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Los Ultimos Cristeros (The Last Christeros)

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Los Ultimos Cristeros* (2011), directed by Matias Meyer.

The Mexican/Dutch film *Los últimos cristeros*, the third feature film by director Matias Meyer, deploys the spiritual and contemplative dimension of the ‘Western movie’ genre in order to bring to life an episode from recent Mexican history, which most people are not aware of, the so-called *Guerra cristera* or *Cristiada*. The film is particularly striking because of its reduction of narrative complexity, which, combined with a very slow pace, emphasizes the moral dilemmas the characters face, and focuses the attention on their rather sporadic dialogue. In its frugality, the film questions the complex interactions between religion and violence in cases of church and state conflict, yet provides no answers.

Curiously, the origins of the film are connected with two father-son relationships: the director’s father, the French historian Jean Meyer, is considered one of the most influential scholars of the Cristero rebellion, while the film itself is inspired by the childhood memories of author Antonio Estrada (*Rescoldo: Los últimos cristeros*), who is the son of one of the last cristero leaders.

The historical context of the film examines legislative measures taken by the Mexican government in 1926 which restricted individual freedom of worship and of religious institutions, enforcing the anticlerical 1917 Constitutional Decree. This religious discrimination sparked a counter-revolutionary conflict in which mostly Roman Catholic peasants fought against the *Federales* in order to defend their right to worship and free religious expression. Very few Catholic priests also took part in the struggle, while the hierarchy of the Church opposed it. Although the conflict officially ended in 1929, some of the *cristeros* (“soldiers of Christ”) continued to fight for several years after that. The events of the film take place between 1934 and 1936, during this protracted (and overall minor) conflict, called the Second Cristiada.

Los últimos cristeros follows a small group of cristero guerrillas led by a stubborn colonel, on their march across deserted mountains with little shelter from the elements, in short supply of

provisions and bullets, but determined to carry on their resistance. They refuse government amnesty and do not surrender even when the main leaders of the rebellion capitulate, aware of the futility of their struggle. Their obstinacy shows their deep commitment to the fight for religious freedom, but it can also be interpreted as an expression of alienation from civilization and an attraction to nature, leading the *cristeros* to adopt an archaic and utopian form of sociality.

Despite its accurate *mise-en-scène*, the film provides scarce historical clues. It begins *in medias res* and focuses exclusively on its small group of protagonists. Meyer captures their anxieties and fears through close-ups that contrast with a series of long shots in which the human figures seem to merge with the rough landscape. Rather than members of a group, the rebels appear as individuals, each left on his own: indeed, as a group they would be an easy target for the army's snipers. Thus the wide gaps left between them evoke a sense of individual strength and of self-reliance that underline the profound loneliness marking each *cristero*. Only when the sun goes down can the *cristeros* reunite in fraternal comradeship, huddling together around the fire and breaking the silence of the night with songs of longing and faith.

Meyer strips the myth of the Western down to one of its essential components: a romantic primitivism that evokes a mystical fascination with nature and its powers. The silence of the wide spaces is rarely interrupted by human voices, which sound reverent in the wilderness, while the rumor of war echoes only distantly. Hardly any gunfire breaks the stillness, and no fighting is shown in the film so that the conflict takes the form of an incessant escape from an invisible enemy that leads the escapees through an exterior landscape that is as dramatic as their interior struggles. The naturalistic acting of the non-professional actors, some of them descendents of *cristeros* themselves, reinforces the impression that this is a fight with neither heroes nor villains, just individuals in the throes of their own fears, who want to withdraw from a society they consider repressive and impious.

Los últimos cristeros does not judge the rebels' position. Meyer's camera is more sympathetic to the film's protagonists than to their cause, and, without any particular emphasis, it allows the ambiguity of the use of violence for religious ends to emerge, showing how religion provides words and symbols that can be used to legitimate armed conflict. However, it should be noted that if the viewers become aware of this ambiguity, by no means does it enter the guerrillas' consciousness: Meyer uses all the possibilities of his cinematic skill to maintain and nourish this productive discrepancy, showing thus his respect for both his subject and his public.