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**CONFLUENCES:
ESSAYS MAPPING THE
MANITOBA-SZEGED PARTNERSHIP**

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I.
CONFLUENCES

COLUMBUS & COMPANY: THE CONQUEST OF THE AMERICAS ACCORDING TO THE MOVIES

András Lénárt

Historical Films and Reality

Historical films reflect the mentality of a certain nation and society, showing specific attitudes towards the historical event depicted in the movie. Similar to the case of conventional historical sources it is essential for the researcher (and also for the viewer) to be able to approach the material with appropriate criticism and to decide whether the given audiovisual document holds any historical value. However, filmic stories cannot be treated as true reflections of the period and the events represented in these films are mere subjective interpretations of historical facts. Some historical films exaggerate the importance of certain details or figures, others treat real events quite freely, while a couple of filmmakers simply falsify facts.

According to the French film historian Marc Ferro, it is impossible to “write” history genuinely with films. The filmmaker, even if he aspires to be authentic, is forced to reinterpret the existing and codified visions of the historians, but he also adds his personal point of view to it. Nevertheless, this does not mean that films cannot help us in mapping the past, says Ferro (162–163). The personality, the political views, the knowledge, and the implicit or explicit intentions of the filmmaker, as well as the social and political circumstances of a given film, all have direct influence over the representation. The director sorts out, emphasizes, and conceals some fragments of history; therefore, it is indispensable to evaluate any film and to not accept unconditionally what we see on the screen. (It is a quite complex question whether representations of history should appear to be true.) Pierre Sorlin says that the screen does not show us the way the world is, but it displays what people think of the world in a certain age (33). This statement is also relevant to traditional historiography because historical films usually reflect the period when the film was shot and not the one that it represents. A film usually explains the prevailing attitude(s) towards the national or foreign history of a society, and it also shows us what the crew thought to be important to show or important to disclose or modify, teaching viewers interesting points about the perception of the past and that of the present.

The conquest of the Americas is one of those historical events about which several countries have crafted their own impression, judgement and approach, in accordance with the nation's role in the new continent during and after the arrival of Christopher Columbus. The literary and filmic representations of the most important figures and events indicate the producer nation's and the time period's general attitude towards the topic.

International Representations of Christopher Columbus

The most famous explorer of the Americas, also the official discoverer of the New World (setting aside the previous arrival of the Vikings and other peoples), Christopher Columbus has been the leading or supporting character of a great number of films shot in various countries. Being the first and the most notable discoverer in the New World, his popularity has not been overshadowed by other conquistadors, although his personality, behavior, and actions remain controversial. Depending on the country that produced the film, Columbus was depicted as an exceptional hero who carried out something extraordinary, an everyday sailor, who simply lost his way and discovered the new continent by mistake, or a bloodthirsty, merciless European, who found pleasure in subjugating and slaughtering masses of innocent indigenous peoples in the new world. Among these different approaches, filmmakers usually make use of the heroic treatment of the famous and infamous Genoese seaman. The positive attitude has its own scales: for example, the Spanish nation regarded Columbus as one of its own (despite him being Italian by birth), and so he was reckoned to be the ultimate Spanish national hero in the period of the nationalist dictatorship of Francisco Franco.

The earliest motion picture about this key figure was the first short film of the French director Vincent Lorant-Heilbronn, *Christopher Columbus (Christophe Colomb)*, shot in his home country in 1904. Ten years later, another French production was screened, this time in co-production with Spain: Gerard Bourgeois's *The Life of Christopher Columbus (La vie de Christophe Colomb)*, 1917). Both films told the story of the Italian navigator following the well-known biographies that had been written on him concerning his childhood, the preparations for the voyage, the first encounter with the indigenous peoples, and his life and death after the discovery. The quality of Bourgeois's film bears comparison with the quality of the silent movies of the 1910s (with the two producing countries being able to provide necessary financial support). Another interesting early example is the German *Christopher Columbus (Christoph Columbus)*, 1922), directed by the Hungarian Márton Garas, a film that ignores the historical facts and treats events with remarkable freedom (Payán 44, España 190) and an interesting fact here is that in the cast and the crew of this film we can find several Hungarian actors. In the silent era the United States also made two films about this seaman, Colin Campbell's *The Coming of Columbus* (1912) and Edwin L. Hollywood's *Christopher Columbus* (1923). In the latter motion picture, which was commissioned by Yale University as part of the *Chronicles of America* series and was adapted from the book written by Irving Berdine Richman, apart from other contemporary adaptations, the earlier discoverers (the Vikings and Asians) are also acknowledged (Munden 140).

Mexico's contribution to the discovery movies started with the film entitled *Christopher Columbus*, also known as *The Greatness of America (Cristóbal Colón / La grandeza de América)*, 1943), directed by José Díaz Morales. The film's approach to Columbus conforms to the attitude of the earlier silent versions both in form and content though Díaz Morales' picture lacks solid historical foundation. In this film, the explorer's explicit purpose is to discover a new world. This is the supreme goal of his heroic mission, but it is well-known that Columbus first had no idea of having discovered a new continent. In this movie, the members of the Council of Salamanca laugh at the

protagonist when he argues that the Earth is round, but in reality this council had no problem with the sphericity of the Earth, although they had serious doubts about the reliability of Columbus's geographical theories. Both Mexican and foreign critics disagreed on the evaluation of this explorer representation in this film: while the Spanish critics, under the influence of the Franco regime, saw it as part of the "Black Legend" (embodying the collection of negative stereotypes about the Spanish nation as ruthless colonizer), in Mexico the film was promoted as a celebration of the Hispanic heritage (España 190).

One of the most interesting but also politically committed interpretations of the discovery of America was made in the dictatorial Spain. In General Francisco Franco's country, films and film policy had a crucial role and movies about the nation's past and present were required to adjust to the regime's ideological guiding principles (Lénárt 2015). Moreover, Christopher Columbus had an additional importance for the Spanish *Caudillo*: in 1948 Franco conferred himself the title of "Admiral of Castille" in the friary of La Rábida (Palos de la Frontera, Andalusia), where Columbus had spent two years before his voyage. According to the British historian Paul Preston, with this act Franco assigned himself the title of the Columbus of the 20th century (152). At the end of the 1940s, the Institute of Hispanic Culture commissioned the production of real "national" movies in order to acquaint the public with the glorious moments of the Spanish history. In 1951, the regime's favorite filmmaker, Juan de Orduña, had the privilege to direct one of the most symbolic propaganda movies of the dictatorship, *The Dawn of America (Alba de América)*, which presents the life of Columbus from his seclusion in the above-mentioned Andalusian monastery to his arrival in the New World. This film was a response to the British *Christopher Columbus* (David MacDonald, 1949), in which Columbus appears not as a hero, but as a more complex character who lacks self-confidence. According to Orduña, the British film humiliated the Spanish nation and past with various controversial elements and scenes (for example, the Catholic monarchs appear as ridiculous figures, Columbus slaps King Ferdinand's face, Queen Isabella is made to look down on her people, etc.). The Spanish government shared this opinion, and, as a result, Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco, who was Franco's confidant, took the lead and asked the Institute of Hispanic Culture to find the adequate script to straighten the dispute (according to rumors, Carrero Blanco himself penned the screenplay) (Castro, 296). The result was an ideologically perfect, but a truly boring and an excessively sentimental film.

According to *The Dawn of America's* Queen Isabella, the discovery of America was enabled by the patriotic activity of the superior Hispanic race, which spread civilization to another continent, with the Catholic religion and the Spanish language as the two basic bonds that tie together Spain and the new continent, so America is seen as the extension of the Hispanic civilization and the notion of *Hispanidad* (a kind of metaphysical exposure of the Hispanic consciousness, together with its cultural, traditional, historic and linguistic layers). Columbus, despite being Italian, becomes in this film integral part of the Spanish nation and Spanish empire: he even claims that his new home is Castile. He also declares that, after the Reconquest of Spain from the Moors has come to an end in 1492 (in one scene even Columbus himself takes part in the reconquest of Granada, which is an impertinent falsification of true, docu-

mented historical facts), Spain has become united again, but the civilized world still needs spiritual reinforcement. This movie implies that God chose Castile to accomplish the mission of establishing contact with this unknown part of the Earth and Columbus was designated in this process as an important intermediary. Therefore, in the movie, explorers were not attracted by the treasures of the New World, they just wanted to spread Christianity and their civilization by protecting the innocent souls of the indigenous peoples.

Guided by divine providence, Columbus arrives in America, and the film concludes at this moment making no mention of the afterwards negative consequences (for example the depredations and massacres committed by the Europeans). The whole film is thus the ultimate manifestation of the regime's "imperial will," of the Spanish national Catholicism and Castilian traditions. In this context, Christopher Columbus becomes the messenger and the representative of these ideals. This film received unconditional financial support from the Franco regime, but the viewers got tired of the historical films with overt propagandistic messages, and *The Dawn of America* failed to live up its box-office expectations.

Before the 1990s, Columbus was present in various films as a secondary character of minor importance. In the anti-Nazi propaganda *Are We Civilized?* (Edwin Careve, 1934), an overt audiovisual attack against European totalitarianisms and dictatorships, he appears in a *tableau* among various heroes from the history of mankind, while in the musical *Where Do We Go from Here?* (Gregory Ratoff, 1945, with lyrics written by Ira Gershwin), a genie tries to send the main character into the Second World War, but by mistake he relocates him to other historical periods (like the flagship of Columbus, where the characters perform a spectacular mini-opera).

The 500th anniversary of the discovery of America in 1992 gave a boost to the filmography of the Columbus-themed productions. The British *Carry on ...* comedy series, quite popular especially in European countries, produced its last feature film under the title *Carry on Columbus* directed by Gerald Thomas. Critics and viewers insist that this is the worst episode of the franchise; some even say that it is one of the worst British movies ever made. According to the author of the series' guidebook: "*Columbus*, at best, is a weak pastiche of the later films. At worst, it is a horribly dull and unfunny mess" (Campbell 136–137). From the same year, a special mention is due for the 26 episodes Japanese-Italian anime *The Man Was from Spain* (Fumio Kurokawa) and the German animation *The Magic Voyage* (Michael Schoemann).

Additionally, in the emblematic year of 1992, two motion pictures were also made about Columbus that are quite well-known all over the world. John Glen's *Christopher Columbus: The Discovery* and Ridley Scott's *1492: Conquest of Paradise* are both controversial movies (especially the first one), but today they are generally regarded as the official Columbus tributes. They contended with each other to captivate the audience, but neither of them became a box-office hit. The weakest element of both films was the protagonist: in one of them, the Italian Christopher Columbus, in service of the Spanish monarchs, was played unconvincingly by the Greek-French actor Georges Corraface; in the other film, he was embodied by the French Gerard Depardieu (ironically also a Russian citizen since 2013), who spoke English with a terrible accent. Furthermore, the globally wide audience was visible less interested in these filmic adventures than other films that came out that year.

Christopher Columbus: The Discovery, based on a screenplay co-written by Mario Puzo (author of *The Godfather*), failed especially due to its miscasting. This filmic project was first offered to Ridley Scott, but he turned it down in order to take on the other Columbus movie (Mathews 1992). In case of the supporting roles, this film was even more disastrous than Scott's movie. King Ferdinand was played by Tom Selleck, in a way that convinced no one that he could rule a kingdom. Not surprisingly and as a consequence, he won the Golden Raspberry Award as Worst Supporting Actor of the Year in 1993, while the film received altogether six nominations for 'worst' categories (Razzie Awards homepage 1992). Marlon Brando, playing the role of the inquisitor Tomás de Torquemada, also delivered one of the worst performances of his career. Glen's Columbus lacks deep characterization despite the fact that he seems to be a real adventurer, a kind of Indiana Jones of the period, who seeks new challenges. As a consequence of the film's financial disastrous outcome, the producers Ilya and Alexander Salkind even got into a legal suit against each other for the breach of contract, fraud and racketeering (Brennan 1993), and their career as producers sank in oblivion along with their film, while the fate of *Christopher Columbus: The Discovery* was to provoke one of the most famous scandals and failures of Hollywood in the 1990s.

With *1492: Conquest of Paradise*, the director Ridley Scott and the writer Rosalyn Bosch wanted to portray Columbus in a way that did not previously meet any preconceptions. Scott claimed that "[h]e was a visionary and he was certainly a man with a conscience. But most of all, he was a man of his times, and the times were different", while Bosch added: "For a long time there was the cliché of the hero [...] and now I'm afraid there is the cliché of genocide. The truth is in between. He was not Cortes, he was an explorer. He imposed his view once he got here, but to blame him for the massacres that followed is like blaming Christ for the Inquisition" (in Mathews 1992). In fact, Scott's Columbus doubted whether the indigenous people will benefit from the arrival of the European civilization; and while it is undeniable that both the photography and the music (composed by Vangelis) of the film are flattering, it is also clear that the creators sacrificed the authenticity in exchange for mere grandiosity and sensationalism.

Some TV productions have likewise put Columbus into a central role. These were the BBC's *The Man with the Cloak Full of Holes* (W. P. Lipscomb, 1946) and *Bye Bye Columbus* (Peter Barnes, 1991), the West German *Christopher Columbus or The Discovery of the Americas* (*Christoph Kolumbus oder Die Entdeckung Amerikas*, Helmut Käutner, 1969) alongside two French productions under the same title, *Christopher Columbus* (*Christophe Colomb*, Pierre Cavassilas, 1975 and Jean-Paul Carrère, 1976). Moreover, it is worth mentioning two television mini-series that focused their storyline on this central character that gained popularity in some parts of the world. Some historians say that the Spanish-Italian *Christopher Columbus* (*Cristóbal Colón*, Vittorio Cottafavi, 1967) is the best biographical representation of the explorer (Payán 46), while the international coproduction *Christopher Columbus* (Alberto Lattuada, 1985) was regarded as the most popular series among the audience, undoubtedly due to its outstanding cast (Gabriel Byrne, Max Von Sydow, Oliver Reed, Eli Wallach, Faye Dunaway), despite its historical inaccuracies and its mediocre *mise-en-scène*.

Other Aspects and Figures of the Conquest

The discovery and the conquest of America did not end with Columbus; many other adventurers and conquistadors made their own contributions to introduce European civilization into the American continent, although their intervention often had unpleasant or even tragic consequences.

Surprisingly, the conquest of the New World that coincides with the birth of the American myth did not inspire a great number of films in the United States. Some film historians explain this as the result of Hollywood's moral and commercial censorship, according to which their movies had to show respect for all religions and countries. By dealing with the topic of the discoveries, directors had to touch upon some elements of the Black Legend, and this threatened the well-established moral policy (Espa a 203). Nevertheless, some films clearly demonstrated that the encounter between Europeans and the indigenous peoples might end in a tragic outcome.

For example, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* (Irving Lerner, 1969), based on Peter Schaffer's theatre play, narrates the tragic consequences of the conquistador Francisco Pizarro's arrival in the Inca Atahualpa's empire. One of the film's official movie posters tells us quite a lot about the nature of the conquest with the following lines: "The Birth of a Hero. The Death of an Empire. The Adventure of a Lifetime. Invading the Kingdom of Gold with just 167 men, Pizarro conquered an empire of 12 million Incas – and changed the course of history." Although the film resembles a theatrical production more than a historical movie (Christopher Plummer's performance as Atahualpa especially lacks authenticity on the big screen), it offers an overview on Hollywood's attitude towards the arrival of the civilization in the land of the (seemingly barbaric) Natives. This clash of cultures is the main topic of Cecil B. De Mille's silent film, *The Woman God Forgot* (1917), although in an absolutely romantic way: in this fiction film, the Aztec king Moctezuma's daughter falls in love with one of the Spanish soldiers who serves in Hern n Cort s' army, and, as a result she helps conquerors invade and occupy her people's empire. More important and of better quality is Henry King's *Captain from Castile* (1947). In this film, a Spanish adventurer (played by Tyrone Power) joins the Mexican expedition led by Hern n Cort s, where he becomes part of intrigues, schemes, and love affairs. This film is a real exception to the rule of moral censorship: it not only describes the horrors of the Spanish Inquisition and the blind religious fanaticism of Christianity, but also gives us a negative depiction of Cort s, who is led by his thirst for gold and blood. Although the film does not include the most violent parts of Samuel Shellabarger's book, it still shows a less-than-positive portrait of the 'civilized' Europeans, so it's not a surprise that this film was banned in Spanish cinemas (Pay n 52). Nevertheless, director Henry King gave the impression that Christianity could be evaluated in a double manner, depending on whether the physical exertion of Christian principles appeared under European (that is, civilized) circumstances, or by merely imposing of other civilization's rules on the 'barbaric' America. An Aztec even declares in the film: "Maybe your God and mine are the same." According to film historian Rafael de Espa a, "*Captain from Castile* is a clear demonstration of the ideological confusion of Hollywood in case of Hispanic American topics, and helps to understand why they have treated the period of the conquest in a quite sporadic manner" (205).

One of the most characteristic figures of the New German Cinema, Werner Herzog, has an individual way of looking at the topic that ensures that his films should occupy a special place among visionary productions. As such, *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (*Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes*, 1972) can be regarded as one of his most emblematic films. According to the story, after having defeated the Incas, one of the conquistadors of Pizarro, Lope de Aguirre leads a group of soldiers through the Amazonian jungle in search of El Dorado, the mythical city of gold. The grotesque atmosphere of madness, alienation, religious fanaticism, human frailty, and moral decay is combined with true aesthetic value, presenting a dark but also surreal vision of the period's South America and the role of the conquistadors. The story is loosely based on the diary of Gaspar de Carvajal, a Spanish Dominican missionary, but Herzog's film is a personal and imaginative view that creatively combines reality with fiction. It usually does not show any respect for the historical facts. Klaus Kinski's performance in the title role is shocking and astonishing; the actor's unpredictable personality and erratic behavior form a unique symbiosis with the suffocating atmosphere, this showing an almost genuine parallelism with the real Aguirre's life (Waller 55–59). Lope De Aguirre and the search for the city of gold happens to be the central topic of Carlos Sauras's *El Dorado* (1988) as well, which in the 1980s, held the record of being the most expensive Spanish film. The legendary Spanish director made use of various novels, historical accounts, and contemporary chronicles in order to recreate an authentic story. Saura's Aguirre is a selfish and cruel fighter motivated only by his desire for gain. The film also depicts the merciless Spanish conquistadors trampling on each other as circumstances require it. In the 1940s and 1950s, the Francoist regime's intellectuals yearned to over-represent the glorious mission of the Hispanic race. As a contemporary film journal stated: "[T]he epic Discovery, the Conquest, the presence of Spain on the continent, are undeniable sources for the Spanish movies. But of all these aspects, the more important value is the creation of the mixed blood, the creation of a new race, the origin of the American man, son of an Indian woman and a Spanish man [...]" (Serrano de Osma 10–11). But the authorities were aware of how difficult it was to rebuild the common past without provoking animosities in the relevant countries (España 196).

The Latin-American contribution to this topic tended to concentrate on the arrival of the Europeans in certain regions of Latin America by emphasizing their direct and immediate influence. The Argentine *Villa Rica del Espíritu Santo*, also known as *The Caravel of the Illusion* (*Villa Rica del Espíritu Santo / La carabela de la ilusión*, Benito Perojo, 1945) shows the first steps of the colonizers and a Spanish woman, who struggle to establish a new home in America, while *The Araucaniad* (*La araucana*, Julio Coll, 1971), inspired by Alonso de Ercilla's famous epic poem about the conquest of Chile, narrates the encounter of the Mapuche-Araucanian Indians with the ruthless conquistador, Pedro de Valdivia. The Mexican *The Other Conquest* (*La otra conquista*, Salvador Carrasco, 1998) depicts, through the conflict of a Spanish friar and the illegitimate son of Moctezuma, the ways in which the Aztec people suffered the so-called the 'other conquest', which was a spiritual one, showing the imposition of the new culture and religion on the traditions of the Natives. In the film, some Aztec survivors seek to op-

pose the Europeans' overwhelming takeover, but it is clear that their desperate resistance will be brutally suppressed.

Besides Columbus, also other notable Spanish explorers deserved representation in motion pictures.  lvar Nu ez Cabeza de Vaca, who was the central figure of *Cabeza de Vaca* (Nicol s Echevarr a, 1991), for example, was one of the few survivors of the Narv ez expedition (a tragic journey of exploration in Florida in 1527). He got in touch with the Native Americans, befriended them, adopted some of their traditions, and later embarked on a new mission, this time towards the inner regions of Mexico. Vasco Nu ez de Balboa, the first European whose expedition reached the Pacific Ocean through the Isthmus of Panama, appeared in the Spanish *The Conquistadors of the Pacific* (*Los conquistadores del Pac fico*, Jos  Mar a Elorrieta, 1963). Although this film was shot during the Francoist dictatorship, in the 1960s Spanish movies were relieved of the former, severe ideological burden due to a less rigorous film policy; therefore, Elorrieta's film could concentrate on Nu ez de Balboa's adventures.

As a closing item, I would like to shed some light on make a Spanish film from 2010, *Even the Rain* (*Tambi n la lluvia*, directed by Iciar Bollain), which builds a real visual bridge between the past and the present. It is a film within a film, focusing on a group of filmmakers who adapt a story about Christopher Columbus in Bolivia. The shooting of the film takes place during the Cochabamba protests of 2000 (also called as the Water War in Bolivia) lead against the privatization of a local water supply company, which affects the film crew's well-planned schedule and the employment of the local actors and extras. It becomes clear that the situation of Native Americans is not very different today since other but quite similar forces determine their fate: previously the white conquerors threatened their future; nowadays international corporations want to deprive them of their water supply. The filmmakers' story about Columbus gains here various levels of interpretation; their approach to the conquest finds diverse metaphors in the circumstances of the shooting of the film, even by drawing a parallel between the consequences of the arrival of the conquerors (slavery and colonization) and the present's neoliberal economic policy. Bollain's film is not the only one that tries to establish links between the period of the conquest and present (and even the future) situations of turmoil: one of the storylines of Darren Aronofsky's *The Fountain* (2006) relates a conquistador of the Mayan empire to questions of mortality, eternity and rebirth. Furthermore, the colonial period, from the American North to the Center and South of America, the stories of adventurers, colonizers, pirates and missionaries, key figures like John Smith, Pocahontas or Bartolom  de las Casas, have offered more possibilities for movie adaptations. But that's another story – both in written and filmed form.

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