

## **THE OTHER CONQUEST, by Gustavo Moheno** **Cine PREMIERE Magazine**

May, 1520. Rain crashes down incessantly against the foundations of the Great Temple. The dead bodies of nobles lie in a heap on the most sacred site of the Aztec Empire.

In the middle of this Dantesque atmosphere, an indigenous youth literally rises from the dead to discover his mother assassinated. It becomes obvious that he is the sole survivor of the massacre and he expresses his desperation with an anguished cry in his native language ("Tonantzine!" which means "Mother!") Cut to 1548: in a Monastery in La Coruña, Spain, Friar Diego, a former missionary to New Spain, prepares to take "the final journey of all mortals". Once he has breathed his last, another monk finds part of an old Aztec codex among the pages of his Bible.

These two sequences mark the beginning and end of the story told in *The Other Conquest* --separated in time but purposely offered together at the beginning of the film, in a brilliant example of cinematic narrative. This is the chronicle, the tale, the beautiful fictitious legend of that surviving Aztec, Topiltzin --scribe, author of codices, natural son of Moctezuma-- and his "redemptive" relationship with the Spaniard Friar Diego who, while seeking to convert him to Christianity, ends up being conquered himself by the spiritual essence of that survivor of demolished Tenochtitlan. What's fascinating, furthermore, is that the film uses the emotional connection between these two individuals to construct an allegory about the cult of the indigenous Virgin of Guadalupe.

The complex, fascinatingly ambivalent, and completely unconventional first work of Salvador Carrasco (a precocious tennis star who traded in the sport for poetry and film), enters one of the darkest periods in Mexican history (1521-31), when --the Conquest over-- the mystery of the Guadalupe visions arises. Far from adapting a history lesson for the screen, though, Carrasco proposes a very stylized paraphrase (What is fiction? What is reality?) of the mixture of races, basing scenes on proven facts and using historical figures like Hernán Cortés and Tecuichpo (the oldest daughter of Moctezuma) as key characters in a remarkable fictitious drama, rich in ideas and interpretations.

This is not the first time that Mexican film has tried to define the birth of our identity through artistic means. In this sense, *The Other Conquest* is similar, ideologically, to Nicolás Echevarría's *Cabeza de Vaca* and Gabriel Retes' *Nuevo Mundo* (1975). Still, Carrasco pursues a very different end, focusing primarily on the emotional blow suffered by Topiltzin as he is forced to change his understanding of the world and its ways virtually overnight.

The film has great conceptual intelligence and contains unforgettable sequences: the sacrificed princess who asks Topiltzin not to forget her, moments before the priestess cuts out her heart; the burning of codices; the scene in which Tecuichpo translates Cortés' words, revealing both the poetic and the abysmal differences between Nahuatl and Spanish; the burning of the feet of Topiltzin (evoking prince Cuauhtemoc's famous torment).

Formally, the film is a real triumph too, and even more so if one takes into account its complicated gestation (the wheels were set in motion in 1992 under the provisional title "The Absolved Vision", but it was delayed for several years due to financial problems). Highlights: the stupendous photographic work of Arturo de la Rosa ("Elisa"), the artistic direction of Brigitte Broch ("Romeo and Juliet"), the music --ritualistic, pre-Hispanic airs by Jorge Reyes combined with the European notes of Samuel Zyman, and performed by The Academy of St. Martin in the Fields --and, of course, the tremendous work of a unique cast (Damián Delgado, as Topiltzin, is spectacular).

A daring work and an ambitious one --in the best sense of the word -- Salvador Carrasco's *The Other Conquest* has the courage to move us to reflection without dismissing the importance of assaulting our senses, as any film that takes pride in being a genuine cinematic experience, a true masterpiece, must do.