NAMES, Vol. 62 No. 2, June 2014, 100–06

# Naming Clues to the Layers of Transgression in *El crimen del Padre Amaro*

APRIL D. MARSHALL
*Pepperdine University, USA*

Mexican director, Carlos Carrera, employs names in *El crimen del Padre Amaro* (2002) to illuminate the complex internal struggles of key characters as well as the power struggles between them. Names in the film also expose contemporary moral and religious dilemmas in Mexican society. The film is based on a nineteenth-century Portuguese novel of the same name. This investigation discusses the way in which nomenclature in the modern cinematic work reveals clues about individual transgressions as well as larger societal and institutional corruption that determine the fate of the characters and the parish where the story takes place.

KEYWORDS names in film, Carlos Carrera, *El crimen del Padre Amaro*, Mexican cinema

Until the release of *Nosotros los Nobles* in 2013, the accolades for the all-time highest-grossing Mexican motion picture in the domestic market had been reserved for Carlos Carrera's *El crimen del Padre Amaro* (2002). According to Carrera, his movie was not as popular with the Catholic Church, which characterized it as "condoning prostitution and drug use, and claiming that the Pope took donations from drug dealers" (qtd in Rodríguez, 2002: 62). The film, starring Gael García Bernal as Padre Amaro, was nominated for several awards including an Oscar and Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film as well as the Goya for Best Spanish Language Foreign Film. Vicente Leñero won Best Screenplay for the film at the 2002 Havana Film Festival and Mexican Cinema Journalists also honored the movie with their Silver Goddess in four categories (<http://www.imdb.com>).

Carrera's movie takes place in modern-day Mexico, but the story is based on the 1875 version of a similarly titled Portuguese novel by José Maria Eça de Queiroz. This literary version, as Alan Freeland explains, is the first of three and the most deterministic:

 DOI 10.1179/0027773814Z.00000000078

> The domination of instinct over reason carries the characters along a path in which illusion blinds them to the consequences of their actions, until these consequences themselves — Amélia's pregnancy and the ensuing threat of social scandal become part of the restrictive circumstances which determine their lives. (1980: 325)

It is this notion of "restrictive circumstances" in part, which allows Carrera to adapt the nineteenth-century European novel's plot to twenty-first-century Mexico. In the film these circumstances include the controversial issues of abortion, celibacy in the priesthood, Church corruption, and drug trafficking. Additionally, Freeland goes on to say that the two central characters, Amaro and Amélia "[. . .] live in a society in which the outward appearance of morality is divorced from the realities of nature" (1980: 325). Carrera observes a similar schism, noting in an interview with René Rodríguez: "there is a 'displacement between what quotidian life demands and what the Church commands'" (2002: 62). Put another way, Susan Baker Sotelo argues:

> The crime of Father Amaro is a contemporary and timeless crime. It is a crime abetted by power brokers — religious and political — who either ignore or collaborate with those who make their living by criminal actions. It is also a story of those who receive no benefits from the power brokers and are victims of crime. The novel and movie share this perspective. So entwined are the crimes of complacency and intent in the film and the novel, that the lives of the victims and those of the power brokers are woven into a tapestry where it is difficult to distinguish between its warp and weft and to identify the threads of the lives of the guilty from those of the innocent. (2009, 247–48)

The names of the principal characters as well as the town in the film exemplify this confused weaving and offer clues to the layers of transgression resulting from "restrictive circumstances," both religious and secular, that are portrayed as part of Carrera's present-day Mexican society. The relevancy of the nomenclature in the film is also linked to the way in which names reveal individual's connections to and confused relationships in the small town where the action takes place.

In contrast to the novel, the movie offers us little background for the young Padre Amaro character. We meet him, recently ordained, on the way to his first parish assignment in the pueblo of Los Reyes. The name of the small town, which serves as the setting for the film, introduces the power brokers Sotelo indicts. *Reyes* is the plural of the Spanish *rey*, which means "king." The lofty reference denotes the privileged place the clergy still hold in a mainly Catholic country, it also refers to the clout of local *narcotraficantes* who are prospering in the region and plundering the *campesinos*' lands, and the toponym ultimately serves to illustrate the confusion between the two groups. Los Reyes can be categorized as coming from what Grace Alvarez-Altman has termed the "anonymical" family of names with regards to literature (1987: 2). "These names do not impart a sense of individuality or personality but a sea of anonymous faces like an idea that has no exact term to express it" (1987: 5). The use of Los Reyes anonymically highlights the idea of controlling others and not any single character. The name also signifies that the relationships and collusion between the clergy and *narcotraficantes* makes it difficult to distinguish between the two factions in Carrera's imaginary pueblo. Both groups manipulate the citizens of Los Reyes in the film for their own gain. Padre Amaro is initially depicted as not

conforming to this paradigm. As the film opens, the bus he is taking to Los Reyes is robbed and an elderly fellow passenger with whom he has been talking has his life savings stolen. As he exits the bus, Padre Amaro gives the old man what cash he possesses. There is a glimmer of hope that the newcomer will not blend into the "sea of anonymous faces" already in power in Los Reyes.

After disembarking from the bus, Amaro makes his way to the local church where he encounters Amélia, played by Ana Claudia Talancón, for the first time. The relationship that develops between Padre Amaro and Amélia is fundamental to the film because it is representative of not just the personal, but also the institutional affiliations that shape choices and lives in Los Reyes. Their interactions create and confuse the questions of authority and sin on various levels.

Amélia is actually "a blend of two medieval names," according to *A Dictionary of First Names* (2006), "*Emilia* (which is of Latin origin) and the Latinized Germanic *Amalia*." While at first trying to maintain his distance, Padre Amaro is eventually drawn to Amélia and even tempted by her spiritual devotion and deep adoration — a worship of the divine Father which in time she transposes on to the earthly young Padre. *Padre* is Spanish for "father," in both the religious and parental sense. Amélia's love for the Heavenly Father is praised in the community, and the absence of an earthly father is apparent. Her passionate love affair with the Church and her Savior make Padre Amaro examine the certainty of his own faith and vocation. She explains that she is not in love with her boyfriend, but "only dedicated to God" in a scene when she is giving Padre Amaro a tour of the new medical clinic being built with parish funds (Carrera, 2002). *Emilia* is "from a medieval form of the Latin name *Aemilia*, the feminine version of the old Roman family name *Aemilius* (probably from *aemulus* 'rival')" (Hanks, Hardcastle, and Hodges, 2006). The Latin origin of Amélia's name reflects the challenge her sincere, if naive spiritual example presents for Amaro as the story unfolds.

Furthermore, in so far as influence in Los Reyes is concerned, Padre Amaro enters into a rivalry with both Amélia's ex-boyfriend, Rubén, and his own mentor, the elder parish priest, Padre Benito. Amélia breaks up with the atheistic (or at least agnostic) Rubén soon after Padre Amaro arrives and the enigmatic gossip, Dionisia, tells Rubén that Amélia is fond of the new priest. He consequently publishes an article in the local newspaper about the corruption of the Church to which Padre Amaro is told to respond by the Bishop. After witnessing an encounter between Amélia and Padre Amaro in her mother's restaurant, Rubén confronts and assaults Amaro on the street. The priest does not fight back and later will not even press charges, choosing instead to "forgive," though a meeting with the newspaper editor and Amaro's rebuttal probably cost the ex-boyfriend his job at the newspaper. The rivalry with Padre Benito is likewise multidimensional.

After being injured by Rubén, Amaro finds Amélia crying in a pew at church. The emotional and spiritual bond between Padre Amaro and Amélia is sealed with a kiss in this scene and an illicit affair begins between the two. This relationship mirrors the long-term liaison between Amélia's mother, Augustina, and Padre Benito. Augustina is also known as "Sanjuanera": "In Mexico, 'Sanjuanera' is the name given to a priest's housekeeper; sometimes the name also indicates a suspicion of her being the priest's lover" (Sotelo, 2009: 251). This is the case in the film. Amélia's mother not only cleans the priest's residence but also feeds him and generally looks after his

well-being. Padre Amaro realizes she also sleeps over on occasion after he moves in. At a monthly gathering and dinner with other priests from the diocese, Amaro brings up the subject of celibacy and asks if it should be optional as a rebuke to Benito. Shortly thereafter Benito stops the affair with Amélia's mother, much to her displeasure and dismay. *Augustina* is a feminine form of *Augustus*, which Hanks, Hardcastle, and Hodges indicate is "from the adjective *augustus* 'great, magnificent' (from *augere* 'to increase')," and Augustina may be the only character with purely noble motives in the entire film, serving everyone but herself.

*Sanjuanera* contains the term *San* and name *Juan* as well as the suffix *–era*. *San* is Spanish for "saint" and *Juan* is the Spanish cognate for "John." The suffix in the term *Sanjuanera* is applied to transform names into occupations in Spanish. Given that the Sanjuanera is a woman and there is an obvious hagiographic allusion, the life of Saint Joanna sheds light on the character's function in the story, since *Joanna* is a feminine form of *John*. According to the website, *Catholic Online*, Saint Joanna "was one of the women who helped provide for Jesus and the Apostles and was one of the three women who discovered the empty tomb of Jesus on the first Easter morning." Sotelo suggests that the Sanjuanera is "a tragic heroine in both the novel and the film" arguing:

> These Sanjuaneras are dedicated mothers. Due to her social situation as a single mother and with a little education, her opportunities in rural Mexico, and 19th century Portugal, are very limited. She very well knows that her relationship with the priest is sinful, but has weighed the sincerity of her love for the priest against her sin, and she has found the scale evenly balanced. She genuinely loves the priest, protects him and has seen her daughter's best interests do concern him. (2006, 255)

Sotelo continues to explain that Padre Benito does not approve of Padre Amaro's relationship with Amélia, but he also ultimately fails Augustina "not because he does not love both her and her daughter but because his primary loyalty is to the Church" (2009: 255).

The rivalry between Amaro and Benito escalates, and in one scene the two are essentially arguing about Amaro blackmailing his mentor in order to continue his relationship with Amélia, as she is "just a child." Benito in fact becomes very ill from all of the tension and his own guilt. And so, one dimension of the rivalry between Amaro and Benito is this parallel between their forbidden loves. Another is the connection Padre Benito has with the local *narcotraficantes* ironically revealed in the origin of his own rather religious name. *Benito* is a Spanish cognate for *Benedict* "from Church Latin *benedictus* 'blessed'" (Hanks, Hardcastle, and Hodges, 2006). Padre Benito is both blessing and being blessed by the drug kingpin, Don Chato, in Los Reyes. The priest performs a baptism at the large hacienda of Don Chato while the *narcotraficantes* finance the new clinic, actually more of a hospital in scale, being built in the town in order to launder some of their drug money.

As his affair runs its course, Padre Amaro begins to embody the general social and religious disorder that has existed in Los Reyes. He, too, exploits his position for personal gain and to hide his indiscretions in due course. Amaro deceives the sacristan, Martín, into allowing he and Amélia to use his house for religious instruction in order to supposedly prepare her to join a convent. The sacristan is a widow whose only adolescent daughter is handicapped and non-verbal. Padre Amaro directs the

sacristan not to reveal the arrangement and others are told that Amélia is teaching the daughter, Getsemaní, the catechism. The religious implication of the daughter's name is undeniable, as it suggests the garden where Christ was betrayed. The girl listens helpless as Padre Amaro and Amélia consummate their love in the room adjacent to hers. Has Amaro betrayed not just the sacristan's trust, but also the Church? Has he betrayed Amélia? Has Amélia betrayed her own faith? Or is the film asking "whether some of the mandates of the Catholic Church — particularly the life of celibacy required of its priests — may not be hopelessly antiquated and in need of some revision" (Rodríguez, 2002: 62). This last question is made even more poignant in the movie as it is repeated in Amaro's comment about celibacy being optional and further underscored in a scene where Getsemaní tries to put Padre Amaro's hand on her breast.

Carrera's film progresses tragically as Amélia reveals she is pregnant and Padre Amaro struggles to keep his transgressions hidden. When he is unable to convince her to leave town or give her baby up, and Rubén refuses to take Amélia back and marry her, Amaro seeks out the mysterious Dionisia. According to Sotelo:

> She is a woman who has known whoring, abortion, healings and enchantments, and has always lived hand to mouth. Her role in the relationship between Amaro and Amélia is pivotal in the novel and the film, though her actions in each differ. In both, she represents the marginalized people of a *pueblo*: uneducated, superstitious and poor. Her hovel, as filmed, is full of cats, grotesquely broken dolls and candle-lit adorned saints. She is a native Mexican *curandera*: a healer or a witch, depending on the perspective of those around her. She is a faithful Catholic, always at mass; or a non-believer who uses the sacramental host in pagan healing. (2009: 254)

Dionisia appears in several key scenes in Carrera's movie. She is alone in the church singing a hymn when Padre Amaro first arrives. Dionisia attends Amaro's first mass in Los Reyes and steals cash from the offering plate as she passes it in the pew. She enters the church just as he and Amélia share their first kiss unbeknownst to the lovers. Like Amaro, Dionisia is both a witness to and perpetrator of multiple crimes.

Amaro needs her help when Amélia becomes pregnant, because Dionisia knows of certain doctors and a secret clinic. He has talked Amélia into getting an abortion and Dionisia makes the arrangements. She also accompanies them to the remote clinic. *Dionysia* were "ancient Greek festivals in honor of Dionysus, a fertility god" (Barnhart, 1954: 1286). This character's name is linked to the very idea of life and giving birth, unfortunately in the film she is also connected to the destruction of life. Moreover, the association with Greece calls to mind classical dramas and the role of the chorus in offering commentary about the characters and action taking place on stage.

Luis García Orso asserts that *El crimen del Padre Amaro* is a reflection of the paradoxes and mistakes in the life of a fictional Mexican town and that there is not a single crime, but many crimes (2003: 105). The protagonist's name represents the idea of a contradiction, which echoes Sotelo's notion of moral complexity inherent in the novel and film. On the one hand, *amar* is the Spanish verb for "to love." If Padre Amaro's love for Amélia is one of the "mistakes" in the film, his love for his vocation and the prestige conferred him because of it are others. Amélia pleads with Amaro in one scene to renounce his vows and marry her.

On the other hand, *Amaro* is also, "a habitation name [. . .] probably from Port. *amaral* a kind of black grape (from L *Amārus* bitter); alternatively a connection has been suggested with a collective deriv. of Sp. *maro*, *amaro* — cat-thyme (L *marum*, influenced by Sp. *amargo* bitter)" (Hanks and Hodges, 1988: 12). Padre Amaro's assignment in Los Reyes has been bittersweet. There is excitement as it is his first parish, yet he has not only uncovered the vices of the elder priest but also fallen into sin and corruption himself. He befriends other local priests and finds favor with the Bishop, but also falls in love with a young parishioner. He first calls this love a gift and later must lie to keep it hidden, and, in trying to save himself, he kills Amélia.

The allusion to bitterness in Amaro's name is especially meaningful with regards to the film's woeful climax. While Amaro waits outside the clinic for Amélia to have the abortion, the night watchman approaches him. It is the old man with whom he rode the bus to Los Reyes at the start of the film. The man explains that, after that bus ride and being robbed, he was unable to open the store he had hoped to own. Instead he wandered around for a while and then became the handyman and night watchman at the clinic. He tells Amaro that there are not a lot of people like him, alluding to the priest's good deed of charity on the bus and then asks if he is there to "relieve" his girlfriend. Amaro answers that he is there to relieve himself, suggesting that he has succumb to the venality and pattern of power in Los Reyes. Their conversation is interrupted by Dionisia's frantic announcement that they cannot stop Amélia's bleeding. She is hemorrhaging and Amaro tries to save her life by getting her to a hospital, but she dies in his arms on the way, reciting the verses from the *Song of Songs* that he used to seduce her.

Sadly, her death does little to change Los Reyes and appears to in fact solidify the corrupt roles and relationships among its residents. The movie's final scenes show Padre Amaro performing a mass for Amélia and mentioning the theme of sin, her mother is crying in a pew as Padre Benito arrives in a wheelchair using oxygen. He is recovering from surgery following an apparent heart attack suffered after his confrontation with Amaro about their love affairs. The only reason Benito survived the health scare is because Augustina called Don Chato to fly him to the city for surgery. The faithful Sanjuanera is true to her namesake occupation and Benito is blessed once again by his association with the *narcotraficantes*. Dionisia is also present at this mass, again to bear witness and judgment. Martín, however, is notably absent. Amaro fired the sacristan and sent he and Getsemaní away after Martín disclosed the secret meetings with Amélia to Padre Benito. Ironically, Padre Benito does not bless his successor. Before Amaro finishes speaking, Benito turns and wheels himself toward the church's exit. Carrera's film ends still attempting to untangle the fabric of personal and social transgressions and consequences among and in the aptly named characters some of whom will seemingly continue to live as kings.

## Bibliography

Alvarez-Altman, Grace. 1987. "A Methodology for Literary Onomastics: An Analytical Guide for Studying Names in Literature." *Names in Literature: Essays from Literary Onomastics Studies*. Ed. Grace Alvarez-Altman and Frederick M. Burelbach. Lanham: University Press of America, 1–9.

Barnhart, Clarence Lewis. 1954. *The New Century Cyclopedia of Names*. Vol. 1. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

*El crimen del Padre Amaro*. Directed by Carlos Carrera. 2002. Culver City, CA. Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, 2003. DVD.

"El crimen del Padre Amaro." *Internet Movie Database*. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0313196/?ref_=fn_al_tt_2> [Accessed June 10 2013].

Freeland, Alan. 1980. "Degrees of Determinism: The Three Versions of *O Crime do Padre Amaro*." *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 57: 321–337.

García Orso, Luis. 2003. "*El crimen del Padre Amaro*." *Xipe Totek* 45: 97–105.

Hanks, Patricia and Flavia Hodges. 1988. *A Dictionary of Surnames*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hanks, Patrick, Kate Hardcastle, and Flavia Hodges. 2006. *A Dictionary of First Names*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/BOOK%5FSEARCH.html?book=t41>.

Rodríguez, René. 2002. "Sins of the Flesh, Relevancy of the Story Make *The Crime of Padre Amaro* Timely." *Hispanic* 15: 62.

"St. Joanna." *Catholic Online*. <http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=294> [Accessed October 10 2013].

Sotelo, Susan Baker. 2009. "Father Amaro's Crime: From the Portuguese Novel to the Mexican Film." *Studies in Honor of Lanin A. Gyurko*. Ed. Ken Hall and Ruth Muñoz-Hjelm. Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta, 247–261.

## Notes on contributor

April D. Marshall (b. 1974) is Chair of International Studies and Languages at Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA 90263. Her principal research interests are Latin American literature and culture, disease metaphors in literature, and popular culture and disease. Her most recent publication is "'Onomastic Emphasis' in Julia Álvarez's *Saving the World*," *Names* 57.4 (2009): 229–235.

Correspondence to: April Marshall. Email: april.marshall@pepperdine.edu