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Movie Review: "The Mission"

The film "The Mission", directed by Roland Joffé and released in 1986, was a fictional account of Jesuit missionaries working in 18th century Latin America and the kinds of problems they encountered while trying to convert the native populations. I chose this film because even though I dislike the proselytizing doctrine of the Church, the humanity displayed by the priests contrasted positively with the politically and profit minded Spanish and Portuguese. And although it was shot in the perspective of the Anglo-priests, it brought up the question for me, how do the natives feel about all of these changes, the religious and social changes especially.

One can find a myriad of messages in this film from an educational basis to commentary on political, economic, and religious institutions portrayed in this film. However, one of the most prevalent themes in this movie was the question: is violence necessary, or can the desires of the man be accomplished by peaceful means? Now this question can be broad, or simply applied to the film and situation presented in the film. That is why I partly found this to be such a well-done film, because the director's theme does not *only* apply to the film. All throughout human history we can see the mark of violence, and we can't help but wonder, could it have been avoided? Could it have been solved without violence? In Colonial Latin American especially, one has to consider this question. The colonization of Latin America was a bloody affair but then when you look at the Church and the impact it had on colonial life, you see another, less bloody, take over. This is not an essay on whether or not the Spanish or the Portuguese were wrong to take over the

land, but there is a curious contrast in techniques to subdue and assimilate the natives into the growing colonial society. The Church wanted their minds (and arguably their souls), while the political and economic powers wanted their bodies. The colonial society, then, was based on European ideologies and theology. The Church was the main religion (in their eyes), and the methods of governing were brought over, as well as a plethora of animals, seeds, and customs, which were adapted into the colonial and native lifestyles.

Through the characters Rodrigo and Father Gabriel, the director explored the issue of violence in Colonial Latin America, while still keeping true to the progression of historical events, namely the Spanish and Portuguese agreement regarding the missions, and the continued exploitation and violence on the natives that the Jesuits could no longer prevent. I think it is because of the director's faithfulness to historical progression that makes the priest's attempts to protect his flock that more despairing. Rodrigo's reversion to violence to protect the natives, and Father Gabriel's passive trusting in love and God to protect his flock both failed. If neither worked, then what could the director be saying? In the face of greater power and violence, these small acts, regardless of their method, are ineffective on such a small scale. Even if you hold on to your beliefs, or give them up for the "greater good," the perpetuation of violence will continue, unerringly, in the face of resistance.

This film fits into the framework of the course as a vivid introduction that really seems to set the tone for much of the rest of Latin America's history. In particular, the history of violence and the issue of including natives into the society as a whole are reoccurring themes I have learned about in this course. So after watched this film, it has put a lot of these issues into a deeper historical context to help explain the behaviors in more recent history.

Overall, I found the film to be well crafted in music, technique, and in the plot of it as well. The main thing I would have liked to see included was a scene better establishing the intense relationship between Rodrigo, the slave catcher, and his wife. I feel it would have made the eventual fight between the brothers that much more understandable in the sense of how devastated Rodrigo was by his wife's betrayal. Still, the way they presented Rodrigo's guilt afterwards was very visually strong and emotionally compelling, especially once freed from his physical and metaphorical burden.

I would not recommend this film to people with strong religious views, negative or otherwise, even though the men seem to be trying to do good work in comparison to the Mother Countries. Religion is a touchy subject for many people and this film, though period accurate in many respects, maybe a high button issue. Other than that, I would recommend this film all of the positive things I've listed previously, in addition to the interest that it is a historical film, but done in such a way, with the intrigue and the uncertainty, that it remains engaging even as we get a painting of how life might have been like in 18th century Latin America.

As I mentioned before, I think strongly religious people would not like the fact that the priests are getting slaughtered, but I also think that anti-Church people would be hypocritical of the priest's goals of imposing their religion on the native (from their perspective). In addition, I think that people identifying with the native Latin Americans, whether by blood, heritage, or by other discrimination, would have a very particular position that is probably uncomfortable, because overall the natives have no power and little say and that I think might be strongly felt by those watching. As it is, I feel uncomfortable watching the priests take advantage of the fact that the natives come to them for protection because there is no other way.

This film illustrated to me the ethnic diversity and social rigidity that was developing in Latin America. Reading it in books gives you the scale of the phenomenon, but seeing it subtly in the background in the town and not so subtly in the priest and native interactions playing out in front of your eyes gives a better – more human - representation of the conditions and the tensions that were created in that time period. It really showed how Latin America was founded on, and continued to function with, violence, even before the revolutionary stages.

It was mentioned before in class, but this film and sitting down to review this film has connected how much the colonial period still influences Latin American history, and gives a cultural (albeit adopted) context to the behavior and similarities in their history.