Bless Me, Última

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Bless Me, Última


Based on Rudolfo Anaya’s acclaimed 1972 novel by the same title, the film Bless Me, Última (2013) is an ambitious undertaking. The film director and screenwriter, Carl Franklin, attempts to translate Anaya’s theme of liminality and syncretism (Native American mysticism and Catholicism; tradition and modernity), but does not fully succeed in mastering the transition from printed page to screen. However, the period details are rich and the cinematography crisp.

Visually stunning, Bless Me, Última floats serenely in its sea of artfully crafted images, but the narrative occasionally drifts without clear purpose. If it is a film about change and moving forward, Franklin does not always make it entirely evident where our protagonist has been or where he arrives at the film’s conclusion. Watching Bless Me, Última is sometimes a frustrating experience, but not without certain rewards. In its rather simplified evocation of the innocence of childhood, it works best if considered as a parable rather than as politically relevant social commentary.

Set in rural northern New Mexico during World War II, Bless Me, Última is centered on the ways in which the world of six-year-old Antonio (Luke Ganalon) is forever altered by the arrival to his family’s modest home of Última (Miriam Colón), a midwife and curandera (a mystical healer), who announces that she will be spending her final days with the family, to whom she is distantly related. There is a hollow dignity to Colón’s performance, reinforced by Mark Kilian’s didactic score (the music is a constant companion to the audience throughout the film, leading them to emotional states that tend to feel forced and artificial). This is matched by Ganalon’s display of wide-eyed innocence. His purpose in the film is to serve as witness to the events of the adult world that unfold before his eyes in a series of melodramatic episodes threaded together by the constant (and often realized) threat of physical and emotional violence. As a stand-in for the viewer, Antonio is a serviceable device; however, as a character meant to shoulder symbolic weight, he is somewhat lacking. A figure of innocence, he is only determined by what he might become, not what he is or was. While Última immediately bonds with him and begins teaching the secrets of her craft to him, we understand that he is to be regarded as the next link in a tradition. Further, when we see the degree to which his mother, María (Dolores Heredia), insists that the Catholic Church be an integral part of his life (in the hopes that he will become a priest), we clearly see the inevitable conflict between indigenous and European cultural practices. This is further augmented by the conflict between Antonio’s parents. His father, Gabriel (Benito Martinez), is a former vaquero who has reluctantly accepted his new domesticated role, but who also wishes to chart a new frontier in California. Antonio has three older brothers who have recently returned home from the war. While two of them quickly move on to the city, another stays behind, only to ultimately let Antonio down when he fails to intercede on Última’s behalf later in the film.

The family tensions are rife for exploring the conflict between traditional ways (the promise of independence offered by the vaquero lifestyle) and the lure of the modern city or of California as that perennial site of regeneration and renewal. Further, the emotional toll of the war on the men is foregrounded near the start of the film when we see a posse gun down a recently returned soldier who has murdered a man. Unfortunately, the narrative gets sidetracked by the conflict between Última (and Antonio’s family) and Tenorio (Cástulo Guerra), a saloon owner whose three daughters are witches. Tenorio is not so much a character as he is a device and his one-dimensional villainy tips into caricature later in the film when he acquires an eye patch after being attacked by Última’s owl familiar. This struggle of good against evil creaks along like a rickety wagon, covering overly familiar territory and taking the narrative focus away from the more interesting possibilities of Antonio’s internal conflict and the collision of tradition and modernity. Tenorio seems to exist mostly to reassure the viewer that Última’s powers are benevolent while those of his daughters are strictly malignant.

This offers Franklin a few opportunities to indulge in magic realism, but the results are rather pedestrian. In a scene in which Última lifts a curse laid by Tenorio’s...
daughters on a man, we experience a segment of the event from Antonio's perspective. Sleeping in the same room as the afflicted man, Antonio is awakened to the man's anguished cries. Franklin intercuts blurry point-of-view shots of Última attending to the man with shots of Antonio trembling in his bed, as if he is feverishly fighting against an invisible force pinning him down. The next morning, Antonio awakens and, like the man in his room, is no longer suffering, yet the viewer is left with no real sense of the purpose of this sympathetic connection between the boy and the man, who is shortly fully relieved of the curse. Later, there are shots of Tenorio's daughters (seen either in flashback or dreams) that utilize jump cuts and black and white tones to convey their malevolence. Beyond these familiar cinematic devices, however, there is no sense of the significance of these women or their father. In a film that otherwise indicates its investment in issues of people struggling with survival and identity in a time of cultural and epochal crisis, this insertion of a rote conflict between good and evil feels alienated from the rest of the film. While this structural problem may be original to the novel, Franklin does little to alleviate the ways in which it undermines the more interesting project of the narrative.

Bless Me, Última is at turns a victim of its own earnestness, and unable to effectively synthesize its multiple storylines and themes. For a film so clearly invested in issues of deep existential crisis positioned within a very specific historical place and time, it is somewhat disappointing that it does not always rise above its own reductive symbolism and narrative clichés. That said, its evocation of the period and the ways in which the world unfolds before the unblemished gaze of a child is at times simply beautiful and goes a long way toward compensating for the film's lesser parts. If the journey the film promises to take us on never really happens, at least where it keeps us is not without its distinct pleasures.

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