

“What’s Love Got to Do with It?”  
*Sympathy, Antipathy, and the Unsettling  
 of Colonial American History in Film*

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First printed in Barcelona in 1493, the following passage from Columbus’s *Letter to Luis de Santangel* neatly details the Spanish ceremony of possession:

Sir: Since I know that you will be pleased at the great victory with which Our Lord has crowned my voyage, I write this to you, from which you will learn how in thirty-three days I passed from the Canary Islands to the Indies, with the fleet which the most illustrious King and Queen, our Sovereigns, gave to me. There I found many islands, filled with innumerable people, and I have taken possession of them all for their Highnesses, done by proclamation and with the royal standard unfurled, and no opposition was offered to me. (Columbus 2002: 40)

That Columbus takes possession of the new world “by proclamation and with the royal standard unfurled” clearly speaks to the formality of this speech act. But, more importantly, that the entire ceremony unfolds before an *escrivano* (the person whose job it was to document this ritual officially) highlights the importance of writing as an instrument of empire. The legitimacy of Spain’s possession of Hispaniola rests entirely upon the *escrivano*’s transcription of Columbus’s misleading declaration “no opposition was offered to me.” This statement (in writing) obscures an important historical reality – namely, the presence of some 300,000 Taino people in 1492, “whose objection,” notes Stephen Greenblatt, “might challenge or negate the proclamation which formally, but only formally, envisages the possibility of contradiction” (Greenblatt 1991: 59). Never mind that the Taino could not possibly have understood the meaning of Columbus’s words; it only took a few strokes of the pen for the *escrivano* to *make* American history. The technology of writing thus provided Columbus with an effective way to silence the native population, in keeping with medieval legal standards, whereby “uninhabited territories become the possession of the first to discover them” (60).

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Indeed, the function of writing in this “closed formalistic” Spanish ceremony of possession was not merely to legitimate Spain’s claim to the land, but to *settle* the otherwise unsettling aspects of European colonization of the Americas. Columbus’s representation of the new world completely ignores the violence of American settlement and utterly fails to anticipate the unsettling decimation of the Taino population. According to Greenblatt, the unfurling royal standard represents one of many reassuring, however deceptive, signs of administrative order. “Consciously or unconsciously,” notes Greenblatt, these bureaucratic formulae “draw [readers] away from a sense of all that is unsettling, unique, and terrible in the first European contacts with the peoples of America” (1991: 54). That Columbus’s strictly adheres to the formality of this ceremony as a sort of defense mechanism recalls an important function of early American literature: *familiarization*.

From Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca to Walter Raleigh and Mary Rowlandson, the “rhetorical maneuver of assimilating the unknown by equating it with the already-known” – what Barbara Fuchs (1997) calls “colonial quotation” – recurs over again in early American literature, to satisfy particular cultural, economic, political, philosophical, and religious prerogatives.<sup>1</sup> For example, in his *Discovery of Guiana* Walter Raleigh repeatedly compares the river Thames to the Orinoco. This curious psycho-geography lends itself to the achievement of Raleigh’s main objective: to woo investors and the crown in a “radical program of overseas colonization” (Taylor 2001: 119). In other words, the comparison affectively encourages readers to imagine the commercial potential of the Amazon jungle. Or consider the biblical framing that Mary Rowlandson employs in her Indian captivity narrative, *A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (originally published in 1682):

It is a solemn sight to see so many Christians lying in their blood, some here and some there, like a company of sheep torn by wolves. (Rowlandson 1998: 308)

My head was light and dizzy (either through hunger or hard lodging or trouble or all together), my knees feeble, my body raw by sitting double night and day that I cannot express to man the affliction that lay upon my spirit, but the Lord helped me at that time to express it to Himself. I opened my Bible to read, and the Lord brought that precious scripture to me, Jer. 31:16, “Thus saith the Lord, ‘Refrain thy voice from weeping and thine eyes from tears, for thy work shall be rewarded, and they shall come again from the land of the enemy.’” (Rowlandson 1998: 312)

Rowlandson’s reliance upon Puritan typology (the application of biblical types to one’s own life) obscures both the historical and the geographical reality of her captivity in New England. At times, she cleverly breaks out of this typological pattern. However, that she invokes the story of Isaiah in this instance to typecast the indigenous population as “wolves” effectively robs the Narragansett tribe of its unique identity. Of course, this typological pattern played an important role in alleviating the trauma of Rowlandson’s captivity. It can be read as a defense

mechanism, one that carefully displaces the culture shock and the uncertainty of her captivity by making them seem deeply familiar (a biblical narrative with a foregone conclusion). But ultimately Christian typology (not unlike “colonial quotation”) threatens the uniqueness of the American experience. Something is inevitably lost in this translation of cultural biases, knowledge, political power, and legitimacy from one civilization to another.

In what follows I shall not examine how the historical film (as a genre) presents filmmakers with an opportunity to “re-create” a particular historical milieu – although the cinema certainly affords spectators an opportunity to become thoroughly absorbed in the past. Instead, I shall comparatively analyze how three films – Werner Herzog’s *Aguirre: The Wrath of God* (1972), Nicolás Echevarría’s *Cabeza de Vaca* (1991), and Bruce Beresford’s *Black Robe* (1991) – use sympathy and antipathy to *unsettle* and/or complicate canonical accounts of the American colonial settlement. For example, whereas Herzog’s *Aguirre* examines the failure of the aforementioned “bureaucratic formulae” to preserve Spanish civility in the new world and provides viewers with a horrifying account of how the megalomaniacal impulses of individual conquistadores figured in the Spaniards’ violent conquest of the new world, other films (for instance Beresford’s *Black Robe*) take a very different approach. Building on a wide variety of historical sources, including *The Jesuit Relations*, these films highlight the sympathetic, and thus transformative, interactions between Native Americans and European colonists/missionaries, in order to challenge conservative binary oppositions (such as savage versus civilized).<sup>2</sup>

Taken together, these films complicate viewers’ preconceived notions of the constitution of an American identity. However, in juxtaposing these two models of “unsettling” historical films – one that offers a critique of power (antipathy), the other that examines transformative cultural exchanges (sympathy) – I shall situate Herzog’s work as an exception to contemporary historical cinema’s general tendency toward an ideology of liberal tolerance and sympathetic identification with indigenous Americans. While both models usefully serve to contest conservative histories of colonial America, the antipathy that Herzog’s work cultivates for the Spanish conquistador Lope de Aguirre represents a potentially more affective critique of imperialist ideologies; Aguirre’s megalomania and gradual descent into madness parallels, in the register of affect, the film’s political agenda – to test the limits of history and thereby dismantle the imperialist ideologies that inform the settlement of the Americas. In short, I shall examine the various ways in which the aforementioned films complement and, more importantly, contradict colonial American literature. Together, these films resist early European colonists’ erasure of Native American identities – their silencing of indigenous voices; dismantle stereotypes and traditional binary oppositions; and/or deconstruct the bureaucratic formulae that continue to draw our attentions, deceptively, away from “all that is unsettling, unique, and terrible in the first European contacts with the peoples of America” (Greenblatt 1991: 54).

### *Aguirre: The Wrath of God* (1972)

In *Aguirre: The Wrath of God*, Werner Herzog's treatment of Pedro de Ursúa's infamous 1560 expedition, which was designed to discover the illusory gold-encrusted streets of El Dorado, colonial American history lapses into political allegory, much as the Spanish quest for El Dorado (one of the most treasured sites in the western imagination) itself reflected the transposition of fact into fiction. Released in 1972, the film implicitly compares Spain's bloody conquest of the new world with European colonialism in Southeast Asia, and, more specifically, with the political economy of the Vietnam War. However, despite the film's allegorical relation to Vietnam – and despite the obvious historical analogy between Aguirre (played by Klaus Kinski) and Hitler – recent scholars have praised Herzog's work for attempting to “rewrite moments of colonialist encounter.” According to Rebecca Weaver-Hightower, “*Aguirre* presents an alternative view of events of colonialist encounter by including indigenous voices not present in the original texts” (Weaver-Hightower 2006: 90). And Greg Waller observes that Herzog's inclusion of representative, non-European characters (from Okello, a black slave, to the native flutist, whose lyrical melody haunts the film) “helps create the sense that *Aguirre* is a microcosm of New Spain in the sixteenth century” (Waller 1981: 57).

Though Ursúa was by no means the first Spanish conquistador to search for El Dorado, the narrative of this particular expedition has been retold over again in various formats, as Lope de Aguirre's monomaniacal defiance of church and state continues to offer a valuable object lesson in human arrogance. In fact Herzog claims that his inspiration came from reading a children's book containing only a brief passage about Aguirre (Cronin 2002: 77). As Bart L. Lewis (2003) explains, for roughly thirty years the Spanish had failed miserably to locate the mythological city of El Dorado. Yet, despite the extremely discouraging “stories of native hostility, starvation, parasite and insect attacks” (26), the viceroy of Peru, Andreas Hurtado de Mendoza, asked Ursúa in 1558 to join the fray. And so, at only 35 years of age, a relatively ill-prepared Ursúa led a company of some 300 men, including Aguirre (the semi-crippled, notoriously disagreeable new world veteran who, even prior to their departure in 1560, had already established a reputation for himself as both a criminal and a renegade), into the unforgiving Amazon jungle. Though the actual purpose of this mission remains unclear (many believe that the primary objective was not to find gold so much as to rid Peru of various malcontents), the expedition was plagued with a variety of disasters, from sunken brigantines and starvation to relentless Indian attacks and, of course, Aguirre's insurrection and defiance of the king, the details of which are carefully reconstructed in Herzog's film.

Because the film was painstakingly shot on location, in the Amazon rainforest in the Ucayali region of Peru (see Figure 25.1), with crew, cast, and camera sent perilously rafting down the infamous Urubamba River rapids, Herzog's work has



**Figure 25.1** Filming Werner Herzog's *Aguirre: The Wrath of God*. *Aguirre: Der Zorn Gottes* (*Aguirre: The Wrath of God*, 1972). Writer, producer, and director: Werner Herzog

a uniquely re-creative feel to it. Viewers are offered a seemingly unmediated, documentary-style perspective on the Spanish invasion of South America. We can read the toll of making this film upon the faces of the actors, and we are thus given a veritable measure of the colonial nightmare that Herzog chose for his subject. The opening sequence reinforces this identification of Herzog's work with non-fiction, documentary cinema, as we are not only led to believe, through voice-over narration, that the film is based upon the diary of the Dominican monk Gaspar de Carvajal (the would-be "only surviving document"), but also encouraged by camerawork to feel completely a part of the expedition. "The camera acts as a witness," notes Waller. "Like the Men, the camera struggles with the rain-forest environment; it sways and jerks about as leaves brush against the lens, which also becomes spotted with the muddy water of the swampy jungle" (1981: 65).

Compounded by his recent confession that the "film is not really about the real Aguirre [. . .] I just took the most basic facts that were known about the man and spun my own tale" (Herzog in Cronin 2002: 77), Herzog's overall documentary-style approach to the film has to be acknowledged as considerably misleading. For starters, Gonzalo Pizarro did not lead the expedition, as the opening credits indicate (in fact Pizarro was killed in 1548, some 12 years prior to Ursúa's journey into the Amazon jungle). Nor is it clear that the would-be narrator, Friar Carvajal, ever had any connection to Ursúa, though he clearly accompanied the Spanish conquistador Francisco de Orellana on an earlier journey, which was meant to explore the Land of Cinnamon east of Ecuador. And Carvajal's *Chronicle* (*Relación*)

paints a comparably horrifying portrait of the hardships endured by Orellana's men:

We reached a [state of] privation so great that we were eating nothing but leather, belts and soles of shoes, cooked with certain herbs, with the result that so great was our weakness that we could not remain standing, for some on all fours and others with staffs went into the woods to search for a few roots to eat and some there were who ate certain herbs with which they were not familiar, and they were at the point of death because they were like mad men and did not possess sense [ . . . ] (Carvajal 1934: 172)

But Herzog's slippery (inadvertent?) conflation of these historical events raises an important question about the film's relation to Fuchs's (1997) key phrase "colonial quotation" – and, more broadly speaking, to the forging of history.

Why Carvajal? The answer, I would argue, lies in the film's powerful critique of European colonialism. Herzog's *colonial quotation* – his making Carvajal the film's narrator – encourages viewers to identify sympathetically with Carvajal's religious authority and thereby to question the morality of the Spaniards' colonial enterprise in South America. Accordingly, Herzog's reliance upon Carvajal invites a comparison between the film and Bartolomé de Las Casas' *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (first published in 1542), which Anthony Padgen, in the Introduction to the 2004 translation of this text, refers to as "the first and the most bitter protest against the excesses of European colonialism in the Americas" (Padgen 2004: xiii). For, just as Las Casas intended his work to be read by Prince Phillip as an eye-witness account of the horrors of Spanish colonialism, so too does Herzog present his treatment of Aguirre's insurrection as an unsparing, documentary-style portrait of "colonial exploration not as heroic or civilizing but as cruel, exploitative, and greed-driven" (Weaver-Hightower 2006: 90).

From the opening scene, which slowly traces the descent of the Ursúa party into the Amazon River valley, to the splashes of water that occasionally dot the camera lens, Herzog privileges the eye-witness perspective. As noted earlier, as the "camera struggles with the rain-forest environment" (Waller 1981: 65), viewers are made to feel very much as part of the action. In his *Short Account*, Las Casas creates a remarkably graphic catalog of Spanish war crimes in America. And he invokes the authority of eye-witness testimony not only to lend credence to his unbelievably horrifying descriptions, but also, as Padgen suggests, to "transmute the narrative of what he had seen into a mode of experience" (2004: xxxiii). "I saw for myself." "I saw all these things for myself." Las Casas repeatedly employs such phrases to establish firmly the truth-value of his *Short Account*. Consider, for example, this passage from his description of the "devastation and depopulation" of Hispaniola:

The way they normally dealt with the native leaders and nobles was to tie them to a kind of griddle consisting of sticks resting on pitchforks driven into the ground and then grill them over a slow fire, with the result that they howled in agony and despair as they died a lingering death.



It once happened that *I myself witnessed* their grilling four or five local leaders in this fashion (and I believe they had set up two or three other pairs of grills alongside so that they might process other victims at the same time) when the poor creatures' howls came between the Spanish commander and his sleep. (Las Casas 2004: 15)

Herzog's film haunts us with similarly nightmarish images of Indian enslavement. And the fact that he perverts historical fact to produce a more compelling (and potentially "commercial") narrative suggests a way to read *Aguirre* as a cinematic variation of the so-called Black Legend (La leyenda nera): "a distorted Protestant-inspired record of Spanish atrocities and cruelties which was to darken every attempt to exonerate Spanish imperial ventures from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries" (Padgen 2004: xiii).

However, Herzog complicates this link to Las Casas through his surprising representation of Carvajal as a character who arouses the viewer's antipathy. When Carvajal murders a Yagua Indian on account of his "blasphemous" behavior – his innocent tossing aside of a Bible once he tested the magical value of this object by holding it up to his ear<sup>3</sup> – suddenly the religious authority/narrator with whom viewers have been encouraged to identify sympathetically turns out to be just as damnable as the other conquistadores. Herzog breaks our moral compass in this scene. And his use of Balthazar, *not* of Carvajal, to voice his most biting criticism of Spanish colonialism reveals the rationale for Herzog's interpretation of the Black Legend to be not the Christian typology that punctuates Las Casas' *Short Account*, but rather the postcolonial theory that eventually informs Gayatri Spivak's (1999) question: Can the subaltern speak?

For example, whereas Las Casas invariably frames Spanish colonial relations in biblical terms, Herzog eschews Christian typology in order to present a more complicated, and thus more real and historical, representation of New Spain. Las Casas continually invokes the biblical authority of Matthew 10:16 – "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves" (*The New Testament* 1998: 15) – to generically identify all Native Americans as innocent victims. Consider, for example, the following passage from his Preface:

It was upon these gentle lambs, imbued by the Creator with all the qualities we have mentioned, that from the very first day they clapped eyes on them the Spanish fell like ravening wolves upon the fold [ . . . ] (Las Casas 2004: 11)

The typology was clearly chosen for rhetorical purposes, to elicit Prince Phillip's sympathy and, in Las Casas' words, to "put a stop to the madness" (2004: 128). Las Casas presents the slaughter of Native Americans in terms familiar to his audience, and thereby encourages his readers to identify sympathetically with these victims of Spanish conquest. But, as noted earlier, ultimately Las Casas' biblical framing has the same effect as the "closed formalism" of Columbus's *Letter*. It is an assimilatory gesture – or, as Daniel Castro argues, an ecclesiastical

imperialism that effectively denies the Indians a right to their own, non-biblical identity (Castro 2007). Las Casas exploits the Indians' victim status to consolidate his religious authority.

Herzog, by contrast, relies on the indigenous characters in his film, including Balthazar (an Indian slave), not only to voice his disapproval of Spanish colonialism, but also to elicit a complex mixture of sympathetic and antipathetic emotional responses from viewers. Consider, for example, the story of Balthazar's social transformation from indigenous royalty into colonial slave:

- BALTHAZAR: Plagues have come over my people, earthquakes, and floods, but what the Spaniards did to us is much, much worse. They gave me the name Balthazar, but my real name is Runo Rimac.
- DONA FLORES: What does that mean?
- BALTHAZAR: Runo Rimac. It means: He who speaks. I was a prince in this land. No one was allowed to look directly into my eyes. But now I'm in chains, like my people, and I must bow my head. Almost everything was taken from us. I can't do anything, I'm powerless. But I am also sorry for you, because I know there is no escape from this jungle.

Since he is assigned the role of translator, Balthazar occasionally gives voice to the mysterious, scarcely visible Indians who haunt the banks of the river. These Indians – who, like those described in the actual *Relación* of Carvajal, are constantly “in ambush hidden inside their tree-covered areas” (1934: 216) – function, importantly, as a shocking reminder of how unsettling were the first European contacts with the peoples of America. For example, at one point the river leads the Spaniards past an Indian village, which erupts in excitement at the sight of Europeans. The brief dialogue is as follows:

- AGUIRRE: What are they shouting?
- BALTHAZAR: They're shouting, “Meat is floating by.”

Though this scene is punctuated by Herzog's characteristic dark humor, the antipathy conveyed through this statement – “Meat is floating by” – provides us with a very real historical representation of the new world, which is clearly at odds with the typology that informs Las Casas' *Short Account*.

In addition, Herzog's film carefully interrogates the Spaniards' reliance upon a variety of bureaucratic formulae designed to normalize what is not normal – beginning with Pizarro's ceremonious outlining of Ursúa's mission “in the form of a document to be submitted for approval to the council of the Indies.” The camera at this point focuses narrowly upon Pizarro's composition of this document and signature, emphatically calling our attention to the role of writing as an instrument of empire. In this scene and throughout the film, Herzog anticipates Greenblatt's suggestion that “Europeans used their conventional intellectual and





**Figure 25.2** Klaus Kinski as Lope de Aguirre. *Aguirre: Der Zorn Gottes (Aguirre: The Wrath of God, 1972)*. Writer, producer, and director: Werner Herzog

organizational structures, fashioned over centuries of mediated contact with other cultures” as a sort of defense mechanism, effectively to offset the “radical otherness of the American lands and peoples” (1991: 54). In fact the Spanish relied on such documents (historical writing) to legitimate, justify, and, more importantly, to disguise their savagery in a misleading, inky cloak of civilization. Consider for example that, after 1513, every conquistador was required by law to carry a formal declaration of Spanish sovereignty “with him and to read it, in the presence of a notary, before making an attack” upon any indigenous Americans (Padgen 2004: xxiv). Written by Juan López de Palacios Rubios, this document – aptly titled *The Requerimiento* – presented indigenous Americans with an ultimatum:

We beseech and demand that you [ . . . ] accept the Church and Superior Organization of the whole world and recognize the Supreme Pontiff, called the Pope, and that in his name, you acknowledge the King and Queen [ . . . ] as the lords and superior authorities of these islands and mainlands by virtue of the said donation [ . . . ]

If you do not do this [ . . . ] we warn you that, with the aid of God, we will enter your land against you with force and will make war in every place and by every means we can and are able, and we will then subject you to the yoke and authority of the Church and Their Highnesses. We will take you and your wives and children and make them slaves [ . . . ] And we will take your property and will do to you all the harm and evil we can [ . . . ] (Juan López de Palacios Rubios, *Requerimiento*, quoted in Milanich and Hudson 1993: 36–37)

The closed formality of this document (as well as the conquistadores' recitation) was clearly intended to mask the savagery of the conquest. Herzog importantly acknowledges the ironic function of this imperialistic writing when Aguirre insists that his insurgency be made legal by being couched in very formal terms, as a veritable declaration of independence (or renunciation of the king's authority). "Because of our mutiny," exclaims Aguirre, "we must make our position legal":

AGUIRRE: Read this document.  
 CARVAJAL [reading]: Caesarian King, by the grace of God, through our Holy Mother the Roman Church, Philip the Second of Castile. We, the undersigned, have until yesterday, the seventh day of 1561, regarded ourselves as your servants and subjects. We are now more than 200 miles from your servant, Gonzalo Pizarro. Fate, God's help and the work of our hands have carried us down a river. A river the natives call Huallaga, in search of a new land of gold. We have decided to put an end to the quirks of fate. We are forging history, and no fruits of the earth shall henceforth be shared. We rebel until death [ . . . ]

"We are forging history." Aguirre's declaration of independence equates writing with power, in keeping with, say, Claude Lévi-Strauss's suggestion that "the only phenomenon with which writing has always been concomitant is the creation of cities and empires" (Lévi-Strauss 1992: 299).

But historical records are fragile. And, as the film slowly unfolds, Herzog importantly equates the gradual breakdown of these formulae/documents with the collapse of the Spanish Empire (see Figure 25.2). Aguirre's implicit threat of violence corrupts the democratic process, as a part of which Don Guzman is chosen to serve as the newly appointed emperor of Peru. Guzman, whose obesity obviously symbolizes Spanish excess, continues to ceremoniously take possession of the Amazon jungle with pen, ink, and paper, desperately clinging to this bureaucratic formula as one of the last remaining vestiges of Spanish civilization. However, in his obvious delirium of imperial wealth and authority, he completely neglects to consider the tattered status of the paper upon which he writes. The fragmentation of this document, an effect of the unforgiving rainforest environment, clearly foreshadows the collapse of this new Europe-led Peruvian empire. And it provides us with a convenient metaphor for Herzog's film, which effectively obliterates the notion of colonial exploration as something either heroic or civilizing. Consider Carvajal's claim at the end of the film:

February twenty-second. The suffering is dreadful. Most men have fever and hallucinations. Hardly anyone can stand upright. The soldier Justo Gónzales drank my ink, thinking it was medicine. I can no longer write. We are drifting in circles.

Carvajal's narration not only equates writing with civilization (as noted earlier), but also reflects the effect of Herzog's own peculiar blend of fact and fiction. For

*Aguirre* tests the limits of historical film, as it leaves us wandering in circles, without any ideological, ethical, and/or moral compass.

### *Cabeza de Vaca* (1991)

First published in 1542, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación* – his *Chronicle of the Narváez Expedition* – describes the miraculous story of one Spanish conquistador's exploration of the Florida panhandle, shipwreck on Galveston Island, Indian captivity, and trek through the southwestern territories of North America, from present-day Florida to Texas, Arizona, and Mexico. Dedicated to Emperor Charles V, the resulting narrative acts both as a highly useful ethnography of Indian tribes (including the Apalachee in Florida and Karankawa in Texas) – those with whom Cabeza de Vaca traveled during his nine-year odyssey – and as a spiritual autobiography – one that neatly details the author's transformation into a new hybrid identity, part Indian healer and part Judeo-Christian prophet. The *Chronicle* thus tests the boundaries of historical writing by pitting what contemporary scholars refer to as the “magical realist” elements of Cabeza de Vaca's powerful faith in Jesus Christ (the faith that ultimately facilitates his survival through various natural and human disasters: shipwreck, hunger, dehydration, and so on) against the more journalistic ethnographic and geographic particulars of his Indian captivity.

Accordingly, Nicolás Echevarría's film adaptation *Cabeza de Vaca* (1991) tests the boundaries of historical cinema (if not merely critics' patience): the film repeatedly alternates between straightforward, documentary-style observation and the sort of surrealist aesthetics that distinguishes the work of, say, Luis Buñuel. Some critics lament this poetic license that Echevarría employs throughout the film, regarding it as a distortion of the textual record (*Chronicle*) – if not as something altogether lacking in historical perspective and context.

The *New York Times* film critic Vincent Canby complains that “so little attempt is made to fix time and place that confusion arises. There seem to be mountains off the coast of Florida, and Texas would appear to be only a stone's throw from the Pacific coast of Mexico” (1991: n.p.). However, such criticism is oblivious to the larger, postcolonial implications of Echevarría's invention. Consider for example the following brief dialogue that unfolds early in the film:

- SAILOR: Our ships are all lost! Is this all that's left of Spain? Our ships are Spain!  
Where? Where? Where are our ships?
- NARVÁEZ: Everyone is on their own. There is no authority to turn to now. Spain ends here!
- SAILOR: Land! Land [ . . . ] a place to die.

This snippet of dialogue has not been taken from the original text; there is no evidence to suggest that Pánfilo de Narváez, the leader of this expedition sent to

subdue and colonize west Florida, ever had such a treasonous conversation, or that he seized the opportunity of this shipwreck to investigate the ideological and ethical limits of the Spanish Empire. Narváez had already demonstrated considerable loyalty to the crown through his participation in Diego Velázquez's campaign to conquer Cuba and, in 1520, by leading a company of roughly 900 men in a loyal (if unsuccessful) attempt to overthrow and replace the unruly ruler of Mexico, Hernan Cortés. But, as Luisela Alvaray suggests, Narváez's declaration in the film – "Spain ends here!" – conveniently articulates Echevarría's "challenge to the forms we [use to] rationalize and validate our histories" (Alvaray 2004: 61). Throughout the film Echevarría not only emphasizes the wholesale transformation of Cabeza de Vaca's character (which in the *Chronicle* is precipitated by the key term "naked"), but also incorporates elements of surrealism, to test our own faith in western perceptions of time and space. Moreover, I would argue that the confusions (geographic, chronological, and so on) that Canby attributes to the film neatly convey the psychological trauma, culture shock, and disorientation typically associated with Indian captivity. In short, the great strength of Echevarría's work lies in his highlighting perhaps the most important feature of Cabeza de Vaca's account: the very heartfelt sympathy that forms between Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca (the Narváez expedition's treasurer) and the Indians – as it is precisely this sympathy that informs the former's ethical and ideological rebirth, both in the text and in the film.

Let us begin with a passage from Cabeza de Vaca's *Chronicle* that details his first encounter with the Karankawa on Galveston Island in Texas:

The next wave overturned the boat. The inspector and two others clung to her to save themselves, but the opposite happened: they ended up underneath the boat and were drowned.

Because the shore was very rough, the sea took others and thrust them, half dead, back onto the beach on the same island, less the three that had perished under the boat. The rest of us, as naked as we had been born, had lost everything, and while it was not very valuable, to us it meant a great deal. It was November, and bitterly cold. We were in such a state that our bones could easily be counted and we looked liked death itself [ . . . ]

At sunset the Indians, thinking we had not left, came to bring us food, but when they saw us in such different attire from before and of such strange appearance, they were so frightened that they turned back. I went to call them and they approached with great trepidation. Using signs, I then let them know how we had lost a boat and that three of our men had been drowned. Before them lay two of our men, dead, with the others about to end up the same way.

Upon seeing the disaster we had suffered, our misery and misfortune, the Indians sat down with us and began to weep out of compassion for our misfortune. For more than half an hour they wept so loudly and so sincerely that it could be heard far away.

Two things stand out in this passage: the Spaniards' nudity and the Indians' sympathy. First, the literal disintegration of Cabeza de Vaca's clothing conveniently signals

the Spaniards' vulnerability – both to the environment and to the pressures of cultural assimilation. Without their so-called “armor of civilization,” the Spaniards make landfall in Florida as mere blank slates (the key term “naked” denotes here Cabeza de Vaca's loss of identity and assimilability). Second, that the Karankawa respond to the Spaniards' plight compassionately (that the “Indians sat down with [the shipwrecked sailors] and began to weep out of compassion for [their] misfortune”) not only undermines European stereotypes of Native American savagery. It also neatly foreshadows Cabeza de Vaca's remarkable “life of sympathy and integration with indigenous people” (Cabeza de Vaca 2002: 61). Interestingly, in his account of the Indians from the Texan coast, Albert Gatschet notes that in the Karankawa language *Ka* means “to love, to like” (Gatschet 1891: 108).

Several things have changed in Echevarría's treatment of the shipwreck of Narváez's expedition and of the first contact with the Karankawa. The Spaniards are not naked; instead they carefully proceed to dress (and/or wrap) themselves in rags – the clothing that the shipwrecked men had used to create a makeshift sail (see Figure 25.3).

And their initial investigation of the Gulf Coast results in a horrifying discovery: their compatriots have all been slaughtered in what appears to have been a ritualistic fit of Indian violence. The Friar's response to this tragedy – “there's witchcraft at work here” – and the seemingly sacrilegious burning of the corpses for the sake of their spiritual purification reveals how desperate the Spaniards are to preserve their Spanish Catholic identities in this strange new world. The Indian attack that follows suggests that this horrifying scene was created to both captivate and capture the Spanish; and, as we watch the Friar slowly vanish into the dense



**Figure 25.3** The Spaniards make landfall on Galveston Island. *Cabeza de Vaca* (1991). Executive producer: Berta Navarro. Director: Nicolás Echevarría



subtropical foliage, in prayer (the crucifix upheld and his back riddled with arrows), the film seems to be making (at this early stage) a powerful statement about the futility of God's providence and the failure of Catholicism as a spiritual defense against Native hostilities.

Although in the *Chronicle* Cabeza de Vaca repeatedly invokes God's providence as ultimately responsible for his survival in this hostile environment (a gesture that would certainly have pleased Emperor Charles V, not to mention the Catholic authorities), Echevarría encourages us to view these particular historical events (Cabeza de Vaca's miraculous survival) from an indigenous perspective. For example, at one point in the *Chronicle*, Cabeza de Vaca claims that he "got lost" while hunting (in Texas) "for the fruit of a certain type of tree, which is like the spring bitter vetch," but that "it pleased God to let me find a burning tree, by the fire of which I spent that very cold night, and in the morning I loaded myself with wood, taking two burning sticks, and continued my journey [. . .] naked as the day I was born" (2002: 57–58). This passage, replete with biblical allusions to the Old Testament story of Moses and the burning bush, is characteristic of Cabeza de Vaca's so-called messianic drive. In Echevarría's adaptation this scene is precipitated by Cabeza de Vaca's announcement "I am going to die" (a statement that conveniently symbolizes his spiritual and ideological death). Accordingly, the film presents the burning tree not as God's work, but as the magical work of an Indian shaman who, earlier in the film, tearfully sympathizes with Cabeza de Vaca's plight. In other words, it is not God but the Indian shaman's sympathetic magic that effectively preserves Alvar's life in the film. And the fact that the Indian shaman employs the magical law of similarity to achieve this goal – the law of similarity suggests that a magician can "produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it" (Taussig 1993: 47) – reinforces the film's preoccupation with Indian sympathy as the foundation for Cabeza de Vaca's cross-cultural identification. Just as the real, historical Cabeza de Vaca had his heart filled with sorrow upon learning from the Opata in Sonora how "the Christians had come into the country before and had destroyed and burned the villages, taking with them half the men and all the women and children" (2002: 90), so too are we encouraged by Echevarría's film to sympathetically adopt an indigenous perspective.

Canby's observation "there seem to be mountains off the coast of Florida" alerts us to an important element of the film – that, as noted earlier, it directly "contests the forms we [westerners use to] rationalize and validate our histories" (Alvaray 2004: 61), from Christian typology (as outlined above) to geography and chronology. The mountains we see looming in the background when Cabeza de Vaca is supposed to be on Galveston Island in present-day Texas may be disorienting, but this, I would argue, is precisely the point. The landscape is not supposed to be geographically accurate, but rather a projection of Cabeza de Vaca's emotional state. The disorientation that we experience mirrors Cabeza de Vaca's psychological–emotional state (homesickness); in this way the film encourages us to identify sympathetically with the Spaniard, who has yet to embrace fully his



new world's surroundings. Echevarría embraces this mountainous landscape not for the sake of geographical accuracy, but to convey the emotional truth of Cabeza de Vaca's Indian captivity.

Second, this is a heartbreaking film, in that it repeatedly relies on tearful faces to convey the strength of the "dangerous emotions" that are exchanged between Cabeza de Vaca and the indigenous tribesmen and tribeswomen whom he encounters on his surreal journey through the Southwest. I use the term "dangerous" to describe these emotions not only because they threaten Cabeza de Vaca's Spanish identity, but also because they unsettle our preconceived notions of Native American savagery. As philosopher Alphonso Lingis explains, "the laughter, weeping, blessing, and cursing of the multitude are fields of force and radiation, not inner states of self-consciousness" (Lingis 2000: 44). Echevarría takes great advantage of this notion of the face as a force field to elicit a sympathetic emotional response from his viewers. The camera narrowly focuses on the shaman's sympathetic reaction to Cabeza de Vaca's poetic homesickness; it tightly frames Malacosa's tearful response at their separation (Malacosa is his formerly abusive Indian master); and it focuses on Cascabel's face (not Cabeza de Vaca's) when it becomes obvious that they must separate so as not to jeopardize Cascabel's tribe unnecessarily when they make contact with nearby Spanish forces. Consider the dialogue between Cabeza de Vaca and Cascabel – an effeminate Indian boy whose life Cabeza de Vaca had saved earlier in the film:

ALVAR NÚÑEZ: Go! Go away from me!  
 CASCABEL: I want to follow you.  
 ALVAR NÚÑEZ: Only death follows me now. Go! Save your people!  
 CASCABEL: Where will we meet?  
 ALVAR NÚÑEZ: Go! Go! My brother, please go now. Together always, Little Brother  
 [ . . . ] together always.

Cascabel's placing Cabeza de Vaca's hand on his heart (a gesture that doubly serves as a reminder of the arrowhead that Cabeza de Vaca removed from his chest earlier in the film and of the love that unites them) explicitly acknowledges Echevarría's objective in this film: to produce an unsettling, heartbreaking account of the Spanish conquest of the Americas. The film forces us not only to consider how the inhumanity of the Spanish conquest causes Cabeza de Vaca to question his faith in Jesus Christ (as when he violently rips from his neck the symbol of his new-born hybrid identity, a Christian cross decorated with feathers), but also to watch painfully as the effeminate Cascabel struggles to accept the wisdom of Cabeza de Vaca's advice.

Then the final scene – a surreal sequence in which a Spanish military drummer leads a troop of indigenous American slaves burdened with the task of carrying a humongous Christian symbol on their shoulders across a barren desert (see Figure 25.4) – serves as a most painful reminder of the impending new world



**Figure 25.4** The new world order. *Cabeza de Vaca* (1991). Executive producer: Berta Navarro. Director: Nicolás Echevarría

order. Despite the fact that, as David A. Howard observes, the real, historical Cabeza de Vaca sought to “bring the Indians of America into the Spanish empire with justice and liberty” (Howard 1997: 3), this sequence clearly conveys the impossibility of such a “humane conquest.” And, whereas the real, historical Cabeza de Vaca concludes his *Chronicle* with the recommendation “[m]ay God in his infinite mercy grant that [...] these people become willing and sincerely the subject of the true Lord who created and redeemed them” (2002: 101–102), the film clearly equates religious conversion with enslavement. In this final scene Echevarría presents Catholicism as a merciless instrument of Spanish imperialism, and in this way he encourages viewers to adopt an indigenous perspective – again, sympathetically. That the slaves are being marched directly into an oncoming thunderstorm provides a very concrete, ominous sense of the fate awaiting the conquered; in fact many of the Indian tribes with whom Cabeza de Vaca lived, including the Karankawa, no longer exist, just as the indigenous slaves on screen fade into darkness.

Yet perhaps the film’s most radical gesture is its questioning of the truth-value of Cabeza de Vaca’s *Chronicle*. When this writer extracts a Spanish musket ball from inside the stomach of a dying Indian, and it suddenly appears very likely that they will soon be reunited with their countrymen, Dorantes (one of the few Spanish soldiers to survive the Narváez expedition) makes the following suggestion: “We better stop talking about magic, if we are going back to Christian lands. If you tell the truth, they’ll think you’re crazy.” Alonso (another survivor) concurs: “They’ll lock you up. You’ll go back to Spain in chains.” In this scene the film radically implies that the historical record (or *Chronicle*) has been falsified to accord with the cultural and political views of Emperor Charles V, and that what really occurred during Cabeza de Vaca’s nine-year odyssey shall forever remain a mysterious matter, up for grabs and open to historical speculation. That Echevarría doesn’t provide us with a translation of the Karankawa dialogue in the film reinforces this point. The historical record is punctuated with blind spots, particularly when it comes to

the question of how indigenous Americans (Apalachee, Aztecs, Guaraní, Jumanos, Karankawa, Taino, Zuni, and others) perceived this new invasive species – the Spanish conquistador. And so, again, just as the Indian slaves fade into darkness on screen, the problem for historical filmmakers is how to reclaim the indigenous voices that have been all but erased from the historical record.

### ***Black Robe* (1991)**

*Black Robe* is a film that explores French Jesuit relations with the Algonquins, the Montagnais, the Iroquois, and the Hurons in present-day Quebec and Ontario. For Bruce Beresford, its Australian director, this issue (the struggle to reclaim indigenous voices) is not nearly as vexing as it was for Echevarría and Herzog. For, in addition to being “inveterate writers,” the French Jesuit missionaries in New France were steadfast ethnographers. Published in Paris between 1632 and 1673, the *Jesuit Relations* chronicles the efforts of French Jesuit missionaries in North America to convert the so-called “pagan savages” to Catholicism. These annual reports are so marvelously detailed that they continue to serve as an important resource for scholars investigating the cultural collision of Europeans with Native Americans in the early phases of colonial American settlement. Indeed, like so many modern ethnographers, the French Jesuits certainly understood the importance of immersing themselves in the aboriginal culture they were studying and attempting to convert. They took seriously the task of communicating their experiences in writing, both to educate and to inspire fellow missionaries. As Allan Greer notes: “because they lived in native villages for years on end, learned local languages, got to know the people, and took their place on the margins of Amerindian society, they came to know the native people as few other Europeans did” (Greer 2000: 3). As noted earlier, the untranslated dialogue in *Cabeza de Vaca* conveniently underscores both the practical impossibility of recapturing the Karankawa’s voices and, in a more general sense, the Spaniards’ closed, formalistic relationship with Native Americans. The same may be said of the untranslated dialogue in Herzog’s *Aguirre*: it realistically conveys the failure of communication in New Spain.

However, this is emphatically not the case in Beresford’s *Black Robe*. Beresford’s translation of the Algonquian and Iroquoian languages provides us with some measure of the *Jesuit Relations*’ pivotal linguistic and ethnographic significance in this contact zone; the Jesuits’ rigorous attention to indigenous languages helped create – to borrow Benedict Anderson’s terminology – “unified fields of exchange and communication” (Anderson 1991: 44) in North America. In other words, the conversations that take place in the film between the Algonquins, the Montagnais, the Iroquois, the Hurons, and the French accurately represent the political economy of New France, in which both Jesuit missionaries and *coureurs de bois* (French woodsmen) resided among Native Americans, in present-day Canada’s remote interior. The fur trade, according to Alan Taylor, “deeply implicated Europeans

and natives in mutual dependency” (Taylor 2001: 92). “Just as the French adapted to Indian trade protocols, the Indians began to think of the goods as commodities with negotiable prices” (96). In other words, because the French had a vested interest in the fur trade (and not in the Spaniards’ phantasmagoric El Dorado), they were necessarily motivated to acquire Algonquin and Iroquoian languages, in order to cultivate strong alliances with the Indians. Indeed the French, unlike the Spanish in Mexico, Florida, and South America (as discussed earlier), came “not as conquering invaders, but as a new tribe negotiating a place for itself in the diplomatic webs of Native North America” (93). Although European trade relations invariably exacerbated tensions between Native American tribes (the French and the English, for example, became embroiled in a hotly contested turf war between the Algonquins and the Iroquois), the intimacy that forms between these two cultures – the French and the Algonquins, in particular – nonetheless reflects a balance of power and mutuality that for the most part did not exist in New Spain.

Accordingly, *Black Robe* explores the larger implications of this deepening European–Amerindian mutuality. Early in the film, for example, French settlers and Algonquin people assemble together in a farewell ceremony, in which Samuel de Champlain arranges for the Algonquins to accompany the film’s title character, Father LaForgue, on a dangerous journey up the St. Lawrence River into Huron territory, to reestablish contact with a remote Jesuit mission. As the camera cuts between the Algonquin chieftain and Champlain, who are simultaneously preparing for the ceremony (both are dressed in military regalia, jewelry, headdresses, and animal furs), the soundtrack neatly alternates between tribal rhythms and chant on the one hand, French folk song and dance on the other, thereby encouraging viewers to compare the ritualistic pomp and circumstance of both cultures. One French soldier’s astute, yet anxious analysis of Champlain’s appearance reinforces this equation:

- FRENCH SOLDIER 1: Look at him, dressed like a savage chieftain. We’re not colonizing the Indians. They’re colonizing us.
- FRENCH SOLDIER 2: Not me they’re not. I’m not becoming one of those wild woodsmen. In one more year, I’m going back to France.
- FATHER LAFORGUE: Are you? Are any of us? If the winter doesn’t kill us, the Indians might. If they don’t, it could be the English. So keep your faith, and may death find you with God in mind.

The second soldier’s resistance to the notion of becoming a “wild woodsman” (*coureur de bois*) acknowledges (by seventeenth-century standards) the “dangerous” implications of this deepening mutuality – namely that it may transform one’s European identity. Through Champlain’s “savage” appearance and, more importantly, through a young Frenchman’s romantic attraction to a young Algonquin “princess” (Chomina’s daughter Annuka), this scene neatly introduces viewers to one of the film’s primary themes – mutual transformation. For, despite Father LaForgue’s bittersweet suggestion – “may death find you with God in

mind''<sup>4</sup> – the more familiar with and deeply immersed in Algonquin culture he becomes, the more he begins to question his faith, to fear death, and to see things from the Indians' perspective. In essence, Beresford converts *Black Robe* into a love story, though not strictly in terms of the Hollywoodesque romance that unfolds between LaForgue's *donné*, Daniel, and Annuka.<sup>5</sup> In a broader sense, the film is an exploration of human mutuality, in which LaForgue learns not only to love the Algonquins, the Montagnais, the Iroquois, and the Hurons, but also to see them as something other than a challenging test of one's faith or, in the case of the Iroquois, an evil presence, even if disincarnate (Perron 2003: 163). To further explore the film's radical unsettling of colonial American history, let us compare LaForgue's story to the real and historical ordeal of Father Isaac Jogues.

Though missionary service in North America did not appeal to the majority of French Jesuits, Greer notes that "a minority were inspired by what they had heard and read of this daunting assignment in a forbidding land and became desperate to 'sacrifice themselves' (for that is how they generally understood the gesture) in New France" (2000: 11). Like the shockingly disfigured priest in LaForgue's flashback, who insists that there is no more "glorious task" than attempting to convert the "savages" in New France, Father Isaac Jogues was part of this enthusiastic minority that understood American missionary service to be a gloriously fast track to religious salvation and possible sainthood. The first of the Jesuit martyrs in New France, Jogues embraced the physical horrors of colonial life there, including Indian captivity, as a reification of the Catholic notion that "heroic self-denial could be a means of making contact with the divine" (Greer 2000: 4). Consider, for example, the following passage from Jérôme Lalement's hagiographic narrative of Indian captivity, "How Father Isaac Jogues was taken by the Iroquois, and what he suffered on his first entrance into their country" (Lalement 2000: 162):

During the thirteen days that we spent on that journey, I suffered bodily torments almost unendurable and, in the soul, moral anguish: hunger, the fiercely burning sun, the threats and hatred of those leopards, and the pain of our wounds, which, in the absence of any dressing, became putrid and worm infested [. . .] But these things seemed light to me in comparison with the inward sadness that I felt at the sight of our first and most ardent Huron Christians. I had expected them to be the pillars of that rising church, and I saw them become the victims of death. Seeing the path to salvation closed for such a long time to so many nations, people who perish every day for want of succor, made me die every hour in the depth of my soul. It is a very hard thing, a cruel thing, to see the triumph of the devils over whole nations redeemed with so much love and ransomed in the currency of a blood so adorable.

And consider this passage, in which Lalement describes, in graphic detail, how Jogues was forced to run the Iroquois gauntlet, a wholly (and holy) terrifying and torturous event that ultimately encourages his identification with Christ:

I had always thought that the day on which the whole church rejoices in the glory of the Blessed Virgin – her glorious and triumphant Assumption – would be for us a

day of pain. I gave thanks to my Savior, Jesus Christ, because, on that day of gladness and joy, he was making us share his suffering and admitting us to participation in his crosses [. . .] There, on both banks, were many men and youths armed with sticks, which they let loose upon us with their accustomed rage. By then, I had only two fingernails left, and those barbarians tore them from me with their teeth, rending the flesh from beneath and cutting it clean to the bone with their nails, which they grow very long. (Lalement 2000: 164)

Lalement reframes Jogues's Indian captivity in imitation of Christ's, when he insists that his sufferings were "filled with joy and honor" (2000: 162). He re-presents Jogues's ordeal as a particular blessing, in keeping with the Catholic practice of corporal mortification. The practice of "putting the flesh to death" (whether through celibacy, fasting, self-flagellation, and so on) comes from Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* – "For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live" (*The New Testament* 1998: 255). In other words, Lalement couches Jogues's real historical experience in biblical narrative, in order to satisfy conventional hagiographic expectations as well as for the sake of inspiration. For, as Paul Perron suggests, Jogues's "torn and tortured body moves and provokes emotional responses from all actual and potential believers and consolidates their shared semantic universes and value systems" (Perron 2003: 165). Accordingly, Lalement claims that Jogues found Rene Goupil's horrifyingly disfigured body "all the more beautiful in his resemblance to Him [Jesus], who bore a face which was viewed with delight by the angels, though he appeared to us, in the midst of his anguish, like a leper" (Lalement 2000: 165). Lalement's identification of Goupil with Christ prefigures his elevation to the status of a saint. But in its typecasting of the Iroquois as the evil presence in this hagiographic drama, Lalement's account suffers from the same closed formalism that plagues Columbus's *Diario*. Lalement describes only what is necessary (Jogues's mangled body) to achieve a particular rhetorical–religious effect (to reinforce Jogues's status as martyr). The Iroquois are "never described corporeally." Or, as Perron suggests, they function primarily as "absent signifieds in the inter-subjective communication between Christians and potential Christians" (2003: 163).

In *Black Robe*, Father Bourque's insistence that "[d]eath is not always a great evil" echoes Lalement's valuation of Jogues's martyrdom. However, as noted earlier, the more immersed LaForgue becomes in Algonquin culture, the more he starts to question his own faith and membership in the Society of Jesus. Indeed, LaForgue's ordeal is markedly different from Jogues's (in that Beresford carefully conveys the force and feel of the Algonquins' material and phenomenal world with great attention to detail). Even the flatulence that punctuates LaForgue's first night in the teepee is no mere laughing matter or comic relief, but rather a realistic affirmation of the Algonquins' humanity. Sleeping in close quarters with the Algonquins, who (in the film) enjoy sexual intercourse without privacy, LaForgue must confront the "flesh" that he's been trained to mortify.



We see LaForgue struggle to overcome these external/corporeal distractions through his faithful performance of various important Jesuit rituals, including self-flagellation – a gesture that is intended to facilitate his identification with Christ. LaForgue’s use of a pine bough to punish his body symbolizes the Jesuit perception of the North American landscape as testing ground for one’s faith, replete with all the symbolic paraphernalia of the biblical narrative. However, LaForgue’s ultimate failure as a Jesuit missionary lies in his inability to read New France in missionary terms. For example, about midway through the film, LaForgue appears to be stuck at a cultural crossroads. He obviously (tearfully) questions his faith in Catholicism (his European identity), yet stubbornly refuses to validate Daniel’s newly adopted indigenous perspective, from which the Algonquins are “true Christians”:

- LAFORGUE: I’m afraid of this country. The devil rules here. He controls the hearts and minds of these poor people.
- DANIEL: But they are true Christians. They live for each other. They forgive things we would never forgive.
- LAFORGUE: The devil makes them resist the truth of our teachings.
- DANIEL: Why should they believe them? They have an afterworld of their own.
- LAFORGUE: They have no concept of one.
- DANIEL: Annuka has told me, they believe that in the forest at night the dead can see. Souls of men hunt the souls of animals.
- LAFORGUE: Is that what she told you? It is childish, Daniel.
- DANIEL: Is it harder to believe than a paradise where we all sit on clouds and look at God?

Daniel’s logic only exacerbates LaForgue’s identity crisis, and, as the scene fades out, a visibly distraught LaForgue kneels in prayer at the river’s edge. That this unsettling conversation occurs in the wake of LaForgue’s self-confession – “I don’t welcome death as a holy person should” – implies that he is on the brink of emotional and spiritual collapse. The St. Lawrence River – this great body of water that links Montreal to “savage” Huron territory – thus functions as a metaphor for the natural forces and corporeality that, as a devout Catholic priest, LaForgue must transcend. And yet, although he refuses to acknowledge the historical–temporal reality of the North American wilderness that surrounds him, LaForgue also lacks the faith necessary to navigate this new world as biblical narrative. For example, at a crucial turning point in the film LaForgue gets lost in the woods. This scene alerts us to the possibility of LaForgue’s rebirth (cultural transformation). As he scans the forest canopy to regain his sense of direction, the interior of a cathedral flashes on screen, the gothic archways and pillars marvelously alike the pine forest that enshrouds LaForgue. The equation suggests that LaForgue has lost his ability to navigate the Jesuit path to salvation. And he confesses as much when he says: “I’m afraid Lord. I don’t welcome death as a holy person should.” When the Algonquin hunting party discovers him alone in the wilderness, LaForgue’s fears

are temporarily converted into joy. He warmly embraces his Algonquin traveling companions, and the following brief exchange takes place:

LAFORGUE: I was lost.  
 ALGONQUIN HUNTER: How could anyone become lost here? The woods are for men.  
 Did you forget to look at the trees, Blackrobe?

The hunter's observation – "The woods are for men. Did you forget to look at the trees, Blackrobe?" – encourages viewers to read LaForgue's misdirection as stemming from his refusal to accept his own *humanity*. Is the fact that LaForgue sees a Gothic cathedral where the Algonquins see a forest simply a product of the faith he places in the afterlife, not in his physical environment? Or is this scene suggesting that LaForgue sees life in the afterlife, as a devout Jesuit missionary should? But exactly how faithful is LaForgue? He doesn't "welcome death as a holy person should." And, instead of thanking God for his salvation in this episode, he warmly embraces one of the Algonquin hunters, thereby acknowledging (in a very heartfelt explosion of emotion) his deepening reliance upon their resourcefulness, generosity, and, most importantly, compassion.

In other words, this "lost and found" scene represents a radical departure from the biblical narrative, because LaForgue's salvation rests upon the Algonquins' sympathy, not upon God's providence. The scene affords us a real glimpse of LaForgue's humanity (to be contrasted with his religious asceticism), and, as such, it prefigures the film's moving *dénouement*, in which LaForgue baptizes the Hurons not for the love of God (and not even for the sake of their salvation). It is a loving baptism, a gesture that not only seems intended to provide the Hurons with some comfort in this world (and not in the afterlife), but also acknowledges the mutuality of their dependence (see Figure 25.5). LaForgue's sympathetic performance of this religious ritual serves to reaffirm his and the Hurons' humanity. The conversation that precedes the baptism is as follows:

HURON CHIEFTAIN: A demon cannot feel grief. Are you a man?  
 LAFORGUE: Yes.  
 HURON CHIEFTAIN: You must help us, Blackrobe. Do you love us?  
 [Note: there is a long pause here, and Beresford fills this space with a visual montage, in which LaForgue remembers his Algonquin traveling companions, the Montagnais, including Mestigoit (the shaman), and the Iroquois leader.]  
 LAFORGUE: Yes.  
 HURON CHIEFTAIN: Then baptize us.

This heartfelt scene lingers in one's imagination as a powerful affirmation of human sympathy. For it is not God's image that LaForgue conjures up when he weighs the question posed to him by the Huron chieftain – "Do you love us?" – but rather the various faces of the Indians with whom he has interacted



**Figure 25.5** Bruce Beresford's *Black Robe: A love story*. *Black Robe* (1991). Executive producer: Jake Eberts. Director: Bruce Beresford

on this challenging spiritual journey, including the Iroquois who have heinously tortured him. The montage of Indian faces that Beresford cleverly incorporates in this pregnant moment (a pause) reveals to us a newly transformed LaForgue: someone who has no saintly ambitions, doubts the efficacy of prayer, and baptizes only to express his sympathy for the Hurons' plight.

In short, this is a love story because Beresford represents LaForgue's baptism of the Huron people as a humanitarian, not a religious gesture; it is an expression of his love for the Hurons, Algonquins, Montagnais, and Iroquois. In this final scene LaForgue embraces this important component of missionary service – the baptism – to provide the Hurons with some comfort in this life, *not* in the afterlife. In this way the film maps an important transformation in LaForgue's Jesuit relations. Although it's unclear whether or not he has completely lost his Christian faith by film's end, one thing appears to be certain: his close interactions with Algonquins, Hurons, Montagnais, and Iroquois in New France have given birth to a new humanitarian outlook. The decision to baptize was not automatic, not a product of LaForgue's strict adherence to the religious dogma informing Jesuit missionary service, but rather a thoughtful, sympathetic, and thereby human reaction to the plight of the Hurons. And we know this because of the dramatic montage of Indian faces that inform his affirmative answer to the question – “do you love us?” – that was raised by the Huron chief.

## Conclusion

Though *Black Robe* was based on the 1985 historical novel of the same name of the Canadian author Brian Moore (and not on the *Jesuit Relations*), the film remains a most useful tool in the early American literature and history classroom,

as it highlights how very sympathetic – and thus mutually transformative – the interactions were between Native Americans and Europeans in colonial North America. In his horrifying account of the physical torture experienced by Isaac Jogues, for example, Jérôme Lalement treats Indian captivity as merely a reifying biblical narrative in the Christo-mimetic tradition/stories about martyrs (Hinojosa 2010: 75). Lalement reduces the Iroquois to an evil presence, even if one instrumental to the consolidation of Jogues's religious authority. To complicate this typological pattern, Beresford's *Black Robe* introduces an indigenous perspective on Jesuit missionary service in New France. LaForgue's faith has not been restored through his journey up the river to the Huron mission; it has been altered (radically expanded) through his embrace of the Algonquin people not for their value as religious commodities – as potential Catholic converts – but as people whose pagan religious beliefs are equally legitimate.

In addition, the film poignantly acknowledges the damaging character of the European presence in North America. Similarly, the film is chiefly concerned not with the religious significance but with the economics of Indian captivity – with how European trade relations pitted the Iroquois against the Algonquins in a violent turf war. And, finally, the film's closing annotation implicitly acknowledges how, as Taylor notes, the “deepening *mutuality* of dependency bound Europeans and Indians together in an uneasy embrace” (2001: 92).

However, precisely because these films are so thoroughly sympathetic and, as noted earlier, embedded in our modern ideology of liberal tolerance (in other words they leave us with no doubt about which characters merit our sympathy), I am inclined to suggest that none is nearly as unsettling as Herzog's *Aguirre*, which both literally and figuratively tests the limits (moral and ethical) of historical writing and filmmaking. Herzog's anti-heroic approach makes it practically impossible for viewers to take comfort in any false dichotomies. Herzog's own fascination with Lope de Aguirre is indicative of the film's overall treatment of this historical figure's megalomaniacal search for El Dorado as thoroughly complicated and/or lacking the sort of emotional, moral, ethical, and ideological clarity we might enjoy when we watch such films as, say, Roland Joffé's heart-wrenching *The Mission* (1986). Herzog insists:

It is difficult to explain my feelings about Aguirre [...] Aguirre fascinated me because he was the first person who dared defy the Spanish crown and declare the independence of a South American nation. At the same time he was completely mad, rebelling not only against political power but nature itself. (Cronin 2002: 77)

Our first impulse may be to condemn Aguirre for his violent self-promotion, racism, and greed. But, on second thought, we are obliged to acknowledge that there is a connection between the insurrection that unfolds in Herzog's screenplay and the independence we cherish as a political ideal. Ultimately, Herzog refuses to

give us any moral compass. And, most importantly, the film affords an unsettling glimpse into the value of historical writing as an instrument of empire. “History is generally on the side of the winners,” notes Herzog (in Cronin 2002: 77). And so *Aguirre* is ultimately an exploration of the various ways in which colonial American literature (the Spaniards’ written documentation) has served to both legitimate and consolidate traditional European power structures, including Carvajal’s “ecclesiastical imperialism” (Castro 2007).

Another anti-heroic film, *Burn!*, directed by the great Marxist filmmaker Gillo Pontecorvo, similarly uses considerable poetic license to provide viewers with a very real historical representation of the economics of the sugar cane industry in the Caribbean and, most importantly, of how Europeans make and remake history to satisfy particular ideological and economic agendas. Thus I argue that anti-heroics and antipathy are more likely to produce an unsettlingly real historical film about colonial America than the heartfelt approach preferred by filmmakers like Beresford.

### Notes

- 1 Barbara Fuchs coins the phrase “colonial quotation,” which she defines as follows: “By *quotation* I mean the references by colonial writers to the works of earlier explorers and planters as well as the larger rhetorical maneuver of assimilating the unknown by equating it with the already known. Such quotation does not overlap perfectly with the notion of *translatio imperii* – the westward translation of Rome’s imperial tradition to nascent European empires. However, the quoted discourse may use *translatio imperii* as its particular justification. The quotation of colonialist discourse from one instance to the next naturalizes expansions by bring newly ‘discovered’ lands and people under the conceptual domain of the already known, the already digested. Thus this particular kind of intertextuality advances a colonialist ideology” (47).
- 2 Roland Joffé’s *The Mission* (1986), for example, strategically uses cinematography and Ennio Morricone’s music to convey effectively the spiritual rebirth of a former slave trader turned Jesuit missionary and Guarani (Native American) sympathizer. By contrast, Gillo Pontecorvo’s film *Burn!* (1969) illuminates the antipathetic elements of the capitalist economy that informs the eighteenth-century Scottish physician James Grainger’s poetic sublimation of the violence undergirding the Caribbean sugar cane industry in his West Indian Georgic, *The Sugar Cane*. *Burn!* subverts the power of Grainger’s poetry to transform the “savage face” of the plantation system.
- 3 This scenario occasionally crops up in colonial American literature when Native Americans are first introduced to the Bible. See, for example, Thomas Harriot’s *Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1588).
- 4 This idea resonates neatly with the Jesuits’ treatment of New France as a testing ground for one’s faith – an ideal place for the expression of one’s love of God.
- 5 Greer (2000: 11) notes that *donnés* “were individuals, usual young men and boys, who helped the Jesuits with non-religious duties. By the terms of their contracts, they had to remain chaste and serve without any pay other than their room and board.”

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