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MAMACRUZ

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MAMACRUZ

Abstract

This is a film review of MAMACRUZ (2023), directed by Patricia Ortega.

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Author Notes

Dereck Daschke is a professor of Philosophy & Religion at Truman State University and holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago Divinity School. Particularly interested in the intersection among religion, psychology, and wellness, his academic work over more than two decades has analyzed the transformational breakdowns and creative buildups in the form of apocalypses, mysticism, new religious movements, psychedelics, the Bible, Bob Dylan, and, of course, film. He regularly teaches “Religion and Film” at Truman and has overseen a number of student research theses that have contributed to the conversation about just why it is that movies capture our meaning-making imaginations in the way they do.



MAMACRUZ (2023), dir. Patricia Ortega

This film opens with Mama Cruz, a 70-ish grandmother played by Spanish TV and film star Kiti Mánver, watching with rapt attention a romantic scene in a telenovela while her schlubby husband Eduardo (Pepe Quero), whom she more or less affectionately calls “Gordo” (“Chubby”), naps next to her on the couch. However, one sharp snore from Gordo snaps her out of her daydream, and it is revealed that she is actually watching a Catholic religious program. Her face registers the disappointment in being brought back to (ironically) a more mundane reality. This scene sets the stage for the tensions between Cruz’s religious and marital routines on the one hand and her inability, or unwillingness, to constrain her innate but long-dormant sexuality in her “golden years” on the other. Pitched as a comedy, it gets some effective laughs out of Cruz’s tendencies to fall into sexual reverie in the least appropriate moments. Viewers see this happen particularly in her church role as a seamstress for the garments that adorn her church’s statuary of Jesus and Mary, where her religious bond with these figures is momentarily transformed into an erotic one

(recalling, at times, a much tamer version of 2021's *Benedetta*). Yet director and co-screenwriter Patricia Ortega always treats Mama Cruz's journey of sexual self-discovery as a woman in the final era of her life with dignity and a sense that we all should appreciate our relationships with our own bodies before life passes us by and it's too late.

When it becomes clear that her husband no longer desires her, rejecting her advances as she attempts to rediscover her capacity for sexual expression within the bond of marriage, she begins attending a sexual therapy group. It becomes clear that she has never had an orgasm, and even the thought of masturbation remains strongly taboo for her at first, reinforced by her nosy and judgmental churchgoing friends. But when a chance encounter with online porn creates a venue for self-pleasure long denied her, joining the group offers Cruz a chance to explore forms of her own desires and pleasure she may have never known existed. (One of the group members tells her, regarding how she needs to take her need for sexual release into her own hands, as it were, "The Holy Ghost doesn't do the dirty work.") Some of these women are close to her age; some are younger; one is undergoing treatment for breast cancer. As it happens, her sewing prowess allows her to overcome her shyness and connect with the women of the group. When she offers to make beautiful, even sensual, undergarments for living women, not religious icons, she realizes how much she has cut herself off from the powerful current of life itself, a position that has contaminated her relationships with her husband, her granddaughter, and her daughter, an ambitious dancer living away from her family while she secures a dream job in Vienna. She comes full circle by reconnecting with the memory of her own mother, the source of her skill with clothing and sewing, but who had her own way of negotiating a woman's erotic space in a conservative society that Cruz must finally embrace.

For all its potentially raunchy subject matter, *MAMACRUZ* is a gentle and life-affirming ode to owning one's own sexuality, pleasure, and desires at any age, regardless of what the church, family, or society at large may tell you is "appropriate."