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**The Typological Rhetoric of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's  
*La última cena*<sup>\*</sup>**  
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Hipertexto

In this article, I will deal with how Cuban film director Tomás Gutiérrez Alea uses Biblical typology in his film *La última cena* to criticize the treatment of slaves during Cuba's colonial period and concurrently to incite awareness of such mistreatment in his present day audience. Biblical typology has been an important interpretative tool for many centuries. The early church fathers used it to discuss how the Old Testament prefigures the New. Northrop Frye succinctly defines this practice:

The general principle of interpretation is traditionally given as "In the Old Testament the New Testament is concealed; in the New Testament the Old Testament is revealed." Everything that happens in the Old Testament is a "type" or adumbration of something that happens in the New Testament...What happens in the New Testament in an "antitype," a realized form. (79-80; cf. Landow ix)

For example, Moses is an Old Testament type of the New Testament antitype Jesus Christ, in that both save their people. Typology's most important objective is to explain away supposed divergences and inconsistencies between the Testaments, such as how to comprehend the priority of the New Testament over the Old or how to understand the drastically different natures of God in the two volumes. The prophetic sense of typology should also be noted; an Old Testament type "prophesies" a New Testament antitype.

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In the modern era, especially since the 19th century, typology has lost its place in Biblical Studies. Theologians no longer typologically interpret the Bible because they tend to accept the same inconsistencies as relevant to distinct periods in Judeo-Christian history. Nevertheless, typology has begun to exercise a great influence on literary production. Such works portray a character that functions as a type of a Biblical antitype. In other words, the modern literary work functions as the Old Testament does in traditional typological exegesis. For example, works like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Lowance 159-84) and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Anspaugh 219-23) utilize Biblical tropes in such a manner. To illustrate, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* Eva and Uncle Tom are Christ figures who through their deaths inspire people to change their opinion of slavery. Texts like these use this rhetorical strategy in order to criticize a society that doesn't rise up to Biblical standards. In addition, the prophetic sense of typology gives these authors a way to talk about a more desirable future.

In the contemporary period, typology continues to have a role in literature. Judy Pocock has, for example, observed typological characterization in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. Interestingly, in this novel (as well as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Huck Finn*, albeit in different ways), typology functions as a tool with which to talk about the African American experience. For African Americans, the Bible can have something of an ambivalent significance. As Vincent Wimbush says,

Almost from the beginning of their engagement with it, African Americans interpreted the Bible differently from those who introduced them to it, ironically and audaciously seeing in it—the most powerful of the ideological weapons used to legitimize their enslavement and disenfranchisement—a mirroring of themselves and their experiences, seeing in it the privileging of all those who like themselves are the humiliated, the outcasts and powerless. (17)

In spite of this double sense of the Bible, or perhaps partly because of it, Osayande Obery Hendricks says that Morrison uses what Hendricks calls “guerrilla exegesis”: “*Guerrilla exegesis*, then, is the bringing or leading out of oppressed/suppressed/don't-get-no-press meanings by sabotage, subversion or other non-traditional appropriations of hegemonic renderings” (76 author's emphasis). When Morrison invokes typological meaning, she uses it in more unorthodox ways than Stowe or Twain. The ambivalence her culture feels about the inheritance of the Bible dictates that this must be so.

Why does Morrison use typology, if it is difficult to use in the accepted fashion? When Pocock describes typology, she identifies a great and strategic rhetorical power: “Morrison appropriates the methodology of Christian typology and her primary strategy is to mobilize the *typological power* of biblical names” (282 my emphasis). What characterizes this power? I would suggest that typology's force resides in, first of all, its status as a collection of tropes that have great resonance with the large number of readers who know the Bible, which has an unequalled place in the Western cultural tradition. Second of all (and this is precisely the utility of guerrilla exegesis), its use permits Morrison to highlight the contradictions between the teachings of the Bible and the horrors of racial inequality enforced by supposedly

Christian peoples. The ambivalence that Wimbush mentions is an expression of these productive contradictions.

One could say that Latin American liberation theology has aims similar to those of guerrilla exegesis. The movement's operative idea was that the Church had systematically served the rich and ignored poverty since the colonial period, so much so that it needed to institutionally reorganize itself so that it could provide "an initial political option for the poor that [is] followed by a subsequent epistemological option for the poor" (Tombs xii). In other words, Tombs says that liberation theology asserts that the Church must provide material sustenance and political representation ("political option," or better said "political rights") for the poor and then a theology that gives priority to the poor instead of the rich (an "epistemological option"). Liberation theology exercised great influence on the Latin American political climate during the second half of the 20th century. Although its influence has waned since the 1990s, it continues to be a vident force.

Although Alea has little to do with these changes in the Church in a concrete, institutional manner, one could say that, in a broader sense, his film *La última cena* continues the work of the liberation theologians by virtue of its attempt to rethink and use religious tropes in a way that sheds light on social injustice. Specifically, Alea utilizes a typological allegorical system. As such, perhaps Roberto Fernández Retamar would say, in terms of the genealogies that he develops in his well-known essay "Caliban," that Alea continues in the line of liberatory Latin American religious thinkers that began with Bartolomé de las Casas and culminates with the contemporary currents of liberation theology. What is more, Alea stands, along with Morrison and others like her, in a tradition that has mixed feelings about the Biblical inheritance yet sees its power and therefore utilizes it for revolutionary aims.

*La última cena* was released in 1976, a year that perhaps not coincidentally lies in Morrison and liberation theology's most productive period. It deals with a religious count who, during the 1790s (we know the rough time period because the plot takes place soon after the end of the Haitian Revolution), decides to benevolently make an example to his slaves and his brutal overseer, don Manuel, by reenacting the Last Supper. The count plays the role of Jesus, and has the overseer pick 11 slaves to act as disciples, while the count himself picks, as the 12th and last disciple, a rebellious slave named Sebastián. However, the count's ostensible kindness is revealed to be false when he brutally kills the 11 slaves the overseer had picked (Sebastián escapes) after the slaves rebel for being forced to work on Good Friday after the count had told them during their supper that they would not have to do so. The story has a factual basis. Alea took it from Manuel Moreno Fragnals's history *El ingenio*, which narrates the story of a count who did more or less the same (Fragnals 49).<sup>1</sup>

*La última cena* came out in a period in which "[t]he establishment of the ministry of culture, together with larger political developments during the period, led to a revitalization of cultural objectives. Included in this was the development of a

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<sup>1</sup> Alea says in regards to this story, "Ese episodio es un hecho real; se concentra en el personaje del Conde Bayon, que reunió un Jueves Santo a doce esclavos, les lavó los pies y los invitó a cenar... cuando al otro día nadie acude a trabajar el mayoral desata la represión y el conde se quita la máscara. Comienza una rebelión" (Evora 39; cf. Alea 1987: 53, Alea 1989: 154).

more coherent, more lucid historical vision” (Sánchez Crespo 198). Alea took part in this development, as at this point in his career he had elected to utilize a more direct filmic language in order to communicate his message to his audience with greater clarity, and history was one of the mediums he chose to use to achieve this aim. As such, *La última cena* serves not only as an investigation of the history of slavery in Cuba but is also a film that uses this historical information to incite awareness of racial and class politics in the contemporary audience by showing how such history informs the present. William O. Deaver characterizes the film as propagandistic, saying “the film depicts a call to arms and the mobilization of the revolutionary movement in contemporary society to overthrow oppression and inspire insurrection against imperialism and colonialism” (438). It is, then, impossible to think about this film outside of the context of the Cuban Revolution. This is, of course, not unusual for the Cuban cinema, as the institutional program for the arts calls for works that serve the administration’s ideological agenda. What is uncommonly provocative about this film, though, is that Alea chose to utilize religious themes and tropes in order to achieve these ideological goals. Considering that Communist Cuba is an officially atheist society, Alea had to carefully develop an artistic vision that would not risk falling prey to the distinct possibility of censorship on the basis of a religious theme. Alea succeeded in this project precisely because he exercised great aptitude in the manipulation of guerrilla exegesis. Alea’s criticism of class-based injustice comes out clearly and strongly in *La última cena*; therefore, he did not offend the censors.

*La última cena* utilizes typological rhetoric in order to show in what capacity its characters manage to (or not to) live up to the moral archetypes found in the Bible. There are three Christ figures in the film.<sup>2</sup> Obviously the count is one of these, as he performs the role of Christ at the supper. Significantly, he consciously and intentionally plays this role (keep in mind that this is not the case for some of the characters I will discuss below). Alea goes to great pains before the supper sequence to allude to the count’s coming role. Cinematographically, there is a large quantity of shots suggestive of him as Christ. For example, soon after his arrival at the mill, we see the count conversing with the chaplain in front of a cross. During this sequence, the count spreads his arms wide in a posture that resembles Christ’s crucifixion on the cross. Such visual suggestions culminate in the setting of the supper sequence, which Alea intentionally designed to resemble Leonardo Da Vinci’s famous painting.

Despite the allusions to his status as a Christ type, his religious nature, and the sincere goodwill he feels towards his slaves, the count does not achieve the self-denying standard of Christ. In the end, his typological performance is little more than the ostentatious pretension of a man who, due to his mixed feelings regarding the institution of slavery, has a guilty conscience but will not cede his place of power. Indeed, the performance has as much to do with reaffirming this privilege as it does with religious feeling: as Alea says in regard to the count,

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<sup>2</sup> There are other examples of typological characterization as well, most notably the Judas type, but in this essay I will focus on the Christ figure.

La cena que [el conde] ofrece a sus esclavos no pretende ser una despedida sino más bien *una reafirmación ritual de su condición de amo* y, al mismo tiempo, un intento desesperado por resolver la contradicción entre sus intereses materiales y espirituales. En dos palabras: el conde quiere seguir disfrutando de sus privilegios, pero con la consciencia limpia. (Evora 40 my emphasis)

The breakdown in the count's religious character becomes apparent during the supper sequence. For example, after Sebastián spits on him, the count characterizes Sebastián as Judas. When he relates the story of the treacherous disciple to other slaves, he equivocally says that Judas sold himself for 20 (the correct amount is 30) pieces of silver. What is more, the majority of the count's religious discourse has to do with how the African race can achieve perfect happiness through slavery. The count asserts that slaves must necessarily suffer the pains of a life of hard work in order to enjoy the delights of heaven in death (cf. West 161). He goes so far as to say that God predisposes Africans to enjoy manual labor, as evidenced by the fact that they sing as they work. The slaves, of course, laugh at his naive theo-ideological defense of the institution that affords his livelihood. As Paul Schroeder says, "The supper sequence... provides a brilliant exploration into the mind of a sensitive if hypocritical slave owner and the contradictions in behavior and thought that result from the distortion of Christian values by material interests" (80). As such, while the count may seem uniquely religious in that he invites his slaves to dine with him, he is really little more than a master who uses religion as an ideological construct to defend his material interests. That is to say, he is more or less the norm and not so different after all, and certainly no Jesus Christ.

Finally, on the day after the supper, a date on which the count had promised that the slaves would not have to work in the fields, the count does nothing when the chaplain protests that don Manuel is making the slaves work, effectively breaking his promise. And when the slaves rebel, rather than considering his error in promising the slaves something he was unwilling to enforce, the count calls on soldiers who help him violently repress the rebellion. He kills eleven of the twelve slaves who had performed the role of the disciples, brutally placing their heads on tall stakes as an example to the potentially unruly. Earlier in the film, the chaplain had characterized the count as Christ and don Manuel as the brutal God of the Old Testament, but by the movie's culmination it is apparent that the count is the most merciless of all. This evolution in characterization inverts the typical typological logic that moves from an Old Testament type to a New Testament antitype. The count typologically devolves, moving backwards from the supreme Christian love of Christ to the destructive power of the Old Testament God.

Clearly, Alea intends for the audience to understand what he does with the count as a criticism of the duplicitous ideological nature of the aristocratic Christianity of colonial Cuba. Alea, though, does not attack Christianity out of sheer antireligious ill-will. His position is more nuanced; as he says,

Está claro que no es nuestra intención negar el espíritu cristiano como parte de nuestra herencia cultural. Por otro lado, la religión en si misma no es el gran problema, ya que no es una causa sino una consecuencia de las insuficiencias del proceso de desarrollo social... Pero la verdadera problema es la instrumentalización que se hace del espíritu religioso...

para someter a una clase y en todo caso para frenar el desarrollo de la sociedad. (Evora 41; cf. Alea 1987: 54)

As such, more than provide a criticism of colonial Cuban Catholicism, the film aims to show what happens when an “hombre sinceramente religioso” (Evora 43) loses sight of his religious values in the wake of class-based material desires. This does not necessarily imply a devaluation of religious belief, although it does, as evidenced in the above discussion, imply a hostile attitude towards the often oppressive ideological uses of such beliefs. Moreover, and most importantly for my argument, this ambivalent attitude towards Catholicism allows Alea to use religious tropes while maintaining a critical attitude towards the misuses of religion. Religion is not characterized negatively in and of itself; in fact, the point of comparing the count to Christ is to show that while Christ sets a positive example, the count does not fulfill his desires to be like the Savior. His worldly interests are more powerful than his spiritual feelings, and they eventually distort those religious feelings beyond recognition.

The film becomes more complicated when one considers the two other Christ types. The first of these is don Manuel. For most of the movie, don Manuel plays a villainous role by virtue of his cruel treatment of the slaves—as the chaplain says, don Manuel is the brutal God of the Old Testament (although I should note that the chaplain believes that don Manuel is just, as he sees the cruelty of the Old Testament God in terms of necessity and, moreover, the chaplain too favors the institution of slavery, although like the count he evidences the pangs of a guilty conscience in regards to it). The count and the chaplain feel themselves to be morally superior to don Manuel because they are ostensibly kinder to the slaves. During the supper sequence, for example, one slave asks the count if don Manuel is, as the chaplain says, like God, and the count in his drunkenness emphatically says no (and thereby duplicitously subverts the same authority that he will refuse to keep in check when don Manuel abuses it the next day).

However, while the moral status of the count worsens by virtue of his failure to live by the Christian standards he so zealously professes, something more ambiguous happens with that of don Manuel. It is undoubtedly true that he treats the slaves in a cruel, brutal manner. But is he worse than the count? Don Manuel says that he only does what is necessary, implying that he only does what he must do to further the count's interests, and there is a grain of truth in what he says. As such, don Manuel, although certainly not in the same way as the slaves, is subject to the count and the colonial power that he metonymically represents. His status as such becomes obvious during the slave uprising. It is in this sequence that don Manuel is forced to typologically perform a Christ role. Because he is the most obvious symbol to the slaves of their oppression, they put don Manuel in stocks. The visual image of the overseer in stocks typologically suggests Christ on the cross. The slaves first threaten and then decide to kill don Manuel when they find that the count will not cede their demands (Sebastián, whose ear don Manuel had cut off at the beginning of the film as punishment for attempting to run away, deals the overseer's death blow). While it may seem that don Manuel deserves his fate because he is the one who forces the slaves to work on Good Friday, it is important to remember that the chaplain advises the count not to permit don Manuel to make the slaves work.

Indeed, it is improbable that don Manuel knows anything about the count's promise to the slaves, and instead thinks that he is simply executing the count's will. And he is probably right. The count responds to the chaplain's entreaties by saying the he, despite his status as lord over the mill, has nothing to do with what don Manuel does. The count denies his power over don Manuel in order to place himself in a position of moral superiority over the overseer (he doesn't want to have anything to do with the mistreatment of slaves—that is don Manuel's domain), but his refusal to act is more a sign of approbation than anything else. The culpability, then, on final analysis lies with the count, whose unenforced promise lies at the heart of the misunderstanding. Therefore, don Manuel's performance of the Christ type can be understood as the overseer being sacrificed for the sins of the master and the society he represents. Significantly, don Manuel does not choose to play this role. The count, who does choose his role, can afford to act what is essentially a false Christ role but would never play the role of a suffering savior.

The third person, or better said the third group of people, that act the Christ role are the slaves (cf. West 159). Their performance as the disciples is more obvious than their Christ role, which does not become apparent until the final segment of the film. It does, though, become very clear in these late moments. This allusion is more powerful and direct than the one featuring don Manuel. The viewer sees don Manuel in stocks with his arms in a position that appears cross-like. The slaves' heads, on the other hand, are on stakes on the top of a hill, visually reproducing Christ's situation on Golgotha with the two criminals, which is one of the most enduring visual images of Christ in Catholic culture. As happens with don Manuel, the typological position of the slaves functions as a criticism of the colonial order. Logically, just as Christ must die for the sins of the Biblical order, someone must die for the sins of the colonial order, and those that must die are don Manuel and the slaves. Also as with don Manuel, it is important that the slaves do not choose to perform this role, and indeed are not in the position to choose anything for themselves. Their heads are on stakes because the count orders it so.

The position of Sebastián in this typological milieu is ambiguous. He is, of course, a slave. However, although all of the slaves seem to conform to certain character types (Antonio the Uncle Tom type, Bangoché the proud but resigned type), Sebastián is singular and better-developed in that he has a powerful, assertive nature. He functions as the Hegelian antithesis to the count. This is most apparent in the supper scene when Sebastián spits on the count. The count repeatedly asks Sebastián if he recognizes him (Alea plays on the Hegelian notion of recognition, so important in the master-slave dialectic), and Sebastián spits on him, asserting that while he may physically be a slave, he still has his subjecthood and refuses to mentally be a slave, furthering the dialectic that is operative between the two.

Furthermore, it is difficult to place Sebastián in the film's typological system. On the one hand, he has more to do with African than Christian religion (cf. Martínez-Echazábal 18, Chanan 272). What is more, he does not perform the Christ role as the other slaves do. Alea visually emphasizes this fact by giving Sebastián's head a place on one of the stakes, and then focusing the camera on that stake before fading out to Sebastián running free through the hills, with African rhythms as

background music. This fade out separates Sebastián from the Christian context of the crucified slaves and places him more squarely in an African context.

What one can say about Sebastián with some certainty is that he functions as a type of the Castro revolutionary. As Deaver says,

Unlike the other slaves, he is not a comic sycophant prone to dancing and joking for the master's diversion. Instead, he is a committed revolutionary dedicated to escape, mutiny, and social upheaval to achieve equality and freedom. As such, he is the harbinger of the Castro Revolution as well as the model citizen committed to *socialismo o muerte*. (438 author's emphasis)

This function, although in a manner distinct to that of the other characters, fits well with the prophetic sense of typology. Sebastián prophesies the liberating Revolution, just as the Old Testament prophesies the liberatory New Testament.

It should be duly noted that Sebastián manipulates typological logic by his own will. Sebastián's agency further emphasizes his status as a foil to the count, as Sebastián and the count are the only characters that by choice perform their roles (as opposed to don Manuel and the other slaves, whose roles are forced upon them). If one follows the logic of the film, this fact suggests that a certain power is invested in Sebastián, similarly as is in the count. This power is precisely that of a committed revolutionary that is a herald of the Castro Revolution. The juxtaposition of the count and Sebastián, which Alea emphasizes visually by the shots of the two at supper seated side by side, is one of two people that represent two groups that have had or have power in Cuba, namely, the colonial and Revolutionary systems of government.

In conclusion, *La última cena* realizes guerrilla exegesis through the typological characterization of Jesus Christ types such as the count, don Manuel and the slaves. The film criticizes the colonial order by showing how the count, who voluntarily performs a Christ role, doesn't live up to religious precepts that he pretends to espouse. An important element of this criticism is the question of who gets to choose to act such roles. The answer to this question resides in the characters that have power, the count being the most obvious of these. Don Manuel and the slaves don't have this power, a fact that reveals their oppressed positions in the colonial system that is operative in the film. The role of Sebastián is that of a Hegelian foil for the count. He is the only character that escapes the oppressive system that takes the lives of don Manuel and the other eleven slaves that ate supper with the count. On final analysis, he can be understood as a precursor to the Castro Revolution.



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