

RECONSTRUCTING LATIN AMERICAN HISTORY IN
WALKER AND *THE MISSION*: POSTMODERNISM AND
ALLEGORY

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The controversies surrounding the term postmodernism suggest a number of differences in the production, aesthetics, and critical backgrounds involving the making of and writing about recent fictional texts. Postmodernist texts, filmic and literary, are characterized by the coexistence of different genres, the conjunction of both high and mass culture, and the representation of the historical past. Critics like Fredric Jameson and Guy Debord have questioned the validity of such historical representations, which are said to transform historical past into sources for stylistic forms and historical crisis into commodities to be easily consumed by audiences¹. By contrast to the alleged ahistoricism of postmodernist representations, as defined by Jameson, in his article "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capital," third-world texts have been defined as "nationalist" or "allegorical."² However, a closer view of the problems experienced by Latin American intellectuals shows their ability to map or locate the history of both first and third worlds. Furthermore, this process of interdependence is evinced not only by the production of third-world intellectuals but also by that of first-world artists: European and American films representing the history of Latin American countries—in direct or indirect ways—show an intrinsic relationship between the third and first worlds and

their respective historical past. It seems that postmodern artistic productions are turning the national quality associated with allegory into a transnational issue with alternative readings of the past: they reveal the reproduction of older discourses involving relations of dependence in the present histories of first and third world countries, thus self-consciously showing the power of historical narratives.

Alex Cox's *Walker* (1988) and Roland Joff's *The Mission* (1986) foreground the historical and political process of two Latin American nations and their unveiling of the relationship of dependency between the history of Latin American countries, Europe and the USA. Despite their different stylistic treatments of the historical film, that is, Cox's overt parodic reading of the past and Joff's naturalistic treatment of the historical object, these two films recontextualize their own present moments not only to locate the histories of Brazil and Nicaragua but also of the USA and Europe. *Walker* self-consciously cross-cuts the boundaries separating the historical and the fictional fact and conflates different filmic genres: the historical, the documentary, and the western, thus presenting different historical discourses that have helped to define the relationship between Nicaragua and the USA; *The Mission*, on the other hand, makes use of history to relocate the struggle between Indian minorities, Theologians of Liberation and the power of Liberal Capitalism. Despite their different aesthetics—*Walker* can be defined as a postmodern reading of different genres whereas *The Mission* follows a naturalistic mode of representing the historical events in the La Plata region in the eighteenth century—both films present an allegorical reading of Latin American politics since the relations of power of the past are used to explain the present—a present moment configured within the struggle of the forces of liberal capital and the third-world, as a repeated paradigm in the narrativizing of Latin American history.

Walker narrates the life-story of the nineteenth-century American adventurer William Walker. The film focuses on Walker's invasion of Nicaragua in 1855 with an armed crew of Americans, also known by

that time as the “Immortals,” or “Filibusters.”³ By 1856 Walker had forged an election and declared himself president of Nicaragua; in 1857 he was ejected from the region by a collective effort of the five Central nations. The film integrates nineteenth-century history with Reagan’s 1980s politics towards Nicaragua. Although the film develops linearly from William Walker’s first major political steps towards his performance as a president of Nicaragua—a role which takes most of the narrative time—*Walker* juxtaposes a number of anachronisms with its use of parallel editing, thus integrating past and present American politics towards Nicaragua.

Manipulation of information—specifically of historical information—is turned into a problematic issue in Cox’s use of parallel editing. The juxtaposing of shots, with Walker’s men attempting to escape from the Mexican battle camp and medium-shots of Walker comfortably writing in his diary that “his men would rather die than try to escape,” informs the audience about the dichotomies imbued in historical narrative forms such as the diary. In this sequence, the gap created by the shots of the filibusters attempting to escape and Walker’s personal and historical account foregrounds the problems involved in the manipulation of facts in historical narratives—an amalgam of personal perspectives and collective imagination. The factuality and realism associated with journals, diaries, and travel narratives are revealed as historical accounts that are nonetheless narrativized.

Similarly to its denaturalization of the historical film and the documentary, *Walker* can be read as a parody of the western—specifically the genre’s emphasis on geographical and historical locations and its teleological progression with the prevalence of the hero. In fact, *Walker* uses these conventions of the western in order to expose their construct effect. As an illustration, the western gun fight opening sequence of the film—with its violence and rivalry motifs—has its iconography so exaggerated that the usual drama associated with the western acquires a comic and hilarious effect: the Fiesta music counterargues the slow-motion blood gushing from the actors’ bodies,

thus creating a second level of reading which is the mockery or the parody of the genre. Similarly, the revenge motif of the western genre is transgressed in William Walker's lack of motivation for killing. The act of killing is emptied out of its content. Unlike western heroes who want to revenge for psychological reasons—as a motif for the development of the plot—Walker kills his brother with the excuse that “mother never liked him [the brother] anyway.” In this sense, the film questions the teleological narrative generally associated with individuality, sense of history, presence of a hero, necessary progression and growth.

In accordance with such a parodic reading of different genres, Walker's defense of American ideals is rendered as a historical failure. Walker's American manifest-destiny discourse—generally associated with the historical romance—and his defense of the American historical mission, moral regeneration and expansion of freedom are shown as fabrications since Walker is not only blind to a Nicaraguan reality but also oblivious of his initial plans once he is in power.⁴ His reasons for invading Nicaragua—Walker's desire to develop a democratic system in Nicaragua and his faith in the goodness of American Imperialistic expansion—are dropped out as the narrative develops. Almost at the end of the film, throughout the beach sequence, Walker is questioned by a British artist “what were his ends,” and Walker answers that he has forgotten the ends. The echo of his words, “I don't remember the ends,” is followed by a sequence of shots in which a coke bottle and a pack of Marlboro are placed at the background while, at the foreground, two filibusters are being tortured by one of Walker's own followers. The parallel editing—juxtaposing shots of Walker's answers with shots of the torturing—questions Walker's manifest-destiny discourse by associating American multinationals and their massive cultural and economical domination in third-world countries.

Historical films tend to follow accepted stylizations of historical periods, historical borders and a linear time development. In *Walker* the integration of the historical events of the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries allows a less linear reading of history, making the audience more aware of its own reality, historical crisis, and media: film, television, and printing industry. As an example of anachrony, Walker's picture on the front page of *Newsweek* is a reference to Reagan's policy towards Nicaragua. Furthermore, in the credits sequence, Cox juxtaposes a newsreel with Reagan's discourse—as a form of offscreen commentary—denying military intervention in Nicaragua. In the newsreel, the audience is presented with the images of the American Marines landing at the border of Nicaragua with images of the bodies of Nicaraguan civilians. By relocating the audience on its own present historical moment, *Walker* questions the linearity of historical accounts and the traditional narrative ends of historical films in which past historical crises are presented as resolved events with no connection with the present. *Walker* undermines the conventions of the historical film—specifically its pretense to present the “real” and to subject the viewer to believe in a historical past capable of solving its crisis. As an allegory of power relations dominating the Latin American scenario, Walker articulates a macro-perception of the ways in which Latin American history has been (re)constructed by Walker's or Reagan's democratic discourse.

If Cox's style is predominantly parodic, Roland Joffé's *The Mission* renders the events in a naturalistic manner; that is, the codes of the genre are never exposed or denaturalized—as if the rendering of the events through the filmic images were as close as possible to the real facts. A closer reading of the film, however, suggests its contemporaneity in approximating the Jesuits—and the missionary endeavor as a whole—with the Theologians of Liberation. The majestic use of the mise-en-scene, as well as the dramatic development of the historical facts and characters, with its persistence on presenting the communion of the Jesuits and Guaranis as a perfect one, already displays a utopian account of the history of the Missionary Reductions founded by the Jesuits in the La Plata Region of the seventeenth century. Jesuits and converted Guaranis are presented as fighting for a common

cause: the defeat of the Portuguese and the Spanish slave traders, the treaty of Madrid —sealed between the Portuguese and the Spanish Crown—and the power of the heathen.

Joffé's film is informed by recent historians' account of the idealism imbued in the Jesuits' mission. Indeed, the narrative structure of the film conveys a historical argument that helps to locate the film in its own contemporary moment. This historical argument is twofold: (1) it presents the missions in a very positive way as a utopian plan for the betterment of the Guaranis; (2) it presents the Jesuits of the eighteenth century as counterparts to the Theologians of Liberation.⁵ Thus, rather than seeing the film as "a blurring of the historical past," as Jameson has argued about contemporary historical films, the film's value for the viewers seems to rely on the political and historical argument that its narrative raises, that is, the presentation of the Jesuits as the liberators of the oppressed and dispossessed Guaranis. As the film develops, the Jesuits are presented as combining religious and military strategies to defend the oppressed; thus, the narrative approximates the Jesuits to the Theologians of Liberation, suggesting a common cause in the formers' rejection of monopoly capitalism as an economic system and the latters' struggle against liberal capitalism—despite their historical differences. The fictional and filmic techniques—its ordering of the events, development of the characters, use of focalization and voice-over narrator, mise-en-scene, and music—clarify Joffé's historical argument not simply as an anachronism but as a powerful narrative of a struggle that expands the borders of the La Plata of the eighteenth century.

The opening sequence of the film presents a number of awesome panoramic shots of a Jesuit who has been punished by the Indians; his body descends the huge falls tied to the cross. The fragility and immobility of the body immediately evokes sacrifice and crucifixion. These initial shots condense information about the Jesuits' efforts to defy the dangers represented by the Spanish and Portuguese States, by the heathen, and also by nature itself: the cataracts are a symbol of the Jesuits' constant effort to defy the power of nature. As the sequence

develops, as soon as one Jesuit is killed by the Indians, another comes to replace him. The descent through the fall is replaced by Father Gabriel's ascent through the rocks in order to continue the work that was left undone—the conversion of the Guaranis.

Similarly, the close-ups which are interspersed with the panoramic shots show the details that help to construe the character of the Jesuits: the cross, which is carried by different Jesuits, can be read as a penance and a necessity since the Jesuits become undifferentiated martyrs. In this sense, these images create the paradigm for one's understanding of the Jesuits: they are pacifists, obedient to the precepts of the order, and tenacious in their cause. Once Father Gabriel reaches the top of the Falls, he plays a flute to enchant the Indians with his music, which is melodic, sad, and resigned. Furthermore, there is a sense of complete harmony between the shots showing the idyllic beauty of the jungle and the music produced by the flute. Indeed, in this first contact with Father Gabriel, most of the Indians become involved with the music, and the Guaranis' only instruments of defense against the foreigner—their arrows—are put down while the flute, still pointed to the Indians, represents the Jesuit's instrument of pacification and victory. The superimposing of a number of shots of the forest and the Indians evinces the inevitable union between the alleged peaceful nature of the Guarani and the peaceful methods of the Jesuits—both, Jesuits and Indians, respect the power of nature: violence is useless in this scenery. The narrative and the images build up a sense of perfect union.

The plot, which is polarized between the Jesuits—with their peaceful methods and good intentions—and the Spanish settlers in the colony of Asunción—with their greed and desire to enslave the Indians—emphasizes the intrinsic goodness of the Jesuits' mission. The richness of the settlers' clothes and habitation, as well as their titles and connivance with the slave traders and Bandeirantes, contrasts with the Jesuits' abnegation, rejection of power, and struggle for the cause of the Guarani. All shots epitomize this polarity leaving no room for doubt or a questioning of the Jesuits' defense of the Guarani. Historically,

however, this presentation of the Jesuits can be polemicized since they were always in obligation to the Spanish Crown, hardly questioned the enslaving of the African in Spanish and Portuguese colonies, and were in agreement with the *encomienderos*—Spanish settlers who had the right to employ the work of the Guarani in their farms on a weekly basis.⁶ Furthermore, the Reductions were used to protect and establish the frontiers of the Spanish territories.⁷

The rendering of events in the film also presents an anachronism in its transposing of historical facts from the seventeenth century into the 1750s, the period in which most of the action takes place. The final sequence—the defense of the Indians by the Jesuits after the Treaty of Madrid and during the Guaranitic War, from 1754 to 1756—is rendered as if the Jesuits fought for the Indians against the Spanish and the Portuguese; however, according to different historians, the Jesuits had to accept the Treaty, and the Guarani were left alone to fight the war and to be decimated by Spanish and Portuguese soldiers. The Jesuits' armed defense of the Indians, as portrayed in the film, can be seen as based on another historical fact dated from 1629, when Father Antonio Ruiz de Montoya left the Guayra Reductions with approximately 12,000 Guarani, in what was called "Exodus of Montoya," in the direction of the Paraná River, towards the South, to protect the Indians from the constant attacks by Bandeirantes.⁸

The historical events in the seventeenth century, with Montoya's heroically standing for the Guarani's cause, can be seen as a role model for Father Gabriel who, like Father Montoya, is presented as supporting the Indians and allowing other Jesuits of his Reduction to take arms against the soldiers. Unlike the film, in the Guaranitic War the Jesuits had to accept the orders of the Spanish Crown. If Father Montoya's heroic deeds and the Mbororé• Battle are the inspiring historical facts to what is seen in the narrative of Joffé's *The Mission*, one can conclude that the film transposes the historical events of the seventeenth into the eighteenth century in an attempt to simplify the historical polemics concerning the Jesuits' response to the Treaty of Madrid.

The film's presentation of the Jesuitic Order—*Companhia de Jesus*—as an open and flexible institution, in which even a marginal such as Rodrigo Mendonza can be accepted, as well as Father Gabriel's and the other Jesuits' abnegation for the Guarani, further suggests a certain closeness between the Jesuits and the Theologians of Liberation. The latter stand for the oppressed and propose a more open church, thus questioning the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church as an institution.⁹ It seems possible to understand such a liberal view of the Jesuits as the film's contextualizing of a historical past within the discourses available nowadays since the Jesuits in the film can be seen as the preceptors of the new Theology of Liberation. By turning the Jesuits' action during the Guaranitic War into an heroic deed and by enhancing the pacific methods and the democratic spirit of the Jesuits, the film foregrounds a vision of the Jesuits that is close to our perception and knowledge of the discourse of the Theologians of Liberation. One can ask, then, what the film has done to the disciplinary and hierarchical, but no less pious, "*Companhia de Jesus*" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Historians unanimously agree about the Guaranis' decisive action during the Guaranitic War, a war that was fought and decided by them. Despite this fact, the film turns the Jesuits into heroes. Such artistic liberty poses a proximity between Jesuits and contemporary Theologians, thus allowing the film to present a more universal reading of history or a more universal historical argument; that is the struggle of the powerless —Indians, Jesuits, minorities and Theologians of Liberation— against established hierarchies, those of the State and of the Church. In this sense, the powerful shots showing the Guarani being killed by the soldiers in a diffuse photography freeze the images and stand out as timeless, historical and contemporary. Similarly, the black and white photography of Cox's credit sequence, which shows Nicaraguan civilians being killed, gives the audience the interweaving of past and present, first and third world countries. Furthermore, these films seem to question the alleged separation between the allegorical

readings—traditionally associated with third-world artistic production—and the more postmodern first-world aesthetic forms.

Other films call for a new reading of the allegorical and the pastiche: Carlos Diegues *Bye Bye Brazil* or Carla Camuratti's *Carlota Joaquina*.¹⁰ The allegory in these films shows an intrinsic relationship between the third and first worlds and their respective histories. The allegory in these films reveals the reproduction of older discourses involving relations of dependence in the present histories of first and third world countries, thus self consciously evincing the power of historical narratives. Perhaps, the distant other, still historical and geographically distanced, discloses its relationship to the history of first world countries and their audience, as in a process of assimilation and transculturation, not only to problematize the possibility of a purely national product, but also to reinscribe the foreigner within the national. This expansion of boundaries, from the national to the transnational, names the processes actualized in contemporary filmic texts—processes which negotiate new positions and call for new definitions.

Notes

- 1 Fredric Jameson. "Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Review* 146 (July-August):30-69.
- 2 See Fredric Jameson, "Thirld World Literarure in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" *Social Text* 15 (Fall 1986):73.
- 3 Alexander Cockburn. "Movie Over, Ollie." *American Film* (October 1987):28-32.
- 4 In Schat's discussion of genre he observes that in the western film, the ideological reasons for the conflicts are not exposed, whereas in the historical romance value systems are disclosed, p.27. Thómas Schatz. *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (New York: Ramdom House, 1981). See also

Jon Tuska, *The Filming of the West* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976). For an important discussion on American expansion see Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), p. 288.

- 5 Maxim Haubert has argued that there are too many differences separating the Jesuits of the XVII and XVIII centuries and the Theologists of Liberation. My thesis in this paper is to propose that the film's political agenda and contemporariness rely on its presentation of the Religious missionaries as potential agents of change for the oppressed and powerless. In this sense, Hayden White's analysis of the power of fictional narratives to present an alternative to present realities can be applied to Joffé's rendering of the Jesuits. In Maxim Haubert, "Les Reductions Guaranies Et La Th•ologie De La Liberation," *Estudos Ibero-Americanos*. PUCRS, 1(June-1989):7-20. See also, Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Interpretation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1992), and Robert Burgoyne, *Bertolucci's 1900: A Narrative and Historical Analysis* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1991).
- 6 Bartolomeu Melia. "Fantasia e Historia" *Accieon: Revista Paraguaya del Reflexion y Dialogo* (Agosto, 1987):50.
- 7 See Kern, p.26 and Quevedo, p.7.
- 8 Rafael Carbonell de Masy, *Estrategias del Desarrollo Rural en los Pueblos Guaranies (1609-1767)*. Barcelona, 1992, p.82.
- 9 Maxim Haubert has mentioned that "unlike the Jesuits, the theologists of Liberation have questioned the hierarchy and totalitarianism of the Church" "Les Reductions Guaranies Et La Theologie De La Liberation," *Estudos Ibero-Americanos* (PUCR, June, 1989):16.
- 10 I have previously analyzed *Bye Bye Brazil*. See the *The Michigan Academician*, Ann Arbor, XXIV (1992): 551-57.