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TWO DIFFERENT LOOKS AT THE PAST:
THE REPRESENTATION OF HISTORY IN *THE MISSION* AND *BLACK ROBE*

MARIA TERESA COLLARES

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José Luiz Meurer
Coordenador

BANCA EXAMINADORA:

Anelise Reich Corseuil
Orientadora e Presidente

Fernando Simão Vugman

José Gatti

Florianópolis, 26 de maio de 2006.

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ABSTRACT

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MARIA TERESA COLLARES

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Supervising Professor: Anelise Reich Corseuil

In this research, I investigate the differences between the films *The Mission* and *Black Robe* focusing in their representation of history. I analyze those films drawing mainly on the concepts of the classic realist and revolutionary texts formulated by MacCabe, on White's discussion about fictional accounts of history, on the definition of the historical fiction film genre by Grindon, and on Sobchack's phenomenology of the epic. The importance of the research is based on the idea that each representation of history implies a particular meaning, that is, a particular way to see the present and how it is influenced by the past. The thesis presents a theoretical introductory chapter, two separate chapters with a close analysis of each film separately and, afterwards, a comparison of the results. My thesis is that *The Mission* is a progressive film that stems from the epic and presents a distinction between fictional and historical elements. Moreover, it proposes a more universal historical argument. *Black Robe*, on the other hand, is a revolutionary film that focuses on detail and represents the historical event as analogous to a trauma. Furthermore, it invites the spectator to look at the specificities of the situation it narrates.

RESUMO

DOIS OLHARES DIFERENTES SOBRE O PASSADO:
A REPRESENTAÇÃO DA HISTÓRIA EM A MISSÃO E HÁBITO NEGRO

MARIA TERESA COLLARES

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Professora Supervisora: Anelise Reich corseuil

Esta pesquisa investiga as diferenças entre os filmes *A Missão* e *Hábito Negro*, focando em como cada um deles representa a história. A análise se baseia, principalmente, nos conceitos de texto realista clássico e revolucionário formulada por MacCabe, na discussão de White sobre relatos ficcionais de eventos históricos, na definição do gênero de filmes ficcionais históricos de Grindon e na fenomenologia do épico desenvolvida por Sobchack. A importância da pesquisa está calcada na ideia de que a cada representação da história corresponde um sentido, ou seja, uma maneira diferente de ver o presente e como ele é influenciado pelo passado. A dissertação apresenta um capítulo introdutório teórico, dois capítulos com uma análise cuidadosa de cada filme separadamente e, após isso, a comparação dos resultados. A tese é que *A Missão* se trata de um filme progressista que tem suas origens no épico e apresenta distinção entre elementos ficcionais e históricos. Além disso, propõe um argumento histórico universal. Já *Hábito Negro* trata-se de um filme revolucionário que foca nos detalhes e representa o evento histórico à semelhança de um trauma. Além do mais, convida o/a espectador/a a olhar para as especificidades da situação que narra.

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INTRODUCTION

When analyzing the films *The Mission* (Roland Joffé, 1986) and *Black Robe* (Bruce Beresford, 1991) the similarities become clear and the differences, although very striking, are much more difficult to define. Both films deal with the Jesuits' enterprise among the Native Americans in their civilizing missions. At the same time that both films present as their main character a Jesuit missionary, they also denounce the impotence of the Native Americans against the European process of civilization as massive invasion. Both films claim to be true to historical fact. Why are they so different, then? Why does the spectator, as I ponder about my feelings, leave the cinema with such different feelings and thoughts about each of these films?

A tentative answer could be that *The Mission* is an epic, which shows a big spectacle – armies and waterfalls, majestic nature, and a hero. Even if that is true, this form has implications that are important to discuss, such as the reason why the hero is so appealing to the viewer. In relation to *Black Robe*, many issues also deserve attention. If the film does not present a hero, for instance, it is important to investigate the meaning of this choice. Moreover, if both films claim to represent a real historical fact, is one of them being more real than the other? What would that mean? These are some of the questions that aroused my interest as a spectator and a film scholar after watching the films. With the purpose of clarifying some of those questions I will analyze *The Mission* and *Black Robe* in relation to Colin MacCabe's definition of classic realist and revolutionary texts, to Hayden White's and Leger Grindon's ideas about the validity of fiction as an account of history, and, finally, to Vivian Sobchack description of the classical epic.

The importance of MacCabe's theory on the classic realist and the revolutionary texts for my research is that it deals with the different ways through which fictional works

attempt to represent reality and the consequences for the spectator. Since its first productions, film has been associated with its potential to represent the real. The debate on film realism is partly due to the fact that the cinematic apparatus has, since its conception, been associated with its potential to reproduce reality in visual terms. And its technical advancements have always come to improve the impression of reality, with the addition of color, stereo sound, use of digitalized image and many other associated devices. On the other hand, this same apparatus involves also an elaborate process of mediation, which includes point of view, editing, and selection of objects for the *mise-en-scène*, until the film is finally shown to the viewer. However, most films do not allow the spectator to perceive director's and film crew's process of mediation and creation. And more rare are films that allow the viewer to make the decisions themselves. Films that call attention to their own language are defined as metadiscursive films. As Colin MacCabe points out, the films traditionally called realists are still the most popular ones ("Theory and Film" 179). Thus, the importance of the concept of realist film and its consequences for the spectator.

In the text "Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses", MacCabe proposes a definition of the classic realist text based on its form rather than subject matter. According to him, the classic realist text is defined as the one in which the narrative discourse appears in a privileged position in relation to other discourses in the text. For example, if the discourses of two characters are contradictory, the narrative discourse will show us which one is right through the words of the narrator or the images on the screen – MacCabe understands filmic discourse as the possible combinations of words and images on which depend the positions allocated to the spectator ("Theory and Film" 221). The narrative discourse cannot be questioned, inconsistent, and contradictory. Although narrative discourse hides its own articulatory status, it is in relation to it that the other

discourses, such as characters' dialogues, can be measured and judged according to an empirical idea of truth. For MacCabe, this dominant discourse, which serves as a parameter for the others, can be accomplished in cinema by the narration of events that the camera shows us. The definition of the classic realist text given by MacCabe entails two essential features:

1. The classic realist text cannot deal with the real as contradictory.
2. In a reciprocal movement the classic realist text ensures the position of the subject in a relation of dominant specularity. ("Realism and the Cinema" 221)

The impossibility to see/show reality as contradictory comes, according to MacCabe, from the fact that the narration in the classic realist text acquires its dominance from the position of knowledge which is taken up by the camera in the cinema – reality is the way the camera *shows* and we *see* it. He reminds us that it is this knowledge that makes the story possible in the classic realist text, as we see in Hollywood style of narration: the spectator begins the story with a "lack of knowledge," the "truth" is slowly revealed throughout the film, and total "knowledge is guaranteed at the end of the story" (311). While the discourses of different characters can be questioned, the dominant discourse of the narration is decisive. This structure, for MacCabe, places the spectator in a position of specularity in which "the only problem which reality poses is to go and look and see what *things* there *are*" (221). Hiding the operations involved in the making of the dominant discourse – which culminates in the 'transparency' that Hollywood classical style highly praises – guarantees for the spectator what seems to be a direct access to truth, and confers him/her a unity of position. MacCabe thus explains that the spectator becomes a subject who reads the objects as they are presented to him/her, so he/she is placed "outside any articulation" (227), which logically means also outside production. One of the consequences of the realist film is that it reinforces an idea of reality that is based on the ideological notion of the subject as well

as its illusory centrality, unity, and final knowledge in relation to the objects. First, the viewer does not produce any meaning, but accepts the meanings presented by the film as though they were produced by him/herself. And then, the text reinforces the idea that there is a final reality, a total truth, that reality and subject are not made of contradictions.

In his critique of MacCabe's theory (1994), Christopher Williams tries to deconstruct the main points of the classic realist text's definition. One of his arguments is that "MacCabe was simply wrong when he asserted that the narrative discourse is not present as a discourse or as articulation" (279). However, what MacCabe said is that the narrative discourse is present but tries to hide its articulatory status through techniques that aim at the so-called transparency. Williams also claims that what MacCabe points out as the equivalent to the narrative prose in the cinema is only *imagetrack*, but this is an oversimplification of MacCabe's concept of filmic discourse, which includes the possible combinations of words and images on which the positions allowed for the spectator depend. Another mistake that Williams tries to detect in MacCabe's theory is the confusion between the terms narrative and realism: "Narrative and realism are not coterminous. The mistake was to have collapsed them one into the other" (279). In this case, it was Williams' mistake. MacCabe never said that all kinds of narrative are realistic or can be defined as classic realist texts. He describes as classic realists texts a specific kind of text in which the narrative discourse dominates and serves as a parameter for the truth. But Williams goes on to argue that only because realism depends on certain conventions it does not provide a position of knowledge or specularly. His position is contrary to that of Arine Kirstein. Based on Trinh T. Minh-ha's critique of realism, she states that the realist style supposes a certain view upon life, a

view in which the world is seen as fixed, stable, and unchangeable. For her, as for MacCabe, the challenge to this view must pass through a change in the role of the spectator.

MacCabe goes beyond the definition of the classic realist text proposing its subdivision into reactionary and progressive. Moreover, he proposes another category of text, in opposition to the classic realist one, the revolutionary text. According to him, the reactionary text is the classic realist one that presents a dominant discourse that is also dominant in society (234): when the dominant discourse in the text contradicts the dominant discourses of the time, the text should be called progressive (225). Finally, a text is revolutionary only when it presents no dominant discourse (233). Then, there is not the handling of a ready-made knowledge to the spectator, but he/she has to produce a meaning from the contradictions – and contradictory discourse – that the film offers. MacCabe regards this kind of text as revolutionary because it disrupts ideological notions, and subsequent positions, of subject/object. Drawing on Terry Eagleton's discussion about the workings definitions of ideology, in this research the term will be understood as a kind of collective symbolic self-expression that attends to the promotion and legitimating of the interests of a specific, socially significant, group or class, which may or may not be dominant, in the face of opposing interests. If ideology, here, can be seen as "a discursive field in which self-promoting social powers conflict and collide over questions central to the reproduction of social power as a whole" (29), it can be assumed that it is a peculiarly action-oriented discourse, which has a ring of opportunism about it. However, this definition does not imply whether the ideas and beliefs of the specific group or class, called ideology, are either true or false.

To investigate if a text is a classic realist one – if its discourse presents a classic structure – and can be further analyzed as reactionary or progressive, a sound parameter, suggested by MacCabe himself, is to see whether they conform to the features of the classic Hollywood style, as described in “The Classical Hollywood Style, 1917-60” by David Bordwell. He identifies in the films that follow the classical style, three levels of generality:

1. The use of technical elements such as three-point lighting, continuity editing, movie music, centered framing, dissolves, 180° rule, whip-pan, wipes, etc. (6);
2. The systems of narrative logic, cinematic time, and cinematic space that define functions and relations for the technical devices. For instance, the cut is usually employed to link scenes in a way that implies continuity of space and time, if a lapse occurs between scenes, there must be a clue such as a dissolve or a swish-pan to warn the spectator. It is important to note that “a given device may work within any or all these systems, depending on the function that the system assigns the device” (6);
3. The subordination of time and space to narrative logic, “even if the individual device or system varied from normal usage” (6).

In the third level, the intersection between MacCabe’s definition of the classic realist text and Bordwell’s description of the classical Hollywood style becomes particularly clear, as we notice the privileged position of the narrative instance despite all efforts to make it pass unnoticed, through the other levels of generality.

Films that conform to the classical style described by Bordwell, and that MacCabe regards as realists, can be divided into reactionary and progressive ones. The difference

pointed out by him is that in the reactionary films the dominant discourse is consonant with the discourse that is socially dominant. In progressive films, on the other hand, the dominant discourse defies the forces of power in society and presents another view of the world. Ryan and Kellner further discuss the importance of these two different modes of production, in aesthetic and political terms in *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Films*. One of their contributions is to exemplify the values and institutions that the dominant discourse in film help legitimate,

...individualism (with its emphasis on self-reliance and its distrust of government), capitalism (with its values of competition, upward mobility, and the survival of the fittest), patriarchy (with its privileging of men and its positioning of women in a secondary social role), racism (with its unequal partitioning of social power). (1)

Moreover, they establish a bridge between the use of determinate techniques and conventions by filmmakers and the ideas they can reinforce, if used in a reactionary way, or challenge, if used progressively. One instance would be the use of a camera technique, low angle, which, in films, suggests a natural hierarchy and can be used to emphasize certain social hierarchies and the power of certain individual as being ‘naturally’ superior or, on the other hand, to suggest that collective force – such as workers in a strike – are superior to individual power. An example given by Ryan and Kellner is the end of the film *Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974), when,

...a formulaic *film noir* crane longshot of the street, as the camera elevates (a reference to the opening sequence of another Welles noir film, *Touch of Evil*), shows the dark environment enveloping and overpowering the small human figures, powerless against the dominant social powers. (83)

According to MacCabe, both kinds of realist films, the reactionary and the progressive ones, do not challenge the notion of subject, which eventually determines the

way we see ourselves and the world. However, MacCabe states that there is the possibility to problematize the position of the subject within the classic realist text since “the dominant discourse can be subverted, brought into question” (“Realism and the Cinema” 227). According to him, it is possible to detect some moments of subversion, which he compares to verbal slips, “these *moments* are those elements which escape the control of the dominant discourse in the same way as a neurotic symptom or a verbal slip attest to the lack of control of the conscious subject” (227). And these moments are also noticed by Ryan and Kellner who claim that, “even conservative films... can yield socially critical insights” (14). Some critics, such as Robin Wood, believe that genre films are inherently riddled with hopeless contradictions and irresolvable tensions. According to Wood, a genre is ideologically pure only in its simplest, most archetypal form. As soon as it begins to develop, it reveals unsolvable ideological oppositions such as nature versus progress or ideal female versus erotic woman. However, in the end, the realist text is paralyzed by the presence of the dominant discourse already decided for the spectator, who must ‘read’ it. That is why, although Ryan and Kellner argue for the effectiveness of the progressive film to reach the audience and make them question conservative values, they foreground the possibility and the importance of another kind of film, with some other form. As they say,

Form, or means of representation, as much as the content of the film, needs to be transformed because the prevailing patterns of thought, perception, and behavior that help sustain capitalism and patriarchy are determined, we would argue, by representations, the dominant forms or modes through which people experience the world (...) the development of socialism necessitates different cultural representations, different forms or ways of constructing the world and a sense of one’s place in it (...) the political struggle between Left and Right comes down to a contest over the shape of life, the form it will take. (267)

The question raised by MacCabe is if this other form could be possible. And his answer is positive. He comes up with the idea of the “revolutionary” text, which “rather than the simple subversion of the subject or the representation of different (and correct) identities” would present “the displacement of the subject within ideology – a different constitution of the subject” (“Realism and the Cinema” 230). This revolutionary practice derives, according to MacCabe, from Brecht’s theory and practice and it is “characterised by its ability to actually work on and transform the very form of ideology – to change the position of the subject within ideology” (232). The revolutionary film presents no dominant discourse; the narrative is not privileged over the characters. Instead, it presents contradictory discourses and it depends on the spectator to produce a meaning for the film. Thus, the spectator is inserted in the process of production and there is not only “a different representation for the subject but a different set of relations to both the fictional material and ‘reality’” (233). The examples he gives are *Kuhle Wampe* (Dudow, 1931) and *Tout va bien* (Godard-Gorin, 1972).

The way in which a film represents reality is inherently riddled with ideological connotation. By the same token, history is a construction based on values and assumptions. Rosenstone, writing about the historical film, states that “history is never a mirror but a construction, congeries of data pulled together or ‘constituted’ by some larger project or vision or theory that may not be articulated but is nonetheless embedded in the particular way history is practiced” (49). Hence, reality and history represented in a film bear witness to its underlying values. Hayden White, in *The Content of the Form*, identifies two different concepts of history, history as beautiful and history as the sublime. The first concept implies a vision of history as owing a unity, which makes it understandable. Thus, any

confusion is seen as a superficial phenomenon, produced by a lack in the documents' sources or mistakes in the order of the archives, since history makes sense. The second concept, history as sublime, implies a vision of history as chaos, confusion, and anarchy. The danger is that, as it makes no sense, it may accept whatever meaning one imposes upon it. According to White, the process of disciplinarization of the historical studies consisted in a series of demarcations of what history should not be, what should be repressed (61). In this process, the concept of history as sublime was marked out, as the utopic thinking in general. By the same token, the establishment of certain values and attitudes as orthodox made of history a repository of the kind of facts that could serve as subject of those disciplines which came to de-ideologize the thought men, society, and culture in the end of the nineteenth century. The effort to distinguish history from fiction because it represented real events and should contribute to the knowledge about the real world, made of imagination a faculty in need of disciplinarization inside historical studies. However, imagination, exactly in the sense that it is used to characterize the doings of the poet or the novelist, is what operates in the last stage of the historian's work, when he must compose an account to present his/her findings. Thus, the judgment of what is acceptable, in this aspect, is aesthetic. Moreover, the choice of how historical reality should and should not be seen, brings with it an ideological component. White states that, if, on the one hand, it is possible to produce a knowledge which is not associated with any specific political program, any knowledge produced in the social and human sciences can be of use to a particular ideology. This is remarkable about the historical knowledge that appears in the form of the conventional narrative associated with the nineteenth-century notion of realism (81), which MacCabe defines as classic realist text. While MacCabe discusses the representation of reality in literature and cinema, Hayden White, in "The Modernist Event,"

focuses on the representation of history through fictional accounts. He situates the origins of the historical fiction film in the nineteenth-century historical novel. According to White, the nineteenth-century historical novel mixed an “‘imaginary’ tale of romance and a set of ‘real’ historical events” (18). The blend had the intended effect of summing up the attractions from both sides, the “concreteness of reality” and the “‘magical’ aura peculiar to the romance” (18). The reader should know how to distinguish between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’, so that the exact effect was reached. But the new genres – such as infotainment, fiction, and other genres that mix fictional and historical elements – that deal with historical phenomena have been dissolving this distinction between the real and the imaginary. In White’s words, “Everything is presented as if it were of the same ontological order, both real and imaginary – realistically imaginary or imaginarily real, with the result that the referential function of the images of events is etiolated” (19). Thus, there is no more “dominant discourse” – to remember MacCabe’s definition – in relation to which the truth can be verified. White argues for the adequacy of these new techniques particularly in order to represent the “events of the past that are supposed to be crucial to the development of the community’s identity” (32). A historical event can no longer be observable, thus it cannot serve as an object of a respectable scientific knowledge, and hence it is totally acceptable, according to White, to try to explain it by narrativizing it. However, when you narrativize, you assign a meaning and take from the spectator – and the community – the possibility to feel and reflect about the event. He writes,

Modernist techniques of representation provide the possibility of de-fetishizing both events and the fantasy accounts of them which deny the threat they pose, in the very process of pretending to represent them realistically. This de-fetishizing can then clear the way for that process of mourning which alone can relieve the ‘burden of history’ and make a more, if not totally, realistic perception of current problems possible. (32)

Unlike the possibilities suggested by White, when one transforms such an important and not understandable – at least not easily – event, such as the Holocaust or Gandhi’s assassination, in a story that provides one explanation for it, no matter how faithful to historical evidence it is, you are not taking into account the contradictory and loose aspects of reality. It is exactly the absence of those aspects that will prevent the “psychic mastery” of historical events, as White exemplifies talking about the Holocaust,

By making the Holocaust into the subject matter of a narrative, it becomes a story which, by its possible ‘humanization’ of the perpetrators, might ‘enable’ the event – render it fit therefore for investment by fantasies of ‘intactness,’ ‘wholeness,’ and ‘health’ which the very occurrence of the event *denies*.(34)

Summing up, both MacCabe and White describe non-classical alternatives of representation as ways to allow the participation of the reader/spectator in the production – or its impossibility – of meaning. According to them those alternatives are more similar to ‘real’ life, full of gaps and contradictions, than classic realism itself. However, it must be noted that the importance of the classic realist text cannot be denied even because it cannot escape those gaps and contradictions in its very texture.

In this research, I will investigate if the films *The Mission* and *Black Robe* present a dominant discourse and if they present moments of subversion in their texts. Another possibility that these films suggest is that they cannot be contained into these categories – progressive and revolutionary – and extrapolate the boundaries between them, showing instances of more than one of the classifications proposed by MacCabe. Their differences in relation to the discourses and the consequences of those differences can be, in principle, analyzed more freely since both films deal with a similar subject matter and can be defined as historical films. *The Mission* tells a story about the Jesuitical missions among the

Guaranis in South America, located in the border between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. *Black Robe* narrates the efforts to found a Jesuitical mission among the Huronians and Iroquois in a region that is, nowadays, the French part of Canada.

Since both films represent historical events through a fictional account, I will define them as historical fiction films. Furthermore, these films have already been defined as historical films by critics and general audiences. According to Steve Neale, “particular genres can be characterized not as the only genres in which given elements, devices, and features occur, but as the ones in which they play an overall organizing role” (174). This means that a film may present characteristics that are recurrent in many genres, but one of the genres will be more prominent since its specific features will be predominant in the film. And, according to Leger Grindon, the historical fiction film has an overall structure with the following dominant features:

1. “The selection of a historical episode” (5);
2. The intertwining of “the romance and the spectacle – the one emphasizing personal experience, the other, public life” (10);
3. The turn to history as “a useful device to speak for the present time” (1).

For Grindon, the central theme of the historical fiction film is the relationship of individual to society, embodied in the way each film relates romance and spectacle. If the film focuses on romance and on the individual characters involved in it, it “promotes a view in which personal motives and individual acts are the primary causal force behind the historical change” (25). If, on the other hand, it emphasizes the spectacle – period setting, mass action, the broad visual landscape – the film foregrounds extrapersonal motives as the forces that propel historical change. However, Vivian Sobchack, writing about the

Hollywood epic, points out other functions of the spectacle. According to Sobchack, it is the spectacle, characterized by extravagance, repetition, and excess, that makes history emerge in the consciousness of the audience. The excess “of sets, costumes, stars, and spectacle, of the money and labor that went into the making of such entertainment” (285) leads to a field of temporality in which the spectators of the capitalist society can recognize themselves as historical subjects. In Sobchack words,

The genre *formally repeats* the surge, splendor, and extravagance, the human labor and capital cost entailed by its narrative’s *historical content* in both its *production process* and its *modes of representation*. Through these means, the genre allegorically and carnally inscribes on the model spectator a sense and meaning of being in time and participating in human events in a manner and at a magnitude exceeding any individual temporal construction or appropriation – and, most important, in a manner and at a magnitude that is intelligible as excess to lived-body subjects in a historically specific consumer culture. (287)

Thus, the epic depends rather on generality, extravagance, and excess to build historical representation, than on accurate reconstruction. In this research, I will discuss the ways in which the films *The Mission* and *Black Robe* associate romance and spectacle, drawing on Grindon’s definition of the historical fiction film. But I will also analyze if some aspects of spectacle in those films can reveal characteristics that Sobchack detects in the Hollywood epic.

In both *The Mission* and *Black Robe*, the spectator is involved in the personal experience of the main character – Jesuit priests in both films – and witnesses the representation of a historical episode – the participation of the Catholic Church in the colonization of the American continent. Due to this similarity, these films have already been studied comparatively. In the article “Good Indian and Bad Indians: The European Perspective of Native Americans as depicted in ‘The Mission’ and ‘Black Robe’”, Paula

Motta-Santos compares the ways in which Native Americans from the South and North hemispheres are portrayed in each of these films. She argues that their different portrayals as well as their consequent classification into “good” or “bad” in the European imaginary “stem out not of the differences between the cultures/nations of the colonialists themselves, but mainly from the differences between those peoples that were subjected to white European domination” (186). Her point is that the Europeans tend to perceive as “bad Indians” the ones who are more attached to a region, thus having “a stronger notion of propriety,” the feeling that they own objects and, particularly, the land on which they live, as the Iroquois in *Black Robe*. This notion would represent a threat to the colonizers purpose. The “good Indians,” from the colonizers’ point of view, were the ones who did not fight for land with the Europeans (188), because they did not think they possessed the land they were using and living in, as the Guaranis in *The Mission*. This idea, according to Motta-Santos, has been perpetuated through the media. In her words, “this perception of good and bad Indians is still true nowadays, at least in Europe, where the main vehicle of acquaintance of Native American reality is still the cinema/TV” (190). Motta-Santos does not endorse the representation and classification of Native Americans into good or bad. However, she assumes that this classification has its origins in the cultural differences between Guaranis, Huronians, and Iroquois, that is, in reality itself and not in its representation in the cinema. Nonetheless, Motta-Santos offers a good insight of the role of the media in reproducing a certain ideology, which is conservative in her opinion.

In his article “*The Mission* and Historical Missions: Film and the Writing of History”, James Saeger reinforces the idea that the media has been responsible for perpetuating a conservative ideology, at least in relation to the Native Americans. However,

he opposes Motta-Santos when he shows that the portrayal of the Guaranis in the film *The Mission* does not correspond to the way they lived before and during the period of the Jesuitical missions among them. He states that the depictions of the Guaranis in this film, as in many others, constitute “insulting stereotypes of colonized peoples”(64). He based his research in documents that reveal the Guaranis differently from what the Europeans would consider good, remembering Motta-Santos definition. On the contrary, he describes them as “horticulturalists [sic] who supplemented garden plots with hunting”(67) and who were not nomad, although some moved among the settlements in which they lived (65). Moreover, he describes the ways in which “most Guaranis rejected Christianity for decades, often generations”(70) but allied with the Jesuits in order to protect their settlements from “epidemic diseases of European origin and the loss of men and women to Spanish employment”(65). Besides considering the film inaccurate, Saeger claims that *The Mission*, “like the history of missions by American academics before 1960, is about priests, imperial administrators, and settlers”(69). For those academics, the Guaranis did not have an opinion or their opinions were unimportant. And, still according to Saeger, *The Mission* duplicates the same ideology of those academics when it describes the history of the colonies as being decided among imperial administration, settlers, and the Church.

As Motta-Santos and Saeger, I believe that films present an important ideological effect upon the viewers, but, differently from them, I am not convinced that *The Mission* and *Black Robe* only reproduce a conservative ideology. First of all, because there is not only the representation of the Native Americans to be analyzed in these films. Only by a careful analysis of a number of elements in their content and form we can get to a better understanding of the overall ideology the films convey. Second, because we cannot reduce

the discussion about ideology to questions about accuracy of representation – i.e. if the film is or not true to historical fact – for even accurate representations carry on a message. Leger Grindon remembers, “the function of authenticity in historical fiction films is generally misunderstood as a disinterested reproduction of the past” (4). On the one hand, it must be clear that there is no such thing as examining the past for its own sake. Hayden White claimed that any historical account, fictional or not, represents history in one way or another that is, inevitably, ideologically-loaded (101). On the other hand, if something has changed from historical accounts to its representation in filmic production – as Saeger points out in *The Mission* – it is important to investigate the meanings and results of this change. For these reasons, I will compare these two films in terms of their conformity or challenge to realist conventions and their possible consequences for one’s understanding of the films.

The first chapter of this thesis is dedicated to the discussion of the film *The Mission*. I investigate if its discourse can be regarded as a progressive one, if it presents moments of subversion, and the relation between romance and spectacle in the film. In the second chapter, I analyze the film *Black Robe* and discuss whether it is a progressive film that presents moments of subversion or if there is the possibility to find revolutionary aspects in it as well as the way it deals with romance and spectacle. And, in the concluding remarks, I readdress some important points of the discussion, comparing and contrasting the analyses of the films.

CHAPTER 1:

THE MISSION, PROGRESSIVE AND SPECTACULAR

The Mission's director, Roland Joffé, who came from the theater and also directed TV series, made his debut in the cinema in 1984, directing *The Killing Fields*. This drama set in Cambodia already revealed Joffé's interest in the fate of individuals subject to forces beyond their control. *The Killing Fields* received seven Oscar nominations from which it won three: Best Supporting Actor, Best Cinematography, and Best Editing. *The Mission*, his second film, repeated the success of his first work in the cinema, winning the Oscar for Best Cinematography and the Palme d'Or at Cannes.

A first view of the film *The Mission* can make us think that it totally conforms to the codes of the classical Hollywood style. As Corseuil points out,

Roland Joffé's *The Mission* renders the events in a naturalistic manner, that is, the codes of the genre are never exposed or denaturalized – as if the rendering of the events through the filmic images were as close as possible to the real facts (181)

This historical film claims to be true to historical fact and its naturalistic treatment of the subject is in accordance with its purported truthfulness. The costumes were carefully designed according to the period, the location as near as possible to where the historical event took place, replicas of historical buildings were built. Moreover, the sequence of events follows the causal chain, without distortions or disruptions that could complicate the understanding of the story. However, Corseuil shows that a closer look upon the film can reveal its contemporaneity through an allegorical reading¹. By the same token, I will show in a closer analysis of the film that not all of its scenes and meanings can be seen as

¹ According to Corseuil, a closer reading of *The Mission* suggests its contemporaneity in the movement of approximating the Jesuits from the Theologians of Liberation. Thus, the film allegorically addresses the present struggle of the forces of liberal capital and the third world.

naturalistic. As MacCabe indicates, there is the “possibility of moments within a classic realist text...which escape the control of the dominant discourse in the same way as a neurotic symptom or a verbal slip attest to the lack of control of the conscious subject” (“Realism and the Cinema” 227). And, in *The Mission*, we can see those moments of subversion punctuating the film, thus, attesting to its resistance to be contained by its own dominant discourse. One of the most remarkable examples is the sequence that precedes the flagrant of the adulterers by Rodrigo. The shots of Rodrigo’s face are intertwined with shots of his brother looking for his fiancée in the middle of a procession, resembling a crosscutting, which follows the action of the different characters. Soon, however, the brother and the fiancée disappear and we are left with the shots of Rodrigo’s face and the shots of the crazy procession mixed with carnival and bullfight that proceeds as the night falls. This sequence of parallel editing is more related to the inner time and feelings of Rodrigo than to the rest of the narrative and involves the spectator in an oniric atmosphere. Nonetheless, one can say that this sequence is detached from the rest of the film in which a logical narrative discourse is predominant.

The Mission begins with a written warning to the spectator saying that its story is based on true facts. This self-conscious narration, generically and realistically motivated, is quickly followed by a scene in which the priest Altimirano dictates a letter to a superior, telling that he had accomplished his task in relation to the Jesuitical missions, as “the Indians are free to be enslaved”. This scene shows compositional, generic, and realistic motivation to a relatively “knowledgeable and communicative” (“The Classical Hollywood Style” 25) narration. The images of the writing of the letter are intertwined with shots of the Guarani. These shots become longer and longer until they are not interrupted anymore and we only hear the text of the letter. Before long, the voice over disappears and the images

are let to speak for themselves. After the credits, the story develops mostly through characters interaction and through the images. The voice of the priest/narrator appears again at turning points, four times, with only small comments, particularly at the end of the film when, in a circular movement, we see again the images of the writing of the letter. After the story finishes, there is another written message to the spectator saying that there are still Indians who fight, in other ways, for their dignity and there are still Jesuits who try to help them. This movement of narration – beginning self-conscious and restricted to the point of view of one character, then becoming omniscient and unself-conscious, regaining self-consciousness at the end of the film – is typical of the classical Hollywood style as an attempt to involve spectators in the narrative without calling attention to its medium. According to Bordwell,

In the classical film, the narration is omniscient, but it lets that omniscience come forward more at some points than at others. These fluctuations are systematic. In the opening passages of the film, the narration is moderately self-conscious and overtly suppressive. As the film proceeds, the narration becomes less self-conscious and more communicative. The exceptions to these tendencies are strictly codified. The end of the film may quickly reassert the narration's omniscience and self-consciousness. (25)

The same attempt to involve the spectators with the narrative without calling attention to its artifice can be detected in the presentation of the credits after the action has already begun. In *The Mission*, the credits' sequence informs us the status of the character performed by each actor through the order in which the actor's name is presented on the credits and the size of the letters, thus, conforming to Bordwell's observation that the credits "will certainly introduce the film's narrative hierarchy. Protagonist, secondary protagonist,

opponents, and other major characters will be denoted by the order, size, and time onscreen of various actors' names" (25).

Nonetheless, it is from this opening sequence that an important departure from the classical Hollywood style will be developed. According to Bordwell and Thompson, "a narrative begins with one situation; a series of changes occurs according to a pattern of cause and effect; finally a new situation arises that brings about the end of the narrative" (90). In *The Mission*, however, the narrative begins and ends with exactly the same situation: the destruction of the missions, the killing of many Guaranis, and the end of the Jesuits' dream. This is a subversion that traverses the story, threatens the whole narrative, and is finally fulfilled at the end of the film. Nothing could stop it, not even the heroes of the film. Despite the initial sequence of the film, which informs the spectators about the tragic destiny of the Guaranis, the audience cannot resist the feeling of wanting and even expecting that the heroes will save at least some of the Native Americans who found shelter in the missions. After all, the classical film shows the main character pursuing a goal, and the spectator, usually unaware of the resolution, cheers this character in direction to her/his final destiny. But the ghost of the revealed tragedy hangs over the heads of the spectators throughout *The Mission*, creating an odd feeling of uselessness mixed to the unavoidable expectation. This feeling persists until the final defeat of the heroes.

The characters have an important role and a well-defined function in the classical Hollywood style. According to Bordwell, "psychological causality, presented through defined characters acting to achieve announced goals, gives the classical film its characteristic progression" (17). To be in accordance with the classical conventions, first of all the characters must have clearly identified and consistent traits (13), which are already presented in their initial appearance and confirmed throughout the film (15). Second, the

agency of the character must be reinforced, that is, the conflict of the story is the result of obstacles to the desire of the characters (16) and the film must show them trying to overcome those obstacles until the final resolution, which must be the result of the characters' actions and not of impersonal causes (13). In *The Mission*, the initial appearance of the two main characters presents their most salient traits, which are eventually going to be confirmed. Father Gabriel (Jeremy Irons) appears as a calm, peaceful, and religious, though an obstinate Jesuit, who is going to insist on the conversion of the Guaranis who already killed a missionary. And, in the end of the film, Father Gabriel dies with a cross in his hands, while praying and preaching to the converted Native Americans. Rodrigo Mendoza (Robert De Niro) is initially presented as a strong, violent, and passionate man with a sword in his hands. And, although he repents from his crimes to become a Jesuit, he dies while passionately defending the Guaranis with the same guns that he carried in the beginning of the story. In relation to the characters' agency, however, *The Mission* contradicts the classical Hollywood style. Both Father Gabriel and Rodrigo achieve part of their goals – the first founds a mission and converts a good number of Guaranis while the latter pays for the crime of killing his brother and finds a good reason to live again – but they do not succeed in their common and most important objective: to preserve the mission of San Carlos and to protect the Guaranis who live there. In fact, they even lose their lives trying to do so. More importantly, their failure is not the consequence of some error they have made, but is presented as the conjunction of historical powerful forces that are beyond their reach, such as religious, economic, and political ones.

According to Bordwell and Thompson, in the classical Hollywood style, action must be the result of the characters' agency,

...action will spring primarily from individual characters as causal agents. Natural causes (floods, earthquakes) or societal causes (institutions, wars, economic depressions) may serve as catalysts or preconditions for the action, but the narrative invariably centers on personal psychological causes: decisions, choices, and traits of character. (108)

The result is the reinforcement of the ideology of individualism, the idea that when a person is obstinate and makes ‘the right thing’, she/he is going to succeed, even though the conditions of life are not favorable. As Bordwell remarks, “it is easy to see in the goal-oriented protagonist a reflection of an ideology of American individualism and enterprise” (16). Thus, when *The Mission* shows institutions as stronger than individuals, it is clearly being a progressive film, as defined by MacCabe, since its dominant discourse goes against individualism and capitalism, which are the values that the dominant discourse in most of the classic films reinforces. In fact, the film reveals how capitalism – in its embryonic stage – could destroy nature, peoples, and peaceful enterprises that intervene in its mechanism of gathering more and more wealth in the hands of the powerful. Moreover, it denounces the uselessness of individual and even small groups’ efforts against the institutions that own the power.

Furthermore, when analyzing the scenes of nature, we notice that the dominant discourse cannot hold itself together and be totally coherent throughout the whole film. The moments of lapses and slips can be seen in the contradiction between the sequences that show a peaceful and a threatening nature. The scenes that show nature in all its magnificence and turbulence reveal a remarkable difference from the usual principles of space in the classical style, that are aimed at the personalization of space, to the frequent and decentered long-shots in *The Mission*. Those shots of great waterfalls, heavy rain, or high cliffs usually show a human figure in small scale in the border of the frame, thus, this figures contrast with the grandeur of nature, accompanied by a majestic soundtrack. Those

long-shots of nature depersonalize space, achieving an effect contrary to that aimed for space in the Hollywood style (54), particularly because they are, most of the times, immediately followed by events in the story where the characters feel the force of oppressive forces such as the State and the Church. In these cases we can say that the shots act as an introduction and a commentary to following sequences, thus reinforcing the role of the impersonal causes in the development of the narrative. An example is a scene where a Guarani and her baby suffer both the effects of the Portuguese army and the heavy merciless rain. Contradictorily, this very nature is portrayed, in other scenes, as a “Garden of Eden”, as Altimirano describes when going up the river to the mission of San Carlos. This idyllic view of nature appears in scenes that show the Native Americans living peacefully in their environment and, frequently, the Jesuits, as well as the novelties they bring and teach, are shown being accepted and well adapted to this environment and way of life. These sequences are also accompanied by a calm soundtrack, which intensifies the idea of peacefulness and the perfect relationship between men and nature. It is exactly this contradiction that allows a position for the spectator. Instead of an already decided meaning, she/he will have to produce her/his own meanings from the contradictions that are being presented in the film.

Though punctuated by moments of subversion that tear up its cohesion, there is a dominant discourse, which plays an overall organizing role in *The Mission*. That is how MacCabe explain its mechanism,

Through the knowledge we gain from the narrative we can split the discourses of the various characters from their situation and compare what is said in these discourses with what has been revealed to us through narration. The camera shows us what happens – it tells the truth against which we can measure the discourses. (219)

In *The Mission*, we have many contradictions or conflicts among the discourses of Don Cabeza, Altimirano, Father Gabriel, and Rodrigo and we can compare what they say to the sequences that the camera shows us. When, for example, Don Cabeza says that he does not participate in the enslavement of the Guaranis, we know that he is lying, because we have seen him negotiating with Rodrigo himself when he was a slave trader in a previous scene. In addition to that, the film makes use of a whole range of classical conventions to involve the spectators in the narrative. One of these conventions is the recruitment of a famous star to play the main character (Gunning 220). Robert De Niro plays Rodrigo Mendoza, the main character of *The Mission*. Thus, the overall mise-en-scène is in accordance with the camera narration.

Other convention followed by the film is the presentation of two lines of action (Bordwell 16). In *The Mission*, the two lines of action, Rodrigo's life and the dislodgment of the Jesuitical missions, are correspondent with the recurring generic figures of the historical fiction film, which are, according to Grindon, "the romance and the spectacle – the one emphasizing personal experience; the other public life" (10). In the film, Rodrigo's experience, his unsuccessful relationship, his crime and repentance, and his discovery of a new reason to live are the second line of action – the romantic element of *The Mission*. The spectacle is embodied in the first line of action – the decision about the transference of the missions, the resistance of the Jesuits and Guaranis, and their final defeat by the Spanish and Portuguese armies. For Grindon, the relation between romance and spectacle shows the film's view of the forces behind historical change. In *The Mission*, the emphasis is totally placed on the spectacle, which foregrounds the power of extrapersonal forces, such as religious and economic ones, propelling history and supplanting individual will. This does

not mean that the film preaches accommodation, since its final message reinforces the importance of acts of resistance from the minorities, such as the Native Americans and the Jesuits who are left in the mission. In one of the last sequences, which shows the children who survived the genocide leaving the ruins of the mission, we see that they take with them the musical instruments that the Jesuits taught them how to play. By the same token, Father Altimirano says that the Jesuits who resisted leaving the missions and were killed will have their names and acts alive for a long time. Nonetheless, they were not capable of overcoming the obstacles of the extrapersonal forces, which are represented, in the war, by the spectacular army and crowds of slaves.

Other reading of the spectacle, that does not contradict the former one, is suggested by Sobchack's description of the classic Hollywood epic. According to her, the spectacle in the epic works as a vehicle to arouse historical consciousness in the spectator. Since the audience that the epic addresses is inserted in a particular consumer culture, it is through the idea that the historical content, the process of production, and the modes of representation of the narrative repeat each other in terms of the human labor and the cost they entail that the spectator is led to experience the feeling of "being in time" and "participating in human events" at a magnitude that extrapolates specific temporal construction and is intelligible to her/him (287). The field of temporality that the genre creates is a general one, not necessarily based in historical detail, but rather in extravagance, surge, splendor, and repetition of elements that make reference to historical setting as well as great and important events. Many aspects of the spectacle in *The Mission* can be described as splendorous, costly, and even excessive, although also historically accurate. That is the case of the architecture of the villa and of the missions that were

specially built for the film. Even a replica of the immense church of San Miguel was erected as part of the scenery. It is also true about the war sequences where the army attacks the missions, showing a profusion of ordered soldiers in their old-fashioned uniforms against disordered Guaranis in panic. And the scenes of nature, with all its grandeur in relation to the smallness of people, certainly contribute to enhance spectacle and make reference to a time when nature was more exuberant and abundant. Those spectacular aspects in *The Mission* help arouse in the spectator the feeling of historical experience that makes sense to persons who participate in a specific consumer society and contribute to a multileveled temporality, which the spectator can experience as subjectively transcendent and objectively significant. And the feeling of participating in history in a way that transcends the subject and has an intelligible meaning will be important to make the audience receptive for a universal reading of the argument of the film that is going to be discussed in the end of the chapter.

In relation to the languages spoken in the film, there are some interesting aspects that deserve to be mentioned here. Drawing from Bakhtin uses of the terms “poliglossia” and “heteroglossia” in relation to literature, José Gatti, in the article “Poliglossia in Women’s Films: *Carlota Joaquina* – Notes on the Presence of Languages in Film,” develops those concepts in relation to the cinema. According to Gatti, the convention in Hollywood films regarding the representation of different languages is the use of heteroglossia (the use of the same language with different accents) to stand for poliglossia (the use of different languages among different characters). In *The Mission*, this convention is avoided. Though the story takes place in South America, the Portuguese as well as the Spanish characters talk to each other using the English language fluently and accurately

(monoglossia standing for poliglossia) what can make an exotic place distant in time seem familiar, a political use of language discussed in Gatti's article. This particular use, in *The Mission*, will also facilitate the identification with the time and characters of the story and the universal reading of its argument. On the other hand, the Guaranis in the film really talk Guarani between each other and sometimes with the Jesuits (poliglossia), what reveals the care with the depiction of the Native Americans in order to avoid stereotypes.

In *The Mission*, motivation follows the codes and conventions of the classical style. Bordwell defines motivation as “the process by which a narrative justifies its story material and the plot's presentation of that story material” (19). He proposes the divisions of the sorts of motivation into compositional, realistic, and intertextual. As he says, “multiple motivation is one of the most characteristic ways that [sic] the classical film unifies itself” (19). In *The Mission*, the three forms of motivation are present and contribute to the unity of the film. One example of compositional motivation – certain elements must be present so that the story can continue (19) – is the adultery performed by Rodrigo's fiancée and his brother. It motivates Rodrigo's killing of his brother, which is a crime horrible enough to make him repent, suffer, and change his life. At the same time, the realistic motivation – justification of narrative elements on grounds of verisimilitude (19) – is tied to the compositional one, since the adultery, at that period, was a crime that demanded a duel, and someone who killed in a duel was not punished by law, thus, Rodrigo does not go to prison. The generic kind of intertextual motivation – narrative elements are justified on the grounds of the conventions of certain classes of art works (19) – also plays a part in this sequence. Since this is a historical film, the spectator is not surprised by what seems today an

exaggerated reaction to adultery, because that would be expected from a man in the seventeenth century.

Music is another important aspect in *The Mission* and it remains faithful to the codes of the classical Hollywood style, functioning as a narration element. Before important sequences, as the first appearance of Rodrigo, for example, the soundtrack, created by Ennio Morricone, anticipates the action. And when the sequences show a peaceful environment, the music highlights the pleasant atmosphere. Bordwell states that, “the music often expresses characters’ mental states” (34), and that is the case when Rodrigo is about to kill his brother. In addition to that, music is the means by which Father Gabriel first approached the Guaranis. Playing his flute, somehow like a snakes’ enchanter, he attracts the Guaranis and conquers their admiration. The blend of diegetic² and non-diegetic music in *The Mission* creates a perfect assistance for the narration and its hyperbolic, even exaggerated, tone help create the epic feeling and highlight the spectacular moments of the film. Moreover, some of the most important props in the film are musical instruments: Father Gabriel’s flute and the violin.

The use of props and motifs are also in unison with the classical Hollywood style, thus, helping to unify the narrative and to give strength to the dominance of its discourse. Bordwell states that “Hollywood cinema reinforces the individuality and consistency of each character by means of recurrent motifs...The motif may associate the character with an object or locale...For major characters, the motif serves to mark significant stages of the story action.” (15). That is what happens to Father Gabriel and his ostensorium, or with

² Diegetic music is the music that has its source within the diegetic world, the story. It can come, for example, from a radio or an instrument. It is opposed to non-diegetic music, which does not have its source within the story world.

Rodrigo and his sword. First, Rodrigo used the sword to enslave Guaranis and to kill his brother; then it was tied to him, with other pieces of armor, to be carried as a part of his penance; finally, he took the sword again to defend the Guaranis. Although we have already discussed how Rodrigo is not able to achieve his goal in the end of the film, he is, nonetheless, a goal-oriented hero, such as Bordwell defines Hollywood main characters (16), and the narrative accompanies him in his quest for a final resolution.

In short, *The Mission*, even though presenting some deviations and subversions, conforms to the codes of the classical Hollywood style. According to Bordwell, “in Hollywood cinema, a specific sort of narrative causality operates as the dominant, making temporal and spatial systems vehicles for it” (12). In *The Mission*, the narrative discourse is the dominant discourse, however, it is not in unison with the ideology typically reinforced by Hollywood films. Those values encompass, according to Robin Wood,

1. Capitalism, the right of ownership, private enterprise, personal initiative; the settling of the land...
- 4a. Nature as agrarianism; the virgin land as the Garden of Eden...
- 4b. Nature as the wilderness; the Indians, on whose subjugation civilization is built...
8. America as the land as anyone is or can be happy; hence the land where all problems are solvable within the existing system. (476-78)

The first concept pointed as dominant in Hollywood films by Wood is exactly the opposite of *The Mission*'s discourse. As suggested by Corseuil, “the narrative approximates the Jesuits to the Theologians of Liberation, suggesting a common cause in the formers' rejection of monopoly capitalism as an economic system and the latters' struggle against liberal capitalism” (182). At the same time that the film presents the Jesuits as heroes, both Jesuits and Guaranis are portrayed as victims of the religious and economic powers that dominate the colonial society. At a certain point in the narrative, the dialogue between Altimirano and the Portuguese administrator in the colonies suggests that the economic

success of the missions and the possibility of economic competition they represented were the causes for their destruction. Moreover, one of the Jesuits, Father Ibaye, describes how the profits of the missions' plantations were divided among the community saying that "this was the doctrine of the first Christians," in what could be seen as a defense of a communist ideal. Furthermore, the film claims to be inspired in the book *The Lost Paradise: The Jesuit Republic in South America*, by Philip Caraman. Although it is not faithful to details of the book, it presents a romanticized version of some of the events described in it, particularly in the thirteenth chapter, "The Guaranic War". And, above all, the film maintains the view of the author that the Jesuitical missions were a socialist lost paradise, as we can see in this quote from Caraman's book:

Cunninghame Graham's book still has value. He knew the Guarani, who were brought by the Jesuits from the forest into towns and for many years lived among them. Moreover he was nearer in time to the memory of the Jesuits than any other writer. 'I myself,' he writes in his Introduction, 'five and twenty years ago have often met in the deserted missions men who spoke regretfully of the Jesuit times, who cherished all the customs left by the company, and though they spoke at second hand, repeating stories they had heard in youth, kept the illusion that the missions in the Jesuits' time had been a paradise.' As one of the founders of the Labour party, Cunninghame Graham was attracted, not without reason, by what appeared to him the perfect harmony of the ideal socialist state. (13-14)

Regarding the concepts that Wood enlists about nature, we have seen that *The Mission* presents a contradiction between nature as power and danger – hostile to humans – and nature as a Garden of Eden – where the innocent live in peace. In this case, the dominant discourse of the narrative refuses to take sides. Thus, it cannot be said that it reinforces any concept, since it leaves the final decision for the spectators.

In relation to the assumption of "America as a place where everyone is or can be happy", there are two different points I would like to raise. The first is that *The Mission* clearly shows that not everyone can be happy within the existing system. On the contrary,

so that the powerful can be and continue to be happy a lot of people must suffer. The film clearly shows the struggle of a minority for some space, but eventually, no place is allowed for them within the prevailing system. The second point I would like to raise is that the America of the film is not exactly the United States of America; nonetheless, it does not exclude it. Corseuil writes that despite historians' agreement about the Guaranis' decisive role in the Guaranitic War, *The Mission* depicts the Jesuits as heroes. According to her, this permits an approximation of the Jesuits to the Theologians of Liberation, and makes possible for the film to present a more universal historical argument, which is the effort of the powerless and the minorities to overcome the established hierarchies of the State and the Church (185). Although the story presented in the film takes place in South America, its argument is universal and applies both to the relation between Latin American countries and United States or others as to the relation between powerless and powerful groups anywhere including the United States of America and Brazil.

SECOND CHAPTER:

DETAIL AND REVOLUTION IN *BLACK ROBE*

The Australian director Bruce Beresford started his career as the head of the British Film Institute Production Board, in London, and, back to Australia, played an instrumental part in initiating and supporting Australian New Wave cinema. In 1980, he directed '*Breaker' Morant*, which was nominated for Best Adapted Screenplay. In the United States, he directed, among others, *Tender Mercies* (1983), *Crimes of the Heart* (1986), and *Driving Miss Daisy's* (1989), which received the Oscar for Best Director and Best Film. *Black Robe*, released in 1991, was an Australian-Canadian production, which won the Genie Award.

The film *Black Robe* presents in its narration the typical movement of the classical Hollywood style – from self-consciousness to omniscient unself-consciousness and back to self-consciousness, omniscient at this time, at the end. The film begins with the credits sequence, which reveals self-consciousness from the part of the narration because it is a direct address to the audience (Bordwell 26). The credits already initiate the narration with the design of the letters indicating the period in which the story takes place and images of an old map of the American continent with drawings showing the colonizers and Native Americans along with the names of the actors ordered according to the importance of their character in the story. After the credits sequence, an intertitle presents the period and place of the story - Quebec, North America, 1634 - and the rest of the film shows what Bordwell calls "narration-through-character-interaction" (30), except for a written message at the end, which is generically motivated, as the film claims to portray historical facts. The message tells the spectator about the destiny of the mission and the christianized

Huronians: they were attacked and killed by the Iroquois fifteen years later, and the Jesuits went back to Quebec. The credits sequence plays with the expectations of the audience. Writing about narration in Hollywood epics, Sobchack states “maps often accompanied those historicizing voices – punctuating the text; simultaneously promising the viewer epic scope, empire building, and adventure; and signaling the pastness of the past and its safe history-book distance from the present” (281). By the same token, she writes about the design of the letters,

...at times, this temporal repetition is graphically introduced into the text – its often exotic presentation both invoking “the past” in visual onomatopoeic reference to antecedent forms of writing, to “original” documents, and claiming the anonymous authority that the written word has secured in our particular culture. (292)

In part, this expectation is matched, and I will not say fulfilled, by the film since it presents adventure, and it claims to be true to historical fact. However, the viewer who is led by the credit’s sequence to expect to watch a classic epic full of grandiosity will be totally frustrated. Drawing on Sobchack definition of the Hollywood epic, we can define *Black Robe* as the perfect anti-epic. According to Sobchack, the main characteristic of the classical epic is “not so much the narrative accounting of *specific historical events* as it is the narrative construction of *general historical eventfulness*” (286). This general idea of a historical important event in the past is built through repetition, exaggeration, costly production, “surge and splendour and extravagance” (302). On the other hand, this past is so general - it lacks detail and specificity - that it “creates the *general* possibility of recognizing oneself as a *historical subject* of a particular kind” (286), that is, the viewer can recognize her/himself in a kind of catharsis as a subject of the story and of history. *Black Robe*, on the contrary, shows a detailed past, in which characters are too human but with values that differ so much from our present days that it becomes difficult for the viewer to

identify with them. In a paradoxical movement, the film takes us so close to the characters that we are kept at distance. Moreover, there is no splendor in this past to which *Black Robe* takes us. The spectacle is not excessive or extravagant. It is closer to the non-splendorous features that Grindon lists in its description:

... The features of the spectacle are period setting – architecture, as in temple of Moloch in *Cabiria* (1914) and the gladiator school in *Spartacus* (1960), mass action (conquering armies, coronations, striking workers), and the broad visual landscape or “nature”, represented by the plague in *Monsieur Vincent* (1947), the sea and the shore in *The Vikings* (1958), and the desert in *Lawrence of Arabia*. (15-16)

The only spectacular images in *Black Robe*, as being majestic and full of grandeur, are the images of the landscape.

The representation of the historical past in *Black Robe* is detailed and rich. Totally different from the generalization that Sobchack detects in the epic, the reconstitution of the past in *Black Robe* appears in each small object of the mise-en-scene. At the same time, the event that is represented, the fight of the Jesuits - particularly of Father LaForgue - to convert the Huronians to Christianity, is devoid of any aura or grandiosity. Moreover, as the plot develops all the characters in the story become less heroic and more human.

Black Robe presents a plot divided into two interdependent lines of action pointed as typical of the classical film by Bordwell (16): in the first line of action there are the adventures of the Jesuit to arrive at the mission, in the second line of action, romantic love – romantic relationship between man and woman – is involved. Nonetheless, this romance is completely different from the classical model. It happens between a white European man and a Native American girl who have sex without being married and who leave together at the end of the story - the spectator is

left without a cue about their future, if they are going to constitute a family or to fall apart, while, according to Grindon, marriage is the chief goal of romance (10). The most interesting characteristic of the romance in *Black Robe* is the role of the woman. According to Bordwell, in the classical film, “character traits are often assigned along gender lines, giving male and female characters those qualities deemed ‘appropriate’ to their roles in romance” (16). Annuka, the Algonquian girl who lives a romance with the young Frenchman in *Black Robe*, does not behave appropriately at all. She is not the ideal female of the classical Hollywood style, described by Wood as “wife and mother, perfect companion, the endlessly dependable mainstay of hearth and home”, nor she fits in the role of her shadow, the erotic woman: “(adventuress, gambling lady, saloon ‘entertainer’), fascinating but dangerous, liable to betray the hero or turn into a black panther” (477).

Annuka is a young woman, almost a teenager, who respects the codes of her people, which are different from the white European ones. Although she does not like Father LaForgue and even suggests leaving him alone, she would never abandon her family and her tribe. Moreover, she, and her ability to use her sexuality, is the responsible for saving LaForgue and the others from torture and death. When a hostile tribe arrests the two Europeans, the Algonquian chief, and his children, Annuka attracts the enemy responsible for the night watch. When he is making sex to her, she stabs him and lets her father and the two Europeans free. So, her capacity to attract and betray works in favor of the main characters, in what can be seen as a subversion of the ideology of the classical films. Besides that, Wood lists among the values reinforced by the classical Hollywood cinema:

Marriage (legalized heterosexual monogamy) and family... (the homestead is built for the woman, whose function is to embody civilized values and guarantee their continuance through her children) and an extension of the ownership principle to personal relationships ('*My* house, *my* wife, *my* children') in a male-dominated society. (476)

First, as already mentioned, there is no reference to marriage in the film. Second, since the romance in *Black Robe* is between a European white man and a Native American woman, she does not embody civilized values. On the contrary, she represents the values of the Native Americans that the Europeans have difficulty to understand. The French young man shows better capacity to accept and adapt to the Native values; thus, he is portrayed as more apt to survive in the American continent. Finally, the ownership principle does apply to the relationship between Annuka and Daniel. Its principle would be better described as a deal, I agree to be with you while it pleases and favors me and vice-versa.

Daniel is a French young man who insists to go with LaForgue in his trip to the Huronian territory. He begins the trip as Father LaForgue's translator and defender among the Native Americans. But, as he gains familiarity with the Algonquians and with Annuka, he begins to adopt some of their ideas and way of living. When the Algonquians leave LaForgue to die alone, Daniel leaves with them. However, when they come to rescue the Jesuit and are arrested by the Iroquois, Daniel repents and asks for LaForgue's pardon. At the end, Daniel feels obliged to stay with LaForgue and to protect him, but *Black Robe*, as the Natives call LaForgue, releases Daniel from this task and allows him to leave with Annuka. In the beginning of the film, the relationship between LaForgue and Daniel suggested that *Black Robe* could be a "buddy film" where two male friends engage side by side in quests that lead them forward while women are only mediators that reassure the bond between

the male (Ryan and Kellner 151). But this hypothesis is discarded when Daniel's behavior makes him contrast with LaForgue's insistence on European values. Daniel, in opposition to LaForgue, shows an adaptability to the New World and its values that, besides making him more apt to survive there, calls into question LaForgue's beliefs and behavior. Furthermore, his relationship with Annuka, instead of functioning as a link between two men who desire the same woman, works as a separating vector between a priest and his possible apprentice. This separation happens because LaForgue does not accept desire as something natural, he even flagellates himself when he feels it, while Daniel accepts his own desire and decides to live it.

The main line of action in *Black Robe* revolves around the main character, Father LaForgue, and his quest to arrive at the Jesuitical mission in the Huronian territory. His initial appearance does not reveal much about him. We get to know that he is a Jesuit, uses a black robe, and seems to have a conviction in his ethics and in the Church. Later on, we discover that he is French; that his mother imagined that he was chosen by God to be a saint; that he came from a family of a good situation, social or financial. And that he firmly intended to save the souls of the pagans by converting them to Christianity. However, as the film develops, we see him becoming more and more doubtful about the need or meaning of the conversion of the Natives. Nonetheless, he persists on his task and succeeds in arriving at the recently found Jesuitical mission and converting the Huronians who live there. But there are some aspects of his achievement that do not fit the conventions of the classical Hollywood style: first, he achieves his goal not only because of his action, but also because of the Algonquians' help and of the many coincidences; second, as the story

develops LaForgue's belief in his goals becomes less and less firm and he goes on mechanically, as if he were merely not able to do something different; finally, the written message in the end of the film informs the audience that the conversion of the Huronians, LaForgue's goal, was exactly what led them to be killed by their enemies.

More than beginning to doubt the relevance of the baptism for the Native American, Father LaForgue begins to question the boundaries between dream and reality. Surrounded by the Algonquians, who believed that "the dream is more real than death, or a battle," facing a new world full of mist and mysteries to his mind, LaForgue cannot distinguish anymore between dream and reality, right and wrong, life and death. When he separates from Daniel and Annuka, he says, "What can we say to people who think that dreams are the real world and this world is an illusion? Perhaps they're right. No farewells, no greetings, no names. The forest speaks. The dead talk at night."

The film plays with the limits between dream and reality, when it makes Chomina's dream become true, and when LaForgue walks involved by the mist with the howling wind in his ears. LaForgue's flashbacks contribute to this atmosphere since the reality of the new world is so different from his past life in Europe that the contrast between them can create the feeling that one of them is not real, or both. When LaForgue sees Daniel having Sex with Annuka on the bush, for example, he remembers his meeting with a claimant in which he sat in a well-decorated room, between his mother and hers, while she played the flute totally covered by an embroidered gown.

Black Robe presents four flashbacks that are compositionally motivated as memories of the main character. According to Bordwell,

Classical flashbacks are motivated by character memory, but they do not function primarily to reveal character's traits...Character memory is simply a convenient immediate motivation for a shift in chronology; once the shift is accomplished, there are no constant cues to remind us that we are supposedly in someone's mind. In flashbacks, then, the narrating character executes the same fading movement that the narrator of the entire film does... Psychological causality thus permits the classical viewer to integrate the present with the past and to form clear cut hypotheses about future story events. (43)

The flashbacks in *Black Robe* contradict these conventions. They are totally subjective and, although they reveal reasons for some behaviors and especially feelings of the main character, they do not help us at all to make hypotheses about LaForgue's future actions. On the contrary, they contribute to show the confusion of the character when confronting his past experience with the reality of New France. In fact, these flashbacks highlight the contradictions, which undermine LaForgue's belief in the importance of achieving his goal.

It is interesting to notice that, in a subversion of the conventions of the classical Hollywood style, the images of the flashback are more clear and defined than the rest of the film. A disturbing effect is achieved by the use of light and sound in *Black Robe*. The film does not make use of three-point lighting. The images made during the day seem to be filmed only with natural light and the few night sequences seem to make no use of back or fill light. The sources of light are always realistically motivated – daylight, a bonfire, candles, and so forth. The oppressive effect created by this chiaroscuro is intensified by the sound of the wind, which becomes higher as LaForgue becomes more confuse. The mist that pervades the forest and that floats in the surface of the lake, as well as the white snow spread all around, contribute to create an oniric atmosphere in which reality and dream are alike. On the other hand, LaForgue's flashbacks are filmed in a totally different way, with the use of three-

point lighting, in clean spaces, and a clear sound. During these four brief moments, all the usual principles of the classical Hollywood style, that the viewer is already used to interpret as the normal image of a film, are respected. However, this represents an inversion of the classical style, in which memories and dreams can be diffuse so as to differentiate them from the appearance of reality that the rest of the film should have. Furthermore, The contrast in the use of light between the European and Canadian sequences can be suggestive of LaForgue's process of mental confusion as he becomes more and more involved with the American wilderness.

At the same time that the film plays with dream and reality, it plays with past and present. For the Native American, the dream is more real than everyday life – and death. For Father LaForgue, the past is also more real than the present. To the spectator, past and present, dream and reality are presented as contradictory and undecided. The Native Americans, for example, are shown as naive in scenes when they watch a clock as if it were an idol. They are shown as childish when they believe that the dead walk in the forest at night, or that LaForgue is a demon. They are shown as honored when they strive to keep a promise or to defend the family. On the other hand, they are portrayed as cruel, when they abandon Father LaForgue alone in the hostile forest or when they torture their enemies slowly until they die. The use of language enhances the contradictory depiction of the Native Americans. While the European characters speak English in the film, though they are in New France and almost all of them are from France, the Native Americans speak the language of the nation they belong to, and some of them know a bit of English. This polyglossia among the Native Americans contributes to avoid their depiction as uniform people. Another instance of contradiction is when Father LaForgue appears in one scene

trembling of fear because of the noises of the forest while in another scene he does not hesitate to defy the arrows to baptize a woman before she dies. Almost at the end of the film, in one of the most delicate scenes LaForgue prays on his knees before a crucified Christ and asks, “Father, why is it that Chomina will never be with you in Paradise and I will? ” This and many questions and contradictions in the film remain unanswered.

There is not, in *Black Robe*, a dominant discourse that can offer the viewer a parameter against which she/he can contrast and compare the different discourses of the characters in order to decide who is good, who is evil, who is right, who is wrong, what is the truth. That is a decision that will be left solely for the spectator. And that is what ultimately makes *Black Robe* a revolutionary film. Although the narrative consequently humanizes the ones involved in it, *Black Robe* does not present the kind of narrative that shows reality as a coherent and consistent whole impelled only by individual agency. Opposing the classical Hollywood style, *Black Robe* does not offer any explanation for the event it represents, hence it does not run the risk of providing the viewer the illusory “intellectual mastery” of the occurrence feared by White (32). The way is open for the viewer to feel and think and produce her/his own meaning.

CONCLUSION

Concluding this research, I will compare and contrast the main ideas that emerged in the analyses of *The Mission* and *Black Robe* in the light of MacCabe's, White's, Grindon's, and Sobchack's writings. The objective is to summarize the main differences and similarities between those films.

The Mission is a progressive film and, as such, although it presents disturbing moments of subversion, it brings a certainty about reality to the spectator. In its version of the past, the film clearly establishes who were the heroes, who were the villains, what is right, and what is wrong. The Jesuit missionaries, for example, are represented in the film as quite stable in their righteousness, in the certainty that they are doing the right thing and will go on and bear the consequences. The film points towards a direction to the spectator that creates a feeling of security: there is a need for more people to resist the status quo, and the Jesuitical missions are presented as a model for a different society, more just and tolerant. However, in many instances, *The Mission* oversteps the boundaries of the classic realist text and subverts it not only ideologically, as the progressive film that it is, but also in its form. In these moments, the position of the spectator as the subject who consumes a cultural product is rendered problematic both by the attack on capitalist ideology in which that spectator/consumer is inserted and by the subversion itself as a lapse, which bears witness to the false unity and stability of the concepts of subject and object. *Black Robe*, on the other hand, offers no certainty for the spectator. Its Jesuit missionary, for instance, is highly problematic. LaForgue is not sure about the necessity, legitimacy, or charity of the missionary effort. The spectator, likewise, is left in doubt about it. This revolutionary film presents reality as contradictory and unstable. It is the spectator who will decide what is

right or wrong, whether there is a villain or a hero. Each spectator will have to produce her/his own meaning from what is presented by the film plus her/his own experience. When describing the revolutionary text, MacCabe pointed out that the meaning assigned for a film will vary from one spectator to the other, and that is important to allow her/him a different relation to the fictional work, instead of the simple consumption (233).

Other difference between the films *The Mission* and *Black Robe* becomes clear when we take into account Hayden White's ideas about the representation of historical events. Drawing on his description, *The Mission* is nearer to the generic prototype of the historical film – the nineteenth-century historical novel – in that it depends upon the ability of the reader to distinguish between real and imaginary events (18). It is implied in the structure of the film that the elements related to romance, to the particular story of Rodrigo Mendoza, are fictional, while the elements related to the story of the Jesuitical missions are supposedly historical. Besides that, the film establishes a meaning to the event it fabulates. White defines meaning as “what the facts established about such events can possibly tell us about the nature of our own current social and cultural endowment and what attitude we ought to take with respect to them as we make plans for our own future” (21). In *The Mission* the meaning is presented through its universal historical argument, which shows the struggle of the Guaranis, as a group, within the capitalist system, against the established economic, political, and religious powers. The film *Black Robe* shows a different treatment of the historical event. The participation of the Jesuits in the colonization of the American Continent, as represented in *Black Robe*, resembles a trauma, to which is difficult to assign a definite meaning. According to White, traumatic events

...cannot be simply forgotten and put out of mind, but neither can be adequately remembered; which is to say, clearly and unambiguously identified as to their meaning and contextualized in the group's memory in such a way as to reduce the shadow they

cast over the group's capacities to go into its present and envision a future free of their debilitating effects. (20)

The meaning for the events represented in *Black Robe* will have to be produced and can change from spectator to spectator as well as it will probably vary from time to time. Although the meaning assigned to the events in *The Mission* can also present some variation, depending on the theoretical background used to approach it, for example, this variation will be much more restricted than the possibilities presented in *Black Robe* because the filmic discourse already points to a direction, while excluding others.

Regarding Leger Grindon's description of the historical fiction film, Both *The Mission* and *Black Robe* deal with the central theme of the genre, which is the relationship of the individual to its environment, nature and society. In *The Mission*, the frontier between romance and spectacle is very clear and correspondent to two interdependent lines of action, the personal and the historical. Furthermore, the focus is placed on the spectacle, the historical, which reveals a view of extrapersonal motives as the primary forces behind the historical change. As the film develops, its main character, Rodrigo, becomes less individualized and more stereotyped: without particular life or romance, only social preoccupations and heroic acts are left for him. Little by little, he begins to represent a class rather than an individual person. But it is exactly the heroism and self-sacrifice in him that makes of him a model to which the spectator can identify. In *Black Robe*, on the contrary, the human aspects of the characters are explored. Their conflicts are the focus of the film, particularly in regard to the main character, Father LaForgue. The images we see and the sounds we hear are closely related to his feeling, as the mist covering the places and the wind howling higher and higher as LaForgue becomes more confuse. Even the most intimate human physical necessities are depicted in the film, as the act of defecating.

However, the reality in which they are inserted, their ideas and values are so different from ours that the more the characters are revealed, the harder it becomes for the spectator to identify with them. It is as if the film performs a paradoxical movement, taking us so close to the characters that we are kept at distance. Nonetheless, the spectacle is also present in *Black Robe*, in the scenes of nature, portrayed in cold and luminous landscapes that contrast to the misty chiaroscuro that pervades the rest of the image, as though the only clarity or certainty could be found where the humans did not interfere yet. The film portrays the relationship of individuals among them and to society as extremely difficult and contradictory, particularly when there is the encounter of different sets of beliefs and values based on different historical backgrounds, as it was the case with the Europeans and Native Americans during the colonization process.

In relation to spectacle, there is a great difference between *The Mission* and *Black Robe*. Drawing on Sobchack's description of the Hollywood historical epic, we can say that *The Mission* stems from the epic, while *Black Robe* goes in the opposite direction. In *The Mission*, the costly production is evident in the settings and in the sequences full of extras. The splendor and extravagance are also present in the scenes of nature and in the remarkable soundtrack. Those elements are responsible for the construction of general historical eventfulness, rather than the account of specific historical events. The use of famous actors to play the main roles also contributes to create the general field of temporality. According to Sobchack, "stars are cast not *as* characters but *in* characters – as 'types' who, however physically particular and concrete, signify universal and general characteristics" (294). Thus, in a mimetic manner, the star, although her/his character may be overtly well constructed as De Niro's Rodrigo, represents not exactly the real historical figure but its real significance. The opening of a temporal field that creates the possibility

for the spectator to recognize himself as a historical subject and to see the historical figure as someone she/he could have been in the past contributes to the reading of the argument of the film as a universal one. It facilitates the transposing of the argument from the specific historical event the film narrates to contemporaneous situations, making possible, as suggested by Corseuil, a more universal reading of history (185). It is interesting to note, however, how all the excess and extravagance are centered upon a character, Rodrigo, who eventually cannot cope with the institutionalized forces that effectively hold the power. As Sobchack writes about *The Last Emperor*, “all the surge and splendor and extravagance of the historical epic cinema is paradoxically centered upon a historical figure – a ‘great man’—who seems to have little agency” (302). This movement is in accordance with the progressive discourse of the film, since the majority of the mainstream films reinforce the ideology of individualism and *The Mission*, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of cooperation and tolerance.

Black Robe does not explore a general idea of the historical past. On the contrary, it invests on the particularization of the historical event it narrates and of the characters involved in it. Besides the careful reconstruction of detailed sequences and characterization, the psychological features and reactions of specific characters, such as Chomima and LaFogue, are explored to such an extent that it becomes impossible to see them as stereotypes or to read them as the representatives of a class. It is also difficult for the spectator to identify with individuals who are inserted in a different time, with different values and backgrounds. Going in a direction opposite from *The Mission*, *Black Robe* proposes, rather than a more universal historical argument, a closer look at the specificities of each time and situation.

Far from closing the discussion, the aim of this research is to contribute to the continuing examination of historical representation in its different modes. The examination of the ways we represent our past is extremely important for it relates closely to the ways we envision our future.

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THE MISSION'S CREDITS

Director: Roland Joffé

Director of Photography: Chris Menges

Film Editor: Jim Clark

Producers: Fernando Ghia, David Puttnam

Associate Producer: Iain Smith

Production Designer: Stuart Craig

Screenwriter: Robert Bolt

Costume Designer: Enrico Sabbatini

Supervising Art Director: Norman Dome

Art Directors: George Richardson, John King

First Assistant Director: Bill Westley

Second Assistant Director: Gerry Toomey

Third Assistant Director: Uberto Pasolini

Make-up Supervisor: Tommie Manderson

Set Director: Jack Stephens

Special Effects: Peter Hutchinson

Stunt Coordinator: Vic Armstrong

Music Composed, Orchestrated, and Conducted by: Ennio Morricone

BLACK ROBE'S CREDITS

Director: Bruce Beresford

Director of Photography: Peter James

Film Editor: Tim Wellburn

Producers: Robert Lantos, Sue Milliken, Stéphane Reichel, Jake Eberts, Denis Heroux

Associate Producer: Eric Norlen

Production Designer: Herbert Pinter

Screenwriter: Brian Moore

Costume Designer: Renee April, John Hay

Art Director: Gavin Mitchell

First Assistant Director: Pedro Gandol

Make-up Supervisor: Linda Gill

Set Director: Réal Proulx

Special Effects: Louis Craiq

Stunt Coordinator: Minor Mustain

Music Composed, Orchestrated, and Conducted by: Georges Delerue