

# CABEZA DE VACA (1991)

## Scene Analysis

0:19:06

### The Spaniard and the Dwarf

By Lauren Eisner

[1] In the 1991 film *Cabeza de Vaca*, there is one character creation by Nicolas Echevarria that sparks the transition of a normal Spaniard into a man with deeply rooted connections to two cultures. The native Malacosa infiltrates Cabeza de Vaca's life and enslaves him. Ironically, it is the initially frightening Malacosa -- "evil thing," an armless dwarf -- who presents the opportunity for a better understanding of native culture as the film progresses. Echevarria constructs this character to add to the mystical feeling and fantasy that leads Cabeza de Vaca to find his true, evolving identity.

[2] The first depiction of Malacosa occurs when the captives Cabeza de Vaca, Dorantes, Castillo, and Estebanico are brought to a riverside village, where they are locked in a small, bamboo cage (0:21:27). These men have no idea what awaits them when the dwarf confronts them. They are basically in shock to see such a small, aggressive man savagely cursing at them as he is lifted from his boat. Malacosa saunters combatively around the cage, till the scene climaxes when the howling Cabeza de Vaca is removed by force. The initial interaction between Malacosa and Cabeza de Vaca, then, is extremely strained: Malacosa is a hateful being, the source of unknown horror.

[3] In *The Account: Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca's Relacion*, there is a peculiar minor character "Evil Thing," who slightly resembles Echevarria's major character, Malacosa (81). In the text the natives tell Cabeza de Vaca about an evil, small-bodied, faceless, and probably white (since he is bearded) character who, among other frightening things, freely enters their homes, stabbing and eviscerating them, and later, oddly, healing them too. To calm the native's fears, the Spaniards tell them they will be safe if they become Christians.

[4] The only similarities between the text's Malacosa and the film's Malacosa is that they are both small in stature, violent, and evil. In addition, however, the description of the text's Malacosa pulling arms out of sockets could have spurred Echevarria's imagination to create an armless dwarf for the film.

[5] The contrasting aspects of these two characters far surpass their similarities. Echevarria constructs the film Malacosa in two ways different from his source. First, Echevarria changed the entire viewpoint on "Evil Thing" from a legendary white man to a real native dwarf. Echevarria's use of the physically defective native is a true reversal of the text, where here the audience is provided with a mythical native, who plays a major role in facilitating the transition of Cabeza de Vaca into a more open-minded man of mixed cultures. Second, in Cabeza de Vaca's text we find the Spaniards presented as the powerful men protecting the weak natives, whereas in the film Malacosa has complete power, authority, and control over a Spaniard.

[6] Dwarfs are seemingly never cast in high-profile roles of respect in films or any expressions of art in "white" culture. However, the film accurately portrays the views within native culture involving those with physical defects. The portrayal of Malacosa as a powerful, spiritual ruler and assistant to the most potent man in the film, Hechiero, maintains a new, interesting outlook on dwarfs and people with physical "otherness."

[7] The society of the natives gives much respect to Malacosa and in fact provides him with unusual privileges. Malacosa continually derides the Spaniards and is even allowed to make one his personal servant. This respect given by the natives to this man with physical defects is also reflected in the film 1492: Conquest of Paradise through Juanito, the Spanish character with a cleft lip. [Although a Spaniard, the natives are immediately drawn to and interested in him at first contact.](#)

[8] The conquistador Cabeza de Vaca and the dwarf Malacosa are an unlikely pair, but Echevarria moves them through a series of stages in which they are both transformed. The first feeling of Malacosa the audience has is shockingly aggressive, as we have seen above. We next see Cabeza de Vaca dehumanized when Malacosa maliciously spits on him and laughs mockingly (0:23:46). Cabeza de Vaca is severely angered by the actions of Malacosa. He is shocked not only that he is being held in enslavement through magic and other means, but that he is being held by an armless dwarf. "God, what am I doing here in this land?" he wails, "Enslaved by morons and this monstrous being, Mala Cosa. Laugh, Laugh! In my country they would have impaled you." This scene ends, however, when Malacosa cries when the despairing Cabeza de Vaca recites a sad poem. The cultures of the Spaniards and the natives seem to merge here through the bond of human sympathy. The poetic lament is the medium through which the two cultures come together, and Malacosa is so touched by it that he begins to cry.

[9] The bond between Cabeza de Vaca and Malacosa becomes a relationship of compassion and sympathy for one another when Cabeza de Vaca helps Malacosa by pouring water on him in order to clean himself (0:35:24). Here the audience is faced with a Malacosa oddly dependent on his servant Cabeza de Vaca. The relationship between these two characters is seen even closer during a much later scene (0:50:33), after Cabeza de Vaca has exhibited his new shamanic powers, in

which the true feelings of attachment and then loss are expressed through Malacosa's tears as Cabeza de Vaca leaves his master. This change in emotion presents a clear example of the bond occurring between the cultures.

[10] Echevarria's filmic technique reflects the evolution of the relationship between Cabeza de Vaca and Malacosa as well. The film's use of camera angles portrays the ever-changing power differentials between the two. When Malacosa is first presented to Cabeza de Vaca, this dwarf appears powerful and of a higher stature than the Spaniards. The Spaniards are presented sitting, which is one of the few ways to create the illusion of a tall, powerful Malacosa. The same is true later when Malacosa spits on the kneeling Cabeza de Vaca. However, as the film further builds up the transition of a man torn between two cultures, Cabeza de Vaca "grows" in stature through the lens of the camera. When Cabeza de Vaca is set free, he is erect, given power and strength, and Malacosa is again presented as a little person. Cabeza walks away, and Malacosa is seen not simply as further in the distance but as losing his powerful stature.

[11] A profound transformation has occurred, as we come to see Cabeza de Vaca bonding with the native Malacosa. Malacosa transcends all original perceptions as an evildoer and becomes further humanized through each scene within the film. The mere appearance of Malacosa would shock and continues to shock audiences into complete fascination in the film. In our culture, Malacosa would have been easily viewed as a worthless freak, however Cabeza de Vaca learns to see past this dwarf's physical deformities and discovers a companion. The characteristics of these two individuals are blurred, if for only moments, in the film and surpass all preconceived notions of a Spaniard and a Dwarf.

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