

God Is...

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Núria Güell, *Una película de Dios—A Godly Tale*, 2018, videostill [Cat. 7]

What does God have to do with the trafficking of women? For the Mexican version of her project, Núria Güell decided to interview girls rescued from human trafficking networks and to base these interviews on works of colonial art. It proved to be a revelatory intuition.

From the very beginning, we see an unmistakable origin-based disparity between Güell and her interviewees. While the artist takes care to introduce herself as Catalan, this nuance holds little relevance in Mexico: her accent and appearance are interpreted as simply “Spanish.” Her frankness contrasts with the discomfort shown by most (though not all) of her subjects, as well as of the men she chats with. Güell is the one who controls the project, the camera, the editing. In short, she occupies a position of power, as tends to be the case for Europeans (especially Spanish) in Mexico. Certainly, the entire project was grounded in clarity and respect toward the interviewees, even by the two men who appear on the scene—men we gradually learn have trafficked women. However, Núria unquestionably steers the situation, and the selection of colonial art helps us interpret the glaring cultural asymmetry in retrospect.

The girls are asked to comment on works that Mexico City museums have agreed to lend for the exhibition. In discussing these paintings, it becomes clear that they recognize very few of the Catholic scenes beyond the most obvious ones, like Adam and Eve. The biblical stories conveyed in the paintings are foreign to them; they know nothing about the *Golden Legend*; and they are far from being able to explain why Saint Agatha has lost her breasts. It matters little that their own stories graze those of the Italian virgin, or that Vaccaro’s painting is located in the San Carlos museum, which they have never visited.

Therefore, when Núria Güell explains her intention to show the girls images that are part of “the culture,” an essential problem is revealed, one that will continue to unfurl throughout the project: European Catholic culture is considered “culture” by antonomasia. It is taken for granted that her interviewees are part of that culture (something that is never confirmed in the interviews), and they too accept the premise that images from European culture are products of culture writ large. This normalization of European culture as “universal” reveals a disregard for the violent conditions of imposed evangelization in Spain-plundered lands starting in the fourteenth century. It’s no secret (although such this information is treated as secondary, as part of “the past”) that in

Anáhuac, European Catholic culture was violently inflicted onto a population whose heirs identify as Catholic today, even though they do not truly belong to this tradition; indeed, they access it only superficially, because it was never theirs to begin with. For example, how much does the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* really matter in Mexico, not to mention Spanish mysticism in general? Spanish Catholicism is unthinkable without it; in Mexico, though, the mysticism of Saint Teresa or of Saint John are either shadowy chapters or entirely unknown. The Spanish colony imposed epistemic violence here. The indigenous people's severance from their own cultures did not mean that they were fully integrated into the new society—and not only due to major obstacles such as the confrontation of two completely different histories and languages whose structures, writing systems, and morphology resisted such consolidation, but also because integration was never truly the objective of the Spanish project. Evangelization functioned as a tool of domination, and it was translated into a realm of social differences based on racism; “caste paintings” clearly conveyed these hierarchies. Today, too, racism in Mexico still classifies people according to the color of their skin. (45:47).¹

Evangelization ushered in a patriarchal, colonial, racist regime that planted deep cultural roots in Mexico. While the settlers lacked total access to European Catholic culture, colonial domination and exploitation did permeate the social fabric. It hardly could have been otherwise: most social relations at the time were regulated by the legal apparatus set forth in Alfonso X's *Las siete partidas* [*Seven-Part Code*] which clearly express the close institutionalized relationship between religion and masculine domination.

In Mexico, a relationship has been established between poverty and the indigenous world, as if the former were somehow intrinsic to the lifestyle of the latter. In this sense, it is clear that the colonial order has not disappeared. The very act of using “Indian” or “indigenous” to condense an entire range of astonishing cultures into a single word serves as harsh proof of its persistence. *A Godly Tale* subtly but effectively exposes the existence of this colonial backdrop as a basis for the dire conditions facing women, who often exploited by pimps to give them a sense of two-pronged hope: they will leave poverty behind, travel to the city, and find

1— We will be referencing certain moments from the video *A Godly Tale*, which is part of Núria Güell's exhibition at the MUAC.

love. Like the three-faced Christ in the colonial painting, these three expectations are fused into one: *to escape from nothingness, which has a lonely face.*

Marie Magdalene Penitent

Him: The image represents the loneliness they felt. Even though they were with other girls, they were vulnerable, alone, helpless.

Her: They drugged her and raped her a bunch of times because she didn't want to have sex.

Him: Some people do notice, but no one does anything for them. They can't scream for help. They feel alone.

Her: We feel alone inside. We don't get enough protection from other people.

They are reduced to this nothingness by their triply subordinate state: being women, being poor, and not being "white." Theodor Adorno once said "Love you will find only where you may show yourself weak without provoking strength,"² and there is certainly no love to be found in these lives. But there is *hope* for love, an eternal flame that lets them keep living. However, this hope is problematically configured, because it is based on a presupposition: the chance for a better life depends on men.

The women always feel alone. There is a deep void, and they want to fill it with this man's image. They want to feel full of love and excitement. And they want to know that men have power, so that they can stop feeling alone. So that they can feel love and be sheltered by it. (52:25)

There is an intensely revealing moment in the video: halfway through the interview, after describing the atrocities to which they were subjected by various men, all the women jump, shout, and lean out the window when their neighbor, a good-looking young man, appears in their line of sight. (31:25).

Meanwhile, the male interviewees haven't escaped violence, either. If the accounts of two men, a pair of brothers, are to be believed, their childhoods were marked by the beatings they received from their mother and grandmother—as well as by the

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2— Theodor Adorno, *Mínima moralía*, Madrid, Taurus, 2001 [1951], p. 193.

beatings that men dealt their mother, a prostitute (53:18). For these men—both uneducated and without access to the labor market—women are objects, property, valuable goods in a world that forecloses other material, cultural, and emotional assets. This is, then, a patriarchal regime within what Aníbal Quijano has called the “matriz colonial del poder” [the colonial power apparatus], which wholly distorts men’s and women’s lives, though not in equal ways. Within this regime, the status of women is even more starkly inferior: a condition reinforced by an education in which mothers train their daughters to “respect men,” bolstering respect for the Catholic religion. As a result, women tend to exert terrible violence onto other women in a ferocious defense of this value system.

In other cases, women see their daughters as rivals competing for a man’s affection. Even if he’s raping the daughter, even if she’s only nine years old, it doesn’t matter: she is still a rival. This harsh competition, the essence of capitalist modernity, ends up obliterating family ties. People are only deemed worthy if they have exchange value as commodities. In being objectified, then, their worth is reduced to that of a merely sexual object, which makes incest nearly systematic.

When it comes to such devastation of the symbolic realm, which Lévi-Strauss describes as the very foundation of culture, what transpires is not only dehumanization, but also death as a solution to horror. Could this be what makes Santa Muerte [Holy Death] emerge as an escape hatch for Catholicism in the video (1:02:00)? The syncretism of this cult is very clear: it is genuinely Mexican and certainly not Catholic. Worshiping death grants power, agency: “You can’t touch this,” says the mother of the pimps, whom was initiated into the cult by her sons. Worshipers appeal to her for protection, although they do so at some risk; you pay for any disloyalty with your life or your children’s lives. Even so, having death on your side is essential ammunition for someone who decides to do “bad things.” After all, the Santa Muerte doesn’t work miracles; people request bad things of her. This escape for Catholicism is thus an element of agency, but it takes place on the margins of the law: through criminal activity, where death is the only true solution.

Amid such precariousness, the “sexy” female body can be another agency-propelling factor. In this respect, one of the girls explains how she used to charge her clients five thousand pesos for intercourse and a thousand additional pesos every time they asked for something else. In this patriarchal world, women aren’t

entirely defenseless; they find agency as women in their sensuality and their bodies, but in few other places, which leaves them highly exposed. As a result, they are unable to solve the problem of their “void,” the emptiness they hope to fill in the form of a man.

Adam and Eve

Her: They make a good couple. They’re really happy.

Him: They’re a couple. When it was time for them to be with us, we made them believe that we really loved them. There was a romance. There were feelings like they meant something to us. It can have religious or historical meaning, but the girls believed in a kind of marriage that would bring them a better standard of living. Once we had them “working,” we made them think it was temporary, that they’d get to buy a house and be housewives. It meant getting them out of their environment without any support from anyone.

This hope for a better life, the women’s desire to secure a certain kind of peace (being a housewife, having a family, being loved and valued), and the assurance that their suffering is a temporary state en route to a better life, is the essence of the pimps’ promise: the bait that lures them into horror. When they bite the hook, their loneliness deepens.

While their longed-for redemption takes the form of marriage, one in which the man is the supreme good, the girls’ testimonies convey the systematic absence of men who might serve even marginally as father-figures. They are certainly absent as material providers; above all, none are loving or protective. In *Una película de Dios*, there are no fathers. There are copulatory machos, there are procreators, there are rapist stepfathers, but there are no fathers. The paternal role is gone; there is only violence and incest in its place.

For these women—and in some sense for the men as well—God is the father they never had. God, or the concept of God, is the figure of someone who protects, loves deeply, allows community ties to be forged with others (*religio*). In this way, the cycle is renewed: the idea of God is ultimately their last hope, and religion seems to be the only way out of a labyrinth that the women themselves have created.

All this being said, it is striking that the two pimps’ social reintegration occurs via their transformation into Protestant pastors, with all the ultra-conservative and androcentric values that such

a choice implies. Thus, the colonial power apparatus is renewed and reinforced, now governed by the form of neoliberalism spread south from the United States. This is by no means an incidental detail: Protestant neocolonialism has already contributed to how the most disadvantaged sectors of the Brazilian population voted in a fascist president. Such ultra-conservative morals go hand-in-hand with neocolonialism at its most predatory, allowing us to think that we have ended up in a film of God. As Lacan once predicted: this is the triumph of religion, but, of course, in its affiliation with capitalism, as intuited by Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Religion operates by mobilizing a poor, vulnerable flock toward a protective God who is infinitely good, loves unconditionally, and takes care of His own, dividing them clearly between men and women, each with their own specific roles.

The exhibit also includes *Magdalene in front of Jesus*, by Juan Correa, a New Spanish painter born in Mexico in the seventeenth century. As with all the other paintings, there is a speaker mounted over the public, playing a recording of an interviewee. For this piece, the voice belongs to one of the brothers as he gives his video testimony. The narrative is more complete in the exhibition, however, and what the viewer hears literally falls down onto her from up above. As he discusses the painting—in which Mary Magdalene kneels at Jesus’s feet, surrounded by various men and not a single woman—he describes how he once saw one of the girls speaking with a police officer. Since that was forbidden, the man threatened her: “We will talk at home.”

Him: “Do you know what’s going to happen to you?” “Yes,” she said, and she asked if she could go to the bathroom first. She was terrified. There was a picture of Christ in the hallway. I watched her and saw that she was kneeling there. I asked her what she was doing, and she said, “I was praying to God that you wouldn’t hit me.”

I had a stick I called “Panchito.” I hit her with it that day.

Pope Francis recently sent a message to his flock: “Jesus doesn’t settle for a ‘percentage of love’: we can’t twenty, fifty, or sixty percent love him. It’s all or nothing.”³ It’s true: Jesus demands

3— Pope Francis (pontifex_es), November 14, 2018. Accessible at: <https://twitter.com/pontifex_es/status/1062684069551575040?lang=es>.

total surrender. But does he keep his promise of a better life? He couldn't give the woman what she begged for as she prayed on her knees. She got a beating anyway.

God is a systematically un-kept promise, especially for the vulnerable. But the promise is very effective, and God keeps drawing from it, convincing parents to deliver their sons and daughters into the hands of men (calling themselves *fathers*) who will violate them in all possible ways, including, of course, sexually. In the film, the two brothers operate in exactly this way: they promise women love and protection, assure them support and a better future, but the women end up in prostitution. It is hardly coincidental that both men have found God along the way: the illusion of God was always there, helping them *work*. God is a pimp.