

# The Myth and the Legend: in Search of Christopher Columbus in Film

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The most hotly debated of the centenaries of 1492 has now passed, but not the continuous efforts to invent an imaginary version of the mysterious and elusive figure of Christopher Columbus, or to argue the debates and refutations over every aspect of the events and processes that transformed the history of Western Europe and the New World after 1492. Proof of the continued fascination with the character, and with the contemporary relevance of the myth and legend of Columbus are to be found in the recent premiere of Icíar Bollaín's film *Even the Rain* (2011), the negotiations that Richard Branson, the billionaire owner of *Virgin Atlantic*, engaged to obtain T. S. Nowlin's screenplay *Columbus* to make a 3-D movie about the Admiral's life, and other productions such as Anne Thomson and Marc Etkind's television series about his fourth voyage, *Columbus: The Lost Voyage* (2007) and the movies *The Manuscript* (2009) by Dominican director Alan Nadal Piantini and *Christopher Columbus – The Enigma* (2007) by Portugal's Manoel de Oliveira.

While in literature, Christopher Columbus belongs to a long line of mythological, literary or historical characters –like Ulysses, Antigone, Cain, the Wandering Jew, Don Juan, Faust, Dracula or Lope de Aguirre– that have evolved into a robust and diverse literary theme, the same phenomenon has also occurred in film. Columbus, like Jesus, Cleopatra, Julius Caesar, Spartacus, El Cid, Joan of

Arc, Robin Hood, Henry VIII, Queen Elizabeth, Romeo and Juliet, Captain Smith and Napoleon, is the subject of an impressive, diverse and international film corpus that spans various cinematic genres. This alliance (history, myth, literature and film) and its associated strategies (historical past as document, evocation, inter-text) date back to the beginnings of film, when directors and producers both in Europe and in the United States turned to the historical, mythological and literary past in search of characters and themes to bring to the screen. The fact that the birth of cinema coincided with the triumphalist celebration of the fourth centenary of Columbus facilitated his early insertion into the world of film. Since then, Columbus' character has worn as many different outfits as there are perspectives on the man, his epoch, discovery and colonization. And these depictions of Columbus as messianic agent, heroic figure, or the opposite, cover all genres, from epic biography, comedy, musical, adventure or documentary, and even animated films.

Culturally, Columbus has always been an important polysemous point of reference. Hence his appearance in many titles of works, even though he may not be the protagonist or a supporting character; this is both a symbolic and a box-office strategy, evident ever since Charlie Chaplin subtitled one of his most important medium-length films *The Immigrant* (1917) as *A Modern Columbus*, in order to associate the Tramp's character with Columbus, as another immigrant to the New World. *Goodbye, Columbus* (1969) by Larry Peerce, based on Philip Roth's novel of the same title, exemplifies a Columbus model in its telling of the story of the adversities faced by a poor Jewish boy from the Bronx in his efforts to win the hearts of the family of his beloved, a rich Jewish girl from Radcliffe. In other cases, for example during the inter-war period and in the fifties, there are films in which, although they do not refer to him by name in their titles, Columbus intervenes along with Moses, Confucius, Napoleon Washington or Lincoln, to question and denounce the rise of totalitarianism, war and dictatorship (*Are We Civilized?*, 1934, by Edwin Carewe; *The Story of Mankind*, 1957, by Irwin Allen). The insertion of Columbus in didactic animated films (*Hysterical High Spots in American History*, 1941) or in musicals (*Where Do We Go From Here?*, by Gregory Ratoff, 1945) reaffirms his essential importance in American culture.

In Spain we find films whose titles reaffirm other aspects, such as the fears of the first sailors or the socio-economic conditions in 1492 –*Al borde del gran viaje* (On the Verge of the Great Voyage, 1940) by Antonio Román; *La marrana* (The Sow, 1992) by José Luis Cuerda– or other historical figures, like *Juana la loca... de vez en cuando* [Joanna the Mad... from Time to Time, José Ramón Larraz, 1983]. In *Alba de América* (Dawn of America, Juan de Orduña, 1951), one of the most classic Spanish films about



*The Immigrant (A Modern Columbus)* (Charles Chaplin, 1917)

Columbus, the metonymic title prefigures him as the sun, initiator of the dawn of a continent. In Latin America, directors have chosen to focus on the historical processes of conquest, colonisation and neo-colonisation. Whether present or absent, Columbus is always a presence, a shadow, a nightmare, as in the cases of *Orinoko, New World* (Diego Rísquez, 1984) or *Macuro* (Hernan Jabes, 2008).

Films about Columbus provide an alternative cultural space for critical exploration of the practices and the multiple perspectives and underlying interpretations behind the film productions focusing on the character. Historically, the first film about Columbus was a short French movie made in 1904, twenty-two minutes and twenty-six seconds long, titled *Christopher Columbus*, a production of the Pathé Brothers directed by Vincent Lorrant-Heilbronn (1874-1912). In this film, Vincent Denizot, a tall, hardy, imposing and very dramatic actor, plays the role of the Admiral. In eight sequences that start with the rocking movement aboard the Santa Maria (Rolling on the sea), the film reviews a core history of Columbus comprising, in addition to the mutiny, the disembarkation (where the Indians welcome the newcomers warmly); the celebrations of the Indians (Indian couples and children who embrace Columbus and present a dance); their triumphant entrance into Barcelona (welcoming of Columbus and the Indians by the people); their reception at court (parade in the court; entrance of the dressed-up Indians); Columbus' fall from grace (clerics denounce him to the King, who confronts him); and Columbus in jail (the King visits him but refuses to remove his chains). In this last sequence, Columbus, abandoned and downcast, contrasts his current situation with the triumphant entrance before the King and Queen, the memory of which is projected in the upper right corner of the screen. However, the film doesn't end there. A final sequence is introduced, dedicated to Columbus' glory (Apotheosis), a celebration held centuries later with the participation of soldiers, statesmen, children, and three ladies representing equality, fraternity and liberty. They all pay tribute to Columbus, whose statue can be seen in the background, where we can also see an official coach passing by, decorated in gold.



1492: *The Conquest of Paradise* (Ridley Scott, 1992)

It is significant that the decision was made to start the film with the last stage of the journey, at the moment of the last conflictive incident (mutiny), which is the prelude to the culminating moment. The film's sequential order dismisses questions related to his origin, or the time he spent and his marriage in Portugal, or his years of waiting in Spain, the preparations for the journey, the contribution of the Pinzón brothers and the recruitment of the crew. Here, Columbus is alone, and he alone celebrates the landing in the New World and the triumphant return, just as he stands alone to face the humiliation and ingratitude of the King and Queen. There is no problematisation of his personal life, or of his relations with the Indians with whom he is presented as magnanimous, generous and patient. They in return receive his gifts happily and celebrate his arrival with dancing. Neither Columbus nor his crew show any astonishment in their encounter with the other, and the Indians convey no such surprise either. Queen Isabella is almost absent, and King Fernando is the villain. The end is presented as a tribute and recognition of a mistreated sailor, and as an exaltation of the new colonialism of Imperial France, which exports and propagates the ideals of liberty, fraternity and equality. The peoples conquered or about to be conquered should generously welcome the *offerings* that European civilization has to give them, just as the original Amerindians did with Columbus.

There are now many Columbuses on film and many challenges to reinvent and construct a story that is worn out, locked into a repetitive and clichéd formula (Columbus/hero; Spaniards/villains; scientific knowledge/ignorance; individualism/oppression; idealism/pragmatism; history/fiction) that is nourished by the Black Legend. What do movies about Columbus tell us about him, about his status as a foreigner, about Europe, Spain and the Indians? How can the director make use of the exceptionalism of the hero and his adverse relationship with his environ-

ment to develop a Columbus that absorbs and captivates the spectator? How can we break the mould and move beyond the stilted Columbus of Washington Irving (the exceptionalist hero-genius interpretation) or of Kirkpatrick Sale (the emblem of all the evils of modern colonialism)? Is it worth questioning the profitability and success of the film projects about Columbus, an individual about whom we know so much, but do not know even more?

### **The representation of Christopher Columbus: from silent film to sound**

The historiography of films about Columbus reveals some interesting facts<sup>1</sup>. In silent films and talkies up until the 1940s, producers and directors acclaimed for other films suffered commercial failures in their experiments with Columbus. Such was the case of the French film company Gaumont and prolific director Louis Feuillade (*Christopher Columbus*, 1910), famous for the *Fantômas* series, and of George Kleine (1864-1931), importer of European cinema to the United States, famous for *Quo Vadis?* (Enrico Guazzoni, 1913), *The Last Days of Pompeii* (Gli ultimo giorni di Pompeii, Mario Caserini, Eleuterio Rodolfi, 1913) and *Othello* (Dimitri Buchowetzki, 1922), but whose attempts to distribute Feuillade's film failed to arouse public interest. The Italian campaign to celebrate Columbus Day in New York is the subject of *Columbus Day Conspiracy* (1912), in which William J. Gaynor, mayor of New York City at the time, took part. The first feature film on the topic, *Christophe Colomb* (1916), was a Spanish-French co-production directed by Emile Bourgeois which, despite a one-million peseta budget, elaborate set designs, painstaking efforts to preserve historical authenticity and the use of three cameras for the first time in Spanish filmmaking, also failed to achieve the success expected; the film, in which the French actor Georges Wague played the role of Columbus, had a biographical sequence structured with an introduction and

five chapters (A Queen's Inspiration; Into the Unknown; The work shines eternal; The Zenith of Glory; The Sad Reward). In 1919, David W. Griffith directed the documentary film *The World of Columbus*. In 1923, *Columbus Discovers a New Whirl*, by Australian illustrator Frank A. Nankivell, became the first North American presentation of Columbus in animated silent film, a trend continued by Walter Lantz, the famous owner of the animation studio that created *Woody Woodpecker*, *Andy Panda* and *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit*. In the film *Chris Columbus, Jr.* (Walter Lantz, 1934), written by Victor McLeod, Oswald the Lucky Rabbit is a Columbus seeking to prove that the Earth is round and to discover new lands.

The production of *Cristobal Colón o la grandeza de América* [Christopher Columbus or the Greatness of America, 1943], by Spanish exile José Díaz Morales, was the first sound film made in Mexico. Columbus and the greatness of America are the catalysts for a story aimed at exalting *La Raza*, the notion of Hispanic and Spanish identity as elements of alliance between Hispanic peoples at a time when Franco's Spain viewed the works of Spanish republican exiles in Mexico with suspicion. This 135-minute feature film was notable for its lack of technical resources, its modest budget, and the role of Columbus being given to quite a mature actor (Julio Villareal, a Spaniard resident in Mexico since 1903), whose performance displayed a rather arrogant attitude with regard to the Spanish King and Queen and in moments of religious reflection. Its distribution in Spain by Hollywood's Columbia Pictures was emblematic of the transactions that needed to be negotiated to accommodate Francoist censorship. The strategy of voice-over commentary was used to silence everything that could be considered a criticism of the nation and of the Spanish people (such as the intrigues of Francisco de Bobadilla) and to propagate the ideology of the State: at the climactic moment of the landing, the action is interrupted to indicate that "they have arrived at one of those countries that live in sin and that need to be converted to the true religion, that of Our Lord Jesus Christ, in the name of Spain". From this sequence it cuts to the scene of Columbus' death in Valladolid.

The trend that started in 1904 of constructing all-encompassing, explicatory epic films that legitimate or promote national projects continued in *Christopher Columbus* (1949, Gainsborough Pictures) by English director David MacDonald, and *Dawn of America* (1951, CIFESA) by Spanish director Juan de Orduña, the two most important productions prior to 1992. The mythologizing depictions of Columbus by Frederic March and Antonio Vilar are part of the classical film iconography that generations of spectators recall fondly, but that future generations would rail against.

*Christopher Columbus* is a long epic-biography, historically rigorous in terms of set designs and wardrobe, which

recounts episodes that dramatise the challenges faced by the hero in his efforts to explain his plan, persuade and secure the support of the Monarchs, win the solidarity and respect of his crew, and fight against the intrigues of the court and a mutiny during the voyage. And he triumphs, only to be defeated by ingratitude, rumours and plundering of his profits. This firm, decisive and self-confident Columbus, who in March's performance is an elegant, tall, restrained and meticulously coiffured gentleman, falls from grace in the end and vanishes behind the darkness of the proscenium curtain. Rather than a man of the action, he is a dreamer, a rational voice/being crying out in a wilderness of scepticism, greed and villainy.

The genesis and the production of *Dawn of America*, sponsored by the Institute of Hispanic Culture, are testimony to its status as a contestation against the British version by MacDonald. The Spanish government reacted with indignation at the depiction the Catholic Monarchs, the excessive emphasis on court intrigues and the absence of the project of evangelisation. They sought the production of an exemplary and allegorical film that would offer an interpretation that would highlight the important political and historical role of the Monarchs, and insert the great achievement and the national support it received within a providentialist conception of the story. The exaltation of the Discovery would thus serve to exalt patriotic values, and to caricature the enemies of the Spanish regime of the period.

Orduña adhered to a depiction of Columbus as visionary and prophet, supported by knowledge, science, his maritime experience and the secret of Toscanelli's map. The images of the Santa Maria on the open sea, the scene showing some doubtful sailors, frightened and scared by the unknown, and the majestic shots of the sea are effective. And Martin Pinzón, Columbus' ally and defender, is charged with the task of describing his life in retrospect from the birth up to the mutiny. In the moment of triumph and of the encounter, this Columbus, a good Christian and a gentleman, takes possession of the "promised land" to which they have come "as brothers". The images and the final scene (the triumphant return to Barcelona with Indians, the baptism of the Indian, sacred music, the Lord's Prayer) establish the central nature of the evangelising mission and of the Castilian people in the formation and construction of pan-Hispanic identity and unity: "Castile shall carry noble blood to illuminate the noble family of the Spanish dominions. The noble transplant must flourish on those shores and the lineage shall grow in honour and life beyond measure. And across the sea and time, it shall bind us always to a single destiny" under "a single faith in a single language". The film was a financial disaster. Long, slow-moving, predictable and propagandistic; the characters, like wax figures, lacked human freshness and vitality.

### The desacralisation of the historical and mythical Columbus: three film examples

In reaction to MacDonald's and Orduña's solemn and propagandistic depictions, others, like the very popular actor and director of the Spanish commercial films, Mariano Ozores (*Cristóbal Colón, de oficio...descrubidor* [Christopher Columbus, Profession: Discoverer, 1982]) and British directors Gerald Thomas (*Carry on Columbus*, 1992) and Peter Barnes (*Bye, Bye Columbus*, 1992), turned to the theme to desacralise the historical and mythical Columbus. The first of these is representative of Spain's period of liberalisation and transition after Franco's death, while the others were failed attempts to debunk the Columbus myth in the context of the celebration and counter-celebration of the quincentenary.



1492: *The Conquest of Paradise* (Ridley Scott, 1992)

*Cristóbal Colón, de oficio...descrubidor* is a farce and parody of the Columbus depicted in *Dawn of America*. The popular Andrés Pajares plays a simple-minded Columbus who lives in a world of revelry, jibes, jokes and provocative and shocking allusions and images, daring for the time but worn out and irrelevant today. However, it is the only version that constructs an image of the Columbus-hero on his return as a deranged, disoriented and crazed individual whose physical appearance seems more like that of a shipwreck victim than of the triumphant explorer: red-bearded, thin, almost naked and in chains, who on hearing himself announced as a *hero* who has returned with good news of a new world, casts a gaze all around him and drops dead in front of everyone. The truth is that he has returned from a journey

described by the crew as "fatal and infernal". His story, introduced by the Queen, and continued by a narrator's voice, as in *Dawn of America*, frames the historical sequences, which are presented through flashbacks, and always with a clearly provocative intention (in his childhood in Genoa, the camera focuses in on the genitals of the baby Columbus), mocking (in "This is Spain") and parodic (the romantic scene between Columbus and Beatriz on the river in *Dawn of America* is transformed here into a scene with Columbus singing "I love you" in English to a Beatriz suffering from gas, to the sound of the birds and the continuous flatulence that never leaves her even in the marriage bed). This reformulation dismantles the providentialist conception of the Discovery, and ironically juxtaposes the discourse of the pan-Hispanic project (*Dawn of America*) with a new prophetic vision (projected on the screen) that presages wars, explosions, New York City, Marilyn Monroe and trips to the moon, and subscribes to a criticism of capitalism (the newly discovered world is the world of "Drink Coca-Cola"). The film, a great box-office success at the time, offers up a memorable metaphor. A dead Columbus and a queen who gets his name wrong when she begins her presentation highlight the suspicious and manipulative role of the director, writer and historian in the construction of a text, including the director of this comedy.

The two British comedies are daring efforts that fail to break out of the category of clumsy texts based on the stereotype. Although *Bye, Bye, Columbus* is a film commissioned by the British Broadcasting System to commemorate the fifth centenary, *Carry on Columbus*, is, if it bears mentioning, a better work. Barnes' Columbus (played by Daniel Massey) is a cynical and irreverent monster, whose divine mandate comes to him from a parrot that imitates the voice of God. When the Queen reprimands him for turning Indians into slaves, he replies that they take cannibal slaves on board so that they can eat each other during the journey.

The most interesting aspect of *Carry On Columbus* is the introduction of an international intrigue. The Sultan of Turkey, who imposes burdensome taxes on every caravan that passes through his territory, finds out that a certain Christopher Columbus (played by Jim Dale), is planning to find a new route to Asia from Portugal. He sends a spy (Sara Crowe as Fatima) to Lisbon so that, in collusion with a local resident, she can prevent Columbus from achieving his goal and ruin his prosperous business. There is also a certain novelty in the encounter with the Indians who, dressed in extravagant attire, sporting names like Pontiac and talking with Brooklyn accents, refuse Columbus' gifts and, in exchange for their leaving, give the Spaniards a chest full of fake gold. The image presented of Columbus is that of a selfish opportunist dressed in a red velvet cloak and a huge medallion chain.

The occasion of the quincentenary provided the opportunity for new reformulations of Columbus and the discovery, according to revisionist approaches, inclusive, multicultural and less Eurocentric perspectives, ecological concerns and substantial budgets for some films. From hero and genius, Columbus was transformed into villain, slave-trader and even genocidal maniac.

### **The historical exceptionalism of Columbus in modern versions**

However, the two Hollywood films on the theme, *Christopher Columbus: the Discovery* (1992) under the production of the Salking Family and the direction of John Glen, and *1492: The Conquest of Paradise* (1992) by Ridley Scott (preceded by extremely costly advertising campaigns, and productions in which no effort was spared to hire internationally known artists, solicit advice from well-known historians, and shoot at different locations around Europe and Central America) did not turn into big box-office successes or classics of contemporary film. The music and special effects are impressive and offer excellent scenes of lush landscapes, action on the sea, on the ship and during the discovery, but they did not move away from the widespread conception of Columbus' historical exceptionalism, of the Spanish as the embodiment of superstition, ignorance, intolerance (the Inquisition) and as agents of destruction, or from the view of the Indian as a being with agency. The films were essentially big visual spectacles set within the classical genre of epic cinema.

*Christopher Columbus: The Discovery* was conceived as an adventure movie for the whole family that steered clear of all political controversy. Columbus (played by Georges Corraface) combines the qualities of Lawrence of Arabia with those of Robin Hood, and displays his great gifts as a swordsman, lady's man and persuasive talker. With a great cast (Marlon Brando as Torquemada) and a screenplay by Mario Puzo, the action is centred on Columbus-as-hero and on the challenges he faced up until 1492 and the discovery itself. The music by Cliff Eidelman brings together a variety of registers that capture the emotions, the dangers of the voyage and the climax of the arrival, in which the *Gloria* emphasizes the spectacular and grandiose nature of this moment. The Indians, as in previous texts, watch and admire but do not react. This triumphalist film shows Columbus as a black-haired handsome dreamer and adventurer, a good father and lover and a man of reason, who on first setting foot in the New World has the freshness, enthusiasm and spiritedness of a person coming off a cruise ship ready to start a tourist excursion.

*1492: Conquest of Paradise* divides the action into two very distinct segments: the first is dedicated to the long wait in Spain, and the second to the character's arrival, administration and fall from grace. Columbus (G rard Depardieu) is the seafaring entrepreneur, the man of

destiny, the chosen one who, despite his temperamental qualities, is faithful to his mission. He has to survive in a world dominated by superstition and an oppressive atmosphere, full of fear, which is symbolised in the horrible spectacle of human execution under the Inquisition. In the second segment, Columbus is a compassionate, fair and moderate man, who preaches that the conversion of the Indians should be done by persuasion and not by force and who, like so many other Columbuses, declares that he has come in peace and with honour. The film's plot includes numerous episodes and narratives that are not very well woven together and Columbus emerges in the end as a sad, worn out and pathetic old man who is told that it was Vespucci who discovered a new continent. Columbus isn't a colonialist monster or slave-trader but a visionary, a victim of human greed, evil and ingratitude. The title does not do the plot justice; the film is not about the year 1492 or about the conquest, but about Christopher Columbus, his rise to the status of myth, his fall to the level of other men and his compensation in Western written history.

### **Other representative offerings**

To find truly anti-Columbus offerings we need to turn to documentaries, such as: *Columbus Didn't Discover Us* (Robbie Lepezer, 1991), *Surviving Columbus* (Diane Reyna, 1992), *The Columbus Invasion: Colonialism and Indian Resistance* (1992), or a very short film (18 minutes) *Columbus on Trial* (1992) by the socially committed Chicana producer and director Lourdes Portillo. With the acting support of the satirical group Culture Trash, she produces a completely irreverent text centred on a trial against the Admiral. The judge and defending attorney are Chicanos loyal to their Hispanic roots, while the prosecutor, a man of indigenous origin, pleads for a verdict of guilty for this "great assassin". A witness named X, a black slave, fears that he will be acquitted, and indeed they do declare him innocent, but after hearing the sentence a young Chicana woman shoots him dead. This small independent Chicano film does what major commercial films have never dared to do. The killing of the first colonizer is a symbolic death and a complete break with every trace that recalls a tradition of Spanish/US dominance and oppression in the Chicano/Latino imaginary.

The disappointing parade of film essays that adopt black-and-white ideological postures, with plots supported by a scaffolding of monumental historical licence and inaccuracies and simplistic classifications for or against providentialist interpretations, foundationalist or deconstructive theories of nation, progress or modernity, is worthy of a study of its own. But I can affirm that three new films made in the 21<sup>st</sup> century seem to offer new approaches and presentations that are less spectacular but more intelligent and ironic, some of them entertaining



1492: *The Conquest of Paradise* (Ridley Scott, 1992)

and others provocative. In contradistinction to comedy and to the all-encompassing epic biography vindicating Spanish ingratitude, these films opt for the possibilities offered by adventure film and meta-film, and openly advocate the construction

of texts of a fictional character, thereby moving away from the pretension of realism, but establishing narrative threads that connect past with present. The first of these is *Christopher Columbus - The Enigma* (2007) by the nearly one hundred year-old Portuguese film director Manoel de Oliveira, who conceived it as “a work of fiction with a romantic tone, evocative of the act of discovering America”. And it is according to this conception that it should be judged. As is typical for Oliveira, the film is long, slow, nostalgic, intellectual and discursive. Based on the book *Christopher Columbus was Portuguese!* (2008), by Manuel Luciano de Silva and Silvia Jorge de Silva, this film offers a different perspective that is in part positioned as a compensatory nod to the postponement or oblivion over the last five hundred years of the achievements and nautical and maritime contributions of the Portuguese around the world generally, but especially in North America, without delving into the problematic issues of postcolonial times. The film starts with the image of the Admiral’s enigmatic signature and a narrator’s voice explaining the keys that reveal its true identity (Salvador Fernández Zarco, son of Isabel Gonsalves Zarco, daughter of the Jewish sailor Joao Gonsalves Zarco, who discovered Porto Santo, and of Fernando, Duke of Beja and enemy of King Juan II). Immigration, scientific study, passion and dedication come together in the life of this character and his wife, who spend their time travelling from place to place (Cuba, Alentejo, where Columbus was born), visiting museums and monuments, absorbed in a poetic and musical atmosphere that evokes the sea, in search of records of the great discoveries of Portuguese history.

The premier of *The Manuscript* (2009) by the young director Alan Nadal Piantini was a milestone in the history of Dominican film as the first epic adventure film produced in that country. Shot in Spain and in the Dominican Republic, the film tells of the adventures of a young investigator modelled on Indiana Jones, Lara Croft and Jack Colton, named Santiago Chevalier (played by Nadal Piantini himself), and a history teacher who become caught up in a complex plot involving various mysteries. A group of Spanish mercenaries try to steal Columbus’ remains and in the process find a manuscript that contains

a secret. The loss of these remains would affect not only the island’s economy, but also the dignity of a nation that has turned them into the cornerstone of its national history and identity. This search and in the efforts to stop the robbery results in a magical mixture of the roles of Columbus, the clergy of the Cathedral, the historians, the image of three caravels juxtaposed with those of an aeroplane, the excavations, and assorted struggles and intrigues; in short, adventures mixing together five hundred years of the history of Columbus in the Dominican Republic and Spain aimed at seducing the spectator. The soundtrack contributes brilliantly to integrate emotion and suspense into the action.

*Even the Rain* (2010), directed by Icíar Bollaín, is a film dedicated to the memory of Howard Zinn, the historian and the activist known for his stance against the war in Vietnam, the defence of the rights of the marginalised and for his popular book *A People’s History of the United States* (1980), based on the story of Hans Koning. The film presents a Columbus driven by his passion for gold, with a troubled disposition reflected in his obsession for erecting crosses and gallows, who enslaves Indians and subjects them to forced labour or turns them into servants, and who is incapable of restraining the *fierce beasts* of his men, who came only to kill, destroy and commit all manner of cruelties. And this is the version of Columbus that Sebastián (the director, played by Gael García Bernal) comes to film in Cochabamba, Bolivia. Very cleverly Bollaín resorts to the film within a film in order to situate a kaleidoscope of dominant and subaltern perspectives and relationships at the heart of the film, thereby problematising the accuracy and limitations of any approach to the past and the difficulties and challenges involved in examining it in all its complexity. It is a fiction film (Icíar Bollaín’s) about the production of another film (Sebastián’s about *Columbus*), to which other productions are added, like the documentary about the making of the film about Columbus, and an aborted project (the refusal to film a documentary about the abuse of the Indians for protesting against water privatization), as well as scenes that show the actors viewing the filmed scenes, or the television reports about the Indians’ demonstrations against the government. As spectators we witness the production of a text (the film) in which the prescriptions of a script, the references and sources that Sebastián turns to (De Bry’s drawings as a model of the brutalities), the circumstances, anxieties and frustrations of the actors, the contraposition between the desire to make a unique film and the stubborn insistence of the producer (Luis Tosar) for economising and minimising costs even at the expense of historical accuracy (filming in Bolivia instead of the Caribbean, hiring Indians who speak Quechua to play the role of the Arawak people), the question of the participation of indigenous actors (the Indian mothers who refuse

to take part in the scene in which they must drown their children) and the crisis in Cochabamba all problematise the limitations involved in creating, filming and writing about history, and in practice, prevent the completion of the film. But added to this story is the drama of Daniel (the leader of the Indians, played by Hatuey) and his fight against the authorities who oppress them, imprison them or abuse them for defending their rights to water. The Water War breaks out, the production team must decide whether to help, intervene, or flee in terror and cowardice from the danger. The producer, who initially has no interest in the local drama, risks everything to save the daughter of the leader of the protests, resulting in a drama of human transformation and solidarity.

The characterisation of Columbus (played by Karra Elejalde) as a gold obsessed slave-driver and oppressor of the Indians contrasts with the positions of social and human justice of the two other major characters, Montesinos and Las Casas, who temper the behaviour of the discoverer and the other evil Spaniards. In the end, the film is never finished; there are still incomplete fragments of scenes of a Columbus who –slave-driver or not– escapes once again so that many more Columbuses may rise from the places where they were silenced or banished by the director, and seek out more directors to try out new masks for the Admiral's identity. ■

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## Notes

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- 1 Other films about Columbus worth mentioning, apart from those that are discussed in this article, include: *The Coming of Columbus* (Colin Campbell, 1912); *Christoph Columbus* (Márton Garas, 1923); *Columbus* (Edwin L. Hollywood, 1923); *The Double-Crossing of Columbus* (Joseph Henabery, 1934); *Cristoforo Colombo* (Carmine Gallone, 1937); *Chris Columbo* (Eddie Donnelly, 1938); *Christopher Columbus Jr.* (Roger Clampett, 1939); *Where do we go from here?* (Gregory Ratoff, 1945); *Hare We Go* (Robert McKimson, 1951); *Kolumbus entdeckt Krähwinkel* (Ulrich Erfurth, 1954); *The Story of Mankind* (Irwin Allen, 1957); the Brazilian television series *Cristóvão Colombo* (1957); *Christopher Columbus* (Jay Ward, 1962); *Willy McBean and His Magic Machine* (Arthur Rankin Jr., 1965); *Cristóbal Colón en la facultad de medicina* (Julio Saraceni, 1962); *Columbus 64* (Ulrich Thein, 1966); the Italian-Spanish miniseries *Cristóbal Colón/Cristoforo Colombo* (Vittorio Cottafavi, 1967); *Professor Columbus* (Rainer Erler, 1968); *Christopher Kolumbus oder Die Entdeckung Amerikas* (Helmut Käutner, 1969); *El paraíso ortopédico* (1969), by Chilean Patricio Guzmán; *Robinson Columbus* (1975), by Danish Ib Steinaa; *Der: Ein Kolumbus auf der Havel* (1977), by German Hans Kratzert; *Le retour de Christophe Colomb* (Jean-Pierre Saire, 1983); *Christopher Columbus* (Alberto Lattuada, 1985); the animated film *Die Abenteuer von Pico und Columbus* (Michael Schoemann, 1990); *Colon: The Scatological Columbus Epic* (Eric Gravley, 1992); *Mein Freund Kolumbus* (Thibaut Chatel, 1992); and the animated film based on the book of the same name by Dario Fo *Johan Padan a la descoberta de l'Americhe* (Giulio Cingoli, 2001).

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