

1994

# Images in Penitent Ritual and Santo Art, A Philosophical Inquiry Into the Problem of Meaning

Michael Candelaria

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/shri\\_publications](https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/shri_publications)

---

## Recommended Citation

Candelaria, Michael. "Images in Penitent Ritual and Santo Art, A Philosophical Inquiry Into the Problem of Meaning." (1994).  
[https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/shri\\_publications/43](https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/shri_publications/43)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Southwest Hispanic Research Institute at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in SHRI Publications by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [disc@unm.edu](mailto:disc@unm.edu).



UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO, ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO 87131

1994

**IMAGES IN PENITENT RITUAL AND  
SANTO ART, A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY  
INTO THE PROBLEM OF MEANING**

By

**Michael Candelaria, Ph.D.  
California State University, Bakersfield**



**Southwest  
Hispanic  
Research  
Institute**

NOTE: Do Not Copy or Quote Without Permission of Author.

IMAGES IN PENITENT RITUAL AND  
SANTO ART, A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY  
INTO THE PROBLEM OF MEANING

By  
Michael Candelaria, Ph.D.  
California State University, Bakersfield

1994

A Seminar Paper Presented At:

Summer 1994 Seminar  
"Hispanic Expressive Culture and Contemporary Public Discourse"

Hosted By:  
Southwest Hispanic Research Institute  
The University of New Mexico  
1829 Sigma Chi Rd., NE  
Albuquerque, NM 87131-1036

(505)277-2965

Funded by a grant from:  
Humanities Fellowship Program  
Division for the Arts & Humanities  
The Rockefeller Foundation

SHRI Seminar Papers\*  
Summer 1994 Seminar  
"Hispanic Expressive Culture and Contemporary  
Public Discourse"

\* \* \* \* \*

Michael Candelaria, "Images in Penitent Ritual and Santo Art, A Philosophical Inquiry Into the Problem of Meaning"

Ramón Gutiérrez, "Constructing the Penitent Brothers: Charles F. Lummis and the Orientalization of New Mexico"

Sylvia Rodríguez, "The Taos Fiesta: Invented Tradition and the Infrapolitics of Symbolic Reclamation"

Miguel Gandert, "*Retratos Mestizaje*: A Photographic Survey of Indo-Hispano Traditions of the *Río Grande* Corridor"

Enrique Lamadrid, "La Indita De San Luis Gonzaga": History, Faith, and Inter-Cultural Relations in the Evolution of a New Mexican Sacred Ballad

Olivia Arrieta, "*La Alianza Hispano Americana, 1894-1965*: An Analysis of Organizational Development and Maintenance"

Helen Lucero, "Hispanic Weavers of Northern New Mexico: Three Families"

Victor Alejandro Sorell, "Her Presence in Her Absence: New Mexican Images of *La Guadalupe*"

Genaro Padilla, "Autobiography: Reading and Hearing the Voices of My *Antepasados*"\*\*

Mónica Espinosa, "A View from Within: Aurelio Macedonio Espinosa (1880-1958)"

Tey Diana Rebolledo, "Subverting the (Dis)course: *Mexicana/India* Voices in Southwestern Narratives"

Ana Perches, "*Ni de aquí ni de allá*: The Emergence of the Mexicano/Chicano Conflict"

Francisco Lomelí, "Background of New Mexico Hispanic Literature: Self-Referentiality as a Literary-Historical Discourse"

Gabriel Meléndez, "Contesting Social and Historical Erasure: Membership in *La Prensa Asociada Hispano-Americana*"

\* Requests for copies must be made directly to each author.

\*\* Available from publisher: My History, Not Yours: The Formation of Mexican American Autobiography, University of Wisconsin Press, 1993.

IMAGES IN PENITENT RITUAL AND SANTO ART,  
A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY INTO THE PROBLEM OF MEANING

If cultural expressions, in ritual and art, for example, reveal basic meanings of life, then, an interpretation or a reading of those cultural expressions is possible. Hispanic New Mexico has produced many religious images called "santos." Of these the most prevalent images are those of Christ and the Virgin Mary.<sup>1</sup> For the

---

<sup>1</sup> E. Boyd states, "The theme of the Crucifixion engaged the attention of the New Mexico santos more than any other..." El Palacio, (August, 1951): 235. William Wroth makes this observation late nineteenth century New Mexico: "One is immediately struck by the preponderance of images associated with the passion and crucifixion of Christ..." in The Images of Penance, Images of Mercy. Southwestern Santos in the Late Nineteenth Century, (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma, 1991), p. xi. According to Thomas J. Steele's study, instances of the Cristo Crucifijo appear more than any other image from 1815 to 1900. Santos and Saints. Essays and Handbook, (Albuquerque, New Mexico: Calvin Horn Publishers, Inc., 1974), p. 171. Significant symbols include Nuestra Senora de los Dolores (Our Lady of Sorrows) who represents Mary, the Mother of Jesus, enduring the sorrows of his passion and crucifixion. She shown with a sword or swords piercing her heart. Her image is used during the highly emotional Encuentro ritual performed on Good Friday. Another significant Marian symbol is that of Nuestra Senora de la Soledad (Our Lady of Solitude) portrayed wearing a nun-like gown. Santa Veronica is also ritually important for the Penitents. She holds the veil with the imprint of Jesus' face. Sometimes Our Lady of Sorrows, Our Lady of Solitude, and Veronica are confused. Dona Sebastiana, the Angel of Death, while not properly an object of veneration, is a pervasive

purposes of this study, which is restricted to Penitent religion and santo art, I will focus on the Cristo Crucifijo, Jesus Nazareno, and the Angel de Muerte (Death Angel) or Dona Sebastiana.

What can these images show us about Hispano culture? This question presupposes the assumption that meaning is possible and, hence, that interpretation is not a vain science. Thus, alongside the first question, I will also simultaneously raise questions concerning the possibility of meaning. Ultimately, for the purposes of this investigation, these questions collapse into the following one: What are the referents of the images of Christ and the Death Angel in Penitente ritual and Santo art and what do they reveal about Hispano culture?

Other related questions come to mind. What motivates our desire to know the meanings embedded in Hispano culture? Is there some hidden meaning, objectively present, waiting to be uncovered or, rather, some arbitrary and subjective meaning in the process of being constructed? Do the penitentes and santeros, through ritual and art, preserve, in some way, the spiritual core, the ethos of Hispano culture? What inward essence is being externalized and made objective in religion and art? What self-knowledge do we hope to discover in the mysterious interplay between inner content and outward form? Dare we find in these cultural expressions a rich resource for an authentic Hispanic American philosophy?<sup>2</sup> As E.

---

symbol among the Penitents.

<sup>2</sup> See Rudolfo Kusch who attempted to find in Latin American indigenous and popular thought an original American philosophy, El pensamiento indigena y popular en America, (Buenos Aires, 1973), Geocultura del hombre americano, (Buenos Aires, 1976). See also Juan Carlos Scannone, Sabiduria popular, simbolo y filosofia.

Boyd notes, it was not until 1925 that santos were written of as a subject in themselves.<sup>3</sup> Early Anglo travelers, traders, soldiers and settlers dismissed the Santos as crudely conceived dolls. Now, says, E. Boyd, they are regarded as spiritual accomplishments.<sup>4</sup> In what sense are they spiritual accomplishments? Who has the competency to interpret them truthfully and the right to speak for Hispano culture?<sup>5</sup>

Alejandro Lopez raises this latter question and makes it the basis for his critique of Larry Frank's coffee table book on

---

Dialogo internacional en torno de una interpretacion latinoamericana, (Buenos Aires: Editorial Guadalupe, 1984), and Enrique Dussel, Philosophy of Liberation, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985), Metodo para una filosofia de la liberacion, (Salamanca: 1974), Filosofia etica Latinoamericana, tomos I, II, III, (Mexico: Editorial Edicol, 1977), Augusto Salazar Bondy, Existe una filosofia de nuestra America? (Mexico, 1968), Jose Carlos Mariategui, "Existe un pensamiento hispano-americana?" Temas de nuestra America, (Lima, 1974), Raul Fornet-Betancourt, Problemas actuales de la filosofia en Hispano America, (Buenos Aires: Ediciones FEPAI, 1985), Estudios de filosofia Latinoamerica. 500 anos despues, (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico, 1992), Filosofia intercultural, (Mexico, Universidad Pontificia de Mexico, 1994). See also, Hacia una filosofia de la liberacion Latinoamericana, (Buenos Aires: Editorial Bonum, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> "The Literature of Santos," The Southwest Review, (Spring 1950): 137.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>5</sup> Here we might as well be speaking of the competency of the reader. Who has the competency to read the Hispano cultural code? Following Louis Althusser's structuralist Marxist, Fernando Belo refers to the ideological mode of consumption. Knowledge of social reality is gained by some of its agents through a reading of ideological texts. According to Belo, reading is a matter of locating codes and naming them. As I see it Ideological texts should include religious images and ritual practices. See Fernando Belo, A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark, trans. by Matthew J. O'Connell, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1981). Reading is always re-reading. For Belo the competency of the agent consists of "the effect, inscribed in the agent's body, of all his or her earlier practices; it takes the forms of economic skill, political power, competence in reading/writing," ibid., p. 31.

Santo Art, New Kingdom of the Saints.<sup>6</sup> Lopez accuses Frank of the unpardonable sin of selling out the 'soul' of the New Mexican Hispano culture. According to Lopez, Frank makes the Hispanos "incidental" to their own story, appropriates to himself the title of "discoverer" of this tradition, and wrongly declares the tradition dead. In fact, Lopez argues that New Mexico Hispanos live under a kind of colonialism that is maintained by denying Hispano genius. Recognition of our Hispanic genius, Lopez hopes, would result in the end of victimization. Frank, however, does not allow Hispanos to be "interpreters of their own culture."

Perhaps here lies the answer to our question. The motivation behind our discourse is that we want to be interpreters of our own culture so that the world will stand up and notice our Hispanic genius.

#### I. Images of Christ are Mirrors of Self-Understanding.

Every culture has its genius. In the history of philosophy, no one has probably expounded this idea with as much intellectual rigor and rational conviction, and I might add, with as much dialectical obfuscation, as the German Idealist philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Hegel claims, in his Lectures on Aesthetics, that "...each epoch always finds its appropriate and

---

<sup>6</sup> Alejandro Lopez, "Whose Kingdom?" The Sun, (Feb., 1993): 7. See Larry Frank, New Kingdom of the Saints, (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Red Crane Books, 1992). Lopez considers Frank's book politically incorrect and wrongly timed for coming out in the Quincentenary. As Lopez sees it, Frank's message amounts to colonialization, marginalization, victimization, and the extinction of Hispano culture. Lopez sees a dissimulation of the highest order in the gap between exalting a people's culture while marginalizing the people.



adequate form...."<sup>7</sup> Though there exists many questions about adequacy, the claim that the ethos of each epoch is expressed in idiosyncratic forms has the force of intuitive clarity. I also agree with Hegel regarding the symbolic form of art. On this matter, Hegel says that "We must pass beyond the sensuous form in order to penetrate its more extended and more profound meaning."<sup>8</sup>

In the hermeneutic tradition from Friedrich Schleiermacher to Wilhelm Dilthey, this movement from "outer" expression to "inner" intention serves as a fundamental principle of interpretation. I, too, will take as a guide the proposition that behind sensible forms lies intelligible meaning. What Hegel says about myths applies equally to religious art. They are "...creations of the human spirit, however bizarre and grotesque they may appear..."<sup>9</sup> Because they are human creations they

---

<sup>7</sup> The Philosophy of Hegel, ed. by Carl J. Friedrich, (New York: The Modern Library, 1954), p. 334. Hegel's Lectures on Aesthetics were delivered in 1818 at Heidelberg but published posthumously.

Hegel presupposes a rational view of history. Reason rules the world. Events, states, laws, rights, constitutions, etc. happen for a reason and are therefore rationally explicable. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, The Philosophy of History, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 337. Hegel sees two terms involved in the symbol--the material phenomenon, the sensuous object, and the "meaning found in the mind and expression," ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 338. For Hegel, works of culture, art and religion "contain in themselves a meaning for the reason." Ibid. Wilhelm Dilthey made a distinction between the natural sciences and the human sciences. The former seek to explain phenomena, the latter seek to understand meaning embedded in cultural expressions. Dilthey presupposes a universal human Spirit--Objective Spirit--that externalizes itself in cultural expressions and that same spirit is the mind of the interpreter. So, interpretation amounts to self-understanding. In Hegel's view, each people is determined by a principle of Spirit that expresses itself by its cultural objectifications in religion, art, politics, etc. These particular

contain in themselves the very reasons for their being.<sup>10</sup> In short, religious symbols are forms of the imagination by which a people expresses its innermost secret sentiments.

Now, what Hegel said of Greek art applies no less to santero art: "...the divine beings of the Greeks are not yet the absolute free spirit, but spirit in a particular mode, fettered by the limitations of humanity, still dependent as a determinate individuality on external conditions."<sup>11</sup> Analogously, the images of Christ are not expressions of freedom because they are pictorial representations of suffering humanity. I think Hegel would say that Hispano culture does not conceptually grasp the essence of human freedom, but, instead, represents human alienation in carved wooden bultos, in painted retablos, and in religious drama.

Ludwig Feuerbach applied Hegel's idealism and dialectics to

---

cultural objectivations reveal Spirit's general nature. See The Philosophy of History. Michel Foucault, on the other hand, seeks discontinuities in history and argues for the decentering of the subject. See The Archaeology of Knowledge, trans. by A.M. Sheridan Smith, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 339. According to Hegel, in art Spirit apprehends itself.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 56. Found in The Philosophy of History, delivered in 1822 and published posthumously. Hegel's concept of freedom is a positive formulation. The negative concept of freedom means freedom from external constraints imposed by society. The positive notion emphasizes freedom for the development of all human capacities in harmony with the laws of society and nature. For Hegel the idea of history is the nature of Spirit (Geist), the subject and object of history, working out its self-knowledge. This self-knowledge is its freedom. The means of its realization are the passions and interests of human beings as well as the "Cunning of Reason"--Spirit using unintended consequences to bring about its universal will. The realization of Spirit is the ethical community that results from the union of the universal will of Spirit with the interests of individuals. The separation between its current stage and its realization is alienation.

religion. According to Feuerbach:

Religion, at least the Christian, is the relation of man to himself, or more correctly to his own nature (i.e., his subjective nature); but a relation to it, viewed as a nature apart from his own. The divine being is nothing else than the human being, or, rather, the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective--i.e., contemplated and revered as another, a distinct being. All the attributes of the divine nature are, therefore, attributes of the human nature.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, the idea of god is none other than the image of humanity projected without limitations and defects. Sigmund Freud, an admirer of Feuerbach, makes similar claims in The Future of an Illusion. There he points out the psychical origin of religious ideas: "they are illusions, fulfilments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind."<sup>13</sup> According to Feuerbach's view, the idea of God is the idea of human perfections. "God as God is the sum of all human perfection;..."<sup>14</sup> The images of the

---

<sup>12</sup> The Essence of Christianity, trans. by George Eliot, (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1957), p. 14. Because religion postulates a difference between the ideal and the real, it is essentially alienating, according to Feuerbach.

<sup>13</sup> Trans. and ed. by James Strachey, (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1961), pp. 30-1. Freud goes on to say: "The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes. As we already know, the terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection--for protection through love--which was provided by the father; and the recognition that this helplessness lasts throughout life made it necessary to cling to the existence of a father, but this time a more powerful one," ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

suffering Christ, in this respect, are only projections of human suffering. The idea of Christ is the reflection of human suffering: "... God as Christ is the sum of all human misery."<sup>15</sup> In the following remark, Feuerbach seems to be characterizing Christianity reflected in Penitent moradas: "The Christian religion is the religion of suffering. The images of the crucified one which we still meet with in all churches, represent not the Saviour, but only the crucified, the suffering Christ."<sup>16</sup>

Albert Schweitzer echoes the views of Hegel and Feuerbach. Speaking of the historical quest for Jesus in the history of Christianity, Schweitzer concludes: "Each successive Epoch found its own thoughts in Jesus, which was, indeed, the only way in which it could make him live;" for one "created him in accordance with one's own character."<sup>17</sup> This conclusion led Schweitzer to quip: "There is no historical task which so reveals someone's true self as the writing of a life of Jesus."<sup>18</sup> Following Schweitzer, I am inclined to believe that the portrayals of Jesus in Hispano culture are not so revealing of Jesus of Nazareth as they are of Hispano character.

Jaroslav Pelikan, a Church historian at Yale, says, along

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>17</sup> Cited by Jaroslav Pelikan, Jesus Through the Centuries. His Place in the History of Culture, (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1985), p. 2. From Schweitzer, The Quest of the Historical Jesus, trans. by William Montgomery, (New York: Macmillan, 1961), p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

this vein, that the presentation of Jesus in the New Testament resembles more a set of paintings than a photograph.<sup>19</sup> The images of Jesus in the New Testament are imaginative interpretations not accurate representations. As a matter of fact, oral traditions and historical communities preceded the writing of the Gospels. The Gospels are the later result and product of a long process of theologizing. My point is this, there is no singular image of Jesus in the New Testament. The images of Jesus in the Gospels, and the images of Christ in the Pauline epistles are all the result of a long process of interpretation. Thus, when Pelikan asserts that every later picture of Jesus is based on a picture of Jesus in the New Testament he really means that all images of Christ are pictures of pictures. Cultural images of Christ, like the images of Cristo Crucifijo and the Jesus Nazareno, ostensibly based on interpretations of Christ drawn from the Gospels, are really interpretations of interpretations. As Jean Baudrillard would say, they are signs of signs--simulacrum.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings, ed. by Mark Poster, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1988). "The process of signification is, at bottom, nothing but a gigantic simulation model of meaning...Of what is outside the sign, of what is other than the sign, we can say nothing..." p. 91. According to Jean Francois Lyotard, signs always refer to other signs. Signs are always cross-referring..."signification is always deferred, and meaning is never present in flesh and blood," The Lyotard Reader, ed. by Andrew Benjamin, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1989), pp. 1-2. Lyotard also speaks of "infinite postponement," "recurrence," and "reiteration" of the signifying function. Derrida's translator Gayatri Spivak points out that for Derrida one sign leads to another. Of Grammatology, translator's preface, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. xvii. Similarly, Charles S. Peirce says "one sign gives birth to another," Philosophical Writings of Peirce, ed. by Justus Buchler, (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1955), p. 99.

The Crucifijo and the Jesus Nazareno, therefore, are, first of all, mythical portrayals of Christ, creations of faith, projections of Hispano self-understanding and, only secondarily, if at all, representations of the historical Jesus. It is the Jesus of myth not the Jesus of history that inspires the Penitents. David F. Strauss in his controversial book, The Life of Jesus Critically Examined, (1835-6) divides the biblical material into myth and factual history. Myth amounts to dramatic religious representation. Even the historical material is embellished with mythical drama. The result of Strauss's inquiries is the questioning of the historical reliability of the gospel narratives, leading to the questioning of the historicity of Jesus.

Rudolf Bultmann, too, recognizes the mythical nature of the New Testament portrayal of Jesus, but doesn't see that as problematic.<sup>21</sup> For Bultmann, myths have pedagogical utility. A myth is a story of the "other side" told in terms of "this side." The Resurrection myth, for example, does not purport to be a record of a historical event, but, instead, serves as a teaching about the spiritual presence of Jesus. Myths about Jesus are to be de-mythologized--reinterpreted to address current and actual human questions. Paul Ricoeur takes the position that de-mythologizing opens up the symbolic power of myth for people to explore an area

---

<sup>21</sup> See Jesus Christ and Mythology, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958) and Theology of the New Testament, Vol I., trans. by Kendrick Grobel, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955).

considered sacred.<sup>22</sup> Myths, for Ricoeur, are narratives that express in symbolically rich language human experiences that resist expression in objective and descriptive language. For example, sin, fault, stain, and unclean are symbolic terms that describe alienation from God. For Ricoeur, when symbolic language takes up narrative form and becomes associated with times and places it becomes myth.

I agree with Bultmann who argues for the primacy of the Christ of faith over the historical Jesus. Rudolf Bultmann claims that, "We should abandon a construction of the historical Jesus and concentrate exclusively on the Christ of Faith."<sup>23</sup> There exists, after all, an unbridgeable distinction between the historical Jesus and the Christ of Faith. Whoever the historical Jesus might have been, it is faith that establishes Jesus as Savior, Lord, Redeemer. For the Penitents and santeros, Jesus' historical humanity is of little value. That he died on the cross holds symbolic value not historical significance. Thus, I am led to accept the proposition that images of Jesus are really reflections of human self-understanding.<sup>24</sup> So, what can the religious images of the santeros and Penitents tell us about Hispano self-

---

<sup>22</sup> See The Conflict of Interpretations. Essays in Hermeneutics, ed. by Don Ihde, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1974) and The Symbolism of Evil, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967). "Myth...[is] not a false explanation by means of images and fables, but a traditional narration which relates to events that happened at the beginning of time and has the purpose of providing grounds for the ritual actions....its symbolic function--that is to say, its power of discovering and revealing the bond between man and what he considers sacred," ibid., p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Bultmann.

<sup>24</sup> Pelikan, op. cit., p. 2.

understanding?

Hegel, speaking of German Christianity at the turn of the nineteenth century, says that Protestantism takes "flight from the world." In the same vein, Karl Marx states, in his famous epigram, that religion is the opiate of the people. He also says, lest we forget, in the same passage from the "Introduction" to The Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, that religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature the protest against a suffering world. I believe that these phrases, in a dialectical manner, adequately summarize the core of the Hispano philosophy of life embodied in the faith of the Penitentes and the imagery of Santo art. On the one hand, it is inclined toward "otherworldly" preoccupations, on the other, it does so as an expression of protest against unjust "this-worldly" conditions.

## II. Representation and the Referential Function are Ambiguous.

Whether I am right or wrong, how can interpretation lead us to the real meaning<sup>25</sup> of the santos? What do the santos really

---

<sup>25</sup> What is the meaning of meaning? The question seems to be circular--a worst case example of question-begging. At the very least the phrasing of the question reveals the ambiguity of the term. That the term meaning has several different senses is easy to point out. One way to determine meaning, the one detested by most post-modernists, is to uncover the intentions of authors of texts, agents of actions, and speakers of utterances. That route often proves impenetrable owing to the limitations of verifying the subjective states of others--especially if they are deceased! Meaning may refer to the sense of a proposition. Meaning may refer to an extra-linguistic referent. Meaning may imply causal explanation. Meaning may regard the use of language in a speech act or communication action. Meaning may differ according to different types of language or speech acts--assertives, imperatives, expressives, interrogatives, etc. For Barthes, meaning is intratextual: "We call meaning any type of intratextual or extra-textual correlation, i.e. any feature of narrative which



represent?<sup>26</sup> One approach to the theory of meaning is to postulate a relation of representation between a sign and the object it stands for. Representation and reference are roughly identical. Ludwig Wittgenstein formulates a picture theory of meaning in the Tractatus that argues for a representational relationship between

---

refers to another moment of the narrative or to another site of the culture necessary in order to read the narrative...a correlation...a connotation," Elements of Semiology, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1973), p. 115. For this paper, I will take the position that cultural expressions convey meaning and that meaning must be determined by the referent of the signifier. Michel Foucault would like to abolish the sovereignty of the signifier. It is his contention that there is no underlying meaning to be freed. See "The Discourse on Language," The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language, trans. by A. M. Sheridan Smith, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), p. 229.

<sup>26</sup> Pauline Marie Rosenau gives several different senses for representation: "It is delegation; one individual represents another in parliament. It is resemblance; a painting represents on the canvas what the painter observes. it is replication; the photograph (image) represents the person photographed (object). it is repetition; a writer puts on paper the word (language) that represents his/her idea or thought (meaning). It is substitution; a lawyer represents a client in court. It is duplication; a photocopy represents the original." Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences. Insights, Inroads, and Intrusions, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 92. Post-modernists repudiate representation. Representation does not represent any reality but only other representations. Santos are, using the language of Roland Barthes, signifiers and not signs. He wants to correct the tendency to interpret the sign as a signifier. In his view the sign is a relation between the signifier and the signified--"a two-sided Janus-like entity." Signifiers are located at the plane of expression, whereas signifieds are located at the plane of content. The signified is the mental representation of a thing. For example, the signified of the word 'ox' is not the animal but its mental image. Material substance is required of the signifier. "The substance of the signifier is always material (sounds, objects, images)" Barthes, Elements of Semiology, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1973), p. 47. Signification is the relationship between signifier and signified. It is a union of both terms. The signifier by itself is empty. For Saussure the signified is the concept and the signifier is the image, sound, and the sign is their relation.

the picture and what is depicted.<sup>27</sup> In the Tractatus, Wittgenstein says that the "Imagined world must have something in common with the real world." (2.022) What is the common element? What is the tie that binds the imagined world, the world of the Penitents-- tinieblas, visitas, sudarios, alabados, ejercicios, moradas, maderos, the world of the retablo and the bulto--images of suffering, death, images of Christ, Saints, Angels, Virgins, purgatory, heaven, hell, etc.--with the world that is being represented thereby? If pictures are models of reality, then what reality is being modelled by Penitente religion and Santo art?<sup>28</sup>

In Wittgenstein's representative model two elements emerge.

---

<sup>27</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1990). Although Wittgenstein was speaking of propositions I believe the same holds true for artistic or religious images. The following statements seem to be applicable to both propositions and images. We make to ourselves pictures (Bilder) of facts. (2.1) The picture (Bild) is a model (Modell) of reality. (2.12). The problem of the relation between language and reality, I believe, is the same problem regarding the relation between images and reality. Wittgenstein compares propositions to pictures in the Philosophical Investigations. There he points out the difference between portraits and genre pictures. Portraits depict real people. But, what do genre pictures depict? According to Wittgenstein they are self-referential.

<sup>28</sup> Wittgenstein's Bild translated as picture should best be translated as model. "The term Darstellungen covers 'models' in the widest sense." Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, Wittgenstein's Vienna, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), p. 183. In the Tractatus Wittgenstein says, "Das Bild ist ein Modell der Wirklichkeit," (2.12). Wittgenstein also uses representation as a model. In the 1914-16 Notebooks (7e): "As when in the law-court in Paris a motor-car accident is represented by means of dolls, etc." Immediately before, Wittgenstein says, "In the proposition a world is as it were put together experimentally." For Wittgenstein of the Tractatus a picture implies a likeness: "It is obvious that we perceive a proposition of the form aRb as a picture. Here the sign (Zeichen) is obviously a likeness of the signified." (4.012).

There is the picture and what the picture pictures.<sup>29</sup> There must be something common between the picture and the reality pictured. The picture represents. How does it represent?<sup>30</sup> Is the representation comprehended by sense perception or by reason? Is the sensuous reality of the picture the real object of knowledge or is it the idea being conveyed by the picture that is the real object of knowledge? According to the Tractatus (2.221), what the picture presents is its sense (meaning). Thus, according to Wittgenstein, what is comprehended is the ideal content and not the sensuous content.<sup>31</sup> Charles S. Peirce also defined the sign as

---

<sup>29</sup> Perhaps it is more correct to say that there are three elements: Bild is the picture, Abbliden refers to what is pictured, Darstellung is the way it is pictured. Abblidung is the form of representation, whereas, Darstellen is the act of representation.

<sup>30</sup> In the Tractatus Wittgenstein uses three different words for the act of representation: abbildet (depicts), darstellt (represents or presents) and vertretet (stands for). Darstellen seems to correspond to Peirce's Iconic function. Maybe the purpose of the religious images is not representational but expressive.

<sup>31</sup> It is commonly understood that the meaning of a sign is its ideal content. In the Philosophical Investigations Wittgenstein wants to move beyond what he calls the primitive idea of the way language is used. According to the primitive idea of meaning words name objects. (1:1,2) "The sign does not wait in silence for the coming of a man capable of recognizing it: it can be constituted only by an act of knowing." Michel Foucault, The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences, (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 59. According to Charles S. Peirce, "A sign by Firstness is an image of its object and more strictly speaking, can only be an idea. For it must produce an interpretant idea...", op. cit., p. 105. For Barthes, the signifier is at the plane of expression and the signified is at the plane of content. See Elements of Semiology, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1973). The signified is not a thing but a mental representation. Edmund Husserl's phenomenology also makes a difference between the sensuous sign and the mental act "that passes through the perceptual sign into the ideal meaning," in Henry Staten, Wittgenstein and Derrida, (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 44.

a triadic relation in which a sign stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody which means that "it creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign (the interpretant)."<sup>32</sup> The sign stands for the idea of some object. It is this ideal content, the meaning, which functions as the common element between what is pictured and the reality it represents, and the latter, moreover, is not heaven or some other extra-terrestrial realm, but real human conditions in this life.

Thomas J. Steele, in Santos and Saints, makes strong metaphysical and historical claims about the status of referents.<sup>33</sup> God, Christ, the saints--eternal entities--and events in the historical past are the indisputable referents of the Santos. For Steele, the "saint in the picture" has for its referent the "saint of reality."

Since New Mexican art was religious rather than aesthetic in purpose, so that the goal was to create an instrument of holiness and power rather than an artifact for detached contemplation, the connection between the saint in the

---

<sup>32</sup> Philosophical Writings of Peirce, ed. by Justus Buchler, (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1955), p. 99. "A sign or representamen is a First which stands in such a genuine triadic relation to a Second, called its Object, as to be capable of determining a Third, called its Interpretant," ibid. Building on Peirce's triadic sign structure and Karl Buhler's functional scheme for language, Jurgen Habermas expounds the following elements of the sign structure. First, the sign expresses the intention of the speaker. Second, the sign makes reference to states of affairs, and third, the sign establishes relations with the addressee(s). Postmetaphysical Thinking. Philosophical Essays, trans. by William Mark Hohengarten, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1992), pp. 57ff.

<sup>33</sup> Op. cit., p. 46.

picture and the saint of reality was a matter of great importance.<sup>34</sup>

But, as we will see, the phrase "saint in reality" is ambiguous. According to Steele, the Santos are valued in terms of being able to imitate the original. Steele refers to this mind-set as folk platonism. But what serves as the original, as the saint in reality? It is either the saint in heaven or the saint from earthly life.<sup>35</sup> For Steele, the saint in reality, the referent of the santo, is the saint in heaven: "The question of power insures that the santo will imitate not the saint as he or she was formerly active during an earthly lifetime but the saint presently living at the peak of power and holiness in heaven."<sup>36</sup> "Saint such and such is now in heaven and is assigned by God to aid me; this holy retablo is of itself and by its own sanctity both my powerful claim on him and his potent presence at the spot of need."<sup>37</sup> Without question, then, Steele claims that the saint in heaven is the iconic referent of the Santo: "The New Mexican santero founds his likeness upon what is most real and most holy: the saint in heaven."<sup>38</sup>

Steele, however, draws a different conclusion for the Christ figures. The referent for these is the earthly Christ narrated in the Gospels.

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

The validation of these Christ-figures stems not from heavenly being as it does in the case of saints but from a particular set of earthly actions, the Passion. It is not Christ in his eternal pre-existence or in his present glorification who guarantees these santos, but the earthly Christ in his performance of the only complex of actions that is recognized by Christians as a truly pattern setting and power-inducing earthly and historical deed: his passion and death.<sup>39</sup>

Of course, I do not agree with Steele if he is claiming that the referents of the saints are holy personages in heaven and that the referent of the images of Christ is the earthly and historical figure of Jesus. But I do agree with him if he is attributing these beliefs to Hispano culture.

In the literature many commentators naively write as though the referents of the Santos are the saints in heaven. Robert Shalkop, to give a typical example, states that the Santos are used for invoking the intercession of personages they represent, e.g. Santa Barbara for protection against lightning, San Ramon Nonato for assistance in Chilbirth, etc.<sup>40</sup> To the extent that the religiously inclined Hispano postulates a heavenly realm occupied by real holy personages, then the santos indicate an alienated culture and the thesis that Hispano culture takes "flight from the world" is an adequate one.

Common to religious worlviews is the bifurcation of the

---

<sup>39</sup> ibid., p. 51.

<sup>40</sup> Robert L. Shalkop, Wooden Saints. The Santos of New Mexico, (Buchheim Verlag-Feldafing, 1987), p. 24.

world into two realities. Such Ontological dualisms generally lead to ethical dichotomies where the different realms are ranked heirarchically according to some criteria of value. Consequently, in religious models the heavenly realm stands higher, in the ranking of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, than the earthly realm.

What we are dealing with, however, is not a relation between "this" world and the "other" world, but the relation between words and things, pictures and what they picture, signs and their referents. At the outset we must be clear about one principle, a representation does not prove the reality of the referent. The existence of a symbol like the "Crucifijo" does not entail the existence of the referent crucified Christ. Nor is it clear what the referent really is. As pointed out above, the referent of the Crucifijo and the Nazareno cannot be the historical Jesus because the latter is just a mythical character in a first century Jewish sectarian passion narrative. In general, the referent cannot be determined by semantic definition alone--that simply means that the same name is used different phrases, e.g. Cristo Crucifijo refers to the crucified Christ. Perhaps, as the later Wittgenstein contends, it is the social function of the symbol that determines its meaning and its referent.

This seems to be the route takes in his book Woodcarvers of Cordova. According to Charles Briggs, religious images have become symbols of Hispanic ethnicity. (Briggs prefers the terms image and

image carver instead of santo and santero).<sup>41</sup> Santos are used in "ritual reassertion of group identity."<sup>42</sup> Their importance, so he claims, stems from the fact that they function as cultural and social mediators. Mediators are the "symbolic connection of individuals, groups, concepts, social movements, and other entities."<sup>43</sup> For example, the image of St. Isidore, the patron saint of farmers, mediates between the group and its individual members and between humans and nature. Briggs also says that Holy personages mediate between the worshipper and God. Briggs seems to be making a semantic confusion between the image and the holy personage it represents. What is the referent of the image? The holy personage? A social ideal? This is question is not adequately settled by Briggs? On the contrary, Briggs is ambiguous about the referent. Briggs ethnohistorical analysis and socio-functionalist approach, nevertheless, rely on an implicit metaphysical claim that assumes an ontological dualism between the human world and the world of divine beings. "In short, the images constitute a language, as it were, for a discourse that bridges a universe of holy personages and the social universe."<sup>44</sup> Such a dualism is the necessary condition for a representational theory. Thus, Briggs does not get away from an interpretation based on representation. As I mentioned above, the problem with representational theories is

---

<sup>41</sup> The Wood Carvers of Cordova, New Mexico. Social Dimensions of an Artistic "Revival," (Knoxville, Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press, 1980.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 18-9.



that they posit two worlds and, I might add, cannot adequately account for the correspondence between them.

Briggs speaks, for example, of the iconicity between the image and referent. Iconicity implies a resemblance. How do images of retablos and bultos resemble holy personages? Again, the underlying metaphysical claim seems to posit a real ontological status of holy personages.

Jean Lyotard argues that the reality of the referent cannot be subject to verifying procedures. He emphasizes the semantical nature of the referent.<sup>45</sup> The referent is a function of rhetorical form.<sup>46</sup> In getting at the semantical differences between referent types Lyotard makes a distinction between the addressor instance of a phrase and the referent instance. In an addressor instance (the subject of uttering) a proper name refers to a speaking subject. In the referent instance (the subject of utterance), on the other hand, the same name makes reference to a historical subject. In each case the referent is determined by semantical function. For elucidation purposes, Lyotard takes the proper name of Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher, as an example. When the utterance of the proposition (p): "The French Revolution...." is attributed to Kant, as in, "Kant said, 'The French Revolution...'" Kant is the subject of uttering, the addressor, the one who is uttering. But

---

<sup>45</sup> The Differend. Phrases in Dispute, trans. by Georges Van Den Abbeele, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988). Where Lyotard speaks of the referent, Barthes speaks of the signified. In Barthes, signified and referent collapse into an identical unity.

<sup>46</sup> Wittgenstein holds in the Tractatus that "only in context of a proposition does a name have meaning." (3.3)

in the phrase (q): "it is the case that Kant did say the French Revolution...", the name Kant functions as the historical referent, the subject of utterance. Kant is the one being spoken about. For Lyotard these instances are distinct universe phrases. Kant is the addressor in universe phrase p, but the referent in universe phrase q. Is Kant in the addressor instance identical to Kant in the referent instance? The same name takes on a different quality in each universe phrase. Each universe phrase represents, as it were, a different world. Meaning of terms, therefore, is determined by the context of its universe of discourse. The latter could be historical, rhetorical, logical, fictive, etc. Let me illustrate this point by taking another example from Lyotard. Consider the following sentences: "She is closing the door now." and "The word 'now' is an adverb of time." The two uses of the same word are entirely different. In the former, the term functions as a referent of time, in the latter it doesn't. In the latter the term is self-referential. Semantical placement and rhetorical usage determine meaning and reference.

Following Lyotard's argument, let us suppose that propositions contain names or that pictures contain elements to which there are objects in the world that function as their referents. Then, the names of a proposition and the elements of a picture could be laid against reality to see if reality corresponds to the proposition or picture. But, in fact, there are different types of propositions and pictures. As Lyotard puts it, some propositions show, others signify, and still others name. The referent of an ostensive and the referent of a nominative are

utterly different.<sup>47</sup> The referent of an ostensive can be shown--pointed out--(e.g. "That bulto on the altar is Jesus Nazareno.") The referent of a nominative can only be named--"Jesus Nazareno is the Man of Sorrows." There are as many universes as there are phrases.<sup>48</sup> How can the referent be identical in each instance if at one time it is an object of carved wood and another time it is a name? Moreover, how can there be only one referent if it is shown in different times and places? That Christ is the referent in proposition p "the lighted candle at the end of tinieblas represents Christ" does not necessarily show that Christ is the same referent in proposition q "Penitents meditate on the passion and death of Christ." How can you know if it is the same Christ when different properties are attributed to it? According to Lyotard, propositions belonging to heterogeneous families (Wittgenstein's language games) can affect the referent of a single proper name by situating it upon different instances in the universes they present. Again, modelling my argument similarly to Lyotard's, suppose Christ's name appears in three different phrases. How can Christ be defined? Which is a better definition? Is Christ the addressor of a declaration, the addressee of an interrogative, the referent of a description, the object of an ostensive, the name of a nominative, etc.?

---

<sup>47</sup> "The referent of an ostensive (object of perception) and the referent of a nominative (object of history) are utterly different," ibid., p. 51.

<sup>48</sup> Lyotard says, "Real or not, the referent is presented in the universe of the phrase, and it is therefore situated in relation to some sense," ibid., p. 42.

The referent is equivocal.<sup>49</sup> Roland Barthes raises this point in discussing the "Larger Signified." Barthes uses as an example a statement taken from a Latin grammar handbook: "My name is Leo." The statement doesn't serve to give someone's name, but to teach a language. "Leo" appears to function as a nominative, but it does not name a person. The significance of the phrase is given by its pedagogical context--rules and procedures for teaching Latin.

There is no question in my mind but that inquiry into meaning should take into account the pragmatic use of terms. Let's examine some Penitent terminology (paradigm cases) that share a family resemblance and historically are tied to the larger Christian tradition. The terms I have selected are "Senor," "Cristo," and "Jesus" and they have been selected from Penitent literature--constitutions, prayers, rituals, and alabados. In an apparent citation from the Gospels, a Penitente constitution contains the following phrase regimen: "Do penance and believe in the Gospel; says the Lord." Here is an excellent example of the addressor instance. The Lord (Senor) occupies the position of the addressor. In Lyotard's terminology "Lord" is the subject of uttering. In the addressor instance the authorial presence of the Lord is stressed. "Lord" is the origin, source, and authority

---

<sup>49</sup> Everything cannot be said about a referent. "It cannot be proven that everything has been signified about a name that everything has been said about x not only because no such totality can be proven, but because the name not being by itself a designator of reality...the inflation of senses taht can be attached to it is not bound by the 'real' properties of its referent," ibid., p. 47. For example: "The referent of the name Caesar is not completely describable essence, even with Caesar dead," ibid., p. 53.

behind the message.

Many phrases contain "Cristo" in the referent instance. For example, Penitents are urged to meditate on the "passion and death of Christ." Here, "Cristo" functions as a referent. But what kind of a referent? As I said above, the images of Christ, though they may ostensibly refer to the Christ of Gospel narratives, really refer to some ideal content. The ideal content of the signification contains ritual associations, a mythical quality, and is connected with a chain of signifiers. "Cristo" must be seen in light of its metonymic relation with other signifiers, tradition, and use by the community. The phrase "pasión y muerte de Cristo," an oft-repeated refrain of Penitent cultic formula, is a full signifier, a set of corresponding images. Intertextuality links this signifier with others (apparently narrative events)--the capture in the Garden of Gethsemane, the trials before the Jewish high priests and the Roman provincial governor Pontius Pilate, the cruel scourgings and mockings, the presentation of buffeted Ecce Homo before the mob, the way to the cross, the encounter or (Encuentro) with Mary, the Mother of Sorrows, the Crucifixion itself. Of course, some of these signifiers take on the form of dramatic performance--las estaciones de la cruz, el encuentro, las tinieblas, etc.

"Jesus" appears as a term in the traditional title of the Penitent confraternity: "Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno (Our Father Jesus the Nazarene)." This is an example of the nominative function. (Note also that Jesus is referred to by various titles: "Our Lord," "Our Father," and "Our Redeemer.") Our Father Jesus the

Nazarene names a lay penitential organization, a pious confraternity, a mutual aid society. The reference is to an abstract social entity not to the character Jesus in the passion narratives of the Gospels, and not to the historical Jewish Jesus from the Galilean town of first century Nazareth. It functions as a title pure and simple. Of course, it is connected in a chain of signifiers with "Senor," "Passion y muerte de Cristo," "Padre Jesus," "Jesus Nazareno," "Cristo Crucifijo," but that is an implicit connection that the reader makes. Objectively, and for practical considerations, "Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno" functions as nothing more than a title in some instances.

The term "Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno" also occupies a place as an element in a penitent prayer formula: "In the Name of Our Father Jesus the Nazarene." Prefacing the name of a deity with "In the name of..." is an ancient invocation prayer formula for petitioning the power or presence of the invoked deity. Although Our Father Jesus the Nazarene is identical in both phrase regimens, there is a significant difference. The first use in the previous paragraph is that of a title. In the next, it is used as part of a prayer. It is a formula used in rituals like the "Entrada" or Entrance ritual.<sup>50</sup> Initiates are to enter the fraternity "In the name of the Lord." (Lord or Senor is used identically as Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno.) The use of the term "Padre" has associations with the ancient Christian sect of the Patripassionists who denied the trinity and held that it was God the Father who died on the cross. It also has traditional links

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp. 177ff.

with the Franciscans who use "Padre" as an honorific title as in "Padre Francis."

Another metonym/metaphor linked with the name of Christ is the signifier "blood/sangre." According to Martha Weigle, the hermandad was originally referred to as the *Fraternidad de la Sangre de Cristo*.<sup>51</sup> "Blood" appears in many cultic formulas: "Most Precious Blood of Our Lord Jesus," "the blood which Our Redeemer Jesus Christ shed." "I...venerate your most holy body, the wounds of your most holy side, the water and blood which flowed from it...." Here the term "blood" belongs to the mythological code and signifies a quality of redemption found in theologies of sacrifice. It would be a gross misunderstanding to confuse the use of the term in mythical discourse with the use of the same term in medical discourse.

At times the reference is to the religious image as in The "statue of Our Father Jesus the Nazarene." For example, the 1915-16 Cochiti Rules refers to a particular bulto as the "true image and

---

<sup>51</sup> "The penitential Brotherhood in New Mexico has been known since 1860, by the name, *La Hermandad de Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno*. However, as we have seen, the Martinez-Zubiria correspondence of February-April 1833 quite definitively names the group the Brotherhood of the *Sangre de Cristo*. It appears that (1) this is the original name of the group...Brotherhood of the Blood of Christ of the early 1500's, (2) this name survived in New Mexico until the late 1850's when, under pressure from the outside world (most notably Bishop Jean Baptiste Lamy...), the name was changed to honor the most important advocacy of Christ in the Brotherhood's observances: *Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno*....to avoid the public attention that the name "The Blood of Christ" would give to the flagellant brotherhood....Most Brotherhood constitutions, transcribed and translated by Steele and Rivera, adopt a new name, but the old name, *Sangre de Cristo*, continues to be used in less formal documents and in the observances of the Brotherhood," Marta Weigle, "Penitential Practices in New Mexico: The Brotherhood of the *Sangre de Cristo*," in William Wroth, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

representation" of the "passion and the death of Our Redeemer Jesus Christ."<sup>52</sup> The phrase "the place where the Lord himself is placed", is a reference to the religious image. "We adore thee, O Christ" is also addressed to the religious image and so is the following phrase: "Lord Jesus Christ, I am a poor penitente who comes to perform my exercise and fulfill my devotion." There appears to be a singular identification between the crucifix and Christ. The initiate is to "kiss the crucifix" and the holy earth, then, he is to return to the "place where our Lord is placed and asks a blessing." Here the "crucifix" and the "Lord" are identical. Note the identification between the cross and Christ: "adore the holy cross" and "We adore thee, O Christ" According to the Entrance Ritual the initiate is to profess faith with "this divine Lord" (reference to a crucifix), saying "The cross will deliver us...I avail myself of the Redeemer." Lorenzo de Cordova speaking of a procession on Holy Week describes a cross at the end of the path as "the present cross of Calvary at the morada and an object of worship as representing the true Cross."<sup>53</sup>

The Name of Jesus is also cited in the Trinitarian formulas. The formula for the Holy Family: "Long live Jesus, Mary, and Joseph." The formula for the Holy Trinity: "Mystery of the Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." "Jesus" takes

---

<sup>52</sup> See Thomas J. Steele and Rowena A. Rivera, Penitente Self-Government. Brotherhood Councils, 1797-1947, (Santa Fe: Ancient City Press, 1985), pp. 77ff.

<sup>53</sup> Echoes of the Flute, (Santa Fe: Ancient City Press, 1972), p. p. 38.



on certain qualities because of its linkage with "Mary" and "Joseph." It is also associated in a sole metonymic relation with the Virgin: "In the name of Our Father Jesus the Nazarene and of the ever Virgin Mary."<sup>54</sup> The beautiful alabado called "El Alba," which I heard sung at the end of a tinieblas ceremony, begins with the words: Viva Jesus, Viva Maria. In these formulas, it is the human quality of Jesus that is emphasized. In the formula for the Holy Trinity, on account of the linkage of "Son" with "Father" and "Holy Spirit," it is the divinity of the "Son" that is stressed. This implicit bi-polarization reflects a mentality that conceives a dualistic cosmology--an earthly realm and a heavenly one.

The name of Jesus also takes on a nominative function in the title of prayers and alabados: "El Verdadero Jesus" is one of the most important prayers.<sup>55</sup> It is recited upon reaching the door to the morada. Following Charles S. Peirce, we can see the three types of sign function and corresponding referential functions of the prayer-ritual. As an index, it signals the beginning of rituals. As icon it includes the traditional gesture of making the sign of the cross. As a symbol it signifies the Penitente identification with the passion and death of Jesus Christ.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> "Metonymy, in Lacan's usage, refers to the way in which signifiers are linked to other signifiers in a chain and ultimately an entire network that provides the pathways along which identification and desire operate." Cited from Mark Bracher, Lacan, Discourse, and Social Change. A Psychoanalytic Cultural Criticism, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 50.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., pp. 184ff.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

In Competence in Performance, Briggs tries to overcome the ambiguity of the referent by dismissing the referential function.<sup>57</sup> Briggs claims, for instance, that stylistic constraints "reduce the importance of the referential function in the overall meaning of the discourse."<sup>58</sup> Familiarity and redundancy also place the referential function in the background, "relegating it to a peripheral role in these speech events."<sup>59</sup> Briggs' method of interpretation, however, does not successfully eliminate the referential function. He believes, for example, that images draped in black, during Holy Week, signify mourning. Candles on the tenebrario during the tinieblas ceremony symbolize Christ's light and presence of the Holy Spirit. Here mourning, Christ's light, and the presence of the Holy Spirit take on a referential role. The Stations of the Cross become meaningful as sites of reenactment of parts of the passion drama. "Space, in short, becomes textual space."<sup>60</sup> Ritual time is textual time. Why? Because "ritual represent the events surrounding the crucifixion."<sup>61</sup>

As can be seen, referential function is ambiguous. Names and terms are used in different ways and use determines reference and meaning. In the previous paragraphs we only considered the meaning and reference of names. In the following paragraphs, let's

---

<sup>57</sup> Competence in Performance. The Creativity of Tradition in Mexicano Verbal Art, (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press), p. 317.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 318.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 320.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

examine the images themselves.

### III. Religious Images convey the Meaning of Suffering.

#### 1. Cristo Crucifijo, Jesus Nazareno and Dona Sebastiana.

The Cristo Crucifijo depicts Christ hanging on the cross. Invariably, these depictions are sanguinary. Streaks of blood are shown flowing from the wounds, and, interestingly, from the loincloth. Usually, these streaks of blood follow a decorative pattern, and, consequently, offset the overall morbidity of the subject. At times, the image is depicted with the head hanging down as if to show the dead Christ rather than the dying Christ.

The Jesus Nazareno, a popular subject matter with clearly defined Penitent associations, also displays the marks of the passion, is usually shown wearing a robe, and a wig of human hair. Often, the hands of the figure are tied. William Wroth compares the Hispano Nazareno to the European "Man of Sorrows" and indicates a continuity existing between these images. "This representation of Christ as the man of Sorrows shows the remarkable continuity of penitential imagery surviving in New Mexico in the late 19th century."<sup>62</sup>

One of the first things that strikes the observer of the images of the Crucifijo and Nazareno is their starkly life-like character. Unlike the retablos where the depictions of human figures are almost cartoon-like, the bultos exhibit a strong sense

---

<sup>62</sup> Op. cit., p. 71. Wroth points out the penitential aspects of the Man of Sorrows as well: "The fervent penitentialism which arose in late Medieval Europe is well expressed by this fifteenth century wood cut of Christ holding a scourge in each hand, with wounds covering His body, and dressed in a loin cloth," ibid.

of naturalism and realism. Realism is achieved "by careful carving of teeth, the making of wigs of human hair, the use of translucent material and mirrors for eyes, and the loving attention given to sacrificed flesh."<sup>63</sup> As George Mills sees it, the naturalism of the bultos is for imitating human flesh. For the Penitents human flesh approximates the death of Christ, so wooden images are carved to approximate human flesh.<sup>64</sup> The goal of such naturalism, according to Mill, is to personalize art. Personalization puts art in the real world.<sup>65</sup> E. Boyd, too, in describing the bulto images emphasizes their realism, naturalism, and muscularity. Such realism constitutes proof for her that the crucifijos are works of laymen not of priests. E. Boyd gives an early account of a description of the santos which appropriately conveys my own impressions:

To produce a more horrible representation still, the carver had given the forms extreme emaciation, the ribs standing apart, the abdomen sunken, the bones and cords of all the limbs dreadfully prominent. Add to this cadaverous appearance a network of red streaks tracing the principal veins and you have an image awful beyond conception.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> George Mills, People of the Saints, (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Taylor Museum), p. 55. E. Boyd finds three elements characterizing the two dimensional depictions of the Cristo Crucifijo: 1. a decorative border, 2. shrubs, urns, or pots on each side of the cross, and a poof of loincloth sticking out to one side.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> "Literature of the Santos," op. cit., p. 131.

As I see, and in accordance with my earlier comments, these bultos are polysemious and multivalent in reference. Only at the most superficial level do these bultos refer to the Christ of the Christian tradition. If that's all they did then they would be on a par with all other images of Christ throughout the history of Western Civilization. On the contrary, they are unique particularizations embodying the ethos of a distinctive Hispano culture. At another level, they are self-referential. The images refer to themselves. Signifier and signified become one. The wooden image draws to eye to its own sheer awesomeness and to its own particular fascinating form at the moment. At yet another level the images are prototypes of human individuals. Can one who has observed the emotionally charged Encuentro ritual, the fourth station of the Cross, performed on Good Friday, fail to see the identification between the Nazareno and every man, and the identification between Nuestra Senora de Soledad and every mother? At the deepest level, the manifest images of the saints reveal the latent meanings of life at the core of a culture.

What meanings are conveyed by these images? Writers commonly suggest that the images exhibit sorrow and tragedy. E. Boyd only notes the obvious when she says that the Crucifijos suggest "spiritual sorrow to convey the sufferings of physical torture." Virgil Barker too sees in the images a tragic intensity drawn from an inheritance of intense feeling. He believes, however, that the content of grief and dread mask a hidden joy.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> Virgil Barker, "Signs and Images, Likenesses and Contrasts," Baker compares the Santos with the tavern and shop signs of early Atlantic Coast settlers. He finds several common

Undoubtedly, by peeling back the layers of manifest cultural expression we discover a latent nucleus of earthly pessimism. But, the real question remains, as Mills puts it: "What aspect of culture produced a need to suffer so urgent that it spilled over from a realistic re-enactment of Christ's passion into the most powerful folk art to be found within the border of the U.S.?"<sup>68</sup> If E. Boyd is correct when she notes that: "The theme of the crucifixion engaged the attention of New Mexican Santos more than any other,"<sup>69</sup> then, one must ask, What encourages the representation of suffering?

By framing the question in this manner, we are no longer enquiring into the meaning of images but seeking for explanatory causes. One answer to this question is given by William Wroth in his book, Images of Penance. Images of Mercy, where he claims to be construing meanings from the Santos when, in fact, he seems more

---

elements. They are useful for the illiterate. They function as symbols. They evince a low level of technical skill and both address a wide audience. Differences too are pointed out. Where the Atlantic Coast signs are utilitarian and have a secular purpose, the Santos express intense feeling and a religious purpose.

<sup>68</sup> "These Spanish penitential confraternities were above all Christocentric, and their love of Christ was expressed especially in their devotion to images of Him and His sorrowing mother. The images became central elements...passion plays in which the crucial events of Christ's life were dramatically reenacted," Wroth, op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>69</sup> Op. cit. Interestingly, Michel Foucault point out that the 18th century saw an increase in attention paid to the body as an object and target of power, as an instrument that could be trained and manipulated. Discipline and Punish, p. 148. Emerging from the gaze of the body was a new conception of the body--an intelligent body and a useful body. Ibid., p. 149. But the focus of the new sciences of man was the training of the body to increase its utility. For the Penitents, like the ascetic tradition in Christianity, the focus on the body is renunciation. Ibid., p. 149.

intent on providing functional explanations for the role played by these images in Hispano Catholic culture.<sup>70</sup>

He wants to know, for instance, why there appeared in the late nineteenth century, a preponderance of images relating to Christ's passion. He believes that can best be explained by the social-political situation in New Mexico and by the growing importance of the penitential brotherhood.<sup>71</sup>

In his viewpoint, the Penitent brotherhood has been a preserver of Hispanic Catholic values and cultural identity in the face of a dominant and hostile Anglo culture. After the American Occupation of 1846 it was the Brotherhood, he claims, which resisted domination by an incoming Anglo culture and heroically tried to preserve their Hispanic Catholic heritage. According to this thesis, the Brotherhood in the late nineteenth century constituted the spiritual core of Hispanic society.<sup>72</sup> Hispano religion and culture values were attacked by dogmatic Roman Catholic clergy like Bishops Lamy and Salpointe, and by

---

<sup>70</sup> Images of Penance, Images of Mercy. Southwestern Santos in the Late Nineteenth Century, (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), p. xi.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. Regarding the logic of explanation in the social sciences, Karl Otto Apel asks, "How can one impute causes to individual actions, conceived as events, without assuming the possibility of employing universal laws to deduce and predict them in their intelligibility," Understanding and Explanation. A Transcendental-Pragmatic Perspective, trans. by Georgia Warnke, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1984), p. 19.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. xv. Afterall, the French-American prelates appointed to ecclesiastical control over New Mexico despised Santo Art. "The Roman Catholic vicar apostolic, the Reverend John B. Lamy, who was sent to Santa Fe from Cincinnati in 1851, did not respond positively to the santeros' art. With a cultured European background, he found the local art crude, though he soon adopted a more approving stance, Dillenberger, p. 27.

iconoclastic Protestant missionaries like the Presbyterian, self-styled "apostle to the Mexican," Alexander M. Darley. Economically, of course, the traditional way of life began to disappear under the unrelenting onslaught of entrepreneurial capitalism. As Wroth sees it, Anglos and Hispanics constituted opposed social orders. Whereas Hispanics placed a high value on religion and tradition, Anglo Americans, by contrast, esteemed the material realm and earthly rewards. Consequently, for the Anglos, Hispanic New Mexico was perceived as a static society out of touch with modern life.<sup>73</sup> It is a sad but widely known fact that commercial images--Currier and Ives chromolithographs and plaster cast statues--mass produced in the East Coast replaced the traditional and handmade santos. The Brotherhood, Wroth argues, as the self-appointed preserver of the core religious values, rejected the cheap commercial images and demanded the traditional santos for their ritualistic needs. Thus, Wroth concludes, this accounts for the preponderance of the images of Jesus Nazarene, Our Lady of Solitude, Christ Crucified and Christ in the Holy Sepulchere.<sup>74</sup>

Thomas J. Steele, like Wroth, seeks to provide a similar explanatory account for the "immediate acceptance and the rapid spread of the carreta de la muerte." (Angel of Death and/or Dona Sebastiana)<sup>75</sup> He too finds the explanatory factors in the socio-political situation of New Mexico beginning with the Anglo occupation in 1846. "Old Spanish Way of life was being threatened

---

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. xvi.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.; pp. xvi-xvii.

<sup>75</sup> Op. cit., p. 3.



by a new way--accounts for the emergence of the carreta in 1860."<sup>76</sup> "Factor of public re-adjustment of the Spanish culture to the new Anglo culture."<sup>77</sup> Steele believes that the carreta does something to prevent the stagnation and death of New Mexico Spanish Catholicism.<sup>78</sup> A clue, he claims, is to be found in the Spanish attitude toward the Anglo conqueror.

According to Steele, the origin and spread of the death cart, which includes the image of the Angel of Death or Dona Sebastiana, indicate that the Spanish were intensifying their culture and religion in the face of incoming Anglo settlement.<sup>79</sup> Steele goes back at least to the Taos Rebellion of 1847 to find the source of this attitude. He refers to it as "religious sublimation of a frustrated psychic force."<sup>80</sup> Steele places Padre Martinez as the personality behind the attempt to revitalize Spanish religious life..."energies released in the death cart and onto the making of bultos in the latter one-half of the 19th century."<sup>81</sup> Resistance to Anglo domination and preservation of Hispano cultural values, the same forces that Wroth identifies as the causes behind the increased bulto production of the images of Christ in the latter part of the nineteenth century, account for the emergence of the Death Cart.

---

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

No image symbolizes, in as gruesome a manner, the personification of death as much as the Dona Sebastiana or Death Angel. The image depicts a rather ghastly and horrific image of an aged female skeletal figure wielding a bow and arrow and riding on a wooden cart. This is a master signifier of death, a reminder of personal death. E. Boyd calls the Death Angel a "peculiarly specialized feature of the Penitente morada."<sup>82</sup> According to Boyd, this gruesome image made its appearance about the middle of the nineteenth century when "...Penitente secession was most active and ecclesiastical suppression in the hill villages scanty."<sup>83</sup> Boyd conjectures that the Death Angel stems from the Third Order practice of keeping human skulls "in plain view as excessive demonstration of devotion."<sup>84</sup> Steele, too, probably relying on Boyd, postulates that the death cart was a substitute for the skulls.<sup>85</sup> For Steele, the Death figure is a more complete noble presentation of death than the human skull. The skull supposedly portrayed the death of Christ and is an attribute in the iconography of St. Francis.<sup>86</sup> In the morada, the skull may have preceded the Death Angel, but the personification of death in the Death Angel has been traced by several writers to Petrarch's Il Triomphi, a poetic allegory of fame and death.

---

<sup>82</sup> Popular Arts of Spanish New Mexico, (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1974), p. 462.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> "The Death Cart," Colorado Magazine, no. 55, (Winter, 1978): 3.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

According to Gabriel Fernandez Ledesma, in his study on the origins of the death cart, two ideas converge in Petrarch's Death Angel.<sup>87</sup> First, there is the personification of the human skeleton. Second, there is the cart of triumph of Roman military victory processions. The Death Angel is a synthesis of both ideas. Petrarch's images of Death and Fame, according to Boyd, were carried over into the Tarot cards that were popular in Spain and serve as the link between Dona Sebastiana and Petrarch's Death Angel.<sup>88</sup> Ledesma finds other possible links besides Petrarch and the Tarot cards: the Death Angel in Medieval plays, processions that featured figures of death and the devil, Cervantes' hero Quijote confronted by a cart containing "death with a human face" and Pieter Breughel the Elder's painting, "The Dance of Death."<sup>89</sup>

Laying aside the search for origins, what is the meaning of the Death Angel? For Steele it is a "straightforward confrontation with personal death. This entails involuntary death, unprepared death, and encouragement for buena muerte." It also means self-mortification or ascetic discipline "dying to the human self." As mentioned above, the Death Cart symbolized the "impending death of their very culture."<sup>90</sup> Boyd, again noting the obvious, says that the Death Angel was a reminder of mortality. Fray Angelico Chavez in My Penitente Land says that it is "not so

---

<sup>87</sup> "El Triunfo de la Muerte."

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>89</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

much Christ's death as the certain uneasy fate of everyman."<sup>91</sup> Peppino Mancante in "Saints and a Death Angel," sees the Death Angel as the product of intense feeling and a dejected mood.<sup>92</sup> In his view the function of the death cart was "to meet fervent emotional needs in a highly emotional and traditionally superstitious people."<sup>93</sup>

It is clear from a consideration of the image of the Death Angel that there is no historical referent. In this case the referent is an idea, the idea of a peculiar kind of death, an unprepared for death. Perhaps it may be difficult for the reader to get free of the idea that the images of Christ refer to the historical Jesus. And, this is why I chose the image of the Death Angel. With the latter, the problem of a historical referent does not arise, hence, it is easier to demonstrate that religious signs refer to ideal content.

#### IV. Conclusion.

Its a safe bet to claim that Hispano culture is essentially a religious and artistic culture. Having said this I realize I haven't said anything new, novel, or original. As a matter of fact, I do not claim to have found the key to unlock to mystery of this profound culture. There is no one meaning embedded in these wonderful images. My first objective was to show that images of Christ do not have a historical referent. They are, rather, and

---

<sup>91</sup> Cited by Steele, "The Death Cart," p. 5.

<sup>92</sup> Peppino Mancante, "Saints and a Death Angel," p. 162.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

even more profoundly, mirrors of self-understanding. A second objective was to demonstrate the referential ambiguity inherent in signs. Signs make reference at several different levels. Reference may be direct, indirect, implicit, explicit, self-referential, historical, nominative, linguistic, extra-linguistic, etc. The type of reference is partly clarified by use in context. Nevertheless, when dealing with signs, their meanings, and their referents we are ultimately dealing with ideal content--ideas.

We do not on that account discard the material form of the images. Form serves to convey content. Material form transmits spiritual meaning. A unity exists between Spirit and nature. Wooden saints represent the spiritualization of nature and, conversely, the naturalization of Spirit. On the natural level, humble materials extracted from nature--pine, cottonwood root--are transformed, by human creativity through bold use of line, expressive color choice, decorative design, and symmetrical composition, into pictorial representations of the Saviors and Redeemers concocted by the human imagination. On the spiritual side, a religious ethos of suffering, fear of death, hope of eternal reward, discomfort in earthly life--rooted in Medieval Catholic and Islamic Moorish eschatological beliefs about the hope for paradise and the fear of purgatory and Hell become externalized and objectified in statues of wood and painted wooden panels.

In one sense, the santos reveal a liberating ethics. Hispano culture does not deal with philosophical abstractions, generalizations about theoretical ideas with no practical application. Instead, the Hispano imagination, due to a

corporeality firmly fixed on terra firma, through its religious art and artistic religion, unlike the humanly removed religions of the East, humanizes transcendences, personifies divinity, and makes God speak with the warm domestic voice of the hearth. In this way, Hispano culture is really sacralizing the earthly and elevating the human to divine status. Penitent religion and santo art summarily make use of human form to objectify the deepest religious convictions of culture bound by faithfulness to tradition, a limited theological canon and iconography. This culture evinces a liberating ethic based on equality and communal social philosophy driven by a zeal for self-preservation, cultural resistance, and collective ego-identity.

In another sense, it is an alienated culture whose liberating ethic is weighed down by religious and artistic sublimation. It is driven by a sense of emotional urgency and not by intellectual rationality. It is an unhappy soul expressing worldly sorrow. Santo art makes an aesthetics of pain, suffering, sorrow, solitude, and death. Penitent ritual penalizes the body for the thoughts of the brain. Hispano culture cannot free itself from a dualistic worldview, a quasi-Gnostic opposition between the things of God and the things of the World. In this Neo-platonic universe the things of earthly life, the body, sensual pleasure, are summarily subordinated to the heavenly life, the soul, and ascetic self-denial. There are retablos of God, Christ, the Virgin, Saints, and angels, but, why are there no retablos depicting Mary Magdalene's mystical yet carnal love for Jesus, no bultos of Jesus without a loincloth exhibiting his full

incarnational humanity? After all, these images abounded in the Renaissance, created by artists who, though religiously minded, recognized the sacredness of the everyday world, the divinity of bodily existence, and the dignity of human sexuality. I'll concede that wood carvers make non-religious carvings of animals, birds, and trees, etc. But these have only commercial value and are sold to tourists. Maybe this isomorphism between the sacred and the profane is universal, but without a shadow of a doubt it categorizes the Hispano ethos down to its very nucleus.

I would like to end with a few remarks giving my specific understanding about the particular meaning of the images discussed beforehand. For me, it appears that the images of Christ and the images of Dona Sebastiana reveal cultural attitudes about death. The images of Cristo Crucifijo and Jesus Nazareno convey the idea of the good death and provide motivation for preparing for the good death. The images of the Angel of Death, Dona Sebastiana, and the careta de muerte convey the idea of the bad and ignoble death and warn against the unprepared for death. For George Mills, the attitude toward death separates the Mexican from the New Mexican. "The Mexican transcends life by making a plaything of death. For the New Mexican, death never loses its seriousness...For the New Mexican, death is an elusive double; he may die in triumph or with his sins unexpiated."<sup>94</sup> No doubt, a social political philosophy of equality is implied in the death symbolism. All are equally destined to die--rico and pobre. Death is even-handed and erases all social distinctions. This idea of universal equality, implicit

---

<sup>94</sup> Op. cit., p. 57.

in the culture, can be a punto de partida, a point of departure, for elaborating an ethics of liberation. But to the extent that this idea is sublimated in religious energies, Hispano culture, a culture long worn down by alienation and exploitation, will not be able to realize in new political institutions and social arrangements its inherent beliefs about justice, freedom, and equality.