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I Dream in Another Language

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Abstract

This is a film review of *I Dream in Another Language* (2017), directed by Ernesto Contreras.

Keywords

Indigenous languages, Colonialism

Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press, 2003), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* (2009) and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture* (2015). He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



I Dream in Another Language (2017), dir. Ernesto Contreras

Martin is a linguist who seeks to record and preserve the disappearing indigenous languages of Mexico. He travels to an isolated community to find the last few speakers of Zikril and record them before their language is gone forever. He finds an elderly woman, Jacinta, who speaks the language and tells him that only two others remain who do. When she dies, Martin finds that the two men, Evaristo and Isauro, have refused to speak to each other for fifty years.

As Martin tries to bring the two together, he begins to learn the story behind their separation. He also begins to learn Zikril, although it remains just beyond his grasp as well as beyond ours; no subtitles appear throughout most of the film when it is being spoken (and as it was invented for the film, there are no actual speakers of it). The director, Ernesto Contreras, said at the Q&A that he wanted to convey how language involves a way to conceive the world, and in this way Zikril represents a way that is closer to nature and an earlier civilization. Jacinto tells Martin that it is the original language that animals and humans once shared, so it also preexists the

presence of Roman Catholicism as the colonial religion of the Spanish that brought new concepts of sin and guilt. This forms a key part of the story, as Evaristo is wracked by guilt after the priest preaches that sin cannot be hidden from God, and he has a vision of Christ's blood flowing towards him and accusing him. As he internalizes the worldview of the Spanish colonists, he becomes judgmental of his friend Isauro as implicit in his sin as well. Zikril placed no such judgment on their actions, however, and it may be that his return to that language can open a way for the two old friends to be reunited in a way that transcends guilt about the past.

This film traffics in magical realism just enough to evoke the sense of a mythical world beyond the ordinary. It is not a documentary about disappearing languages but a whimsical fable about love and acceptance, framed in the context of post-colonial societies that seek to preserve their cultural beliefs and traditions. When we finally get subtitles for Zikril at the end of the film, the moment is both comical and touching, and it suggests an eternal preservation of indigenous values that transcends the historical. This is not a political manifesto, but a love letter to older traditions and religions that are still meaningful and valuable.