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# The Black Legend: Postmodernity, the Latin American politique and cinema's role in historical revisionism

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### Abstract

The Black Legend, the 'truth' surrounding Spanish atrocities in Latin America, has become a central point of both Spanish and Latin American modern national identities. Much of the present academic focus revolves around re-examining the Conquest itself and the constructing of Conquest narratives after the Reformation and the 1898 war between the United States and Spain. This is particularly relevant in Hollywood and wider cinematic representations of Spanish colonialism. However, the debate remains mired in Modernist considerations of historical 'truths' and 'absolutes'. In a postmodern world, however, these are no longer possible, meaning the debate must move away from a search for 'truth' to an examination of the political implication of the rising multiplicity of narratives.

Black Legend historical revisionism is, presently, decidedly popular in the Spanish 'national' consciousness. However, Black Legend (cinematic) historiography within Spain only examines the methods and reasons for its own construction, thus, confining itself within modernist historiography. Postmodernity's challenging of grand narratives and celebration of multiple voices questions the possibility of a defined, singular, Spanish national consciousness and, inevitably, forces the Black Legend's historical revisionism towards Latin America. The United States is the modern, hegemonic metanarrative, a narrative disseminated through Hollywood and the cinematic

lens. Given Latin America's historical, geographical, and political proximity and shared Western Hemispheric experience over five centuries – Latin Americans are the shared yet contrasting narrative. Postmodern historical revisionism, therefore, resides most powerfully and politically within Latin America.

## Introduction

Postmodernity's position astride either decade of the new millennium has brought profound considerations of broader intellectual thoughts and conceptions, enhancing the confidence of rising Global South voices. Lyotard's promotion of multiple, fractured narratives and narratives as social constructs led to incredulity towards grand narratives (Lyotard, 1984, p xxiv), which, in the 20<sup>th</sup> (and early 21<sup>st</sup>) centuries, is the American metanarrative and its associated conceptions of globalisation and neoliberalism. Framed within the turn of the millennium, this paper argues that postmodernity is decidedly more politically powerful than it has, thus far, been credited.

The avant-garde or modernism, upon utterance, conjures political connotations of rebellious writers, artists and filmmakers challenging the status quo. Powerful political paradigms are challenged and, ultimately, changed. The Avant-Garde, Surrealism, and Bakhtin's Carnival – all questioned and challenged the dominant paradigms within their specific contexts. As progressive as they were, these movements did not, however, challenge the superiority and right to high culture promoted through European ideals and the Eurocentric metanarrative.

Postmodernity has shifted the world beyond this, yet, in both the literary and political realm, it is not afforded the same political power, pushed aside to kitsch, parody and pastiche – confined to Warhol's soup cans and prints of Marilyn Monroe. Two decades later, the rise of alternative voices, and the political power of postmodernity, became apparent with examples such as Edward Said's *Orientalism*, whereby he coined conceptions of 'Other' voices (Said, 1978, p. 201). Postcolonialism is credited for breaking down colonial delineations between West and East, but postcolonialism and postmodernity are intertwined. The former creates challenges to narratives, the latter legitimising the diversity of 'new' narratives. Postcolonialism, as Said argues, creates the delineations between East and West, but postmodernity developed the existing delineations between Global North and South, particularly regarding ideas of projections of supposed inferiority and strength.

Perhaps the negation of the political power of postmodernity exists because we remain, arguably, within the postmodern period; the movement still to be judged by future writers and analysts. Perhaps it is because postmodernity both questions the possibility and promotes the relatively of truth but, even within the works of Warhol as an example, lay the political essence of postmodernity: questions on commodification and globalisation. Postmodernity's perceived lack of politicism (and its political power) lay in the fact that it does not assign privilege to positions or narratives. Modernist movements challenged that which came before, but the challenge and the change privileged the Eurocentric. This is not to discredit nor diminish the influence of Modernism in creating social change but to illustrate how postmodernism has taken Modernist ideals and, as Modernism did to the movements before it, to continue questioning

commodification and neoliberalism. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century questioned physical commodification, Duchamp's urinal as an example, but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, what separates postmodernity is, as Lyotard argues, the rise in 'informational commodity' (Lyotard, 1984, p. 5).

The questioning of hegemonic processes during Modernism questioned commodification but through the presupposed lens of the superiority of the European/American narrative; postmodernity's power stems from allowing previously silenced, 'developing' national voices. Informational commodity, Lyotard continues, is the 'major' stake in modern competition for power and: 'the breakdown of the hegemony of American capitalism,' (Lyotard, 1984, p. 5) If competition for modern power and the breakdown of American hegemony lay in informational commodification, then it follows that cinema, as the dominant form of American narrative dissemination, becomes the necessary analytical beginning point.

Writing in the context of 1984, Lyotard may not have predicted the fall of communism and, as Fukuyama wrongly claims, the end of history and the supposed final victory of liberal democracy (Fukuyama, 1992, p. i). Nor may he have predicted the rise in the hegemony of American capitalism across the turn of the millennium. However, the prediction of the role of the postmodern in breaking down American economic and political dominance stands. If the American (and European) form the former dominant paradigm, then that which shares geographical, historical, linguistic, and ideological ties with that paradigm is best positioned to challenge that paradigm's dominance. The only location sharing all these points is Latin America. This paper will argue, as Claudia Fermin previously pioneered, that the postmodern debate is profoundly political and 'deeply rooted' in Latin American history (Fermin, 1996, p. vii).

Geo-politically speaking, Latin America has the most shared historical experiences with the United States. With examples such as Pinochet and Noriega, Latin America has come most directly under America's influence. Central and Latin America share the 'Western' hemisphere. Therefore, the greatest questioning of the hegemony of the 'West' comes from the Global South that shares the same continent and 'Western' hemisphere because the countries south of *Los Estados Unidos* are the only ones to share the closest similarity of geo-political experience.

If the postmodern debate is about 'aesthetico-cultural' subjects, as Fermin argues, and the 're'-modelling of those subjects as well as processes of 'literaturization and deliteraturation', (Fermin, 1996, p. vii) than any questioning of American hegemony or the breakdown of capitalist hegemony begins within the literary realm and the postmodern 're'-construction of narratives. The political power of postmodernity in the Latin American context is best demonstrated through the predominant means of mass information dissemination at the turn of the millennium – cinema.

Deleuze cites modern, minority political cinema, as opposed to the West, residing in Africa and Turkey – mainly in Said's spheres of the 'Other' (Landy, 2015, p. 124). Rightly so, but before we do this, we must analyse Latin America as it holds two centuries of postcolonialism (since Haiti in 1804 and Mexico in

1810). Therefore, possessing the longest engagement period with, and resistance to, the American metanarrative. Broad as the term 'Latin American cinema' may be, further narrowing becomes necessary through the choice of films and theoretical lenses. If we are to reconsider the multiplicity of narratives to, from a Deleuzian perspective, counter the past to understand the present for the benefit of the future, then said analysis must begin with the defining narrative of the Old/New World – *La Leyenda Negra* (the 'Black Legend' or the negative portrayal of the Spanish Conquest and colonialism thereafter).

While Landy rightly argues that cinema constitutes 'counter-history' – it must move beyond somewhat stereotypical body politic tropes like Fernando Solanas' tango metaphors (Landy, 2015, p. 124) – and delve to the very core and beginning of the construction of 'American' power and domination narratives – that is, the positive and negative framing originating with The Black Legend itself. To understand present-day American (cinematic) hegemony, it is necessary to analyse the history of the Americas: namely The Reformation and the Catholic/Protestant/Puritan divide through which the Black Legend was constructed. Thus, postmodern deconstructions of five centuries of Black Legend narratives must dually examine films that sit on either side of the Black Legend dichotomy and transcend the 'height' of the postmodern period – that is, the turn of the millennium.

Three films fit these criteria and, thus, become demonstrative of the Latin American questioning of American and Hollywood hegemony. Firstly, Ridley Scott's *1492: Conquest of Paradise* (1992), as the Hollywood blockbuster that 'questions', but re-affirms old narratives, a film demonstrating both the 'traditional' narrative and Hollywood's attempts and need to perpetuate that narrative in an increasingly postmodern world. Secondly, and as the conduit between the Old and New Worlds both in textual content and theoretical considerations, is Salvador Carrascos' *La Otra Conquista (The Other Conquest)* precisely because of the duality of its narrative acknowledges the Old World and the New. Lastly, Icíar Bollain's *También la Lluvia (Even the Rain)* becomes the concluding film for analysis as it not only outrightly questions American neoliberalism and neo-colonialism through films within films but also with its reconsideration of the Columbian narrative.

## **The current historiographical cinematic debate**

In a global, postcolonial context, 1992 was a decidedly pivotal year. The Columbus Quincentenary – despite the cessation of the Cold War, Fukuyama's supposed 'end' of history and the triumph of neoliberalism – intensified the questioning of colonial legacies and narratives. In the Australian context, Henry Reynolds asked: *Why Weren't We Told*, leading Eddie Mabo to fight for Land Rights decisions within the High Court. The 90s, combined with postmodernity's plural considerations of narratives, re-examined Modernism's challenges, its successes, and its failures – notably demonstrated by revisiting the Holocaust – the end of the Cold War igniting the 'Historikerstreit' debate. Ernst Nolte, and other conservatives, argued that The Final Solution must be viewed from a contextual position, measured against other 20<sup>th</sup> century genocides (Roberts, 1991, p. 38), a genocide not at all indicative of the 'greater' German national

identity. Jürgen Habermas, controversially at the time, argued against these conservative, apologetic historical revisionists, and any conceptions of the uniqueness of Nazism and the Holocaust itself (Leaman, 1988, p. 521).

Parallels run between the Historikerstreit and The Black Legend debates because both debates question the 'uniqueness' or 'inherent' nature of a nation's historical identity, and the levels of implicitness of said nation within the atrocities committed. The Black-White Legend debate has, within Spain in recent years, been reignited with the release, and success (100,000 copies sold), of Roca Barea's 2016 text, *Imperiofobia y leyenda negra*. In this, she argues, much like Nolte, that The Black Legend is a narrative construct, created by northern European Protestant propaganda – the modern media a continuation and perpetuation of 16<sup>th</sup> century media myths. For Roca Barea, Spanish colonialism was responsible for atrocities, but Spain is not unique in this, merely another colonial, Imperial power within the European context of colonialism. She argues that if we deprive Europe of its 'Hispanophobia' and its anti-Catholicism, then modern history becomes incomprehensible (Roca Barea, 2016, p. 478). She continues that there has been too much comparison between the Holocaust and Spanish colonialism in terms of genocide itself; arguing that The Black Legend has become nothing more than a conservative, right-wing, Fascist pursuit (Roca Barea, 2021). Esteban Boisseau's 2022 text, *Hollywood Contra España*, continues the same considerations and arguments through the lens of Hollywood's perpetuations of the same 16<sup>th</sup> (and 19<sup>th</sup>) century, negative Spanish stereotypes.

Boisseau argues that Hollywood, and the historical narrative it purveys, unfairly targets Spain with undue focus on the Black Legend but Roca Barea even argues that Boisseau's texts are politically biased works of the current socialist governments. Roca Barea has been heavily criticised for a range of inconsistencies, namely by Edgar Straehle and Jose Villacañas (White, 2019), criticism which undermine her reliability but not her broader popularity nor the popularity of her arguments. Regardless, this remains a heavily Spanish-based debate, largely neglecting the broader Hispanic world. Roca Barea, and Boisseau, both argue that Spain (much as Julian Juderías did a century earlier), needs to be considered like any other European nation – no longer a historical pariah left out in the cinematic wilderness but given its 'rightful' / 'correct' place within the epitome of the 21<sup>st</sup> century 'high' culture – Hollywood.

While valuable, reconsidering Spain and The Black Legend through the cinematic form does not go nearly far enough. The cinematic-historiographical debate requires both broader contextual reconsiderations and far closer analysis of Latin American films – namely because the Spanish academic argument continues to centre around questions of positioning and assigning high culture to literature and cinema. To simply argue that Spanish historical revisionism is necessary so that Spain can be on par with other European nations misses the point. The Black Legend is not just about the Spanish Inquisition nor the Reformation, nor is it confined to the 'Spanish' – it is substantially more complex and politically important, indeed the whole of the Western Hemisphere more important – because Spain, despite Roca Barea's assertions, was the world's first 'major' colonial power. Spain, whether deliberately or not, set the colonial template.

Dismissive relativism does not apply. Spain is not like any other modern colonial power because Spain lay the initial blueprint of modern colonialism itself. Simply because the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films, or *Elizabeth*, portray Spain in a negative light maintains the focus on Spain itself, not on the broader effects of The Black Legend in Central and Latin America, where it has had a decidedly more profound impact. Redressing negative portrayals and narratives is the essence of postcolonial, historical revisionism, but in terms of the Black Legend, Spain cannot be the sole focus because the Black Legend has had far more political, economic, and historical impact in Latin America.

## **The Black Legend, Latin America, and postmodernity**

In 1914, as the Industrial period gave way to Modernism and the competition for colonial spaces intensified, so too did the rise in historical revisionism. In the Hispanic context, this came with Julian Juderías' conceptions and coining of the term – The Black Legend. In essence, Juderías argued for historiographical revisionism surrounding how Spain is historically represented (Juderías, 1917, pp. 218/219); Spain's colonial past must be considered in the same light and context as northern European colonising nations (Roca Barea's argument not new, simply echoing the same sentiments of a century earlier); that the Reformation and subsequent Protestant control of the European narrative and Puritan control of the United States narrative painted both Spain and Catholicism in a negative light; precisely that which Boisseau argues continues with Hollywood (Boisseau, 2022, p. 18).

Juderías' argument being, pre-Historikerstreit debate, that Spain has been considered the pariah of modern colonialism. Whereas the British and French Empires are seen, even today with conceptions of Commonwealth, as the shining beacons of colonialism – the 1898 war for Cuba (where Boisseau argues yellow journalism began the negative media representations of Spain) now presents Spain as the colonial villain; somehow, from Juderías' perspective, the only nation to commit colonial atrocities.

While Juderías argues, as do some Spanish writers of the 21st century for historical/colonial parity with the other colonial powers – to do so only goes as far as Spain trying to gain acceptance from the metanarrative in order to become part of it. In Juderías' context, redressing the situation is understandable as he has both historical proximity to the Spanish-American War and he is coining a term and phrase which, in order to do so, he must first theorise. However, 21<sup>st</sup> century scholarship remains locked in a century-old discussion of Spain itself, belying the profundity of the broader Black Legend context. Boisseau and Roca Barea argue that Spanish colonialism is, firstly, not distinct from other forms of colonialism and, secondly, that the belittling of the Spanish narrative has come predominantly through the cinematic form (Boisseau, 2022, p. 47). While, as Spaniards, they understandably wish to defend their national history and identity – pursuing this path ignores several key points. The Black Legend is not homogenous, not within Spain nor in the broader Hispanic and Latin world. Equally, what The Black Legend means for Spanish historical identity does not mean the same for Mexican, Colombian, Venezuelan and other Latin American historical identities.

## The postmodern in Latin American politics

While sharing language and historical similarities, Latin America is *not* Spain; therefore, considerations of the significance and influence of the Black Legend must be analysed from a different lens. 'Hispanic', while used freely, is an uncertain term, implying multiple semantic interpretations. For an indigenous person, the Spanish are the conquerors. For the mestizo/mixed race person, the 'Spanish' comprises, at most, half of your identity.

For the Dons and Doñas (as we see in the *Zorro* franchise) – Spain is their homeland, one which you aspire to but may not know nor have ever visited. Even within Spain itself, 'Spanishness' consists of multiple, often conflicting narratives. Canarians, Catalonians, Euskadi (Basque), and Andalusians base their identities, primarily, on their regions. In recent memory, both the Basque and Catalonians have pushed for independence. Spain is not a homogenous whole, nor then is Spanish history. However, Boisseau and Roca Barea's arguments rely on framing this concept of 'Spanishness' to re-assess the Black Legend so that 'Spain' can be considered on equal terms to other European nations.

To desire for 'Spain' to become part of the neoliberal metanarrative; to revise history to place Spain on par with other modern European nations negates the potential power of reassessments of The Black Legend. Questioning the metanarrative allows one to challenge that narrative but focusing heavily on stereotypes does not produce enough of Lyotard's incredulity towards grand narratives nor provide enough of a challenge to American capitalist hegemony.

Protestant propaganda, in both the 16<sup>th</sup> century leaflets and in 21<sup>st</sup> century cinema, certainly does frame Spain in a negative light, meaning Boisseau's revisionism has its place, but this needs to be taken further into both the postmodern context and the postmodern political. Boisseau argues that 'fictional' film scenes push Spanish stereotypes (one example used is Alfredo Mayo in the 1963 film *55 Days in Peking*), push Spanish characters into the background, and do not comply with historical reality (Boisseau, 2022, p. 54). This presumes that both historical 'reality' is possible and that Hollywood is, indeed, attempting historical reality. As Custen argues, as far back as 1917, Hollywood history has often been built upon dramatic legend, the 'star' factor and the consumerist nature of Hollywood outweighing any historical consideration (Custen, 1986, p. 124). In his postmodern manifesto, *The Literature of Exhaustion*, John Barth argues that literary forms have 'histories' and 'historical contingencies' (Barth, 1984, p. 71); thus, literature, in all forms, must be analysed both within the historical context of its production and the present context of its reception.

Responding to post-structuralist historical dichotomies, discussing Walter Benjamin's 'tradition,' Barth elaborates that postmodern analysis sees a 'de-totalisation' examination of 'ruling-class' history (Barth, 1984, p. 71), much as Boisseau is attempting. However, history, being always constructed from the present, allows said concepts to be: 'deconstructive forces of hegemonic ideologies,' (Eagleton, 1985, p. 64). Analysing Anglo-Saxon/non-Anglo-Saxon cinema questions only one narrative angle; the past still remains a historical

dichotomy but, within the postmodern, denying those historical dichotomies becomes a necessity as it allows for the continual questioning of history and cinema's role in the construction and dissemination of history.

Hollywood frames Spanish (and all other competing narratives) in a negative light because it is the means of production for the American metanarrative. Its purpose, its role, is to promote the dominant paradigm's narrative precisely because it is Hollywood. Yes, it's the endpoint of 400 plus years of Puritan America. Yes, all the engravings, the films, the books, and the Monty Python sketches that denounce Spain, the Inquisition and colonialism are biased because, through such representations, the dominant paradigm maintains its position. But, even the most simplistic analysis of the Spanish Conquest itself, shows the original conquest, Christianity and colonisation narratives were constructed to favour Spain as, at that moment, Spain controlled and constructed the metanarrative.

Reconsiderations of how Spain (and Latin America) is represented in the cinematic space is certainly constructive, as are considerations that they are constructed historical narratives – and this is the postmodern point – they are *constructed* narratives, *plural*. Roca Barea's discussions on *Imperiophobia* criticises Europe's Imperial powers but still maintains the righteousness of Empire and Imperialism itself (Martínez Shaw, 2019). Decolonisation allowed for the rise of alternative historical narratives; the nature of which questioned the Empire narrative that pervaded historical consciousness for centuries; to aspire to bring Spain to the same 'positive' level of European imperialism is to re-iterate what Juderías argued a century earlier and keeps the academic debate mired in modernist thinking; thus, negating the postcolonial.

From the postmodern perspective, questioning narratives is imperative, but questioning narratives only to become part of the metanarrative defeats the purpose of questioning said metanarrative. As Angela Ramírez reminds us within the postmodern politic, for Lyotard there are three conditions of modern knowledge: the invocation of metanarratives to legitimise the fundamental claim(s) of that paradigm, a legitimation that then becomes an 'inevitability,' but this is, inherently, followed by de-legitimation, then exclusion, and a distinct desire for homogeneous and moral prescriptions (Ramírez, 2005, p. 111). Roca Barea and Boisseau are attempting to de-legitimise the American metanarrative but still within the desire for the homogenous. From the Latin American perspective, such Spanish considerations of the historical (cinematic) revisionism of the Black Legend is akin to King Charles III telling the Stolen Generations of Australia how to construct their history and how they should represent themselves and their identities. It is not enough to simply analyse how Hollywood perpetuates the Legend within Spain itself, but more importantly, within the colonised space of Latin America, the question must become not only how and why The Black Legend has been constructed but, more importantly, what are the political implications of its construction? To absolve Spain of its colonial crimes, or to at least relativise them, only serves to form a re-packaged version of a Eurocentric narrative. Neither conquest or conquered narratives can form a homogenous 'truth' as they are, and have always been, incompatible. In



the postmodern, therefore, it is only the *acceptance* of the multiplicity of narratives that will allow for the removal of antiquated conceptions of Eurocentric dominance.

Postmodernity has raised the voices of the fragmented, silenced narratives, and it is the colonial/Global South narrative which becomes of far more political importance. Historiographical debates on why Spain has been misrepresented have their place, but the true essence of The Black Legend does not lay in Spain. The Black Legend is not about how Spain is perceived in Europe nor the cinematic realm thereof. Its significance lay in the construction of national identities within Latin America. Spain was the imperial master. The United States, within conceptions of 'manifest destiny', became the *new* imperial master. Either option equates to the pre-eminence of liberal democracy as well as old and new colonialism. From the Indigenous/Mestizo perspective – neither option is entirely preferable. Examinations of The Black Legend, in a postmodern world, need to be situated within the analysis of rising narratives, be it the Aztec voices of Mexico, the Bolivian voices of the Cochabamba Water Wars of 2000, the native peoples of the Amazon or the rising resistance of the Mapuche in Chile.

## **The political importance of cinema in the postmodern context**

Cinema is oft seen as merely a form of entertainment, but as the pre-eminent form of 20<sup>th</sup> (and 21<sup>st</sup> century) information dissemination, it needs to be reconsidered, particularly in terms of its influence on the promotion of American neoliberalism and globalisation as well as the construction of associated narratives. The preceding discussion on The Black Legend and its role in constructing Latin American identities could be applied to a wide range of Latin American films. Equally, other, more definitively postmodern films could also be included. However, the following three films have been selected not because they are definitively postmodern in narrative, character, or tropes but because they show the political power of the postmodern epoch, the move from the Hollywood hegemonic narrative towards questioning of national identities and questioning of neoliberalism and neo-colonialism.

### **Ridley Scott's 1492: Conquest of Paradise (1992)**

Scott's blockbuster was, for its context, meant to be a revisionist yet celebratory film. However, one needs to go no further than the movie's title to begin its deconstruction, given it comes across as somewhat oxymoronic. It celebrates Columbus' 'conquest' but also acknowledges Latin America as a 'paradise.' If Latin America is already a 'paradise' (that which Christians seek to find for eternity), then what does the European intrusion bring?

Despite the use of the word in the title, the film lauds Columbus, Christianity and the supposed 'enlightenment' he brings – the word 'paradise' still echoing conceptions of innocence and primitivism. The film, as Le Beau argues, is an attempt to 'reflect' concerns about the Columbian Quincentenary through a Spanish/French/English co-production while still recycling traditional narratives that maintain the European colonial narrative as the dominant paradigm. Scott

himself refers to *his* Columbus as a 'bright light' emerging from a 'dark age,' (Le Beau, 1993, p. 153). Arguments surrounding Spanish stereotypes in Hollywood here become difficult as it is a European co-production (with a French-accented Columbus in Depardieu), but despite attempts to present Columbus as 'enlightened'; the film becomes (produced within the context of rising, challenging narratives) a rallying point for European and American neoliberalism.

There are further fundamental flaws not only in the title itself but also in the fact that these concepts still appear in a film title on the Quincentenary of Columbus' arrival. Columbus, according to the traditional narrative – somehow seems to be the lucky explorer, never intent on conquest. If this is the case, is the film title arguing that the destruction of paradise was from subsequent conquerors, thus absolving Columbus?

This would, as the last third of the film demonstrates and supported by the historical record, seem unlikely given that Columbus asked to be both Admiral of the Seas and Governor of the new colonies. Within the 21<sup>st</sup> century cinematic debate – framed against the conception that The Black Legend begins with Columbus – are negative conquest narratives systematic or symptomatic? Systematic in the sense that Columbus' actions, and subsequent Spanish colonialism, becomes the forerunner of the Eurocentric superiority narrative that would continue for the next five centuries – conquest and dispossession demonstrative of Christendom's colonialism. Conversely, is there forethought and planning, at least in the initial stages, of conquest at all – symptomatic of the fortuitous nature of the Age of Exploration?

Regardless of which side of the debate one sits on, the film itself replays traditional narrative tropes, maintaining the validity of American hegemony in the region through the dichotomy of this narrative – the best of Columbus (Christianity and Enlightenment ideals) the domain of the Global North – the worst of Columbus and the subsequent conquest, the brutal treatment of the natives, The Black Legend, the domain of the Global South.

## **Salvador Carrasco's *La Otra Conquista* (The Other Conquest) (1998)**

*The Other Conquest* details the story of Topiltzin, a surviving descendant of Moctezuma who is taken to be a prisoner of Hernán Cortés after the desecration of the Aztec Templo Mayor (Grand Temple). Topiltzin's physical and metaphorical 'salvation' comes when he is handed over to Friar Diego for conversion. Throughout the film, Topiltzin symbolises modern Mexico – just as the modern nation struggles with its mixed identity, so too Topiltzin struggles to reconcile his Aztec identity with the imposition of the Spanish/Catholic beliefs. This film is postmodern in the sense of dual narratives and changing and uncertain realities but also relevant because indigenous creation stories, as postmodern narratives also do, belie totalising and are often contradictory (Wilmer, 1996, p. 42). *The Other Conquest* becomes the critical second film when we look at the impact of postmodernity on the politics of Central and South America.

The postmodern duality of narrative, as well as the timing of the release of the film (at the turn of the millennium), demonstrates the change in the political situation within the Hispanic world. Topiltzin, his reprieve laying in his conversion, never reconciles his former faith with the new one imposed upon him; the juxtaposition of the Aztec Mother Goddess against the Virgin Mary – not only the key motif of the film but also metaphorical of the duality of Mexican national consciousness; caught between the Old World and The New. It considers the mixed nature of Mexican identity and attempts to disprove the conquest of harmonious fusion between conqueror and conquered; Mexican history cannot be one homogenous truth (Chorba, 2004, p. 223).

Cortes and the Conquistadors in this film commit atrocities, the essence of The Black Legend debate. However, Carrasco's film is far more complex. Friar Diego continually questions the conquistadors' brutality. The Black Legend begins to find increasing shades of grey. Accordingly, Mexico itself must question the mixed nature of Mexico's national identity. If, for Carrasco, Mexico is to reconcile its past, it must celebrate the fractured nature of that historical narrative. Carrasco's film reflects Mexico's attempt to question conventional wisdom and practices to compel a rethinking of historical experience. If, as Wilmer reasons, postmodernity creates a crisis within Modernity (Wilmer, 1996, p. 40), then both this and postmodernity's celebrations of multiple and contradictory indigenous narratives create a crisis in the very basis of the Western colonial narrative itself.

## **Icíaar Bollaín's También la Lluvia (Even the Rain) (2010)**

Icíaar Bollaín's film traces the story of filmmaker Sebastian who attempts to compose a film redressing the historiographical conceptions of Columbus. Set during the Cochabamba Water Crisis of 2000; it questions modern globalisation and neo-colonialism as the very 'vida' of Bolivia being sold off to American foreign interests with little interest in the needs of the original inhabitants; clearly echoing the original Spanish Conquest.

In this film, Columbus is no hero: indeed, quite the opposite. The degrading treatment of the local Bolivians (both as extras in the film and the broader neo-colonial sense) is scrutinised throughout the film. *Even the Rain* is demonstrative of how the new millennium brought cases of outright rebellion, within Latin America, against American neoliberalism and neo-colonialism. The film is clearly demonstrative of the shifting state of the socio-politics of Latin America between 1992 and 2010, illustrating the increased willingness of individuals and large regional and nation-states to challenge American hegemony. This, combined with the renewed push to promote alternative viewpoints from Spain itself, allowed Hispanic literature and cinema to find the confidence to break away from the dominance of the Hollywood metanarrative and to move beyond Hollywood nostalgia for 'traditional' colonial narratives.

The film, a 'Hispanic' co-production, is criticised for creating little more than 'armchair empathy' and for maintaining a presentation of Indigenous populations still in need of rescuing (Hulme-Lippert, 2016, p. 106). This is somewhat inaccurate. The film actively acknowledges a multiplicity of 'truths'

within The Black Legend. Sebastian's film within a film definitively places Columbus as the beginning point of the negatives of Spanish colonialism. It also echoes the dissenting voices of Conquistadors, such as Bartolomé de las Casas, and echoes the Valladolid debates surrounding the righteousness and legality of the Conquest itself.

*Even the Rain* is criticised for its historical inaccuracy, but to do this softens the impact of Spanish colonialism itself. Much like Keith Windschuttle's (2010) historiographical analysis of Phillip Noyce's *Rabbit Proof Fence*, within the Australian indigenous context, whereby he deconstructs (and debases) the film's most powerful scenes from the moral highpoint, using historical 'accuracy' as the yardstick. *Even The Rain* acknowledges the negatives of Spanish imperialism but also questions and ultimately denies the possibility of singular narratives. In a postmodern world of relative truths, the 'accuracy' of a film no longer becomes the tenet of its historical importance. Instead, what becomes more important is the result of the dissemination of that narrative and the questioning of historical narratives in the broader consciousness.

## Conclusion

The postmodern challenge to grand narratives led to historiographical re-considerations and, in doing so, the celebration of the multiplicity of narratives. Re-examinations of how The Black Legend has been constructed over the last five centuries are imperative. However, to re-examine it in terms of how such revisionism can absolve Spain through relativising its colonial past negates the idea of historical revisionism itself.

The significance of reconsideration of The Black Legend is far more relevant in the New World because the Black Legend was *constructed* in the New World. Spanish imperialism was the forerunner to the neoliberal economic colonialism of the United States, so to continue to solely examine how and why the Black Legend was constructed neglects the political power it has in the present moment. Revising it within the postmodern context creates a clear and decisive questioning of the American cinematic metanarrative, which becomes critical in terms of understanding the past, present and future of Latin American historical and political identities.

Ridley Scott's *1492* film attempts to 'question' history – but only succeeds in replaying traditional stereotypes both about the historical narrative and those who control it, becoming, as Cilento's argues, a nostalgia that keeps Hollywood making the same conquest films (Cilento, 2012, p. 246). The United States metanarrative attempts, when confronted with these economically developing and ideologically competing blocs to its south, to maintain its status as the dominant paradigm by keeping and promoting this Hollywood 'nostalgia.'

*La Otra Conquista*, by Carrasco's admission, is an exploration of the duality of Mexican identity, but this need not be negative. Instead, it becomes a recognition that singular narratives in a postmodern world are no longer possible. Historical dichotomies themselves, are also opened up to increasing interpretations. Postmodernity becomes a celebration of multiple narratives and of the necessity for a modern nation to accept the fractured nature of its

historical narratives and identities. *Even the Rain* is also a powerful and important film in this context as it acknowledges, yet critiques, The Black Legend, but also provides important critiques of dominant historical representations, as we saw in *1492*, and attempts, through revising The Black Legend, to 're-establish' a Latin American screen (and political) identity.

Postmodernism has forced The Black Legend debate away from dichotomic interpretations. The Black Legend will continue to be questioned, and the representation of the associated narratives in film (and in broader society itself) will continue to change. How much these narratives change is inexorably tied to how the socio-political situation in Latin America evolves in the future. For now, Hispanic directors, film producers and film backers have found the confidence to step away from, and more importantly question, Hollywood hegemony. We can expect to see more films that continue to question and push the boundaries of the traditional metanarrative of Spanish colonialism and, in doing so, continue to re-examine the social and political influence of The Black Legend.

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