part of the reason why films about the Conquest are not plentiful, as the main motivation why *The Other Conquest* came into being in the first place. In the way it imagines reality, cinema is ideal to question who we are and what we see when we take a hard look in the mirror... Not that any film can ever give us definitive answers, but some will incite dialogue. *The Other Conquest* was made in that spirit. Unless we face these issues, the mirror of the present is empty and the door to the future permanently locked.

When 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox distributed *The Other Conquest*, it became the highest-grossing-ever historical drama in Mexican cinema. Upon its theatrical release in the United States, it became one of the top 10 films of the year according to *The Los Angeles Times*. All this to say that *The Other Conquest* is not just a film about the Aztecs and the Spaniards in the 1520s, but it serves as a larger prism for what happens almost inevitably when two cultures meet: In the name of civilization, military superiority, and other misnomers, one tends to impose itself over the other through violence; and this in turn, also almost inevitably, prompts the sort of resistance that brings about that “other conquest” of the human spirit and the survival of a people’s innermost beliefs. In the case of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico, when we explore not only alternative narratives that challenge the official histories, but also the omnipresence of a brown-skinned indigenous Virgin Mary, it is only pertinent to ask: Who actually conquered whom?

*The Other Conquest* opens with a scene that shows the aftermath of the Festival of Toxcatl, better known as the Great Temple Massacre of May 20<sup>th</sup>, 1520. Our recreation of one of the most traumatic episodes of Mexican collective memory was based primarily on accounts such as Ixtlilxochitl’s 13<sup>th</sup> Relation, the Ramirez Codex, and the Aubin Codex. Every creative choice in terms of framing, look, sound, feel, body language and pacing was inspired by passages such as this one from the Florentine Codex:

*“Some tried to escape, but the Spaniards murdered them... Others climbed the walls, but they could not save themselves... Others lay down among the victims and pretended to be dead... The blood of the warriors ran like water...”*

**[SHOW CLIP #1 —Great Temple Massacre]**

The Great-Temple Massacre scene serves as a metaphor for the whole film by posing the idea of rebirth from destruction. The protagonist, Topiltzin, survives by hiding under a corpse, awakening to a new hostile world where he finds himself an orphan, both literally and figuratively. This sets up the main dramatic premise of the film: What do you do when you are deprived of everything, or nearly everything except what lies within you? We delved into a story of resistance, of counter-conquest, of the creative ways in which memory can draw strength from misfortune to recreate its narrative.

By introducing the protagonist as staging his own death, the film foreshadows Topiltzin's actual death at the end of the movie. Aside from the obvious, a crucial difference is that the Great Temple massacre is an example of a fate-induced plot point, meaning: It happens to our hero unbeknownst to him, much like the arrival of the Spaniards befell on Moctezuma and the Aztecs, whereas Topiltzin's self-sacrifice at the end of the movie is not fate-induced; it is an act of choice in which he wills his own destiny. At another level, one can also read the opening of the movie as a sort of rising from the ashes, or in syncretic terms, a resurrection, the quintessential act of Christianity, except here enacted by a pagan Indian.

The high-angle shots, also mirrored at the end of the movie, are meant to evoke the viewpoint of the gods, for whom man is a small, frail creature who has to grope his way out of the labyrinthine walls in which he is entrapped. When the fateful sound of an Aztec conch pierces through all this death and destruction, Topiltzin heeds the call and makes his way to the top of the pyramid, only to find at the other side his dead mother, who has been slain by the Spaniards. Her body position evokes that of the dismembered representation of the Aztec mother-goddess Coyolxauhqui. As a result of the Conquest, the surviving Aztecs found themselves in a state of cultural orphanhood, a situation that hasn't changed much in the intervening five centuries.

Next, the film introduces Topiltzin's co-protagonist, Friar Diego of La Coruña, through a narrative flash-forward set in 1548, almost three decades after the Great Temple massacre and the ensuing events that comprise the present tense of *The Other Conquest*. 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. However, there is something unsettling about this scene, which implies that the Conquest was a bilateral process that in many ways changed the Spaniards as much as it did the Mexicans. Case in point, Friar Diego was so deeply affected by what he witnessed in Mexico that he has chosen never to speak again.

**[SHOW CLIP #2 —Friar Diego's death]**

Friar Diego's death is anything but unambiguously holy. The interplay between the shadows of Friar Diego and Topiltzin is an allegory for his New World experience: He set out to

convert the savages, but ended up being converted himself. This doesn't mean that he went native; it means he returned to the primordial essence of Christianity in that all men are supposed to be equal.

At the time of the Conquest, Indians were officially regarded as subhuman. In this context, Friar Diego's dying statement that all mortals (mind you, not all Christians) go to the same place in their final journey is borderline blasphemy at worst, or a precursor of liberation theology at best. Seconds later, while the monastery bells toll for the soul of Friar Diego, a bewildered monk discovers a fragment 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 and how to read his shadow hallucination in which he tries to convert Topiltzin, but the Indian backs away and retaliates by converting him instead. Friar Diego's death is full of confusion and mental anguish; it is populated by phantasmagoric Christian imagery that climaxes in an image of a sun that we'll come to recognize as an Aztec god.

Notwithstanding all the trappings of an exemplary Christian death, Friar Diego's encounter with Topiltzin and the devastation of the Conquest has led him far away from anything resembling orthodox Christian faith. He is alone, uncertain, and scared. Nothingness looms ahead.

**[SHOW CLIP #3 —Topiltzin's death]**

Overwhelmed by a sense of loss and by the predicament of his people's orphanhood, Topiltzin has become fixated with a statue of the Virgin Mary to the point that he embarks on a Quixotic mission to appropriate her, as if by doing so he would vanquish the mysterious powers that make the Spaniards do all kinds of questionable things in her name. At the beginning of the movie, Topiltzin could conceivably fault the Virgin for his people's suffering; after all he is publicly flogged under her impassive gaze. But his character arc develops into an unorthodox relationship with the Virgin, whereby Topiltzin not only differentiates clearly between her and her Spanish bearers, but he also converts her into a surrogate for his own lost Aztec Mother Goddess, one of the primary targets of the Spaniards' systematic obliteration of Aztec symbology.

Topiltzin's face-to-face encounter with the Virgin in the sacristy is perhaps the most emblematic moment of the film. At long last, he is able to look in the mirror and what he finds is himself in "the other." Because he now sees Tonantzin in Mary, he removes her crown to express the oneness he feels with her. He then brings her back into his cell through a monastery window that is shaped like a birth canal, and in the process the baby Jesus is left behind, supplanted by the pagan Indian. In true syncretic spirit, the Virgin Mary is now the Mother Goddess incarnate. This is the sacred moment of the birth of Guadalupe —the other conquest, if you will, of the human spirit that helps explain the psychological configuration of the Mexican religious conscience.

So how does Topiltzin die exactly? A shot-by-shot analysis would indicate that he wills his own death. He has accomplished his Quixotic mission and thus chooses to let go... *Fait accompli*. But even if Topiltzin's death is a spiritual act, in cinema there has to be a certain dimension of physicality conveyed through what a character does, or does not do, on screen. Once he enters the birth-canal window, Topiltzin smiles contentedly and lets himself fall as he embraces the heavy icon, which upon impact seemingly crushes his skull. Does that mean that he dies under the weight of the new religion? Or is the fact that he chooses to die here and now a form of transcendence over death? In either case, it is a symbolic assertion of cultural identity against the colonizer, just like at one point in the movie Topiltzin had forewarned, "You can have my body, but my spirit, never!" Compare Topiltzin's fulfilled death to Friar Diego's hollow death at the beginning of the movie... The colonizers tend to outlive the colonized, but often must pay the price of survival.

The following morning, Friar Diego discovers Topiltzin dead, still holding on to the Virgin Mary in a rigor-mortis embrace that is violent and erotic, but also tender and symbiotic. It falls upon Friar Diego to interpret the scene, and it will ultimately be the audience who reinterprets the motivations behind Friar Diego's *mise-en-scène*.

It is significant here that Friar Diego addresses Topiltzin in Nahuatl, the Aztec language. When he alludes to "our venerable mother," he is not referring specifically to Mary or Tonantzin, but to a common mother-figure beyond racial or cultural differences. But it is also significant that

Topiltzin cannot hear him, proving that the timing of tragedies favors audiences over the players on stage.

When Friar Diego detaches Topiltzin's grasp from the Virgin, three drops of blood sprout from her arm. This is a moment that defies the film's own conventions of realism. Within the film's logic, she bleeds because she is separated from her new son, who has sacrificed himself to become one with her. By placing the inert bodies next to each other, as opposed to one on top of the other, Friar Diego desexualizes the scene and creates a placid tableau of acceptance and religious conversion. Whom is he doing this for and why? Is it a noble gesture or one already ridden with guilt? Maybe both. In any case, he summons the Conqueror of Mexico, Hernán Cortés—and through him, the King of Spain—to witness a miracle of tolerance and love, but no one knows better than Friar Diego what Topiltzin, consciously or not, was really up to: Resurrecting his own Mother Goddess. This is a truth that Friar Diego will have to bear like a cross; hence, the vow of tormented silence that accompanies him to his deathbed. Far from a chaste and harmonious betrothal of two cultures, the end of the movie is pregnant with ambivalence, like all histories that result from traumatic memory.

The last shot of the movie starts with the point-of-view of a higher entity who sees Friar Diego first as a shadow, then as a man made of flesh and bone who is humbled by the camera's presence approaching through the window. Below Friar Diego, the mirror has become an unquiet still life whose counterparts lie side by side: one dark-skinned, the other pale-palored; one indigenous, the other European—the synthesis of mestizaje. Friar Diego addresses God, who this time shows itself as the Aztec Sun God. The first word of the film was "Mother," and now the last words are "Unum Deum." If there is a God, in between those words lies the journey we call life.

In other parts of the world, the "encounter" between European and "native" peoples was resolved by the outright annihilation of the indigenous groups. The social consequences of the Conquest of Mexico are especially profound in that the indigenous peoples, through their violent and partial incorporation into the official and religious life of New Spain, managed to survive. The new, hybrid, "mestizo" race which is Mexico, and a good part of Latin America for that matter, was certainly not the result of a tidy and idyllic process of assimilation, but rather a

chaotic mosaic of death, rebirth, and endless trauma.  
Cinema can serve as a space to resurrect collective memory,  
playing a role akin to that of codices in the 16<sup>th</sup>  
century... as the most resilient weapon against oblivion.

Salvador Carrasco  
Santa Monica, CA  
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