THE POLITICS OF MYSTICISM AND THE MEXICAN BAROQUE IN THE SPANISH REPUBLICAN EXILE FILM: *CANTAR DE LOS CANTARES* [SONG OF SONGS] (MANUEL ALTOLAGUIRRE, 1959)

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INTRODUCTION

Although practically unknown, *Cantar de los cantares*[1] [Song of the Songs], the last feature film directed by Manuel Altolaguirre, is the most representative of his aesthetic and religious interests. *Cantar* takes a key text of Jewish mysticism adapted by Fray Luis de León and recreates and reinterprets it in a Mexican setting. At a time when he had already begun making literary contributions to Spanish cultural initiatives, especially to Camilo José Cela's magazine *Papeles de Son Armadans*, Altolaguirre thought that *Cantar* would provide him with the opportunity, if not to return to Spain, at least to engage with Spanish institutions. The film was screened out of competition at the San Sebastián International Film Festival in July 1959, which Altolaguirre attended accompanied by his second wife, María Luisa Gómez Mena. After their stay in San Sebastián, on their way by car to the poet's native Málaga and carrying the film with them, a road accident in the province of Burgos ended the lives of both. Altolaguirre was fifty-four years old.

When watching *Cantar* and interpreting its meanings and its director's intentions, it must be taken into account that for Altolaguirre, the film shown in San Sebastián was not a finished project. The first version of it was written and produced in 1958. In 1959, together with Gilberto Martínez Solares, the poet reworked and expanded the script (Valender, 1989a). In 1958, he had told his nephew Julio of his plans to film it in Salamanca, Valladolid and Ávila (Vílchez Ruiz, 2022). It was with the intention of obtaining financing for this new version that he took advantage of a trip to Spain to show *Cantar* at the San Sebastián Festival (Valender, 1989b). In his letter to Martínez Solares written from San Sebastián, he speaks of "our *Cantar*" and how "I have been very sorry [...] that we have not been able to finish the film together" (Altolaguirre, 1989b: 294).[2] In short, what

Altolaguirre presented in San Sebastián was a work in progress, as his intention was to expand the project by adding Fray Luis's adaptation of *El libro de Job* [The Book of Job] and *De los nombres de Cristo* [The Names of Christ] with the aim of offering a much more structured and theologically erudite reading of the Spanish friar's mysticism.

To complicate matters further, in addition to the fact that there were two scripts, the one Altolaguirre considered the first script, a copy of which has been preserved (Valender 1989a), does not match the content of the film,[3] which omits the introductory frame sequence explaining Fray Luis's unjust imprisonment for translating the *Song of Songs* (his translation was censored by the Inquisition and not published until 1798). Instead of a defensive or despondent Fray Luis, the film presents, in the words of Sánchez Vidal, a Fray Luis "in a kind of trance or serene epiphany, writing calmly in a luminous cell" (2003: 229). Most of the dialogue attributed to the Husband/God is also left out, along with the many amorous flirtations exchanged with the Wife/Church that appear in the script. In the film, the Wife, played by the Black Cuban actress Isolina Herrera, addresses him directly, but in the cinematic structure of shot/reverse shot, the Husband's response is represented primarily through the soundtrack with music rather than a human voice.[4] The Husband is visually represented not by an actor but by elements of nature, especially flowers and trees. The dominant male voice belongs to Fray Luis, played by the Mexican *mestizo* actor Julio Bracho, who guides us as spectators in our interpretation of *Cantar*. In the scenes where he appears as a character, his voice is heard as a voice-over rather than coming from the actor's mouth.

Sánchez Vidal, who has also drawn attention to these discrepancies between the film and the first script, refers to *Cantar* as "cumulative and dispersed fragments, only structured by the partitioning of the successive *Cantos*" (2003: 229). On the contrary, what I argue in this article is that *Cantar*, despite being unfinished, is a very coherent project, both as a formal proposal on the capacities of cinematic language applied to a classic text of mysticism and in terms of its subject matter. It is important to note that while the full title shown in the preserved version of the film is *Cantar de los Cantares de Fray de León*, the first script includes the subtitle *En la poesía mística y en el arte religioso mexicano* ["In Mystical Poetry and in Mexican Religious Art"]. It is with this subtitle in mind that the plot of *Cantar* can be summarised as a mystical representation—visually signified in the aforementioned identification of the Husband/God with elements of nature, and also with recurring vertical movements of the camera—of the Wife's quest for her Husband, which leads her through different Mexican landscapes and iconic elements of pre-Columbian and (especially) New Spanish Baroque architecture and sculpture (which is why, as will be discussed below, it has been compared to *¡Que viva México!* [Sergei M. Eisenstein and Grigori Aleksandrov, 1932]). The Wife's quest culminates in her crowning, i.e., her acceptance of perpetual vows as a nun, which, according to Catholic liturgy, turns her into a wife of God. Therefore, despite the contemplative and anti-narrative qualities that make *Cantar* almost an avant-garde object, there is a discernible attempt at narrative continuity that offers a coherent vision of the role of Catholicism and, by extension, of the Spanish conquest in Mexico. Indeed, through its use of mysticism and the New

THE PLOT IS A MYSTICAL REPRESENTATION OF THE BRIDE/CHURCH'S QUEST FOR HER HUSBAND/GOD, WHICH LEADS HER THROUGH DIFFERENT MEXICAN LANDSCAPES AND ICONIC ELEMENTS OF PRE-COLUMBIAN AND (ESPECIALLY) NEW SPANISH BAROQUE ARCHITECTURE AND SCULPTURE

Spanish Baroque, *Cantar* articulates a discourse celebrating *Hispanidad* that serves to explain why it was viewed favourably by the Franco regime and accepted for screening out of competition at the San Sebastián Film Festival in 1959.

ALTOLAGUIRRE AND THE CINEMATIC ART

Altolaguirre developed his entire career in the film industry while in exile. His work in this field includes "eleven films as a producer, twenty-five scripts—nine of which were made into films while sixteen were not—and five films as director" (Sánchez Vidal, 2003: 221).[5] His work in filmmaking reflects the opportunities, challenges and limitations that life in exile meant for Spanish Republican intellectuals. Opportunities, because having to rebuild his life in exile allowed Altolaguirre to delve into a medium that we know he had always admired and been interested in.[6] Challenges, because of the technical and aesthetic difficulties of what for Altolaguirre was ultimately a new medium of artistic expression. And limitations, because of the reality of working in an art form that was also an industry (one that in Mexico was constrained by monopolistic commercial interests) requiring teamwork and large budgets. The statements we have of his about cinema convey his fascination with the potential of this new artistic medium. Altolaguirre was sensitive to the view of cinema first recognised by the Surrealists as a new art form capable of drawing spectators into a state of trance whereby their individual rational consciousness would yield to embrace a shared experience of a collective self. As he describes it in his article "Elogio del cine" [In Praise of Cinema] published in 1946:

> There is no art form that can so seize us, no poetry like that of film that can so completely transport us. [...] In a cinema, no matter how large the audience is, a single consciousness is formed amongst all attending. In no other spectacle does the crowd unite to form a single body. No other emotion is so unanimously felt. Even the most rebellious, even those of us who want to take an independent, critical position find ourselves succumbing to its captivating influence. [...]. If you want to stop being who you are, if you want to borrow a soul, take refuge in a cinema. It will give you memory, intelligence and will, if only for a while. (As cited in Valender, 1992: 374-375)

Altolaguirre was aware that this seductive power nullifies the will, and he was critical of the way cinema makes the spectator vulnerable to manipulation. In "Recuerdos de un diálogo" [Memories of a Dialogue] (1946), he expresses his frustration: "You have to go to the cinema to swallow the censorship, to repress the applause. [...] We like cinema very much, but shadows are shadows, and cinema is at most a kind of writing, a primitive writing" (as cited in Valender, 1992: 376). Although when qualifying it as "primitive" Altolaguirre seems here to refer to all cinema, in "Las malas artes del cine" [The Deceptive Arts of Cinema] (1948) his criticism is aimed more precisely at cinema as commercial mass culture, leading him into the contradiction of condemning a form that he himself had contributed to with several of his mainstream films: "The public is dazzled and succumbs completely to a form of propaganda. It is curious to observe the negative impact on audiences of old-fashioned films, regardless of their quality, when they receive them without the aura of advertising" (as cited in Valender, 1992: 381).

While he never gave up his work in the film industry, or for that matter in commercial cinema, Altolaguirre articulated an ambitious cinematic poetics closely related to his own main creative practice, poetry. According to this poetics, cinema is understood as a different way of acquiring knowledge, capable of expanding and multiplying the word's capacity to reveal the world. Cinema is the "representation of the inexpressible [...] and the ineffable, which the poet, sculptor, illustrator or musician could not express in words, notes or lines" (as cited in Valender, 1992: 374). It was with

Cantar that Altolaguirre sought to express this capacity, which is why he called it a *cinepoema*, or cinematic poem. As he eloquently expresses in a letter to his sister María Emilia:

> [I made *Cantar*] because of the importance that words have for a poet. Words open up a whole world of representations. [...] I, humbly, have tried to give each word of Fray Luis an external projection and an independent plastic and spiritual beauty. I have not tried to help the word with the image. What I have tried is to make the image prolong the word and, if possible, replace it. In essence, I believe, what I have tried is to illuminate the words. (As cited in Valender, 1989a: 344)

Also key to understanding his cinematic poetics is his assertion that the true medium of cinema is time:

> The deeper you delve into that temporal space, into that tempestuous human inner world, the better, the more felicitous your results will be. [...] To create memories, to build stories, is the mission of cinema. [...] Memories are maintained with that pulsating substance of time [and] cinema is mixed with it. Cinema is either inner life or it is nothing. (As cited in Valender, 1992: 374)

Altolaguirre alludes here to a concept that Gilles Deleuze, in the second of his volumes on the theory and philosophy of the cinematographic image, would later call *l'image-temps*. The time-image defines European neorealism's new way of making films that prioritises the visual elements and soundtrack as the medium of communication, freed of the demands of advancing a narrative plot (Deleuze, 1985). This means that *Cantar* is very much in tune with the sensibility of this new European cinema that had been emerging in the 1950s. Indeed, it is a film in which hardly anything happens, encouraging contemplation and spiritual introspection rather than the entertainment derived from following a story. At the beginning of the film the Wife's voice-over tells us: "This film, *Song of Songs*, has no other plot than the pilgrimage of a Christian soul in search of God" (00:02:43-00:02:51). This explains José Francisco Aranda's review of the film for *Ínsula*, in which he insisted on its avant-garde character, calling *Cantar* "one of the most personal, daring and exquisite works that Hispanic cinema has ever produced" (1959: 11), and describing its images as "intoxicating" (1959: 11). Although he criticises the editing (which Altolaguirre himself wanted to rework), Aranda compares the film favourably to *¡Que viva México!* As a critic already very familiar with European neorealist cinema and the incipient French New Wave, Aranda was well placed to appreciate *Cantar*'s insights into the power of the time-image through the recreation of cinema as a visual explosion. This understanding of a new way of making films is also evident in De la Vega Alfaro's recognition of *Cantar* as "a precursor in Mexico to the neo-avant-garde tendencies that would emerge in the following decade" (2005: 71).

CANTAR IS VERY MUCH IN TUNE WITH THE SENSIBILITY OF THIS NEW EUROPEAN CINEMA THAT HAD BEEN EMERGING IN THE 1950S

However, Altolaguirre had taken his own path to reach this conceptualisation of cinema: the path of poetry, and particularly the use of allegory as a vehicle for mysticism. These three pillars of cinema, poetry and mysticism underpin the construction of *Cantar*. It is not surprising that Altolaguirre chose the theme of mysticism for his most ambitious film. As noted above, he understood cinema at its best to be the "representation of the inexpressible [...] and the ineffable", and therefore representing the mystical experience was within the scope of its capabilities. Altolaguirre's interest in this philosophical, religious and aesthetic perspective is central to his poetry, as expressed in its exploration of the correspondences between the material and spiritual worlds and in its use of

symbols (Vílchez Ruiz, 2022). Since 1930, he had been publishing anthologies of classical Spanish poetry that included Spanish mystics, and in 1927 and 1928 he had actively participated in homages to Fray Luis, alongside other leading poets such as Federico García Lorca, Vicente Aleixandre, Rafael Alberti, Jorge Guillén, Luis Cernuda, Juan Larrea and Gerardo Diego. Once in exile, in 1942, he took part in a similar homage, this time honouring another great Spanish mystic poet, Saint John of the Cross (Vílchez Ruiz, 2022).

POLITICS OF MYSTICISM AND THE BAROQUE

Vílchez Ruiz (2022) puts forward an argument of relevance for considering the ideological nuances of Altolaguirre's engagement with the mystical tradition. She suggests that for the generation of poets who would go into exile after the Spanish Civil War, mysticism constituted a way of preserving their Catholic faith, but freed from its reactionary Spanish counter-reformist shackles: a faith without restrictive disciplines, critical of the dogmas of Catholic doctrine, capable of combining the secular with the divine, the popular with the cultured, and Hebrew, Sufi or Neoplatonic elements with Christian ideas. For a generation educated in the Republican values of tolerance and freedom, mysticism represented "a symbol of ethical, aesthetic, and also poetic regeneration" (2022: 433, 435) that made it possible to integrate God with the human, bringing matter and spirit together, "translating the spiritual essence into the material" (2022: 463). Vílchez Ruiz refers in particular to the ethics of Altolaguirre, who never gave up his Catholicism, as "anti-dogmatic and anti-partisan" (2022: 439), firm in its affirmation of sensory experience, in its desire to contemplate the material world as part of a pathway to purification. Exile was a traumatic process for Altolaguirre, leading to his admission to a French mental institution before his exile to Cuba, and to a pathological condition associated with a profound sense of guilt. To overcome it he was compelled to let go of the more negative aspects of his Catholic faith, which, according to Vílchez Ruiz (2022), was expressed in both his poetry and his work in the film industry.[7] Religion thus became less prominent in Altolaguirre's poetry in the first years of his exile, only to return with greater force in his final years. For Vílchez Ruiz, it was the mystical tradition that "allowed Manuel Altolaguirre to bring out a Catholic meaning and feeling once he had eliminated that which had weighed on his heart. His position was always strictly Catholic, but critical as well of certain Catholic values" (2022: 492). In fact, for Vílchez Ruiz, *Cantar* represents the culmination of Altolaguirre's efforts to "understand religiosity while evading the negative restrictions of Catholicism" (2022: 448), as his perception of reality was "much more in tune with the senses and with his sensibility [...]" based on an understanding of "God that was much freer, without theology's negative side" (2022: 449-450).[8]

The clearest example in *Cantar* of this use of mysticism to rewrite Catholicism as a religion without guilt can be found in the scene recreating the Garden of Eden and the moment when Eve, tempted by the serpent, eats the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge (00:46:05-00:47:28). Unlike the biblical reading, in mysticism the garden is an allegory for the place where the soul enjoys the mystical union, finding its fullness. In the mystical tradition, as Vílchez Ruiz points out, "[t]he tree of life is the most obvious symbol of the union of spirit and matter [...] born out of the darkness, out of the depth of those roots until it grows. It is a symbol of conscious spiritual evolution" (2022: 475). The scene in *Cantar* evokes both traditions: the biblical one, represented by two panels replicating Albrecht Dürer's two paintings of Adam and Eve (1507), followed by the reenactment of the moment when Eve, also played by Isolina Herrera, takes a bite of the apple from the tree and immediately throws it away in regret for

having succumbed to temptation; and the mystical one, with the same actress, now dressed as a nun, stretched out in a relaxed attitude under the same tree, its branches completely surrounding her (as noted above, Mexican flora is used consistently throughout the film as an allegory for God), picking its fruits freely and happily. This second reading, where the garden is a realm of joy with/of the beloved, rewrites a version of the biblical episode free of prohibitions and feelings of guilt for the Catholic tradition (as its protagonist is the character of the Beloved dressed as a nun).

A similar interpretation can be applied to one of the most sophisticated and complex scenes in the film (00:03:52-00:05:21). The scene in question is preceded by several shots at the beginning of the film, in which the camera lingers precisely on frames (of windows, doors and paintings) in a subtle allusion to the cinematographic apparatus itself, and more generally to how our perception is influenced by the medium chosen (cinema, literature, painting), but also by the cultural perspective (European, Latin American). All of this is relevant to the scene that follows, and to the entire film.

The scene begins (Image 1) in a room where two frames can be seen. The one on the right, only partially visible, is the threshold of a door through which Fray Luis enters from a barren garden. Leaning on a lectern and surrounded by books (frames for the word) and a vase, he begins to write. The camera moves left towards the second frame, a painting showing a fragment from the central panel of Hieronymus Bosch's *Triptych of The Adoration of the Magi* (c. 1494). As in the scene of the Garden of Eden, Altolaguirre cinematically re-signifies a paradigmatic painting of the European tradition depicting a key moment of the biblical liturgy, in this case from the New Testament.[9] While Fray Luis writes, the characters in the central panel come to life. Cinematographic techniques place the focus on certain figures in the painting while others are blurred. The shepherds on the roof of the manger where Jesus has been born are shown rejoicing over the epiphany, not distracted by their worldly problems as portrayed in Bosch's painting. The side panels of the triptych, which symbolise the threat of sin to the world, are not depicted at all. The menacing, diabolical figure on the threshold of the manger appears only in wide shots and is relegated to the background. On the other hand, the leading role in the adoration is played by racialised characters, King Balthazar and his page-boy, whose faces are shown in close-up shots.

The scene ends with a close-up of the Virgin Mother, which then cuts directly to the Beloved/Wife/Church. While the mother of God is white, like her baby, his wife is Indigenous. In this way, the film marks the transition between a European Catholic tradition of representing the birth of Christ and its integration into a different tradition located entirely in Mexico, where the rest of the film takes place. The incarnation of God in the child Jesus, a defining element of European epiphanies, is thus given less prominence, as for the purposes of the allegory God here will dissolve into nature. In this new allegorical-mystical dimension, the actress/woman/Wife not only represents the Church, as interpreted by the Christianising tradition of *Song of Songs*, but



Image 1

also stands for the land itself, i.e., Mexico. In other words, Altolaguirre's film not only transposes mysticism to a different artistic medium—from literature to cinema, from painting to cinema—but also transfers the parameters of Christianity/Catholicism themselves to a geographical space once colonised in their name, where their redefinition will be represented through the architecture of the New Spanish Baroque. It is this additional element of the allegorical-mystical dimension that underpins the argument outlined below that *Cantar* offers a defence of *Hispanidad*. The centrality of the Baroque in the film reproduces a discourse that finds in this prestigious and refined artistic style the distillation of a Catholic Spanish essence that would spread throughout the Spanish Empire and place its stamp upon it. In Marzo's words:

> For Spain, the Baroque has been the most concrete metaphor of what it means to be Spanish, and thanks to its empire, which coincided in time with the Baroque period, the best exponent of the nation's capacity to be universal, to convey notions of humanity valid not only within the strict context of the country itself but even in lands where the human presence was still left outside of history, such as the Americas. (2010: 34)

Indeed, throughout *Cantar*, Baroque architecture and painting function as evidence of a perfect integration of Indigenous into Catholic elements, a joyful acceptance of Catholicism through the formal integration of local features. In this syncretism, which places the emphasis on embracing Catholicism through aesthetic difference, mystical ecstasy smooths out all the rough edges of colonialism, as the racialised local individual, represented in the film by the Beloved/Wife, surrenders to the absent monotheistic God. The disembodiment of the divine, which is of course in keeping with the logic of mystical allegory, at the same time reproduces certain gender relations that are also colonial relations. The evasion of the incarnation of the Almighty also erases the conditions of extermination and exploitation through which His law was imposed, resulting in a celebratory spectacle of a land conquered by Catholicism, a characteristic feature of discourses of *Hispanidad*. As a specific example, the Wife's quest for her Beloved, which structures the film, is undertaken mostly on foot through unmistakably rural (never urban) Mexican landscapes (Image 2), including flora and geographical features (nopal, maguey, the Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl volcanoes) and pre-Columbian architectural and monumental ruins (the pyramids of Teotihuacán and the Olmec altar and colossal head of Tabasco), which the Wife passes by without paying them any attention, thus denying them any religious or ritual function. The various colonial Baroque architectural constructions shown in the film receive very different audiovisual treatment: churches and convents (Church of San Francisco Javier in Tepotzotlán, State of Mexico; Basilica of Ocotlán in Tlaxcala; Church of Santa María Tonantzintla in Puebla; Convent of Santa María de los Ángeles, built on a monument dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, in Mexico City; and Temple of San Francisco Acatepec in Cholula, Puebla); monuments (atrial cross at the convent of San Agustín in Acolman, one of the first made for the conversion of indigenous people in the 16th century, which fuses pre-Hispanic and Catholic elements); and paintings (*The Annunciation* [1559] by Juan de Correa de Vivar, an Afro-Hispanic painter who included indigenous and Black figures in his paintings). Each of these represents a step in the Wife's ascent towards the culminating moment when she will become a crowned nun. As in an art history documentary, the camera revels in detailed observations of facades, apses and altarpieces that make the syncretism and indigenous contributions to the New Spanish Baroque evident, providing a background into which the racialised Wife devoutly merges. A culminating example is the Church of San Francisco Javier Tepotzotlán, where pride of place is given to an altarpiece devoted to the Virgin of Guadalupe, where the Wife will be crowned sur-






Images 2, 3, 4 and 5

rounded by bas-reliefs of Black cherubs (00:41:27) (Image 3). This central idea, the frictionless fusion of the indigenous reality with Catholic iconography, is particularly well achieved visually in the scene where the Wife, by means of an optical effect, is literally integrated into a painting of the Annunciation[10] (01:05:00) (Image 4). And a similar visual strategy is used to reinforce this idea when the face of the Wife, now a crowned nun, is superimposed onto the painting of a white crowned nun to highlight their similarities (01:07:13) (Image 5). At the end of the film, the culmination of the Wife's journey represents not only the mystical union with God but also the perfect incorporation of Mexican qualities into Catholicism through her.

All these considerations suggest a need to qualify the interpretation of Altolaguirre's aforementioned interest in mysticism as a tolerant and open-minded project. While such an interpre-

tation was partly based on the incorporation of non-Catholic religions and traditions, in *Cantar* this kind of tolerance and open-mindedness results in the representation of the colonial relationship as a mutually beneficial coexistence of equals or the voluntary acceptance of what one of the parties offers. This is a discourse with a reactionary, anti-modern foundation aimed at concealing the subjugation of the natives that defined the Spanish Catholic empire's civilising project in the Americas. To the extent that *Cantar* facilitates this whitewashed reading of the Spanish conquest, it "camouflages [...] responsibilities and memories, with the aim of extending an aesthetic cloak capable of [...] controlling memory and diverting attention away from the reality of exploitation [...], making [...] the inconvenient others disappear in a mythologised story of integration, communion and *mestizaje*" (Marzo and Badia, 2010: 13).[11]

On the other hand, it is equally possible to argue that by viewing colonised subjects and their artistic representations as active agents in their own transformation and definition of the Catholic worship, the syncretism celebrated in *Cantar* supports a different reading of the New Spanish Baroque, offering a vision of solidarity that Latin American critics call the Baroque *ethos* (Echeverría, 1988; Velasco, 2022). This entails a subversive appropriation of the discourse of *Hispanidad*, transforming the Baroque from a weapon of repression wielded by the coloniser (Marzo, 2010; Locker, 2014) into a tool taken up by the colonised. This *ethos* defines an attitude towards reality among the colonised subjects that effectively combines the two contradictory approaches of submission to and rebellion against the empire by non-confrontational means. The Baroque *ethos* recognises the reality of defeat and the impossibility of reversing or resisting the Spanish conquest. Faced with this fact, colonised subjects choose to seek an "excluded third way" constructed out of the ruins, a path at once equal to that imported from the Spanish metropole and different from it in its concealed and apparently docile incorporation of pre-Columbian culture (Echeverría 1988: 181). As Velasco argues, "[f]aced with the imposition of a monolithic, intolerant, and colonial European universalism, American Indigenous and *mestizo* peoples appropriated it selectively and universalised their own cultures by mixing them syncretically and in an original and purposeful way" (2022: 95-96). From this perspective, the Wife in *Cantar*, repeatedly framed by the most spectacular architectural achievements of the colonial Baroque, embodies the audacity of placing a racialised woman at the pinnacle of feminine Catholic power. Her position is thus analogous to that of the Virgin of Guadalupe, capable of articulating a Mexican identity that would end up becoming independent of the Spanish metropole (Velasco, 2022).

THE WIFE IN *CANTAR*, REPEATEDLY FRAMED BY THE MOST SPECTACULAR ARCHITECTURAL ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE COLONIAL BAROQUE, EMBODIES THE AUDACITY OF PLACING A RACIALISED WOMAN AT THE PINNACLE OF FEMININE CATHOLIC POWER.

Although both these interpretations of the ideology of New Spanish Baroque architecture in the film are plausible, it would be impossible to understand the reception that *Cantar* received in Francoist Spain without a reading of the film as a celebration of *Hispanidad*, of the conquest of the New World as an evangelising, Christianising mission that would come to define Mexican identity. The opportunity to screen *Cantar* at the San Sebastián Festival, as well as its success with the clergy and cultural institutions that at that time were controlled by the most ultra-Catholic factions of the regime, suggest that the film was interpreted as a vision of *Hispanidad* the regime's most reactionary forces could approve of.

CANTAR'S RECEPTION IN THE FRANCO REGIME

There is evidence from August 1958, in a letter to his nephew Julio Mathias, that Altolaguirre wanted to convince Spanish authorities to designate *Cantar* as a film of *Interés Nacional* [National Interest] (Vílchez Ruiz, 2022). Altolaguirre no doubt had some notion of the enormous advantages that such a designation could offer a film in Spain at that time in terms of production, distribution and exhibition. In a letter written on 20 May 1959, he asked Camilo José Cela to use his influence to get *Cantar* a screening at the San Sebastián Festival, given that "as a cinematic poem with a religious form and meaning, it will not be selected here [in Mexico] by the Directorate of Film" (1989a: 290).[12] As the film was indeed screened at the festival, albeit out of competition, it is plausible to assume that Cela did make appropriate inquiries. But other reasons besides this possible recommendation help explain the invitation.

In 1959, the Franco regime was immersed in a fierce internal struggle for hegemony between liberals and ultranationalists. The battle was also being waged in the cultural sector, where Latin America occupied a very important place in discourses of *Hispanidad*. José María García Escudero had been dismissed from his post as Director General of Film and Theatre after the government crisis of February 1952 for being too tolerant, and he was replaced by José María Muñoz Fontán, who favoured strict censorship. Moreover, as Gubern explains (Labanyi and Pavlović, 2013), responsibility for censorship had been transferred to the Ministry of Information and Tourism, which was run by the prominent conservative Catholic Gabriel Arias Salgado from 1951 to 1962. This of course meant years of ironclad control by National Catholics over what national audiences were able to see at the cinema. On the other hand, Luis Carrero Blanco had brought technocrats with neoliberal economic and open-minded political ideas into Franco's government. Notable among these was Fernando María Castiella, the Minister of Foreign Affairs who began the process of Spain's diplomatic reintegration onto the world stage. Once the country's geopolitical position in the context of the Cold War had been consolidated and the hostility of liberal democracies towards the dictatorship had abated, Castiella saw that the time was ripe for Spain to align itself fully with the West. For this rapprochement to succeed, the Spanish dictatorship urgently needed to transform its image, presenting itself as a tolerant and open nation. This explains why the regime was willing to lower the bar of censorship of literary and audiovisual culture in contexts of controlled and limited reception in Spain and for the purpose of exports. One example of this was encouraging renowned artists and intellectuals to return from exile in order to improve the country's international image (Larraz, 2009). Another example was the San Sebastián International Film Festival, established in 1953, which, according to Gubern (Labanyi and Pavlović, 2013), was permitted to screen uncensored Hollywood films—in 1959 it presented *North by Northwest* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1959)—and to welcome productions from the Communist bloc countries of Eastern Europe, especially those with a Catholic tradition. In the case of Latin American politics, Castiella acknowledged the historical ties while toning down the ideologically codified languages of early Francoism and focused instead on diversifying economic and cultural connections with the region (Pardo Sanz, 2000). Castiella's ministry was responsible for the Instituto de Cultura Hispánica (ICH), created in 1946 to promote Hispanic culture, which acted as a very well-funded form of soft power (Großmann, 2014) that was extremely important to the regime. A key space for the dissemination of the discourse on *Hispanidad* around the world and especially in Latin America, in the 1940s it had cultivated an idea of pan-Hispanism in opposition to the values of liberal democracies. During the Cold War, this

discourse would evolve into an understanding of Hispanic identity compatible with liberal democracies as a bulwark against the communist threat (Großmann, 2014). However, in 1959, in a reflection of the aforementioned internal struggles, the director of the ICH was the ultranationalist, anti-Western politician Blas Piñar, an ally of Arias Salgado and an enemy of Castiella (Pardo Sanz, 2000).

The tensions between the different factions of the regime became apparent in 1959 at the San Sebastián Festival's seventh edition. Still in its early days, the festival's profile was yet to be fully defined, and the two factions sought to exploit its soft power in divergent directions. Piñar and Arias Salgado wanted it to specialise in Ibero-American cinema, invoking an ultranationalist version of *Hispanidad*. Conversely, Castiella saw the festival as a showcase where the idea of a liberal Spain could be sold to a broader international public. Although Castiella's vision would ultimately prevail (Tuduri, 1989), it is not surprising that in 1959, a film based on a central pillar of Franco's Spain—Catholicism in a colonial context—should have aroused the interest of its organisers and convinced them, in addition to Cela's recommendation, to include *Cantar* in the festival.

According to a letter that Altolaguirre wrote to his daughter Paloma from San Sebastián in July 1959, the prospects for the film could not have been better. Not only was it being acclaimed at the festival, but there was also hope that the positive response might lead to an invitation to compete the following month at the Venice International Film Festival:

> [The film] has had a splendid reception, with long articles in the newspapers, and it is being screened at the festival out of competition [...]. It will be shown tomorrow, Tuesday, at a special session for the bishop and clergy. On Friday, at the best time, and in the best cinema, it will be screened at the festival. It will be screened twice that day and it is causing a huge stir. Then it will be presented to the distributors and people are saying that we'll have very good offers. [...] In Venice, in August, it will enter the competition for the prize, with the publicity from San Sebastián, which will be very beneficial. (Altolaguirre, 1989c: 291-292)[13]

Altolaguirre told Father Ángel Martínez about the media coverage of the film in *El Diario Vasco* ("Great satisfactions and joys!") (Altolaguirre, 1989d: 293)[14] and informed his co-writer Martínez Solares about the interviews in the top French newspapers (*Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *Les Lettres Françaises*) and that "Spanish critics [are] unanimous in their praise" (Altolaguirre, 1989b: 294). It is also clear from this correspondence that the film sought and obtained a "specialised" audience in the clergy, who responded to it enthusiastically, according both to Altolaguirre's own account and to reports in the press at the time in San Sebastián ("El Cantar de los cantares", 1959) and Málaga (Caballero, 1959). While he predicts it in his letter to his daughter Paloma (cited above), to Father Ángel Martínez he presents it as a *fait accompli*: "His Excellency the bishop saw it, and a large number of clergymen" (Altolaguirre, 1989d: 293). And he gives more details to Martínez Solares: "The Bishop of San Sebastián summoned all the clergy of his diocese and they filled the cinema" (Altolaguirre, 1989b: 294). By extension, the official response seems to have been equally positive, as he goes on to explain to Martínez Solares: "The President of the Instituto de Cultura Hispánica [Blas Piñar MPB] invited us for lunch. The Director of Film [Muñoz Fontán MPB] has requested the film for Madrid" (Altolaguirre, 1989b: 294). This characterisation of the film's success might require some qualification, however, given that Aranda—who was present at the screening for the general public—wrote in his posthumous review that *Cantar* was attended by barely a dozen spectators (1959).

The foregoing suggests that where *Cantar* really had an impact and prospects of success, and by extension, where funding could have been found for Altolaguirre's planned reworked

version, other types of collaborations, etc., was within the hierarchies of Catholic power, i.e., the Church and government institutions. To a regime that was already keen on the idea of persuading illustrious Republican exiles to return to Spain in order to demonstrate its openness and tolerance, to a cultural sector that in the 1950s was controlled by the National Catholic factions of the Franco regime that sought to promote a discourse of *Hispanidad* internationally, *Cantar* must have seemed an attractive and easily exploitable proposition. Unlike the fiasco it would have on its hands just three years later with Luis Buñuel's *Viridiana*, the regime had nothing to fear from the film by the exiled Altolaguirre.

CONCLUSION

Cantar arrived in Spain at a key moment for Francoist Spain marked by fierce internal struggles, as the country was changing and adapting to a new geopolitical situation. Altolaguirre's prestige as a poet, his status as a Republican exile but also a devout Catholic, and the centrality of the discourse of *Hispanidad* in his film all made *Cantar* attractive to the regime. How would the director and the film have navigated this context? What conflicting interests of the regime might have challenged them? Could a subversive reading of *Hispanidad* have been drawn out of *Cantar* by anti-Francoists, or in Latin America, or in the suspicions of some censor? The fateful accident in the town of Cubo de Bureba cut short the prospects raised by those happy days for the poet in San Sebastián. However, the film still offers an opportunity for analysis as part of a project aimed at mobilising and rendering visible the cultural products of Spanish Republican exiles as important artifacts of their time that offer complex understandings that continue to enrich us. In this sense, this article has sought to highlight the significance of this little-known audiovisual text by Manuel Altolaguirre for the key importance of its Mexican setting, for its exposure of the continuity and transformation of the mystical-allegorical structure in the filmmaker's work, for the ways it participates in ideological discourses of *Hispanidad* through the Baroque and for how these discourses helped the film to capture the attention of Francoist institutions.

NOTES

1 Hereinafter abbreviated as *Cantar*.

2 The Manuel Altolaguirre-Concha Méndez archive contains a large amount of material related to the film that has yet to be studied in depth. The archive is held by the Centro Documental de la Residencia de Estudiantes in Madrid, which is part of the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas.

3 However, it does match Altolaguirre's own description in a letter to his nephew Julio Mathias y Lacarra in August 1958 (as cited in Vílchez Ruiz, 2022).

4 The voice of the Husband/God is rarely heard. According to Sánchez Vidal (2003), this voice was provided by the Mexican actor Arturo de Córdova. As the film's credits are incomplete, it is not possible to verify this.

5 A more detailed account of Altolaguirre's work in the film industry can be found in Sánchez Vidal (2003), Sánchez Oliveira (2014) and Valender (1992).

6 According to accounts from friends such as Darío Carmona, and Altolaguirre's correspondence prior to his exile (Valender, 1989a).

7 The influence of María Zambrano also helped Altolaguirre overcome these contradictions, feelings of guilt and distress. In *La confesión: género literario* [Confession: a Literary Genre], a work known to Altolaguirre, Zambrano speaks of confession as "a method to find that person, the subject to whom things happen, and as a subject, someone who remains detached, free from what happens to him. Nothing that occurs to him can nullify him or annihilate him, because this kind of reality, once achieved, seems invulnerable" (1988). Furthermore, Zambrano considered Fray Luis's *The Book of Job*, which Altolaguirre intended to incorporate in an expanded version of *Cantar*, as

one of the first forms of confession, corresponding to the first phase of descent into hell on the mystical path. (Valender, 1998). In other words, mysticism and confession, according to Zambrano, come together to purge the elements of guilt inherent in Catholicism. Similarly, when stressing the liberating function of confession in his "Prólogo a mis recuerdos" [Prologue to My Memories], originally written in 1943, Altolaguirre speaks of the trauma of going into exile as a form of spiritual death, and how his rebirth had been possible after that death (Vílchez Ruiz, 2022). In this sense, as Valender argues, Altolaguirre was able to make *Cantar* after having written his own confessions—later published in *El caballo griego* [The Greek Horse]—and having overcome the personal and collective trauma of war and exile.

8 Vílchez Ruiz even sees a critical intention in *Cantar*, due to its references to Fray Luis being imprisoned by the Spanish Inquisition, calling it "a completely revolutionary act that questions power, public opinion and social, political and ideological norms" (2022: 482). As noted above, however, although present in the script, these allusions were eliminated in the version of the film that has been preserved.

9 As Altolaguirre knew perfectly well, both Bosch's painting and the works of Dürer were in the Prado Museum, and therefore out of his reach while in exile.

10 It has not been possible to identify the authorship, title or location of the painting.

11 Altolaguirre is no exception. Spain's relationship with the Americas concerned many Republican exile intellectuals, particularly in Mexico, such as Juan Larrea, Luis Cernuda, Max Aub and Eduardo Nicol. For an introduction to discourses of *Hispanidad* in Republican exile, see Faber (2017).

12 The letter was first published in the journal *Papeles de Son Armadans* in 1960.

13 With his allusions to Venice, the time of year and competing for an award, Altolaguirre must be referring to the International Catholic Office Film Prize, awarded at the Venice Film Festival, which was held at that time in August.

14 The letter was first published in the journal *Caracola* in 1960.

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THE POLITICS OF MYSTICISM AND THE MEXICAN BAROQUE IN THE SPANISH REPUBLICAN EXILE FILM: *CANTAR DE LOS CANTARES* [SONG OF SONGS] (MANUEL ALTOLAGUIRRE, 1959)

Abstract
Although practically unknown, *Cantar de los cantares*, the last film directed by Manuel Altolaguirre, is the most representative of his aesthetic and religious interests. *Cantar* takes the masterpiece of mysticism adapted by Fray Luis de León and recreates and reinterprets it in a Mexican setting. Its plot is essentially a mystical representation of the Bride/Church's quest for her Bridegroom/God, which leads her through different Mexican natural landscapes and iconic elements of pre-Columbian and (especially) New Spanish Baroque architecture and sculpture. This article begins by analysing the film as a formal exploration of the capacities of cinematic language applied to a classic text of mysticism that reflect developments in film history later defined by Deleuze with the concept of the time-image. It then considers the extent to which *Cantar* articulates a coherent, celebratory vision of the role of Catholicism and, by extension, the Spanish conquest of Mexico. It concludes by arguing that an interpretation along these lines explains why the film was viewed favourably by the Franco regime and accepted for screening out of competition at the San Sebastián Film Festival in 1959.

Key words
Manuel Altolaguirre; *Cantar de los cantares*; Colonial Baroque; Mysticism; San Sebastián International Film Festival; *Hispanidad*; Spanish Republican exile films; Time-image.

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POLÍTICAS DE LA MÍSTICA Y EL BARROCO MEXICANO EN EL CINE DEL EXILIO REPUBLICANO: CANTAR DE LOS CANTARES (MANUEL ALTOLAGUIRRE, 1959)

Resumen
Cantar de los cantares, último y malogrado proyecto cinematográfico dirigido por Manuel Altolaguirre es, aunque prácticamente desconocido, el más próximo a sus intereses estéticos y religiosos. *Cantar* recrea y reinterpreta, en un entorno mexicano, un texto cumbre de la mística adaptado por Fray Luis de León. Su trama representa, en clave mística, el recorrido de la Esposa/Iglesia en busca de su Esposo/Dios, lo que la lleva a atravesar diferentes paisajes naturales mexicanos, icónicos elementos de la arquitectura y escultura precolombinas y, especialmente, del barroco novohispano. El artículo analiza la película, primero, como propuesta formal sobre las capacidades del lenguaje cinematográfico aplicadas a un texto clásico de la mística que coinciden con desarrollos de la historia del cine definidos más tarde por Deleuze con el concepto de imagen-tiempo; segundo, en qué medida en *Cantar* se articula, a través de la mística y del barroco colonial, un discurso de apoyo a la hispanidad, es decir, una visión coherente y celebratoria sobre el papel del catolicismo y, por extensión, la conquista española en México. Se termina argumentando que una interpretación en este sentido explica que la película fuera vista con buenos ojos por el franquismo e invitada a presentarse fuera de concurso en el Festival de Cine de San Sebastián de 1959.

Palabras clave
Manuel Altolaguirre; *Cantar de los cantares*; Barroco colonial; Mística; Festival Internacional de Cine de San Sebastián; Hispanidad; Cine del exilio republicano español; Imagen-tiempo.

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