

Moctezuma's Revenge: Iconoclasm, religion and film

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Introduction

The backdrop to the altar is almost corporeal: a multitude of naked bodies, some limp, others in crucifixion, hang inordinately like flaccid appendages from the cavernous walls behind a large statue of the crucified Jesus, suspended over the altar. In juxtaposition, a congregation of nuns and novitiates sit evenly spaced and rigid, anaesthetised *en masse* by the address of the sombre priest in black garb. Days later, in the same setting, the priest in full regalia, admonishes the disgraced novitiate. Capuchins strap her to a cross. Stripped naked, her pristine body is examined in vain for the *marca diavoli* (the devil's mark). A capuchin repeatedly pierces Justine's ribs and upper abdomen while the priest orders the devil to depart her body, his voice deepening with each command. Simultaneously nuns wail and writhe around the floor. As blood trickles from her wounds, Justine dies.¹

Justine is the love interest of Alucarda,² the female protagonist in Moctezuma's film, *Alucarda*. The two young women meet in a convent where Alucarda was raised from birth and they become united by a blood pact. A subsequent pagan ceremony initiates them into vampirism and they then begin to nauseate when confronted with the symbols and language of Christianity. This soon leads to the episode described above which, in turn,

¹ My description of scenes from *Alucarda*, directed by Juan Lopez Moctezuma, USA/Mexico, Mondo Macabre, 1975, Chapters 4, 'Hellfire Preacher' and 'Crucified.'

² The word derives from, Dracula (spelled backwards). Interesting 'Alucard' is also the name used by Dracula in the 1970's Hammer Horror Dracula movies.

triggers a chain of cataclysmic events like those paralleled in the later Hollywood production, *Carrie*.³

While horror films are a *genre* deemed relevant in the study of religion and film, Moctezuma's work remains unexplored. Indeed the film, *Alucarda*, has also largely eluded commentary or academic critique from film scholars in general. Yet the film digresses notably from the mould of horror *genre* in ways which will be discussed in this paper, and has far more enduring artistic integrity than its contemporary mainstream counterparts. The film's unique examples of inversion, which amounts to metaphorical iconoclasm (the destruction of precious symbols), also render it a fitting case study through various methodological conventions of the academic study of religion, primarily, the study of religion and film.

The Study of Religion and Film

Often in analyses of religious films, particularly the more overtly religious,⁴ the exemplars are drawn from recognisable features from a primarily Judeo-Christian storehouse and the outcome is rather constrained and mechanical. Lyden concisely illustrates this weakness amongst others in approaches to the study of religion and film.⁵ In movies which fall under the umbrella of 'popular culture,' such as *Being There*⁶ and *The Matrix*,⁷ in which religious pluralities co-exist, the scope for sociological observation broadens. An excellent example of a variegated approach can be found in Carr's work on the mystery drama,

³ The 1976 film directed by Brian de Palma.

⁴ Such as Cecil B De Mille, *The Ten Commandments*, 1956.

⁵ John C Lyden, *Myths, Morals and Rituals: Film as Religion*, New York, 2003.

⁶ Hal Ashby, *Being There*, 1979 which is peppered with religious symbols and allusions as teased out by Christopher Hartney in 'Between Sacred and Secular: Pop Cult Saviour Approacheth,' *The Buddha of Suburbia: Proceedings of the Eighth Australian and International Religion, Literature and the Arts Conference*, edited by C M Cusack, et al, Sydney, 2005, 282-290.

⁷ Andy and Larry Wachowski, *The Matrix*, 1999.

Picnic at Hanging Rock. In what might otherwise be superficially confined to an anglocentric Christian interpretation, she detects multiple religious meanings: an indigenous, almost terrestrially based sacrality, at the same time as recognizing allusions to ancient pagan festivities.⁸ Nonetheless, it is the very foreignness, the undelineated nature of these features which renders them ulterior, 'otherly' and to be regarded with suspicion. Hence the religious 'other' is over-represented in mainstream thriller/horror and mystery *genre* as the evil protagonist, reinforcing normative assessments of them as 'other.' The religious 'other' commonly constitutes the threat, is represented negatively and receives minimal scholarly appraisal.

Lyden proposes a new direction in the study of religion and film and, based on the assumption that film is a 'phenomena analogous to religion,'⁹ measures the effect (and in turn the potential of films to convey religious meaning) on the basis of popularity:

... as a popular form of the religious life, movies do what we have always asked of popular religion, namely that they provide us with archetypal forms of humanity—heroic figures—and instruct us in the basic values and myths of our society.¹⁰

⁸ A Carr, 'Beauty, Myth and Monolith: *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and the Vibration of Sacrality' in *The Buddha of Suburbia: Proceedings of the Eighth Australian and International Religion, Literature and the Arts Conference*, edited by C M Cusack *et al*, Sydney, 2005, 123-131.

⁹ Lyden, *op cit*, 12.

¹⁰ Lyden, citing Darrol Bryant, *op cit*, 12. Bryant's claim here is, perhaps too strong. Clearly both religion and film 'instruct us in the basic values and myths of our society' as they provide normative orientation for the members of a society and in this sense, Bryant is correct. Yet it might not be entirely useful to theorise film in light of religion. Alternatively, it might be suggested that the commonality lies in the fact that both religion and art are means through which a society expresses their own orientation of the world, ways that they express their norms. Hence, rather than theorise one phenomena through the other, it may be more profitable to situate both religion and film within a broader theoretical structure. This fits with a broadly Hegelian approach, a detailed discussion of which can be found in P Quadrio, *Geist and Normativity in Hegel's*

Although he provides excellent and thorough evaluations of a number of recent, commercial films from a variety of genres,¹¹ his choices perpetuate the exclusion of films – such as the iconoclastic – that seek to challenge established norms. His methodology further distances fringe and *avant-garde* films from the scope of academic analysis and it is precisely these types of films, not bound or obligated by any controlling entity, which are more likely to challenge such norms creatively and in doing so, to reorientate the meanings and values that we deploy. *Alucarda*, amongst others produced by Juan Lopez Moctezuma, is such a film.

Juan Lopez Moctezuma

Moctezuma¹² was born into an influential and highly cultured family in Mexico City in 1932. Rather than studying law and becoming a judge as his father had done, Moctezuma became a painter, then entered the theatre and eventually became involved in radio and television. He created a radio program named *Panorama de Jazz*, which was highly successful in Mexico and spanned for over 35 years from 1959 until his death in 1995.

Early Theological Writings, in this book on pages 95-111.

¹¹ *'Die hard'* in *ibid*, 146-152; *'The Godfather'* and *'The Godfather: Part II'* in *ibid*, 156-163; *'Titanic'* in *ibid*, 172-178; *'When Harry Met Sally'* in *ibid*, 183-190; *'E T, The Extraterrestrial'* in *ibid*, 194-201; *'The Terminator'* and *'Terminator 2: Judgement Day'* in *ibid*, 207-215; *'The Original Star Wars films'* in *ibid*, 216-225; the films of *'... Alfred Hitchcock'* in *ibid*, 230-231; *'Psycho'* in *ibid*, 232-239; and *'Silence of the Lambs'* in *ibid*, 240-245.

¹² I have derived all the information in this section on Moctezuma's life and career from 'Documentary on film's director;' 'Interview with *Hellboy* director Guillermo del Toro' and 'Text interview with film's director,' all of which are included in the Special DVD Features section of a Special Edition DVD version of *Alucarda*, reprinted from the original and produced by Mondo Macabro (undated). All other sources I have located in my research derive their information on Moctezuma from this one source.

Throughout those years Moctezuma also intermittently worked as a filmmaker and theatre director. While working as an assistant to the famous stage director Seki Sano, he met Alejandro Jodorowsky, a Chilean *avant-garde* stage director who was making his mark in Mexico. The two began working collaboratively in the late 1960s on *Fando y Lis* (1967) and Moctezuma was an associate producer on Jodorowsky's cult film, *El Topo* (1969). Inspired by Arrabal's *Le Panique Theatre*, which unleashed a whirlpool of uncircumscribed emotions, the two set out to apply Arrabal's techniques to their own films.

The 1960s and 1970s saw a new breed of creative young filmmakers emerge from the New Mexican Film School. Moctezuma was amongst this new breed of experimental and innovative directors, but his passion was specifically for the horror genre. Such films were suppressed by the unionised film industry and did not reach mainstream audiences.

Moctezuma went on to make his own film in 1971. *La Mansion de la locura* (Mansion of Madness), loosely based on an Edgar Allan Poe story, is eccentric and entertaining. Though classified as a horror movie in the US, it is regarded as more of a black comedy. This movie was a critical success, receiving awards at film festivals in Italy, Yugoslavia, Switzerland, and France. However, like Jodorowsky, Moctezuma remained an independent filmmaker, shunning the commercial film industry: 'I am fairly inflexible. In the artistic field I think I am fairly tough because I have principles I cannot betray.'¹³ Neither would he forfeit this medium for expressing radical and subversive views. His next project, *Mary, Mary, Bloody Mary* (1974) was in English and received fairly wide international distribution because of this as well as for the exploitable subject matter. When asked in an interview about the marriage of sex and horror in his films, Moctezuma replied:

¹³ 'Text interview with film's director [Moctezuma],' in *ibid*.

I'm interested in erotic images ... it is in the domain of the erotic that reality and the fantastic really come together. In any case, you rarely get one without the other. In *The Mansions* [sic] of Madness I wanted to show the link between madness and eroticism; in 'Mary Mary' the eroticism heightens the violence and serves as a counterpoint to the fantastic.¹⁴

In August 1975 Moctezuma finished *Alucarda*, which was also produced with an English-speaking cast and consequently also received wide international distribution and has been reprinted several times, most recently on DVD. The film is set in the nineteenth century, and therefore does not display the usual signs of aging (such as outdated fashions and hairdos) as some of its contemporary blockbusters. Indeed it was not a blockbuster, receiving minimal promotion and accessible only to isolated, peripheral segments of Mexican society. Although the Mexican government was secular and took great pains to maintain the separation of Church and State affairs, the majority of the population in Mexico was Catholic. Subsidies were only granted for films that had a 'social commitment' or were certain to be box-office hits. Moctezuma's films fit did not fit either category. That is not to say that Moctezuma lacked social commitment. He articulated his own social commitment in producing a film that challenged, particularly, the norms that reinforced Church dogma. His was an exercise in decoding, of reorientating any receptive segment of his society to alternative perceptions and to question or reject those norms. However, in his refusal to acquiesce to the preferred 'social commitment' of Mexican hegemonic powers, he forfeited any access to subsidy.

Moctezuma was a xenophile who hungrily consumed material from the gothic and literary traditions of horror.¹⁵ He sought to innovate and revivify vampire films, his favourite among the horror genre. While resting on the foundations of the vampire tradition, *Alucarda*, he said, differed in that it's protagonist is

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ 'Interview with *Hellboy* director Guillermo del Toro' in *Alucarda*, op cit.

female and her survival is not contingent on drinking blood.¹⁶ He confronts his audience, challenging its members to dislodge or even destroy society's entrenched perceptions of such persistent and pervasive dualities as good and evil, sanity and insanity, purity and pollution and so forth.¹⁷ In *Alucarda*, the distinctions between good and evil are tested and the outcome, ambiguous.¹⁸ Although these may represent symbolic inversion, in some instances the agents and symbols of the Church (not religion *per se*), come under unquestionable attack through techniques such as inverting archetypal forms and symbols, attacks which are iconoclastic in scope.

As the received framework for the theme of iconoclasm is underdeveloped and scholarship on this subject is limited to a narrow range of definitions, I will briefly develop a definitive *niche* to accommodate the form of iconoclastic expression manifest in *Alucarda*, then evaluate some of the iconoclastic features in the film.

Inversion and Iconoclasm

Lincoln has commented on the absence of a theoretical framework through which to interpret and evaluate iconoclasm.¹⁹ Iconoclasm can present in a multitude of forms but is more

¹⁶ 'Text interview with film's director [Moctezuma],' in *ibid*.

¹⁷ When the term 'Moctezuma's revenge' was chosen for the title of this paper, the author had no knowledge of its coincidental usage in the field of microbiology to refer to *Escherichia coli*, a bacteria which commonly afflicts tourists in Mexico. I have chosen to retain the term, not because of its association with a disease to be avoided and regarded with contempt, but for that bacteria's capacity to disorientate; to cause discomfort and dis-ease.

¹⁸ One example of such ambiguity in the film is the deepening of the **priest's** voice as he addresses the devil during the 'Crucified' scene described in the introduction to this paper. Inversely, it was the voice Regan, the teenage girl possessed by the devil, which deepens in William Friedkin's production of *The Exorcist*, 1973, released two years before *Alucarda*.

¹⁹ Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual and Classification*, New York, 1989, 117.

commonly associated with the physical or material destruction of sacred symbols, art and architecture. Post-Mosaic examples of this type of iconoclasm that dominated early Medieval Christianity have been well studied and commented on and the influence of Islam and its proscriptions against idolatry are cited as the impetus.²⁰ Later examples, again in reaction to idolatry,²¹ appear in the Reformation period and the term entered the English lexicon in 1641.²²

Although the term's etymology suggests the breaking or smashing of religious images or icons, by the nineteenth century, the term 'iconoclast' came to be applied in a figurative sense, denoting one who 'assails or attacks cherished beliefs or venerated institutions on the ground that they are erroneous or pernicious';²³ and 'iconoclasm' as 'the attacking or overthrow of venerated institutions and cherished beliefs, regarded as fallacious or superstitious.'²⁴ It has come to be applied to assaults on philosophy and language (as a vehicle for the storage and transmission of symbols)²⁵ and in the definition of its

²⁰ See Adrian Fortescue, transcribed by Michael C Tinkler, 'Iconoclasm', in *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*, Vol VII, 1910, [cited 25/11/06]. Reproduced online in 2003 and 2006 at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07620a.htm>.

²¹ Although in many cases the iconoclastic acts sought to reveal the powerlessness of the images and/or to divest them of any right to privileged treatment, in defiance of, or to force a reorientation on, conditioned norms.

²² 'Iconoclasm' and 'Icononclast', entries in the *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th edition, edited by Joseph P Picket, et al, Boston, 2000 [cited 25/11/06]. Available from www.bartleby.com/61/.

²³ 'Iconoclast', entry in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, [cited 25/11/06]. Available from http://dictionary.oed.com.ezproxy.library.usyd.edu.au/cgi/entry/50111079?query_type=word&queryword=iconoclasm&first=1&max_to_show=10&single=1&sort_type=alpha.

²⁴ 'Iconoclasm', entry in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, [cited 25/11/06]. Available from http://dictionary.oed.com.ezproxy.library.usyd.edu.au/cgi/entry/50111078?query_type=word&queryword=iconoclasm&first=1&max_to_show=10&single=1&sort_type=alpha.

²⁵ Bernhard Debatin, 'Metaphorical Iconoclasm and the Reflective Power of Metaphor,' in *Metaphor and Rational Discourse*, edited by Bernhard Debatin,

intent, no longer limited to sacred or religious targets. This is cogently illustrated in the destruction of the statue of Mao Ze Dong at Beijing University in 1988, a resolute, collective rejection of a particular norm and associated behaviours.²⁶ Lincoln argues in fact that even in the case of sacred or religious targets, an assault on power entities (past, present and 'conceivably' future) is an inherent dimension of the attack.²⁷ He characterises the case of Duchamp's *Fountain*²⁸ as symbolic inversion. I would argue that it is simultaneously an example of functional abstraction,²⁹ constituting an iconoclastic act against, superficially, the Society of Independent Artists, but, implicitly, exposing social anxieties associated with hygiene and bodily emissions. Thus it was an assault on presuppositions or norms concerning art, at the same time as on cultural norms. For Lincoln the iconoclastic act is simultaneously an attack, in the first instance, against the object/subject under attack, but primarily against the 'religious institution' they represent. It is 'beyond that,' an attack 'against the social order that institution served.'³⁰ Although the Society of Independent Artists was neither a 'religious' nor a 'venerated' institution,³¹ the Society held a privileged position and practised exclusivity, a mechanism which was undermined by this act and which contaminated the 'social form' which they had previously controlled and preserved.³² The act brought about the resignation of a number

Timothy R Jackson and Daniel Steuer, Tubigen, 1997, 147-159.

²⁶ One year later, in the days leading up to the 'Tianenmen Square Protests of 1989' (also known as 'The Tianenmen Square Incident' or simply the 'Incident of June 4th, 1989; all far more palatable euphemisms for 'massacre') student protestors erected a styrofoam and plaster statue they called the 'Goddess of Liberty' facing the defaced portrait of Mao. In W J T Mitchell, 'The Violence of Public Art: *Do the Right Thing*,' in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol 16 No 4 (Summer, 1990), 880-899.

²⁷ Lincoln, op cit, 118.

²⁸ A pseudonymously autographed upturned urinal. Ibid, 142.

²⁹ Nicholas Calas, 'Iconolatry and Iconoclasm,' in *College Art Journal*, Vol 9, No 2, Winter 1949-1950, 129-141.

³⁰ Lincoln, op cit, 117.

³¹ Ibid and 'Iconoclast' and 'Iconoclasm' in *OED*, op cit.

³² Lincoln, op cit, 118. Here the act constitutes a rejection or calling into

of members of the society and threw it into momentary upheaval or normative disorientation.

Symbolic inversion as an instrument of iconoclasm is also found in the third *bolgia* of the eighth circle of Dante's *Inferno* in Canto XIX. Here the rocky landscape is perforated by large holes, out of which protrude legs and feet with flames dancing across their soles. Each sinner is buried head-downwards in the rock, their legs and feet kicking and writhing desperately. Dante is addressed by the inhabitant of one hole, Pope Nicholas III who is buried on top of all other simoniacal popes and who anticipates the immanent arrival of Boniface who will push Nicholas further into the hole.³³ This episode is simultaneously an attack on the figureheads of the Church and the primacy of their position as Dante, literally and symbolically, turns them on their heads.

It is this sort of iconoclastic symbolism that eludes scholarly attention, particularly in the study of religion and film. In lieu of a more established methodology and complex taxonomy, I will use the term 'iconoclasm' to refer to instances of non-material or non-physical iconoclasm.³⁴ Both attacks and assaults can take non-physical forms and still result in damage, injury or defamation of the subject under attack. In the case of attacks on venerated symbols, the iconoclast is, in most instances, marginalised 'on lines of class, politics ... national origin as well as those of religion.'³⁵ Lastly, the iconoclast seeks to destabilize, if not completely divest the icon of its proclaimed sacral power with the intent to:

question of a norm as discussed by A W Moore. See Philip A Quadrio, 'The Interplay between the Contemporary Sacred and Secular,' in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, op cit, 16.

³³ Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia: Inferno*, a cura di Natalino Sapegno, precorsi di lettura a cura di Ferdinando Cremascoli, Firenze, 1997 [1955], Canto XIX, Verses 31-87, 217-220.

³⁴ For a further discussion on normative revision through social actions see Quadrio, 'The Interplay between the Contemporary Sacred and Secular,' op cit, 16.

³⁵ Lincoln, op cit, 120.

Demonstrate dramatically and in public the **powerlessness** of the image and thereby to inflict a double disgrace on its champions, first by exposing the bankruptcy of their vaunted symbols and, second, their impotence in the face of attack.³⁶

Having outlined the case for the inclusion of symbolic inversion and other forms of non-physical iconoclasm in the received analytical framework, I will use this as a diagnostic instrument for evaluating examples of this manifestation in Moctezuma's *Alucarda*.

Alucarda

Synopsis

The film begins with the birth of Alucarda. Her dying mother³⁷ leaves her in the care of a dishevelled, hunchbacked, ogre-like gypsy, begging the man to take the infant to the convent and to protect her from '**him**'.³⁸ The next scene begins at the convent in which Alucarda has been raised. Another orphaned young woman, Justine, arrives at the convent to be primed for vocational life. A rather unorthodox friendship develops between the two young women. Eventually they undertake a blood pact, then are led by the same hunchbacked gypsy to the woods where a pagan ritual is underway, and are inducted into Satanic worship. Back at the convent they offend the nuns, the head priest, and God. Punitive measures result in Justine and Alucarda being bound to crosses. Alucarda is struck several times before she passes out. Justine is stripped and repeatedly

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Both Alucarda and her mother are played by Tina Romero.

³⁸ Emphasised in order to illustrate another ambiguity in the film that tampers with the viewers' normative perceptions of good and evil. The hunchbacked gypsy reappears a few scenes later and acts as Alucarda's guide through her initiation into vampirism and paganism, throwing into question the identity of the '**him**' the mother sought to protect Alucarda from.

punctured around the chest and upper abdomen until she dies. Before Alucarda can meet the same fate, a good doctor intervenes and shelters her. But Alucarda returns to exact revenge, unleashing destruction of apocalyptic proportions.

Analysis

The décor of the church described in the opening paragraph of this paper, peppered with statues of crucifixion, stands in mockery of the Constitution on the Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, which states in Verse 125 of Chapter 7 (devoted to Sacred Art and Furnishings) that:

The practice of placing sacred images in churches so that they may be venerated by the faithful is to be maintained. Nevertheless **their number should be moderate** and their relative positions should reflect right order. For otherwise they may create confusion among the Christian people and foster devotion of doubtful orthodoxy.³⁹

Superficially, the film can be seen as a metaphor for the persecution of 'others' by the Catholic Church as the initiation ceremony the two women take part in conflates pagan worship with vampirism. The directorial treatment of vampirism in the film breaks out of the typical mould of the genre as mentioned earlier, in that the protagonist is female and the only time blood is consumed is in the bloodpact ceremony between the two young women. They bear no fangs and the blood consumed during the pact is accessed through small incisions the women make on each other's bodies in a rather sensuous, if not erotic, scene. In *Alucarda*, Moctezuma does not combine eroticism with violence as he did in *Mary, Mary Bloody Mary*. The scene combines eroticism with the fantastic as the hunchbacked gypsy seems to

³⁹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Second Vatican Council Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI On 4 December, 1963, [cited 20/11/06]. Available from <http://www.adoremus.org/599lcono.html>.

be transported to their room through a burst of wind, before leading the young women to the pagan ceremony (the 'Devil's Orgy') in the woods. That ceremony, illuminated by the soft glow of the campfire, is characterised by a mood of communality and emancipation.

In juxtaposition, the first church scene that is described in the opening paragraph (which immediately precedes the blood pact and pagan ceremony) has a dark, oppressive atmosphere. Entitled 'Hellfire Sermon,' the narrative is punitive and apocalyptic. The young novitiates are dressed from neck to toe in constricting garments, with bonnets on their heads, tied under the neck. Their faces are scarred with terror; beads of perspiration accumulate on their foreheads. The nuns similarly wear tight-fitting habits with hugging headdress, which reveal only their faces. As a young novitiate jumps from her seat, hysterical and screaming 'God... Save me. I don't want to burn in hell,' it is more reflective of superstition and error than the scene, the 'Devil's Orgy.' The priest evokes terror and the clerics and nuns in the first instance, perform acts of violence in the film.

Guillermo del Toro tells of the anticlerical sentiments amongst intellectuals in Mexico at the time *Alucarda* was made.⁴⁰ Certainly that is reflected in the film. Moctezuma's techniques attack the servants of the Catholic Church. The notion of the Church as mother, personified by its nuns, is inverted. These representatives of the Church are, in the main, more like Dworkin's quintessential 'mother as a figure of terror' in fairy tales;⁴¹ they have the power to, and do, exact cruel, sadistic treatment on *Alucarda* and Justine. The two, in contrast, are characterised as young, innocent and, before provocation, innocuous.

⁴⁰ 'Interview with *Hellboy* director Guillermo del Toro' in *Alucarda*, op cit.

⁴¹ Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating*, New York, 1974, 35-41.

In fact, the viewer feels extreme sympathy for the Alucarda and Justine characters, despite their destructive potential which is realised when the film reaches its climax. Moctezuma here evokes sympathy for the religiously persecuted but also seems to rebel against religious particularism. The words “the one true and right religion” echo through the church during the ‘Crucified’ scene. That he was critical of the Church’s particularism and oppressiveness, is confirmed in the following quote from Moctezuma:

Terror hides itself behind beauty ... however, she is all the more dangerous for appearing ‘normal’. I should be clear however, that for me she’s [Alucarda] not the real monster, but rather those who try to stop her living out her vampirism.⁴²

It may therefore be more than coincidental then that Justine is also the name of the leading character and the title of one of Marquis de Sade's most famous works, *Justine*, completed in 1791. 'In de Sade's philosophy God is evil and the misfortunes suffered by Justine ... result from denying this truth.'⁴³

Alucarda’s long, wavy hair is never bound and flows freely past her shoulders, in contrast to that of the nuns. Throughout the movie she wears a long black dress that is high at the neck, more representative of the habits of Catholic nuns during the nineteenth century. Even in her black garb she is a joyous symbol of effervescence, a life-affirming image of purity and innocence. In contrast the nuns wear white, restrictive clothing and head coverings made from strips of bandage or gauze-like fabric, which gives them the appearance of embalmed Egyptian mummies. As images of stricture and death, wrapped as if to confine and inhibit the putrefaction within, they are life denying. This is illustrated in the confessional scene when Alucarda tells the priest that the nuns ‘worship death, while she [Justine]

⁴² ‘Text interview with film’s director [Moctezuma],’ in *Alucarda*, op cit.

⁴³ <http://www.angelfire.com/oh/Satanica666/philip4.html> accessed 20 November 2006.

worships life.’ The nuns are ‘hostile to life;’ personifications of Nietzsche’s diagnosis of the Church.⁴⁴

Moctezuma goes even further to completely divest the nuns of any qualities of cleanliness or immaculateness that are normally associated with them. The strips of cloth which make up their habits, splattered with the stale residue of stigmata and blood from self-flagellation, resemble menstrual cloths, inverting perceptions of purity and holiness normally associated with nuns. Moctezuma’s nuns are instead depicted as tainted; diseased.

Conclusion

Moctezuma was regarded as ‘something of a *poeta maldito* or damned poet: the Charles Baudelaire of the 1970s film industry.’⁴⁵ Precluded from receiving subsidies and support in the promotion and distribution of his films by the Mexican film industry on the grounds that they were radical and lacked a ‘social commitment’ to the normative orientations of that institution, subversive or reorientative norms found expression in Moctezuma’s films. In *Alucarda* in particular, Moctezuma contests the religious primacy and power of the Church, championing the cause of the religious ‘other.’ That he attempts to characterise the Church as oppressive and persecutory is clear in the way he portrays its agents as tyrants, and instead evokes sympathy for the two young women who have deviated from the faith.

Some of the techniques he uses to invert the character of those ‘archetypal forms of humanity’ of which Bryant spoke⁴⁶ have been discussed. Any notion of nuns’ propriety over purity has been dissolved through processes of inversion; the hypocrisy of

⁴⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ*, translated with an introduction and commentary by R J Hollingdale, *Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, Middlesex, 1968, 42.

⁴⁵ ‘Interview with *Hellboy* director Guillermo del Toro’ in *Alucarda*, op cit.

⁴⁶ Lyden, citing Darrol Bryant, op cit, 12.

idolatry is emphasised through hyperbole; and Church rituals are cast as barbaric and terrifying. It may seem premature to characterise Moctezuma as an iconoclast on the basis of this brief analysis, but the limited discussion here has illustrated some of the techniques Moctezuma used through the medium of film to attack cherished beliefs and expose the powerlessness of Christian symbols and images through normative inversion.

Iconoclasm is a phenomenon of great import for studies in religion, the antireligious perspective possessing just as much social significance as that which affirms the religious. Such affirmations express and reinforce a commitment to the beliefs, values and practices (norms) of that tradition but the iconoclastic act challenges the validity of those beliefs, values and practices, often by using those very expressions of affirmation to structure the iconoclastic rejection. In turn, these iconoclastic rejections can be used to structure the expression of affirmation. Thus the discourse of affirmation and rejection can interpenetrate in such a way that each part helps to shape the boundaries of the other.

The exploitable subject matter in Moctezuma's *Alucarda* has undermined the film's potential to reach a wider audience and has deprived it of academic assessment. The film, however, through iconoclastic techniques, critiques and distils many social concerns of its time which are relevant to the study of religion and film. It would be neglectful to continue to confine scholarly attention to films with a normative religious orientation to the exclusion of those that challenge those norms and the unquestioning acceptance of them.