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Film Review

Severo Pérez: *And the Earth Did Not Swallow Him* (1995)

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The year 1971 saw the publication of Tomás Rivera's *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him,* the slender novel that is a moving, multi-dimensional retrospective on Chicano migrant workers based in Texas in the '50's. In 1995, director Severo Pérez put out a film entitled *And the Earth Did Not Swallow Him,* based on the novel, using a script he himself wrote. The film was produced primarily for television (with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting as well as the National Endowment for the Humanities) which may have influenced the treatment of the novel.

The source novel is a variegated collection of 1st and 3rd person long and short poignant narrations by Mexican Americans. Essentially, these voices recreate a world of thorny and hurtful encounters with the host culture. Loss of comfort, dignity, and life itself is caused by their economic disenfranchisement. Contemplations, introspections, descriptions, and bits of dialogue recreate such varied experiences as a death from tuberculosis, the shooting of a child, the refusal of a haircut, the bullying in a schoolyard, a collapse from heatstroke. A major presence is a young boy, Marcos, who looks back on "that lost year," the quintessential time of his life, his coming of age.

Marcos is the central character in the film. All of the events are presented through his observation and narration. The family spends the year traveling in pursuit of harvest work. They move from one locale to another, one hard job after another, poorly paid, housed in hovels, thirsting in the sun. The events are lined up in the episodic fashion of the road film. Each scene presents an incident of alienation, frustration, sadness.

The film links the events with two recurring elements: scenes of travel, and scenes of Marcos' introspection. The travel scenes feature overcrowded trucks, backgrounds of beautiful countryside, dialogue about expectations, other places, other jobs. As they travel through the country, there is a resonating sense that it is not theirs. When they stop to work, it is clear that nothing is theirs.

The scenes of Marcos' introspection approach a deeper dimension. They show him wrestling in dreams with the nature of evil. Eventually, he expresses and indulges his anger at the poverty and pain of his life, dares to call down the devil himself -- "and the earth did not devour him!" He attains self-actualization in the striking realization of the righteousness of

his anger. (The film's treatment of this scene is indicative of its relationship to Rivera's novel, in which Marcos vented his anger by "cursing God.")

Another linking motif shows Marcos, hiding his expulsion from school by spending his days in a beautiful formalized cemetery. Idealization, a sense of beauty and peace, characterizes these scenes, suggesting hope and potential. A small touch of irony is present in Marcos' speculation that it's because this place is so beautiful that they -- presumably European Americans - don't cry when they bury someone there. Throughout the film, cultural differences get heavy-handed treatment. There is no possibility and more significantly no desire to assimilate with the villainous establishment monsters that scowl, threaten and cheat.

Over-the-top parody colors one scene in particular, where a minister's wife in charge of arranging a carpentry class for the workers instead arranges an assignation with the carpenter for herself. This scene has one of the most outstanding "gringo speaks Spanish" bits ever filmed. There is one good school teacher, of course, and the principal who is nasty --an international film motif, as is the spanking nun. There is the priest who kindly distributes postcards - from Spain, where he traveled, thanks to their generous offerings. And too, there is the occasional beautiful subtle characterizing moment, as when Marcos' father, reluctant to accompany his son to register in school, reveals an uncertainty, probably about his language, that Marcos never before saw.

Rivera's novel deals with subject matter of ultimate interest and importance subtly and beautifully. In the film, the story is made Crayola-clear: the chronology is simplified, the goodness is sanctified, the villainy is broadened, the losses are agonized. The cast is a handsome crowd of people. The film shatters the kaleidoscopic brilliance of the structure of the novel, lays the pieces out in a sluggish linearity, joins them with tacky cliches and dulls them with sentimentality. Marcos narrates, his boyish voice-over remaining consistent. The acting is broad, exaggerated, sometimes cartoonish.

The novel predated the current and growing surge of interest in Hispanic literature. The film, however, has not aroused a deserved revival of interest in the book, having abandoned entirely the rich Kafkaesque layering of the story. The filmic possibilities, given the nature of the subject matter, could rival Ford's *Grapes of Wrath.* Instead, they line up with *The Waltons.* The source material deserves better. It is time for a remake.