

"We Are All Topiltzin"

by Guadalupe Loaeza (April 11, 1999)

There is no doubt that one of the topics we confront most often as Mexicans is the Conquest. Its history is so heartrending and complex that I have the impression that, the more books historians read and write, the more doubts and differing interpretations occur to them. For those of us who are total neophytes on the topic, the Conquest is just a mystery.

"What would have happened if the Spanish hadn't conquered us? What would have happened if, instead of them, it had been the Vikings? Is the Conquest really about one of the worst genocides in human history? Is it true that the ones who really carried out the Conquest were the indigenous people, the same ones who protected themselves from the few Spaniards who arrived with Cortés?" we ask ourselves, never finding an answer. Something tells me that the nationalists and the ignorant prefer not to deal with the subject. Maybe some people find it too complicated, too distant. But those who openly "get confused" by these historical facts are the racist, guilty ones. I ask myself whether, in their heart of hearts, they're not uncomfortable with the fact that they're of mixed race. In general, these are the people who are always researching how many of their ancestors came over directly from Spain. When one of them travels abroad and admits, in an almost joking tone, that he is mestizo, he likes nothing better than for his listeners to cry, "Oh, I don't believe you! I mean, you don't have a single drop of indigenous blood." These are generally the ones who use words like "nacos" (American equivalent: "tacky/white trash"), "prietos" (American equivalent: "darkies"), and so on.

How many Mexican mothers belonging to the "Three Hundred Plus" don't run to the maternity ward of the hospital where their daughters have just given birth to verify that their new grandchild is a blondie and has no indigenous features? If by chance the baby has had the terrible misfortune to be born with a lot of hair --BLACK hair, that is-- it turns into a family drama. "Who does he look like?" both families ask themselves, feeling totally deceived.

These same mothers are the ones who call up every day and, with absolute anguish, ask the brand-new mother, "Does he have blue eyes? Did he lose that ugly black hair he had on his cheeks? Listen, that "caf^é au lait" color doesn't come from MY family, you understand?"

In regard to this same category of racist, let's not leave out those who suffer and wince when they see Zapatistas in traditional clothing on their television screens. The shock is so great, and it causes them such dread, that they'd rather change the channel to cable, where everyone speaks English and seems "white", not "swarthy and ragged" like those who live in the Chiapaneca jungle.

To everyone in those categories to which I referred above --and I am aware of the fact that I've left out many more-- I recommend from the bottom of my heart that, as soon as you can, you do yourselves a favor and go see "The Other Conquest", a wonderful film written and directed by Salvador Carrasco and produced by Alvaro Domingo.

I am not exaggerating when I tell you that I am not the same person I was before I saw this "biography of a conversion", as the great Spanish philosopher Eduardo Subirats characterizes the film. It all started when I first saw Topiltzin, the only witness to survive the terrible, unilateral battle that took place in the Great Temple in 1520 at which a significant portion of the Aztec nobility and priestly class died, along with thousands of indigenous people.

With a look of deep confusion and sadness, Topiltzin, literally rising from among the dead, climbs the pyramid surrounded by cadavers piled up on the most sacred site of the Aztec Empire. What solitude, what intense solitude you feel in that completely Dantesque environment, blanketed by a torrential rainstorm and beneath the tenuous light of a full moon that seems to deride that massacre! What despair and impotence you see in the features of this indigenous young man! At those moments, we feel the music, by Samuel Zyman fused with the retroindigenous percussions of Jorge Reyes, penetrate us to the very marrow. "We are all Topiltzin," I suddenly said to myself, with a knot in my throat. Arturo de la Rosa's photography is so impressive, so spectacular, that the audience feels like we're climbing the pyramid along with Topiltzin. I felt that close to him. I wanted to console him, to tell him that I was suffering, too, as he was, in that violent, unexplainable Conquest. What gave them the right to come and destroy an entire culture, such a rich civilization? Who invited them to come and impose their language and religion on us? Why do they insist on telling us, "You really are from another world"? As if their world were better than Topiltzin's? Why didn't they just take all the gold they wanted and leave without having brought so many diseases?

Oh, what rage I felt in the face of these Spaniards! Oh, how the pain burning in Topiltzin's heart burned me, too! Oh, how my palms perspired through those moments! Oh, how dry my mouth became as I began to realize what it really means to have been conquered! Oh, how ignorant and indignant I felt at the gaps in my historical knowledge about a topic that should be so essential to all Mexicans!

After those first scenes and throughout the entire film, I went through a range of emotions. More than my head, I followed the film with my gut, with my personal history, with my imagination, with my identity. Why did it hurt so much? Why did I go deeper and deeper into the story of Salvador Carrasco's first film, oscillating between identifying with Friar Diego de la Coruña (José Carlos Rodríguez) and with Topiltzin (Damián Delgado), who resisted with all his might being converted into Tomás with a Spanish accent? Whose side was I on? Feeling all the different things I did, if I had lived through that time, who would I have fallen in love with, Cortés or Topiltzin? Happy with life, would I have become Doña Isabel (Elpidia Carrillo), the rightful daughter of Moctezuma, or would I have done everything in my power to help Tomás escape? Don't we Mexicans continue to treat our indigenous compatriots just like the Spanish treated Topiltzin? How many Topiltzins are there in our country, still suffering so many injustices at the hands of the mestizos? How do we ladies of the house, so similar to the European Virgin, speak to our domestic help? Don't we sometimes use a pretty contemptuous tone when we speak to our chauffeurs? Isn't it true that, when we can, we take advantage of them, making them work more than they we pay them for? Doesn't the type of Mexican that we use in our ad campaigns about crime look just like Topiltzin? Why do we have to show these dark-skinned Mexicans as if they were violent, the violators, the assaulters? Why the hell are we still so racist, so much like the Spaniards who came to conquer us so many years ago?

And so on with these doubts, all of them becoming a profound dilemma inside me. With sweaty palms, I realize that I changed as well, I too was colonized, little by little. Like Topiltzin-Tomás I also needed to fill an emptiness, a huge void about knowing who I was and who I had been over the 52 years that I've been asking myself what it really means to be Mexican.

"No, don't whip Topiltzin any more! No, don't burn his feet! No, don't make him pray to a Virgin who looks nothing like him, who's blonde and looks so haughty! Give him back his language, his gods, his customs, but above all, his dignity! Don't they understand that he doesn't want to be a friar, that he wants to stick with his codices? Why do they want him to love a God he doesn't know, from whom he's never asked nor gotten anything? He has his own. Stop beating him! Why do they want to burn him like that? What does Charles V, King of Spain, matter to him? Where are you, Friar Juan de Zumárraga? Why doesn't the Virgin of Guadalupe appear at these moments? Why? Because she didn't exist! Because those wise old historians say it was the Spaniards who invented her. Because Juan Diego wasn't around yet," I tell myself, feeling so tormented as I watched the scene in which they flogged Topiltzin for not wanting to worship the European Virgin.

According to Salvador Carrasco, *The Other Conquest* is a universal drama about any other culture that's been colonized. The oppression experienced by the Aztecs (who had themselves oppressed innumerable people) in the 16th century is similar to that which oppressed people resist today, like in Kosovo. The oppressor still tells the oppressed, "I believe in this, you believe in that. So either you believe what I believe, or I'll kill you."

To write the screenplay, Carrasco carried out really exhaustive research. He consulted Bernal Díaz del Castillo, the Ramírez Codex, the Aubin Codex, Hernán Cortés' letters, Georges Baudot's Aztec Stories of the Conquest, Christian Duverger's *The Lethal Flower*, Carlos Fuentes' *The Buried Mirror*, Jacques Lafaye's *Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe*, Miguel León-Portilla's *Vision of the Conquered*, *The Ancient Mexicans*, and *Nahuatl Philosophy*, José Luis Martínez's *Hernán Cortés*, Octavio Paz's *Signs of Rotation*, Samuel Ramos' *The Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico*, Hugh Thomas' *The Conquest*, Jacques Soustelle's *Daily Life of the Aztecs*, etc. etc. etc.

In terms of *The Other Conquest*, Mexico's most rigorous film critic Jorge Ayala Blanco raves (a very unusual reaction for him) about the film: "With Alvaro Domingo's now delayed, now restarted independent production and Arturo de la Rosa's sumptuous photography, but with a script true by definition and inspired editing by the director himself, the first feature film by the Cuequense [Mexico's film school] dissident turned New York University film-school graduate Salvador Carrasco is unique in the Mexican film world. This is an artistic proposal on the cutting edge, a rare current film of a cultist auteur who goes to extreme consequences without submitting himself to commercial or narrative conventions. It is a great aesthetic film, the belated last third of a triptych that would include the mythic pre-Columbian epic (Mora's 1990 *Return to Aztlán*) and the conquest-explorer epic (Echevarría's 1990 *Cabeza de Vaca*)." In the same spirit, Ayala Blanco refers to Bach's 'Passion According to St. John', used in the film, as, "echoed at each decisive 'blasphematory' moment by the warm introductory chords of his own 'Passion According to St. Matthew'. Primitive Lenten music without redemption, above Mission-style flutes (Joffé 86). Religious/anti-religious and alternative opera, flamboyant sixteenth-century oratory at the end of the millennium for congregations of secular moviegoers who meet to listen to the Sacred Indigenous Writings. Dramatic monody, another Representation of Body and Soul (De Cavalieri, 1600). A sustained poetic idea of film as lyrical musical art."

For Eduardo Subirats, Carrasco's film "has a powerful historical and contemporary dimension to it. It is a personal, innovative reflection on the 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."

I don't think there's anything more to add. If you want to know yourselves a little bit better, my dear readers, if you want to know more about yourselves, don't miss *The Other Conquest*. You'll realize after experiencing it that you can see yourself better in your own mirror.