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Film Review: Joffé Roland, director. *The Mission*, Burbank, CA: Warner Bros, 1986.

By Katy Vargas

The popular film *The Mission* (1986), a British period drama depicting the experiences of a Jesuit missionary in mid-17th-century South America, underwent severe critique upon its release due to its sterilization and distortion of Indigenous struggles. Written by Robert Bolt and directed by Roland Joffé, the film primarily uses English, though several other languages, most notably Spanish and Guarani can be heard. Historically, the film had a significant impact, partially due to the time of its production as well as the reaction it garnered. Although considered "innovative" at its time, it ultimately sanitizes Indigenous resistance to serve a palatable version of history to a growing culturally conscious audience. The film does depict the brutality and violence endured by Indigenous populations, but these portrayals are largely one-dimensional, robbing them of much of their cultural identity. Furthermore, it adopts a Eurocentric perspective, focusing more on religious conflicts rather than the detrimental effects these disputes had on Indigenous peoples.

During the 16th century, European states began their conquest of South America, leading to the establishment of missions. This film is set almost a century later, during the mid-17th century, and takes place within the borderlands of present-day Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil, where Jesuit missionaries, backed by the Christian church, established missions to convert and subjugate native populations, using coerced labor to cultivate mission lands. The line of thinking used as justification involved the "modernization" of Indigenous populations in order to make them "useful". The film portrays these missions as sanctuaries for "backward" individuals when in reality, many of these missions were similar to what the general public and scholars alike

might consider slave encampments. The film romanticizes missions, presenting them as a more humane alternative to native freedom, yet individuals were often coerced or incentivized to stay. Few chose to remain voluntarily, and all who converted were trapped in these systems for generations, facing harsh punishment for even minor infractions. For example, Indigenous converts often received severe physical abuse, including floggings, for supposedly not working "hard enough." *The Mission* glosses over the coercive and subjugating elements of the missions, and instead, conveys the message that Indigenous people benefitted morally and financially from the work of the missionaries. In reality, Indigenous converts and laborers were not fairly compensated, and it was the missionaries who reaped the benefits of their hard work.

The film takes place between 1754 and 1756, during the Guarani War—a native rebellion against Jesuit missionaries. This conflict was triggered by the signing of the Treaty of Madrid, which redefined colonial borders in South America and removed protections previously granted to missions, such as military protection and state-sponsored financial support. As a result, many privileges were lost, stripping one of the main reasons some individuals had chosen to stay. Supplies were no longer given, and security was nearly non-existent, leaving missionaries and local Indigenous populations vulnerable to outside forces. For the Indigenous converts, they were stripped of their way of life, taught "better", and then promptly discarded by the missions. While *The Mission* touches upon the drastic change endured by Indigenous converts, it does not adequately depict the dislocation, trauma, and inherent violence of how Indigenous lives and culture were completely uprooted during the period. Rather the film shows the aftermath briefly and depicts it as the Indigenous returning to "savagery". This reinforces the idea that the missions were vital, minimizing the real struggles of those who were displaced and abandoned.

The plot of *The Mission* begins with a priest sending his disciple to establish a South American mission, only for the Indigenous people to seemingly "crucify" him, sending him downriver unconscious. Father Gabriel, the head priest, then arrives and quickly integrates himself into the community with the use of a musical instrument that the film depicts as taming or charming to the local Indigenous population. Thus, Indigenous characters are made to appear almost animalistic, as though they are dangerous creatures that can be pacified or controlled. In particular, this scene seems reminiscent of a snake being swayed by a charmer. Within a short time, the group converts to Christianity, and the priest builds a mission to "civilize" them. However, the film overlooks the reality in that many Indigenous people fought for generations to preserve their religions, identities, and cultures, instead implying that Christianity was readily accepted. The only significant resistance to the spread of Christianity is shown briefly when the priest's disciple is nearly drowned and at the end of the film when the Indigenous fight against the Treaty of Madrid through warfare. Even then it is striking that these instances of resistance to the Church were depicted in the film as vehicles for the European characters' personal growth, rather than the exploration of Indigenous struggle and displacement.

Rodrigo, one of the main characters, is driven by grief and guilt after killing his brother and sees the mission as a form of repentance. When he arrives at the mission, the Guarani people cut the ropes he used to carry his belongings, symbolizing his release from his burdens. He is physically and metaphorically being cut free and while this scene is meant to show Rodrigo's transformation, it also mistakenly places the responsibility of his redemption on the native people, almost reducing their spirituality to a form of "magic." Additionally, the film implies that "helping" these people was so virtuous that it could absolve a man of murder. The film progresses to the signing of the Treaty of Madrid, which would lead to the destruction of the

missions as they no longer had protection and thus would be open to attacks from outside forces. Despite the priests' protests, their pleas go unanswered as soldiers arrive to destroy the mission and forcibly relocate the remaining Indigenous residents. The two main characters—Rodrigo and the head priest—choose different paths of resistance. The priest organizes a prayer circle, while Rodrigo steals the invading soldiers' equipment and teaches the Indigenous people to fight using European weaponry. The climax of the film takes place as soldiers overrun Rodrigo and the Guarani indigenous people, leading to many deaths and the burning of surrounding villages. While this scene highlighted acts of acute violence and brutality perpetrated against the Indigenous people, the director of *The Mission* foregrounded Rodrigo's journey from a simple mercenary to "Hero".

The Mission stands as a visually stunning film that tackles complex historical and cultural themes but ultimately falls short in its portrayal of Indigenous struggles. While it strives to shed light on the injustice and savagery faced by the native populations, it is an inherently Eurocentric film about European guilt and redemption, with Indigenous characters mostly relegated to the background. The production may have been considered cutting-edge at the time of its release, but it ultimately silences the resistance of the Guarani people and presents their struggle as secondary to the emotional journey of the European characters. By focusing on the internal conflicts of the Jesuit missionaries and their personal growth, the film misses the opportunity to explore the real, painful consequences of colonialism and the true cost of displacement and destruction of Indigenous cultures. The film could be described in many ways as justifying 17th-century missionary work (and imperialism) in South America, which in the present day is a much more scrutinized history. As such, *The Mission* serves as a poignant

reminder of how narratives can be shaped and manipulated to fit certain ideals, often obscuring the voices and experiences of those most affected by history.