
Bless me, Ultima and the Representation of Social Relations in the Mexican-American Borderlands

By Anna Marta Marini

Set in New Mexico during the WWII era, Rudolfo Anaya's novel *Bless me, Ultima* (1972) is recognised as a Chicano literature classic. Its plot revolves around the relationship between young Antonio and his mentor, old *curandera* Ultima. Followed by *Heart of Aztlán* (1976) and *Tortuga* (1979), *Bless me, Ultima* is the opening novel of a trilogy giving voice to the ethnic counter-memory of Pueblo and Mexican-American people. Written in the wake of the Chicano movement, Anaya's narratives revolved around the reality of everyday life in the New Mexican borderlands, characterised by a strong connection with the landscape, the formation of hybrid identities, and the evolution of syncretic traditions. Given the central role of magic and the author's insight into Mexican-American borderlands culture, its independent film adaptation – directed by Carl Franklin (2013) – transposed the power of Anaya's storytelling, conveying the mythic dimension of the titular character and its impact on local social relations, as well as the exploration of borderlands identity. As it will be analysed further on, the supernatural realm and its connections with daily life, as well as its influence on social relations, are the main thematic and narrative pivots in the adaptation of *Bless me, Ultima*. The configurations of syncretism in the region emerge throughout the narration, as each social group is characterised by a peculiar set of shared values and beliefs; both the novel and the movie highlight as well distinct group members' takes on those same shared beliefs. Ultimately, attention is given to the representation of femininity, especially in relation to the traditional nature of the *curandera* practice and the domestic spiritual role of the woman.

The narrative opens with the arrival of Ultima (Miriam Colón) at the Márez y Luna's home, where she has been invited to move and spend her last days as a show of the profound respect the family holds her in. Right before meeting her, Antonio (Luke Ganalon) overhears his older sisters discussing the elderly woman's fame as a *bruja*, in spite of their parents' negation of Ultima's involvement with witchcraft practices. Traditionally, *curanderismo* is a syncretic practice related to herbal medicine and folk healing, which practice and knowledge are passed to a chosen member of the youngest generation through training.^[1] A *curandero* usually blends religious belief, herbal healing, and white magic practice, performing rituals that detect and contrast conditions possibly related to witchcraft

and curses thrown by *brujos*. In the very first sequence of the film, the theme of magic and its criticality is already evident. Settling in with the family, Ultima takes Antonio under her wing and spends the summer with him, teaching him *curandero* folkways; aside from passing on to him botanical knowledge, she exploits the child's curiosity and open disposition, as they enjoy the local environment together and explore it from stimulating, sympathetic perspectives. Dealing with society external to his domestic context, young Antonio is forced to choose between languages, religious beliefs, and customs; his encounter with Ultima will lead him on a path toward self-awareness and the formation of a consciousness that is multi-layered, in the recognition that - to be true to himself - the choice is not necessarily dichotomic as it seems to be.[\[2\]](#)

Magic permeates the relationship between the two protagonists from the start, as it is clear that Antonio could take Ultima's role as *curandero* in the future; his spiritually inclined nature is markedly different from that of his brothers and most male characters in the movie, and for that he has been chosen to take on her feminine ancestral knowledge. Ultima's spirit animal is the owl, which is now accompanying Antonio when she is not with him. Furthermore, the animal will be instrumental to the confrontation with her antagonists and, subsequently, the dramatic ending of the movie. The film is articulated following a linear narrative, as the flashbacks present in the novel - mostly in form of dream narration - are omitted.

Formally, Ultima and Antonio's enjoyment of rural space is constructed by setting the characters in long shot scenes, alternated with brief dialogues on the force of nature and accompanied by diegetic sounds of the natural environment. The same type of choice is made to structure the soundscape of many sequences in which the farmland is a strong visual component, such as Antonio's arrival at the Luna's *hacienda*. The New Mexican landscape appears consistently throughout the film. Aside from the wilderness explored by Ultima and Antonio, it is relevant to note the strong presence of landscapes dominated by yellow hues, a colour often exploited for its versatile ambivalence.[\[3\]](#) For example, golden yellow wheat fields - at times accompanied by bright natural greens - express a warm, welcoming feeling related to the child's experience visiting his mother's family. By contrast, washed-out, desaturated yellowing grass fields characterise - as analysed further on - the tense sequence of a witch's funeral. Aside from the overwhelming natural landscape presence, the soundtrack skilfully adds to the sense of adventure that accompanies the child in his discovery of the world outside his home.

The young protagonist's perspective is, in fact, central to many shots. When he finds himself among adults, the camera is often placed either at

his eye level - the subjects presented from a slightly low angle - or right behind his back, using his blurred body to frame the scene itself.

The visual representation of a spiritual - and intrinsically supernatural - connection between Ultima and Antonio is constructed in a few different and yet complementary ways. Since the moment of their encounter, a recurrent transition shot accompanies moments in which Antonio feels suddenly bedazzled by a baffling sense of metaphysical power; the shot simply shows a strong, flickering, warm white light during a prolonged moment. As their relationship deepens, Antonio serves as a channel for Ultima to perform her healing magic and yet, the moments of magical action are not thoroughly described. Rather, the understanding of what is happening is left for the spectator to deduce, guided by the perceptions evoked by the visual representation. The mechanism and description of the supernatural healing process are not clear, and they are not supposed to be. The related sequences are characterised by slightly blurry, fixed shots, in which the spectator is placed in Antonio's perspective, whether internal to the character or external, as a suggested out-of-body point of view. Therefore, the magic is represented as - adopting Pier Paolo Pasolini's words - the oneiric archetype intrinsic to cinema and its fundamental irrationalism, through the construction of quasi "cinema di poesia" sequences in which the director's implicit presence and choices become evident.[\[4\]](#)

Drawing on Pasolini's poetic take on film, the reconstruction of the subjective dimension of memory and dream can be assimilated to a film sequence. Insisting on specific shots, the subconscious - and its magical dimension - is represented as an immersion into the character's state of mind and subjective perception, realised by means of formalism. It is a crucial choice in facing the adaptation of the novel, in which the description of magical practice is backed up by oneiric passages. In the inter-semiotic transformation, a mediation between all the magic-related literary elements is necessary in order to convey Anaya's subtle poetic description of magic and supernatural circumstances. In the novel, the oneiric dimension holds, indeed, a most relevant semantic value, as dream, magic, and reality plans intersect throughout the narration.[\[5\]](#)

The magic-related themes strengthen by the first quarter of the movie, when Antonio's uncle falls ill apparently as a consequence of unwillingly witnessing a witchcraft ritual performed by the Trementina sisters, who discover him, curse him and later refuse to lift the deadly spell. It is the first occurrence in which the magical aspects of Ultima's knowledge appear openly. In this occasion, she also marks a clear difference between the work of a *curandera* (implying there could be magic involved but never to harm) and the work of *brujas* or witches, such as she defines Tenorio's daughters. Ultima is called almost too late to save the young

man's life because of the family's fear of local prejudice, as well as of the possible reaction of the wicked Trementina family.

To convey the contrast between good and evil, the film also employs expressive lighting, alternating idyllic, bright views and dark, foreboding sequences corresponding with conflict and danger. When Ultima - bringing Antonio with her, for the first time outside the familiar, soothing context - confronts Tenorio Trementina (Cástulo Guerra) in his saloon, the protagonists go from blindly sunlit dusty exteriors to darker interiors, where chiaroscuro is exploited and a consequent sense of menace is palpable. The main conflict revolving around the use of magic and the struggle between the forces of good and evil lies indeed in the discrepancy between Ultima and what the Trementina family represents. The witch sisters' power does not root in wisdom nor deep understanding of the physical and metaphysical world, but rather in the will to cause harm. As a consequence of Ultima's intervention, later on the witch responsible for casting the spell dies, as the response to it has necessarily been as strong as the initial spell itself.

The aforementioned funeral sequence is constructed to convey the contrast between good and evil once again. Under the gaze of a small group of locals standing on the side, Tenorio leads the funeral procession reduced to himself - customarily dressed in black and riding a black horse - and the hearse, conducted by his two surviving daughters wrapped in black cloaks. As predicted earlier by the locals, the coffin is made of cottonwood branches, a rule dictated by shared beliefs regarding witches. As the Trementina family members approach the chapel, the priest stops them, refusing to perform the Catholic rite and forcing them to turn around and go back the same way they arrived from.

The colour palette significantly shows a dichromatic opposition. The blackness of the wicked family stands in stark contrast to the bright, overbearing sunlight casting a desaturated mood on the environment, where the chapel stands in the middle of dry grass fields. Such a discordance makes the viewer focus on the key spiritual characters, standing out in an otherwise balanced palette; the use of black colour is clearly associated with those who handle supernatural matters, whether for good or bad reasons. In fact, the only characters dressed in total black clothing throughout the movie are Ultima, the Trementinas and the local priest. By means of colour signification, the magical and the religious intertwine on the same ontological level, symbolising the syncretic blend of local beliefs once again.

Following the story's progression, it is clear that the protagonist is called when modern medicine seems to fail, and the resort to Christian faith does not provide relief either. Central to the movie is the community's

ambivalent attitude toward Ultima's role as *curandera* and magical woman, whose knowledge inspires rejecting fear and profound respect at the same time. Victim of constant accusations of witchcraft, the woman represents, nonetheless, the miraculous figure the community resorts to when facing grave sickness and inexplicable phenomena.

The syncretic character of Ultima's teachings and practices is evident from the start; a Christian perception of morality and an animistic ontology intertwine in the motifs of the magic represented. It results impossible to trace a neat distinction between the various elements blended in her spiritual discourse, as they cannot be uniquely connected to specific mythic and religious systems.^[6] The irrational component in her *curandera's* job blends Christian beliefs and tropes with a primordial sense of what is good and what is evil. The magical construct is supported by the equal presence of herbal medicine and application of elements derived from indigenous systems of knowledge, in which spiritual and medical aspects are indissolubly related. The contrast between the catechism taught to Antonio in church and the teachings of Ultima is stark. As much as the latter holds an oneiric component which bewilders him, the former comes across as menacing and far from soothing. In spite of the contraposition between Ultima and the Trementinas, the movie lingers on the ambiguity of the line between *curanderismo* and witchcraft. In this respect, a sequence of the film is particularly relevant. When a group of angered locals fuelled by Tenorio submit Ultima to a proof - walking through a door marked by a cross made with holy needles - she seems to pass and therefore prove that she is not a witch. Spectators notice though that the needles had fallen to the ground before her crossing, during the confused moments in which her owl attacks Tenorio disfiguring him.

The prejudice and conflict about *curanderismo* seem to be internal to the markedly rural community of Mexican descent, which is object itself of external prejudice and discrimination. The folkways remain within the boundaries of the ethnolinguistic minority group, as do the affective connections and social sharing, revealing the existence of an internal colonial system which Anaya depicted by means of his literary work.^[7] In the film adaptation, the cultural gap and relative isolation of Antonio and some of his friends is apparent in the school context, where even for eating tortillas he is laughed at and becomes an outcast. When Ultima makes her first public appearance, accompanying the Márez y Luna to mass, the sequence shows people in the background gossiping about it. It is evident that the *curandera* embodies a wise - respected and feared - ancestral authority among her people; nonetheless, in other circles of the community she is just an old woman, dressed in black, representing obsolescent traditions, uncivilised superstitions, and spooky esoteric beliefs.

Ultimately, it is relevant to note that when the community apparently revolts against Ultima, pushed by her antagonist Tenorio Trementina, the assumed witch-hunting group is composed solely by men. The roles of femininity are a central focus in the movie, exploring the multiple roles of women in the borderlands, where homes and spiritualities would structure around woman-centered frameworks.[\[8\]](#)

If Ultima embodies Mexican-American borderlands spiritual syncretism – and the Trementina sisters the evil counterpart of magic – Antonio’s mother represents Catholic faith. Her relationship with her youngest son is marked by the strong wish for him to become a priest, “a man of the people”, cultured and compassionate. In her faith system, though, there is a natural space for the *curandera*’s folkways and supernatural powers, as strict adherence to Catholic Christianity seems to be inadequate to the Mexican-American spiritual experience.[\[9\]](#)

In the first community-related sequence, Lupito – a young war veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder – kills a neighbour and flees along the banks of the river. The men go out to hunt him, meanwhile the women, such as Antonio’s mother, stay in and pray for the safety of their husbands and for Lupito’s soul. The division of roles is evident, as the men take care of the outside matters while the women govern the domestic space, caring for the family and guaranteeing the spiritual protection of their home.

Antonio’s schoolteacher miss Maestas also represents a mediator figure for Antonio, helping him to fit in society and make the most of his brightness, without forcing him to neglect his culture. The title itself refers to Ultima’s customary blessing and evokes the practice of daily blessing carried out by the elderly women, traditional in the ethnic minority communities of the region.[\[10\]](#) Paradoxically, the only wise male character mediating between superstitious prejudice and rationality is Narciso, the village drunkard (played by Mexican actor Joaquín Cosío). He is the mediator figure intervening in moments of conflict that bring sudden disruption to the small community, lucidly trying to bring his neighbours to their senses with words. Narciso acts in a space external to the home and directly confronting men, assuming a role women could not without breaking the community’s customs.

In conclusion, the focus of the film lingers on magic-related aspects favouring a selective adaptation of the novel, which in turn also explored in depth socio-historical matters and thematic lines related to other conflicts existing within the community, such as the contrasts between livestock herders and farmers. As Anaya himself observed, the film adaptation brings to a wider public an insight into the diversity existing in the country in a down-to-earth, earnest manner.[\[11\]](#) Without yielding to

folklorisation, the movie explores and renders the New Mexican traditional syncretic culture - imbued with spiritual belief, Catholic tropes, magic and mystery - embodied by the knowledge Ultima compellingly holds, as well as the essentially feminine spiritual roles distinctive of the local social system.

Notes

- [1] Robinett, 2003.
- [2] Lipsitz 1990, 227.
- [3] Bellantoni 2005, 76-77.
- [4] Pasolini, 1972.
- [5] Cantú 1974.
- [6] Lamadrid ,1985
- [7] Cañero, 2017.
- [8] Broyles-González, 2007.
- [9] Bauder, 1986.
- [10] Broyles-González, 2007.
- [11] Bridges, 2009.

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