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# Cabeza de Vaca : the rider on the psychic borderlands in Nicolas Echevarria's Cabeza de Vaca

Paul Galante  
*Lehigh University*

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**Galante, Paul**

**CABEZA DE  
VACA: THE  
RIDER ON THE  
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IN NICOLAS...**

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**June 2001**

Cabeza de Vaca: The Rider on the Psychic Borderlands in Nicolas Echevarria's  
*Cabeza de Vaca*

by

Paul Galante

A Thesis  
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Chairperson of Department

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## ABSTRACT

In my paper I examine how Nicolas Echevarria's film *Cabeza de Vaca* functions as a filmic representation of a historical narrative that shapes the questions we ask about the past. I focus on how the film attempts to fill the gaps in Cabeza de Vaca's sixteenth-century historical narrative by stressing that Cabeza de Vaca's shamanism is one of the crucial points of psychic connection with the natives. Cabeza de Vaca's *La Relacion* describes his shamanistic healing activities among the natives, but only offers a few key details about the extent and importance of his involvement in shamanism. Echevarria offers a dramatic and compelling representation of Cabeza de Vaca's shamanistic activity that the historical text only hints at. Cabeza de Vaca's syncretistic Christian/ native religious healing practices are an important symbol of him as a representative mestizo in the psychic borderlands between Spanish and native culture. I suggest that the film portrays Cabeza de Vaca's mystical shamanistic activity among the native tribes as the central element in the formation of his hybrid, syncretistic Spanish Christian / native new-world identity. In my examination of the film and Cabeza de Vaca's *La Relacion*, I propose that Echevarria's representation of Cabeza de Vaca portrays the liminal state of consciousness that serves as a prototype of the mestizo in Mexican national identity.

Cabeza de Vaca: The Rider on the Psychic Borderlands in Nicolas Echevarria's *Cabeza de Vaca*

Scholars are involved in an ongoing debate on the notion of film as an appropriate medium for the representation of history. Historian Robert Rosenstone suggests that "no matter how serious or honest the filmmakers, and no matter how deeply committed they are to rendering the subject faithfully, the history that finally appears on the screen can never fully satisfy the historian as historian (although it may satisfy the historian as filmgoer)" (1173). Rosenstone notes that for many academic historians "something happens on the way from the page to the screen that changes the meaning of the past as it is understood by those who work in words" (1173). Other scholars such as Hayden White argue that what happens in a screen representation of history is not much different than a written representation of history. White says that "every written history is a product of processes" that are "exactly like those used in the production of a filmed representation" (1194). According to White, "it is only the medium that differs, not the way in which messages are produced" (1194).

Donald Stevens suggests that historical subjects on film "can serve as an introduction to the past and an incentive to study history" and that the imaginative representation of history on film "shapes the questions we ask about the past and helps us guess where appropriate sources may be found" (6-7). My focus in this essay is how the film *Cabeza de Vaca* functions as a filmic representation of a historical figure that (as Stevens suggests) "shapes the questions we ask about the past" (6).

Mexican filmmaker Nicolas Echevarria's film *Cabeza de Vaca*, which is based on Spanish conquistador Cabeza de Vaca's written account of his experiences in the



sixteenth-century American wilderness from 1528 to 1536, is a filmic representation of a historical account that directly attempts to shape past history in order to "encourage historical imagination" (Stevens 7). Cabeza de Vaca's written narrative account, *La Relacion*, is the basis of Echevarria and Guillermo Sheridan's screenplay, but the events of the narrative are compressed into a series of scenes that never operate from a strictly chronological or linear narrative. The overall structure of the film is circular, beginning and ending in 1536, and telling Cabeza de Vaca's eight-year journey through the American wilderness in a flashback to 1528 and a series of scenes that largely compress the original story.

*Cabeza de Vaca* combines ethnographic, geographic, and autobiographic details from *La Relacion*, along with a filmic representation of the mystical beliefs, practices, and experiences of indigenous people and the deep personal faith of Cabeza de Vaca. According to Echevarria, the film is about "the depiction of a new man--who is not European, who is not Indian, who is right in the middle" (Della Flora H2). Echevarria says that "this is like the beginning of the new-born American or Latin American" (Della Flora H2).

In my examination of the film I will propose that Echevarria's representation of Cabeza de Vaca portrays the liminal state of consciousness that serves as a prototype of the *mestizo* in Mexican national identity. As Juan Bruce-Novoa notes concerning Cabeza de Vaca's self-representation in *La Relacion*, "Cabeza de Vaca is the New World mestizo voice spoken for the first time" (129). Bruce-Novoa asserts that "having acculturated to survival, Cabeza de Vaca was no longer the Spaniard who set out on the voyage, but a hybrid New World man" (129). Cabeza de Vaca in Echevarria's film is portrayed as the

rider on the psychic borderlands between Spanish and native culture, identity, and consciousness. I will focus in this essay on the representation of Cabeza de Vaca as a shaman in both Echevarria's film and Cabeza de Vaca's *La Relacion*. The film portrays Cabeza de Vaca's mystical shamanic activity among the native tribes as the central element in the formation of his syncretistic Spanish Christian / native new world identity, while in *La Relacion* Cabeza de Vaca offers only a few key details about the extent and impact of his involvement in native shamanism.

Echevarria is a documentary filmmaker who produced films about indigenous Mexican tribes before co-producing, co-writing, and directing *Cabeza de Vaca*, his first feature film, which was released internationally in 1991. Mark Ebel notes that Echevarria has been producing documentaries on the indigenous people of Mexico since 1973 and "worked for a period for the Instituto Nacional Indigeno (INI) making documentaries" that "relate to the contrast and combination of indigenous and Christian religious beliefs among Mexican groups" (11). According to David Maciel it took Echevarria over ten years to complete the film, which the Mexican Institute of Cinematography (IMCINE) calls its "official film" (39). In an essay that explores the trends in contemporary Mexican films, Maciel suggests that *Cabeza de Vaca*, along with other Mexican films produced in the early 1990's, "offers a revisionist view of the conquest and the colonial legacy of Spain in Mexico, attempting to sensitively portray the perspective and world vision of the indigenous people" (39). Maciel notes that a group of Mexican historical films that offer a reconsideration of the Spanish conquest and its legacy in Mexico such as *Cabeza de Vaca* (1991), *Retorno a Aztlan* (1990), *Kino* (1992), and *Bartolome* (1993) were produced around the occasion of the quincentennial celebration of Columbus's

"discovery" of America in 1992. Maciel describes *Cabeza de Vaca* along with the other "contemporary visions of the Colonial legacy of Mexico" as "a classic *indigenista* interpretation which glorifies the indigenous heritage and condemns its Spanish legacy" (39).

Echevarria emphasizes in the film's powerful visual imagery the contact and collision of Spanish conquistadors and indigenous tribes. Some film critics note that the film does not adequately reflect the written account by offering little narrative compared to the rich narrative of Cabeza de Vaca's original work. For example, Enrique Fernandez of *The Village Voice* suggests in his review that the original historical narrative is "one of the greatest stories of all time" but the film offers "few attempts at narrative" (72). White points out, however, that "cinema is better suited than written discourse to the actual representation of certain kinds of historical phenomena" such as "landscape, scene, atmosphere" and the wide range of human "emotion" (1193). The film follows the general outline of Cabeza de Vaca's written narrative, but its historical representational power lies in its depiction of sixteenth-century indigenous tribal culture and Cabeza de Vaca's gradual acculturation into tribal life. *Cabeza de Vaca* portrays a representation of sixteenth-century Conquistadors, landscapes, tribal villages, and native rituals but also the profound sense of psychic dislocation and disorientation that Cabeza de Vaca experiences during his eight-year sojourn in the American wilderness. Joanne Hershfield points out that the film "dramatizes a moment in the colonial process that forced a reconsideration of the relation between conqueror and conquered, between self and Other" and "locates the origins of Mexican identity within complex processes by which individuals were forced to confront the difference of the Other" (9, 16). The film also

depicts the profound spiritual experience and connection with a transcendental mystical force that results in his initiation into shamanism and spiritual bonding with native people. The film offers a representation of Cabeza de Vaca as a man who is profoundly transformed by his sojourn in the American wilderness from Spanish conquistador to a completely new "New World" identity forged by his mystical bonds with the native peoples. There is also a strong sense that his wilderness experience has altered his view of spirituality, from a restrictive culturally constructed religion to a unifying, transcendent mystical spiritual reality.

The portrayal of Cabeza de Vaca's discovery of a transcendent spiritual unity with the natives in the film disrupts the traditional notion of the discovery and conquest of America by Spanish conquistadors. It is a portrayal of a profound moment of alien contact, not only between a European and indigenous tribes but between a human and transcendent spiritual reality. Cabeza de Vaca in his wilderness experience merges his old world European Christian identity with native culture and transcendent spiritual reality. *Cabeza de Vaca* depicts the moment of contact, connection, and, ultimately, as filmmaker Echevarria suggests, "the creation of a new man" (Della Flora H2).

Cabeza de Vaca's deepening assimilation and identification with native culture in the film coincides directly with his deepening involvement in shamanic activity. Cabeza de Vaca's *La Relacion* describes his shamanic healing activities among the natives but only offers a few key details about the extent and impact of his involvement in shamanism. Cabeza de Vaca and his fellow Spanish survivors Andres Dorantes, Alonso Castillo and the Moor Estebanico are all described as involved in healing practices in *La Relacion*. Cabeza de Vaca says, "we all became healers because so many people insisted,

although I was the boldest and most daring in undertaking any cure" (80). In the film only Cabeza de Vaca is a shaman. The film attempts to fill in the historical narrative's gaps by stressing that Cabeza de Vaca's shamanism is one of the crucial points of psychic and spiritual connection with the natives. In the film Cabeza de Vaca's syncretistic Christian/native religious healing practices are important symbols of him as a representative mestizo in the psychic borderlands between Spanish and native culture.

Cabeza de Vaca's shamanism and the importance of mystical reality in his interaction and acculturation with the natives is a central element in the film. Echevarria emphasizes mystical elements in Cabeza de Vaca's experience in the film that are only inferred in *La Relacion*. Echevarria says that the movie's portrayal of the forces that "turned him [Cabeza de Vaca] into a mystic" is "the main story of the film, the transformation of this man" (Della Flora H2). Echevarria is adding his filmic voice to the chorus of scholars such as Rolena Adorno, Beatriz Pastor, Billy Thurman Hart, and Juan Bruce-Novoa who have examined Cabeza de Vaca's shamanism and the veracity of the healings that he represents in *La Relacion*. Rosenstone points out that "history on film" can be part of "the context of ongoing debates" about historical issues (1178). Rosenstone, in a discussion of the historical validity of historical film, suggests that "it is true that each and every work of history takes its place in a discourse that consists of preexisting debates, and the very meaning of any new work is in part created by those debates, even if they are not acknowledged within the work itself" (1177).

Both Echevarria's film and Cabeza de Vaca's *La Relacion* trace Cabeza de Vaca's shamanic healing activity that clearly represents a man blurring the lines between Christian and Native religious ritual and symbol. Tzvetan Todorov suggests that Cabeza

de Vaca's syncretistic religious practice is a "blurring of identity" and at times "Cabeza de Vaca's mental universe seems to vacillate" (199). Todorov notes that Cabeza de Vaca "adopts the trades of the natives, dresses as they do (and goes naked like them), eats what they eat" but "the identification is never complete" because "there are Christian prayers in his healer's arts" (198). Todorov says that "At no point does he forget his own cultural identity, and this resolution sustains him in the most difficult ordeals" (198). I would suggest that (as Echevarria's film portrays) Cabeza de Vaca's syncretistic healing practices are not merely the result of mental vacillation, pure utilitarianism, play-acting, psychedelic visions, or psychotic delusions but evidence of a deepening identification and assimilation into the native culture. The shaman is not merely a showman according to Echevarria.

Echevarria's representation of Cabeza de Vaca's shamanism fills in the narrative gaps in *La Relacion* concerning the extent of Cabeza de Vaca's involvement in shamanism. The written narrative emphasizes the Christian elements to the healing rituals, while the film highlights the native shamanic elements. Cabeza de Vaca confronts the cultural differences by riding the psychic borderlands between Christianity and native shamanism. In *La Relacion* he describes his healing practice as a combination of breathing on the sick person (a shamanic practice portrayed in the film) and enacting Christian rituals and evoking Christian symbols. Cabeza de Vaca writes:

We did our healing by making the sign of the cross on the sick persons, breathing on them, saying the Lord's prayer and a Hail Mary over them, and asking God our Lord, as best as we could, to heal them and inspire to treat us well. God our Lord designed to heal all those for whom we prayed. Once we made the sign of the cross on them, they told the others that they were well and healthy. (62)

Cabeza de Vaca in this passage is describing methods of shamanic healing that he learned from observing native shamans and his own addition of Christian prayer and symbol. He also learns the use of medicinal herbs, cauterization of wounds, and the use of "rocks and other things found in the fields" that have "beneficial properties" from the natives (62). Cabeza de Vaca also writes in *La Relacion* that after making the sign of the cross and breathing on a dead man, the natives report that "the man who was dead and whom I had healed in their presence had gotten up well and walked and eaten and spoken to them" (80).

The importance and veracity of Cabeza de Vaca's shamanic healing activity among the natives is a point of contention among scholars. Beatriz Pastor suggests that Cabeza de Vaca's shamanism is one of a several "successive metamorphoses" that he undergoes as he attempts to "acquire a growing control of the American reality that will enable him to improve his situation" (140). Pastor dismisses Cabeza de Vaca's shamanism as "the careful observation of the healing practices of the natives" that "allow him further on to play convincingly the role of a quack doctor" (140-41). Billy Thurman Hart asserts, however, that the veracity of Cabeza de Vaca's shamanic healing practice is not the main critical issue in the debate. Hart says that "it does not matter whether or not the reader believes in the healings related in the narrative" because "the fact is that the Indians believed and said that they were healed" (lix).

Rolena Adorno and Patrick Pautz trace the reception and influence of Cabeza de Vaca's *La Relacion* from the sixteenth through twentieth centuries and note a re-occurring trend of highlighting the miracle cures of the survivors for use "as a model by which to elaborate accounts of the successful negotiations between the conquerors and

conquered,” particularly in the efforts to convert natives to Christianity (3.135). Adorno and Pautz point out that many of the healings that Cabeza de Vaca describes in the written narrative may have occurred, but that (contrary to Echevarria’s representation) “Cabeza de Vaca and his companions might not have been perceived as great shamans because they performed cures but rather performed cures because they were taken to be great shamans” (1:163). Echevarria’s film reverses this notion by portraying Cabeza de Vaca performing great cures (including healing by laying hands on a native’s serious eye wound and raising a native woman from the dead) *because* he is a great shaman, initiated in the supernatural mysteries and powers of shamanic healing through a profound mystical connection with the *axis mundi*. Eliseo Torres, however, points out that the historical Cabeza de Vaca may be one the first *curanderos* or syncretistic folk healers in the American Southwest and Mexico. According to Torres, a *curandero* “is a folk healer who heals in the material level with herbs, amulets, etc. and/or in the spiritual level using religion, God, saints, prayers, and petitions to heal a patient” (par.2). Torres notes that “the word *curandero* comes from the word *curar* which means to heal” (par.2). Like Cabeza de Vaca, *curanderos* combine Christian ritual and symbolism and native shamanism to effect healing. Torres examines the practices of three twentieth century *curanderos* in Mexico, Texas, and Arizona and notes key parallels to Cabeza de Vaca’s healing practice as represented in his *La Relacion*, especially his mix of Christian prayer and shamanic rituals. Although Torres does not assert that there is a direct link from the *curanderos* that she studied to Cabeza de Vaca, she concludes that Cabeza de Vaca “practiced the rituals of a traditional *curandero*” (par. 20).



In the film (0:44:48) Cabeza de Vaca's initial freedom from his enslavement to the shaman and Malacosa is represented as the direct result, not of outward religious practice, but a profound direct spiritual experience that infuses Cabeza de Vaca with mystical healing power. After healing the wounded native by the laying on of hands, Cabeza de Vaca is initiated into shamanism by the shaman and given his freedom and a medicine bundle, which Ebel notes, is "a serious gift given by an Indian to a European, an act of gift giving usually reserved for family or community members" (125). Beck, Francisco, and Walters note that the medicine bundle is an extremely important symbol for the shaman. They point out that the medicine bundle, which contains medicines for shamanic healing practice, is an essential symbolic element in healing and "blessings, prayers, and other sacred activities" (250). Certain tribes, such as the Florida and Oklahoma Seminoles consider the medicine bundle so important that "if the medicine bundle were not renewed, The People would die, and the tribe would disappear" (250).

The fate of Cabeza de Vaca and his fellow sojourners Dorantes, Castillo, and Estebanico is portrayed in Echevarria's film as inextricably bound to his shamanic practice and power. Later in the movie when Cabeza de Vaca saves the life of the native Cascabel by removing an arrowhead from his chest, he says, "with the life of this Indian goes all our lives" (1:06:16). Cabeza de Vaca kisses his feathered crucifix (a symbol of the mix of Christian and native symbols), lifts his eyes in a gesture of divine supplication, removes the arrowhead from Cascabel's chest, carries him to the water, and immerses him in a symbolic baptism. Unlike the initial healing scene when Cabeza de Vaca is overcome by a powerful spiritual force and receives a vision of the *axis mundi* in the native hut, Cabeza de Vaca heals Cascabel by consciously applying his learned shamanic

healing skills. The scene underscores the notion that Cabeza de Vaca is aware of the utility of his shamanism among the natives, but that he also realizes the life-giving importance of close identification and spiritual interaction with the natives.

Cabeza de Vaca's statement that "with the life of this Indian goes all our lives" is a statement that is tragically played out in the film. Cabeza de Vaca forms a strong spiritual bond with Cascabel after the healing. Their relationship is one of the main symbols in the film of Cabeza de Vaca's deep identification and assimilation into native culture. When Cascabel and a large group of natives follow Cabeza de Vaca on their migration, they arrive at a village that has been attacked by Spanish soldiers (1:23:08). Cabeza de Vaca after this discovery urges the natives to leave him by saying "Only death follows me now" (1:31:28). He, who had earlier equated life with identification and assimilation with the natives, now equates death with the coming of his fellow Spaniards. He tells Cascabel to leave him but says that they will be "together always, little brother."

The scene in the film where Cascabel is healed of the arrow wound is based on an incident in Cabeza de Vaca's *La Relacion*. Cabeza de Vaca had achieved a position of shamanic healing authority among the natives when "they brought a man to me whom they said had been wounded by an arrow along time before" (97). Cabeza de Vaca successfully removes the arrowhead, and as a result of the healing of the man his reputation as a shamanic healer is disseminated among native tribes. He writes that "this cure gave us such standing throughout the land that they esteemed and valued us to their utmost capacity" (97). After this healing, Cabeza de Vaca notes that the natives would bring their food to him, Dorantes, and Castillo "so that we could breathe on it and make the sign of the cross on it; otherwise they would not eat it" (98).

Cabeza de Vaca writes in *La Relacion* that at this point in his wilderness experience he carried with him a powerful symbol of a shaman, a calabaza or hollow gourd with pebbles inside that Cabeza de Vaca says is "a sign of great solemnity" which "added to our authority" (92, 96). He calls the calabaza "our chief insignia and a sign of our high status" among the native tribes (113). In *Cabeza de Vaca* the shaman who initially enslaves Cabeza de Vaca and later initiates him into shamanism uses the calabaza. The viewer sees and hears the calabaza when the shaman and Malacosa first enter the riverside village where Cabeza de Vaca, Dorantes, Castillo, and Estebanico are held captive (0:19:06), and later when Cabeza de Vaca, the shaman, and Malacosa enter a village to perform a healing ritual (0:41:05). The calabaza is the symbol of the presence and authority of the shaman. Cabeza de Vaca also utilizes Christian symbols in his shamanic healing, such as "the sign of the cross" (66). Maureen Ahern points out that the interaction between Cabeza de Vaca and the natives is "through the appropriation of ritual signs" (215). Ahern says that "in the case of Cabeza de Vaca, the appropriation of signs became a bridge for cultural mediation" (216). Ahern suggests that throughout *La Relacion* "two referential systems are operating simultaneously in the text"--native shamanic and Christian (219). Ahern believes that Cabeza de Vaca's use of "the calabaza as a sign of cultural negotiation lies at the heart of this frontier encounter" (226).

Some scholars dissent strongly to the notion of the possibility of a harmonious encounter between the Spanish conquistadors and native tribes. Beatriz Pastor calls Cabeza de Vaca's account of acculturation in *La Relacion* "another facet of the imperial mask" (146). Enrique Dussell suggests that the notion of "the new world as a single culture harmoniously blending the European and the indigenous" as a "myth" and "an

interpretation favored today by the dominant Latin American *criollo* and mestizo classes" (55). Dussell asserts that to even speak of such a harmonious encounter is "to conceal the genocidal shock that devastated indigenous culture" (55). Dussell says that "the new syncretistic, hybrid, predominately mestizo culture was born neither from a freely entered alliance nor from steady cultural synthesis, but from the ordinary trauma of being dominated" (55). Dussell concedes, however, that "in the clarity / obscurity of everyday practices, a syncretistic religion formed" (55). Echevarria's representation of Cabeza de Vaca never denies that there is a profound sense of shock, violence, and psychic dislocation that occurs in the encounter of the Spanish and native cultures. On the contrary, the film powerfully represents the sense of psychic dislocation and disorientation that Cabeza de Vaca experiences during his initial contact and captivity by natives, his traumatic psychic breakdown during his enslavement by the shaman and Malacosa, and his eventual reconnection with Spanish soldiers in Mexico after his eight-year sojourn in the American wilderness.

The film's final scene portrays symbolically the possible future cataclysm of Spanish Catholic and indigenous peoples. The film's final image (1:45:56) of a group of enslaved natives forced to carry a giant silver cross to the sound of Spanish drums across the desert towards an oncoming storm offers the viewer a powerful foreshadowing image of the future destruction, trauma, and suffering that the arrival of the Spaniards brought to the indigenous tribes. The steady, military rhythm of the drums combined with the screen image offers the suggestion of the future forced conversion of natives to Christianity and provides a stark contrast to the subtle sound of the calabaza that indicates the entrance of shamanism earlier in the film. The screen goes completely black for a few moments

before the final credits as thunders rumbles on the soundtrack. Images such as the final image in *Cabeza de Vaca* are an example of what Rosenstone calls "the opportunity to represent the world in images" in order to "make us ask once more the questions about what history can and cannot be" (1184). Echevarria's image and underlying message are profoundly ironic when considered in the light of Cabeza de Vaca's written plea to Charles I of Spain at the end of *La Relacion* for fair treatment of the natives. Cabeza de Vaca writes that in order for the natives "to be attracted to becoming Christians and subjects of your Imperial majesty, need to be treated well; this is a very sure way to accomplish this"(106). He emphasizes to the emperor that " indeed there is no other way" (106). Some viewers may consider the film's final image as "over-the-top" in its dramatic foreshadowing of the traumatic effects of forced conversion on indigenous tribes. Echevarria, however, offers in the movie's last scene, a single final image that both represents the colonizing objectives of the Spanish and portrays the history of the conquest as a catastrophic event for the natives, rather than the civilized, orderly triumph of European Christianity and culture in the New World. The film portrays Cabeza de Vaca's mystical connection with the *axis mundi* in a native setting during a shamanic healing ritual in which he is possessed by a powerful spiritual force. But Bruce-Novoa also suggests that in the shamanism represented in *La Relacion* "Cabeza de Vaca thus came to incarnate a hierophantic *axis mundi*" (13). In other words, Cabeza de Vaca's shamanic activity, as represented in both film and written historical account, not only bridges Christian and native religions but is also "able to interconnect the spiritual with the physical" (13). Cabeza de Vaca's syncretistic shamanism serves "a priestly role" that involves "the sacred rite of orienting the individual to his society and to the universe"

(13). In his shamanic practices Cabeza de Vaca as a shaman occupies a liminal state that mediates the material and supernatural worlds. He also operates in an in-between “transcultural space,” a space that Homi Bhabha calls a “liminal space” of “symbolic interaction,” where there is a continual transcultural process of movement that “opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference” (4). Echevarria's portrayal of Cabeza de Vaca functions in a similar fashion by causing the viewer to question the past in order to reorient or mediate individual perceptions about the roots of *mestizo* identity and to celebrate the mystical roots of indigenous tribes. The portrayal of Christian / native syncretism in the film is a dramatic way that Echevarria "shapes the questions" a reader or viewer can ask "about the past" history of the Spanish conquest and the genesis of a hybrid, synergistic cultural and religious form in early America. As David Denby notes in his review of *Cabeza de Vaca*, "it's not hard to feel in this intermingling of Christian and Indian religions" that "there lies some clue to the modern Latin American consciousness" (59).

The film takes a strong pro-native /anti-Spanish imperialism stance in its depiction of Cabeza de Vaca's spiritual bonding with natives and his enormous sorrow when he sees evidence of the enslavement of natives by the Spaniards. Cabeza de Vaca's initial re-contact with his fellow Spaniards in Mexico later in the film includes a verbal reassertion of the mystical unity he experiences with native people and a strong critique of Spanish imperialism. In the film Cabeza de Vaca confronts and openly challenges the colonizers—setting himself apart from their colonizing designs and actions. After wandering for eight years among the native people, Cabeza de Vaca encounters Spanish soldiers involved in enslaving native peoples in order to build a Christian cathedral. The

captain asks Cabeza de Vaca to help him find native slaves. Cabeza de Vaca tells the captain that "your request offends the faith more than it does me." The captain asks Cabeza de Vaca which faith he is referring to--"theirs or ours?" Cabeza de Vaca responds by saying, "the only one. The faith." The film never suggests that Cabeza de Vaca is interested in the mass conversion of the natives to Christianity, a concern that he clearly states in *La Relacion*. There is a strong sense that his wilderness experience has altered his view of spirituality, from a restrictive culturally constructed religion to a unifying, transcendent mystical spiritual reality. Cabeza de Vaca sees Cascabel (the native with whom Cabeza de Vaca deeply bonds with after healing him of an arrow wound) at the end of the film when he discovers his corpse on the back of a wagon in the Spanish camp. Cascabel is clutching in his lifeless hand Cabeza de Vaca's feather-decorated crucifix that Cabeza de Vaca had thrown away along with his calabaza and shamanic medicine bag when he realized the Spanish soldiers were nearby. There is a strong sense that Cascabel grasped onto the symbol of syncretistic faith and spiritual union with Cabeza de Vaca that represented life and healing at the very moment of his death during enslavement at the hands of the Spanish conquistadors. The film's message is clearly that the spiritual bonding and unity that Cabeza de Vaca experiences as a shaman among the natives is a state of peace and life, while the subjugation of the Spanish and forced conversions are a state that brings death, destruction, and chaos.

The last image of Cabeza de Vaca on the screen is a Pieta-like image of him holding the corpse of Cascabel on his lap crying out in agony "Why? Why? Why?" (1:42:37). He is re-fashioned by Echevarria in the film into a pieta-like figure suffering profoundly in identification with the native suffering—a former colonizer who distances

himself from any colonizing objectives. Echevarria's film blurs the simple binary formulas of conqueror /conquered, and colonizer/ victim. The Spanish role in the conquest and subjugation of the indigenous tribes is emphasized, but Cabeza de Vaca's role and complicity in the process tends to be de-emphasized in Echevarria's representation.

Echevarria's film is a dramatic attempt to examine the present in the light of past history and to "change the nature of our relationship with the past" (Rosenstone 1184). The film *Cabeza de Vaca* offers a representation of Cabeza de Vaca as a man who is profoundly transformed by his sojourn in the American wilderness from Spanish conquistador to a new "New World" identity forged by a mystical bond with the native peoples. Rosenstone says that historical films suggest "new possibilities for representing the past, possibilities that could allow narrative history to recapture the power it once had when it was more deeply rooted in the literary imagination" (1184). Echevarria's portrayal of Cabeza de Vaca's shamanism, his discovery of a transcendent spiritual unity with the natives, and of the fusion of European and Native American spiritual elements in the film reinforces the notion that Mexican identity is based on something more complex than the physical mingling of Native and European traits. Joanne Hershfield comments that Echevarria's film "responds to Mexico's need to interpret a historical past that makes sense for the present moment" and offers a filmic discourse that "provides a site for studying the complex web of social discourses" that a nation such as Mexico produces "to define national identity" (10-11). According to Hershfield, *Cabeza de Vaca* represents in the connective interaction between Cabeza de Vaca and the natives "that a Mexican national identity can no longer be located in the nostalgic myth of history but may instead



be found within the various dialogic processes of everyday interaction between selves and others" and ultimately points to what Hershfield calls "a transformation of consciousness on both sides of difference" (16, 21). In *Cabeza de Vaca*, Echevarria also offers a representational voice for the native peoples which challenges the discourse of conquest offered in such films as Ridley Scott's *1492: Conquest of Paradise* which Ebel suggests offers a "superficial portrayal of the indigenes" and "shows them as a people without depth and as a culture without ideas" (50).

Echevarria's *Cabeza de Vaca* is a portrayal of an individual exploring not only unknown portions of the continental wilderness but also the terrain of his own soul--of newly discovered spiritual territory. It is a portrayal of a profound moment of alien contact, not only between a European and indigenous tribes but between a human and transcendent spiritual reality. It is the depiction of a man lost in the American wilderness who finds his true soul. *Cabeza de Vaca* in his wilderness experience merges his old world European Christian identity with native culture and transcendent spiritual reality. *Cabeza de Vaca* portrays a man riding the psychic borderlands between Spanish and native culture and depicts the moment of transcultural contact, cataclysm, connection, and, ultimately, as filmmaker Echevarria suggests, "the creation of a new man" (Della Flora H2). *Cabeza de Vaca* is an example of a film based on a work "deeply rooted" in American "literary imagination" that also powerfully evokes a new possibility "for representing" and shaping "the questions we ask about" the American past (Rosenstone 1184, Stevens 6).

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### About the Author

Paul Anthony Galante was born in Allentown, Pennsylvania on 25 December 1951 to Guido and Reta Galante. He worked in the family dry-cleaning business for nineteen years. He attended Allentown College (DeSales University) in Center Valley, Pennsylvania where he received a B.A. in English and graduated Summa Cum Laude in 1999. Currently, Paul is finishing his M.A. in English at Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania where he teaches composition and will be starting his Ph.D in August 2001.

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