practical matters review

Niño Fidencio: De Roma a Espinazo (Niño Fidencio: From Rome to Espinazo). A documentary film directed by Juan Farré. Spanish with English subtitles. Produced by Fondo de Promoción al Cine de Nuevo León; Consejo Para La Cultura y las Artes de Nuevo León; Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía; and the Fondo Para La Producción Cinematográfica de Calidad. 2008.

In the years after the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), in the dusty, northern Mexican town of Espinazo, Nuevo León, a folk healer named Fidencio Constantino won a devoted following among the region's desperate and poor. His healing techniques were not conventional. In addition to herbal brews, he took patients for rides on a special swing, dunked them in a filthy pool, and threw fruits to crowds during mass healing rituals. According to some witnesses, he both predicted his own death and promised to rise again. Though he did not apparently do so, Constantino—widely known as *Niño* ("child") Fidencio because of a disease that impeded full sexual development—now lives on via an array of healers who channel his spirit.

Also, he was fat and thin. He was white and not white. He was the son of Jesus, and he was the creation of more powerful men who exploited him. The Roman Catholic Church has rejected his cult, but during his lifetime the Pope sent his blessing from Rome via messenger doves.

These contradictory statements come from interviewees in director Juan Farré's profoundly fascinating, if frequently baffling, documentary *Niño Fidencio: De Roma a Espinazo* (*Niño Fidencio: From Rome to Espinazo).* The film, shot in 1995, tells the story of El Niño Fidencio (1898-1938) and the religious movements that sprung up following his death. It does so almost entirely without explanatory narration, allowing the story to emerge through images of practice and interviews that frequently disagree with each other. Town elders who remember Fidencio, contemporary channelers, ordinary devotees, and skeptics all contribute to a picture whose contours slowly emerge, but whose edges and details remain blurry and impressionistic. A handful of scholars do appear, and the film credits Philip Singer, an adjunct professor of health behavioral sciences and

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anthropology at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan with anthropological research. Still, the experts do little to untangle this story's threads.

The confusion appears to be intentional. While I am not qualified to review cinematic technique, Farré, a Mexican documentary filmmaker, has resisted the scholarly urge to clarify Fidencio and his cult in order, instead, to plunge his viewers into the social reality surrounding *Fidencismo*—a reality that is fluid, shifting, contested, contradictory, and richly textured. Positively, this approach provides a palpable sense of the social dynamics surrounding the formation of a new religious movement—one that is still fluid and "soft," as one interviewee points out. Negatively, it leaves little certainty as to which, if any, of the film's assertions are historically reliable, and it fails to provide necessary background or answer basic questions about history, ritual, practice, and setting. Even what appears to be documentary footage of Fidencio is not labeled as such, leaving some questions about its provenance.

The film, in Spanish with English subtitles, opens with text describing the setting as post-revolutionary Mexico. Deeper historical context must come from viewers' own knowledge, as the text only vaguely alludes to revolutionary governments' anti-Catholic policies, the backlash they provoked, and other dynamics creating the religious "vacuum" that the film does mention. Next, mysterious music accompanies the camera as it swoops over Nuevo León's arid hills and follows railroad tracks into Espinazo itself. There, by way of introduction, the film offers a rapid-fire pastiche of images of Niño Fidencio's devotees—dancing, rolling on the ground, praying, and listening to tinny loudspeakers proclaiming cures for all sorts of ailments. The opening also introduces one of the film's major themes: that the cult of Niño Fidencio served those rejected by churches, universities, hospitals, tourists, and others. "The rich may go to Rome," says one man. "The rest of us will go to Espinazo."

The first major block of the film focuses on the person of El Niño Fidencio himself. It proceeds via interviews with a highly opinionated set of Espinazo elders who offer competing (if somewhat overlapping) stories of how Fidencio healed the poor who flocked to him. What fascinates here is the sheer variety of techniques described and the apparent scale of the operation. In addition to the aforementioned swing and fruit-throwing, witnesses claim (among other things) that Fidencio performed surgery with shards of glass; that he terrified paralytics into walking by confronting them with a bull; and that he treated wards of pregnant women and colonies of lepers, among others. If the witnesses are to be believed (a more-than-open question), Fidencio also related eccentrically to animals, including a clawless mountain lion he threw at people to frighten them, apparently for fun.

After exploring competing accounts of Fidencio's death, the film turns to a reconstruction of Fidencio as a historical person. After a brief and not-quite-clear account of Fidencio's childhood, the narrative juxtaposes expert statements with local oral histories that largely corroborate them. Notably, Espinazo residents remember Fidencio as having symptoms of a cleft palate and Klinefelter's syndrome, which impedes full sexual development. Information about the powerful men

who framed Fidencio's life and death also appears here, but in an incomplete fashion that raises more questions than it answers.

The majority of the film, however, deals with the religious movements and healing practices that appeared after Fidencio's death. These first appear in extended scenes of the *materias* and *cajitas* (loosely, "materials" and "containers") who channel Fidencio while in trances. Espinazo's public spaces appear filled with these healers, often dressed in colorful robes and capes as they dance with, pray over, embrace, and comfort patients. Multiple *materias* and patients also fill the *charquita*, the muddy healing pool once used by Fidencio himself.

The divisions among Fidencio's spiritual heirs drive the film's next section. A screen of text helpfully notes the four main groups of *Fidencistas*, who range in organization from loosely bounded, independent groups to a nationally registered church with creeds, officials, and ID cards. The implicit question is—to impose Max Weber's terms—if and how Fidencio's charisma will be routinized and institutionalized. When one interviewee reveals that he is writing a gospel of Fidencio, the urge to compare Fidencismo to early Christianity becomes irresistible, at least to this viewer. In addition to profiling the competing sects, however, the filmmakers give ample space to scenes of devotion. Among these are processions of penitents rolling on the ground and walking, often barefoot, around Espinazo's plaza and up a rocky hill. While this detailed view of practice is impressive, a maddening amount of questions are neither addressed nor answered. Why are the penitents climbing this particular hill? Is there a particular date or occasion for this practice? Are such processions everyday events?

Toward its end, the film also gives substantial space to Fidencistas' complicated relationships with the Roman Catholic Church, as well as the related question of its religious "legitimacy." A number of Catholic prelates speak for the camera, and while several give predictable dismissals of Fidencismo, one bishop in particular takes its rise as an occasion to find fault with the Church's neglect of the poor. Followers of El Niño have correspondingly complicated views of the church, and the variety of ways in which devotees negotiate the tension is fascinating. "I believe in God, the saints, and my holy Niño," one woman explains. Others, including several priests and many town elders, see Fidencista leaders as nothing more than exploitive charlatans. In any case, Fidencistas' appropriation of Catholic iconography and ritual forms is striking. El Niño Fidencio is depicted in the form of the Virgin of Guadalupe and with the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and the Fidencista church offers its own version of the Eucharist. Farré himself also establishes a Catholic social frame by showing several statements of Pope Benedict XVI, most of which suggest God's special love for the poor.

The film ends on this last note, with multiple interviewees pointing out that the needs of the poor and marginalized drive the cults of Niño Fidencio. The physically repulsive find physical embrace, and marginalized gays, lesbians, and transsexuals also find acceptance. The main thread here, however, is the dignity of humble people who, as one doctor puts it, need healing for both the pain in their bones and the pain in their hearts. To the question of whether Fidencismo will continue, the common answer seems to be yes—as long as there are poor, desperate people with

no other options.

Despite its limitations, *Niño Fidencio: De Roma a Espinazo* is worth seeing for scholars interested in religious practices and particularly in folk healing practices. On one level, the creativity with which El Niño's devotees appropriate elements of Catholicism, spiritism, and Fidencio's own idiosyncratic healing techniques is a fascinating case study of how religious practices participate in the emergence and contestation of a new religious tradition. Similarly, the film's soundtrack—which includes a variety of ranchero-style folk songs dedicated to El Niño—provides glimpses of how the forms of popular culture enter devotional practice. Healing practices, of course, pervade the film. Their sheer variety undercuts any simplistic or essentialist understanding of what folk healing "looks like." Of course, scholars interested in an attempt to sort historical fact from mythical accretion will need to look elsewhere. But for viewers interested in immersing themselves in the creative and contested religious worlds that have emerged—and are still emerging—from a Mexican folk healer working at a time of social upheaval, *Niño Fidencio: De Roma a Espinazo*, will prove fascinating and worthwhile.

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