

**RUINS AND RIOTS: TRANSNATIONAL CURRENTS IN MEXICAN CINEMA**

by

Kirsten Strayer

B.A., Georgetown University, 1998

M.A., University of Pittsburgh, 2002

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Department of English in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh

2009

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH  
FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

This dissertation was presented

by

Kirsten Strayer

It was defended on

September 11, 2009

and approved by

Dr. Lucy Fischer, Distinguished Professor, English Department

Dr. Adam Lowenstein, Associate Professor, English Department

Dr. John Beverley, Professor, Department of Hispanic Languages and Literatures

Dissertation Advisor: Dr. Marcia Landy, Distinguished Professor, English Department

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Kirsten Strayer, PhD

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The dissertation examines 1950s, 60s, and 70s Mexican émigré cinema through aesthetic and political strategies that critically reassess national cinematic self-representation. I discuss multiple factors, including film texts, modes of production, immigration policies, historical discourses and cinematic scholarship in order to understand particular shifts in the images of Mexican national identity. While Mexican cinema's "Golden Age" (approx. 1935-55) is characterized by consistent and regularized images of Mexico's nationhood, I argue that the mid-twentieth century texts undermine homogeneous images of its national body. I explore the works of several émigré filmmakers as case studies that demonstrate how intellectual projects and mobile aesthetic strategies are produced from positions of exile. These films give rise to alternative political and social filmmaking practices other than dominant nationalist visual universes. For instance, I show that the films' grotesque and surrealist predilections emerge from different national traditions and act as palimpsests without homogenizing their differences. While these modes utilize divergent intellectual and artistic forms, they simultaneously bring to the forefront tensions and discontinuities among national traditions that cannot be readily reconciled. In so doing, they fragment earlier "Golden Age" figurations of the Mexican people, particularly dominant tropes of rural and urban identities. I illustrate how these national traditions are in dialogue with the transatlantic influences that inform and underlie the émigré films of the era. By exploring their affinities to such avant-garde theoretical traditions as the theater of the absurd and popular European forms such as the Italian western, I

contend that these works attempt to redefine national spectacle by seeking to map international practices onto regional mythologies, topographies and institutions. These films undermine myths of the nation-state that saturate Mexican cinema and popular culture, including notions of post-revolutionary popular unity and official modes of historical narration. I argue that mid-twentieth century filmmaking aptly illustrates contradictory political, social, and aesthetic impulses at work in the twentieth-century. In examining this era of filmmaking, I show how it anticipates contemporary Mexican cinema's reliance on exiled and dissident filmmakers (e.g. Guillermo del Toro and Arturo Ripstein) and their migratory artistic practices that participate in twenty-first century cultural and political thinking.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the support of many wonderful faculty members, colleagues and friends. I am particularly indebted to the English Department at the University of Pittsburgh for supporting me throughout my years of study and the Cultural Studies Program at the University of Pittsburgh for awarding me its pre-doctoral fellowship. I would like to thank all the faculty and graduate students I've met at the University for their intellectual seriousness, stimulating discussions and support, particularly Amanda Klein, Kara Anderson, Brenda Glascott, Amy Borden, Henry Veggian, Anja Ulanowicz, Vladimir Padunov, Valerie Krips, Richard Purcell, Nancy Condee, Joshua Lund, Jane Feuer, Mark Anderson, Daniel Morgan, Dana Och, Stanley Shoshtak, John Trezn, Daniel Wollenberg, Melissa Lenos and Carleton Grotz. I would particularly like to thank Manisha and Anustup Basu for their longtime friendship, inexhaustible patience, and estimable thoughtfulness. They embody for me the best ways that we can be serious and conscientious peers with each other. Ignacio López Vicuña helped me develop a more sophisticated understanding of Latin American media and urban studies, and was more importantly the world's best apartment-mate.

I would also like to thank my dissertation committee, Lucy Fischer, Adam Lowenstein, and John Beverley, for their continued and serious contributions to my work. The discussions I've enjoyed with them have helped me to become a better scholar, writer and teacher, and their questions and comments consistently challenged my thinking. I must also particularly thank

Marcia Landy, whose contributions to my thinking and writing exceed my ability to thank her in such a short space. Her generous commitment to her students, her intellectual rigor in her seminars, and her dedication as an adviser model the best manner of being a scholar in the world.

I would like to particularly thank the Nationality Rooms Program, the Lithuanian Room Committee, and the University Center for International Studies for financing my research trips to Mexico City's film archives. I would also like to thank Antonia Rojas and the archivists and staff at the Filmoteca at UNAM and the Cineteca Nacional that graciously granted me access to materials I couldn't have found otherwise, and Nico Wright, who found more than a few classical treasures for me.

I finally would like to thank my friends and family outside of my academic circle at the University of Pittsburgh. They have helped me in innumerable ways to write this project and to remember the life outside of it, specifically Namiko Kunimoto, Max Woodworth, Christy Herbes, Liz Healey, Salvador Luna, Daniel Buchanan, Emily Dings, Darla Balthaser, Amy Garbark, Ian Lipsky, and Corey Antis. And finally, I would like to my family, Michael, Peter and Sally, for all of their support over these years, and especially my mother, Bethene Ann Strayer, whose personal grace and intellectual integrity I try to emulate as much as I can.

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION: A TRADITION OF TRANSNATIONAL CINEMA IN MEXICO**

### **1.1 THE QUESTION OF NATION IN CINEMA**

In Néstor García Canclini's essay, "Will there be a Latin American Cinema in the year 2000? Visual Culture in a Post-National Era," the cultural critic questions the feasibility and necessity of national cinema in the era of global filmmaking and saturation of Hollywood aesthetics. His query does not necessarily suppose the end of film production in Latin America. Instead, it imagines a modification of the narratives of national identity that have dominated film, radio and media production (or at least the discourse surrounding production) during the twentieth century. While films continue to emerge from the Southern Hemisphere, there is doubt as to whether or not the texts will construct stories of Latin America's various nation-state actors. García Canclini cites several predominate shifts that characterize late twentieth century media production, distribution and consumption, including the displacement of media reception from public theaters to the domestic sphere (television, internet, DVD, etc.) and an industrial shift from cinema's state support to private funding. His mediatized future is thoroughly saturated with global production, private consumption and a world media saturated by Hollywood's non-"national" narratives. In his conclusion, however, he returns to the idea that national iconographies and regional attributes will continue to punctuate media forms: "The key problem

seems not to be the risk that globalization will erase them but rather to understand how regional, ethnic, and national identities reconstitute themselves through processes of intercultural hybridization” (257).

Written in 1997, this essay predates the explosion of films produced in Mexico that re-established its reputation as a country that generates high-quality cinema. At the time of this article’s publication, only a few contemporary Mexican films were shown either at home or abroad; María Novaro’s *Danzón* (1991) and Alfonso Arau’s *Como agua para chocolate* (1992) are two of less than a handful of examples to gain widespread distribution. Soon after, however, Mexican films proliferated in national and international markets, beginning with *Sexo, poder y lágrimas* (1999) to be followed by many others, including *Amores perros* (2000), *Perfume de violetas* (2000), *Y tu mamá también* (2001), *El crimen del padre Amaro* (2002), *Temporadas de patos* (2004), *El violín* (2004), *En el hoyo* (2006), *El laberinto del fauno* (2006) and *Stellet Licht* (2007). I mention these specific examples due to their substantial domestic and foreign grosses, plus numerous national and international awards. Alfonso Cuarón’s *Y tu mamá también*, for example, broke Mexico’s box-office record for a film’s debut while garnering much critical acclaim, including a best screenplay Oscar nomination

While these films reintroduced Mexican film nationally and globally, their relationship to national cinema is more complex. They appear radically different in form, content and quality from Mexico’s earlier prolific era of cinema, or what’s called its Golden Age (approximately 1935-55). This earlier era is characterized by its genre films and consistent imagery of Mexico; for example, its consistent images of rural nineteenth century haciendas or epic revolutionary war battles. These beautiful melodramas tend to extol the virtues of revolutionary values and rural life. The twenty-first century pictures, on the other hand, veer from this coherency; they are

far removed from older genres and images of a unified national identity. Instead, they often provide a fractured image of the nation or ignore it entirely. *Stellet Licht*, the hyper-real story of a northern Mexican Mennonite whose extramarital affair threatens his relationship with his family, portrays the Mennonite diaspora and does not appear at all concerned with the national ethos. *El crimen del padre Amaro* is based on a Portuguese novel, and the 2006 Ariel winner *El laberinto del fauno* is set in Spain during the Civil War.

When these films do raise the question of Mexican national identity, they often express either a kind of critical suspicion or ambivalence toward a coherent national core. They are usually set in the contemporary world instead of historical milieus, portray figures marginal to the national body (adolescents, the urban poor, migrant workers and other outsiders), and probe the integrity of the nation. In addition, many are financed privately or through international organizations, such as Ibermedia, and often rely on Hollywood and international formal tropes and styles, even if the films concern themselves with national stories. For example, *Y tu mamá también*'s dual narratives highlight the unraveling threads of a highly-constructed national fabric so central to the formation of the Mexican republic. Even with the film's primary story of an adolescent road trip, its voice-over challenges dominant notions of cultural identity through its examination of a brutal and cruel world invisible to its protagonists. Likewise, Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Amores perros* combines the stylistic and narrative themes of 1940s and 50s Mexican melodramas with the aesthetic of contemporary Hollywood cinema even though he can not see the Mexican national imagery or ideology as a regional artifact easily appropriated into the global marketplace. The film is also not an elegy to the coherence of a national past. Rather, the film charts the fragments of national iconography that come into contact with the global economic and political sphere. National concerns are still prevalent—nation has not quite

dissolved into a post-national, global uniformity—but the idea of national solidarity is shown to never have been present.

Despite the Hollywood aesthetics of several of these films, they should not be viewed as final outcomes of global cinema's cultural appropriations. Their narrower topics and more troublesome conceptions of national identity do not increase their exportability of "Mexicanness" in a global motion picture market. Rather, these films are examples of Mexican cinema's position in the forefront of contemporary transnational cinema and highlight either complicit or antagonistic relations between individual films and global cinema. This is not to say all of these films are politically powerful, nor a barricade against Hollywood domination. Mexico's internationally famous directors, cinematographers, writers and actors are profiting from work both inside the country, as well as outside. Iñárritu proves that his version of Mexican melodrama can shed light on both contemporary Mexico (*Amores Perros*) as well as the contemporary United States (*21 Grams* [2003]). In a similar manner, Guillermo del Toro's fairy tale milieus appear highly transposable to Hollywood horror. Some of these films, however, refuse to be images of local exoticism for foreign markets and also reject the ubiquity of Hollywood's cultural appropriations.

Beyond the effects new Mexican film has had on global cinema, these films also gesture toward the complexity of Mexico's filmmaking history, which has produced a strong national cinema and parallel tradition of exilic cinema. Mexico's contemporary cinema is actually the continuation of an earlier tradition of transnational, émigré and exile cinema. Although Mexican cinema has been understood as being deeply informed by its investment in creating, portraying and reifying the notion of a unified national body, it has also been dominated by its relationship to transatlantic and transcontinental markets, aesthetics and politics. To a certain extent, Mexican

cinema has always been transnational, even though its relations with the larger world have been fundamentally different during distinct eras. Twentieth-century Mexican cinema is a paradigmatic example of the ways that cinema can complicate conceptions of the nation. The course of its expansion and retraction during the twentieth century (and its re-expansion in the twenty-first) illustrates how transnational elements coalesce around historical and political moments that extend beyond national boundaries.

While the “nation” in national cinema has long been understood intellectually as a useful fiction, scholars nonetheless debate over the term’s continued significance for film criticism. As twenty-first century cinema productions become more and more dominated by multi-national financing, or financing by global multi-national corporations, and, multi-national crews, scholars have been able to rethink the usefulness and difficulties of the term “national.” Just as the concept “nation” has its own unique history determined by particular political-historical phenomena, national cinema is part of its own problematic politics and history, particularly concerning economic and artistic tensions between Hollywood production and Western European cinema. Many non-Hollywood cinemas have exported films- so-called prestige pictures- which serve to define and illustrate a country’s cinema. Consequently, the importance of any particular national cinema rises and falls depending on various aesthetic, political and social phenomena. Importantly, these pictures cannot accurately portray the assemblage that constitutes the nation as much as they create a snapshot of an aesthetic, social, cultural or ideological position. Furthermore, the idea of national cinema is consistently revised and updated. As this is not a dissertation about national cinema, per se, but rather about one particular aftermath of a cinematic construction of the nation, I am not going to delve extensively into definitions of national cinema. However, I would like to briefly examine the importance of

nation and national identity produced in Mexico, particularly in the first half of the twentieth century.

Andrew Higson, in his article “The Concept of National Cinema,” explicates four approaches to national cinema: economic, text-based approach, consumption-based and criticism-based (52-3). In other words, scholars have examined the construction of national cinema through its industrial practices, common styles or world-views, its audience, and its applicability to art or dominant culture. Although Mexican cinema critics have examined films produced in Mexico through all of these lenses, scholars primarily have examined Mexican national cinema through its industrial practices and its projected world-view, including the encounters between the two. This concentration is for two primary reasons: first, Mexico’s national cinema and its national identity came into being during the “institutional phase” of the revolution (1920-40), during those skirmishes that formed the country’s political, social and economic infrastructures. Secondly, a dominant, fully authorized national culture was considered paramount to the formation of a national identity; officials, audiences, and artists were part of these negotiations:

no other state in the Western Hemisphere invested as much in the creation and promotion of a national culture as the Mexican central government...By the 1930s, it expanded to radio, film, comic books, newspapers, roads, and tourism... Whether directly controlled...or regulated through subsidization and censorship, few areas of modern cultural production [have] escaped the state’s gaze (Vaughan 471).

Mexican cinema’s Golden Age was not considered national because it came from Mexico; in fact, its Mexican origin possessed a complex and fungible quality. However, it often homogenized Mexicans and advanced certain identities over others.



Consequently, Mexican cinema has been primarily understood in relation to its ability to project and construct an image of nationhood both internally and externally. Susan Hayward's discussion of how film "speaks the nation and the national speaks cinema" may be useful here; she writes:

film textualises the nation and subsequently constructs a series of relations around the concepts, first, of state and citizen, then of state, citizen and other (and so on). In this way, cinema—a 'national' cinema—is ineluctably 'reduced' to a series of enunciations that reverberate around two fundamental concepts: identity and difference" (x).

Filmic narrations reconstruct myths of nationhood and national history. Hayward is writing about the French nation, which carries with it its own notions of citizen and subject. A similar formation of state and citizen is crucially important to Mexico's cinematic identity. For example, Acevedo-Muñoz notes that "[in] the process of perceiving and constructing the nation, of centralizing the Mexican state, and of 'institutionalizing' the revolutionary government..., national cinema a mythology of the nation through motifs and symbols. These symbols, in film and other media, became both official and popular" (17).

## **1.2 THE NATIONAL IN GOLDEN AGE CINEMA**

Mexican cinema's Golden Age is understood as "national" for a myriad of economic and cultural reasons. At the height of the era, the growth of Mexico's studios was the result of complex negotiations between private financiers and government protectionism; the state's role grew increasingly larger in terms of its hand in financing and exhibition. In the thirties, the state also began to become interested in the industry more directly as a tool to promote national

values, subsidizing the new studio CLASA, for example (Noble 14). The president not only supported Mexican-produced film by extolling its virtues but by exempting the industry from the standard revenue tax in 1936 (García Riera 130). More significantly, the Banco Cinematográfico, founded in 1942, loaned the money that would bankroll the industry. Although initially private, its financial backing included the national bank, the Banco de México, and the board was primarily peopled by bankers, not filmmakers (Mora 59). The Banco Cinematográfico was nationalized under state control entirely in 1947. State financial and ideological oversight reached new heights during the nationalization of the film bank, which comprised the bulk of studio financing, encouraged genre pictures and assured a consistency of popular genres and Mexican imagery through their intricate loan system (Mora 75-77). Ostensibly the role of the bank was to loan capital to finance films that reflected the contemporary cultures of Mexico (Mora 62) and thus projected a particular image of Mexico. However, even as the bank helped to inaugurate a period of incredible growth in the industry in the 1940s, the banks loaned money to those producers who has succeeded in making previous profits. Thus, the industry became a rather isolated and closed institution:

The insiders' financial network consisted of major producers, the national film bank, and key distributors and exhibitors. The biggest producers helped set up a sweet financial system whereby they made films and accumulated wealth in classic capitalist fashion: by using someone else's money (Berg 40).

While the bigger producers made money, smaller and emerging filmmakers had a more difficult time securing financing through the bank's closed channels. Independent producers had to both

secure credit and find distribution with little or no help from the government's policies (Berg 40).<sup>1</sup>

Although the government's financial investment in Mexico's cinema is significant for understanding its national character, perhaps more important to the idea of Mexico's Golden Age as a "national cinema" stems from the films consistent representations of particular kinds of images during this era. Mexican cinema produced and disseminated a particular national image of the nation, and swiftly 'national self-image matched cinematic representation' (Berg 5). Mexico's Golden Age began approximately in the late 1930s, when the release of films such as *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (*Out at the Big Ranch* 1936) and *Vamos con Pancho Villa* (*Let's Go with Pancho Villa* 1935) ushered in—both thematically and aesthetically—the generic visual and ideological forms that would dominate Mexico's studio cinema for the next twenty years. These two films inaugurated certain paradigms and clearly illustrated the Golden Age cinema's fondness for genre pictures, archetypal star figures and broad national mythologies. *Vamos con Pancho Villa* began a similar barrage of romantic types: pure, loyal and admirable soldiers and *soldaderas* of the revolution. These revolutionary films were set in a particular historical epoch, but tended to focus particularly on the initial uprising against the Diaz regime rather than the later, more complex political situations. These genres brought out some of the most vital modes of national identification, such as associations with rural identity (even though the

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<sup>1</sup> Berg also notes the President Avila Camacho's role in negotiating union disputes between the industry producers and its artists, thus providing an even more closed space for filmmakers. The newly formed artist's union closed its doors in 1945 (41).

population was increasingly urban) and the institutionalized revolution (even as power consolidated itself around one party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional or PRI).

There are many genres, peoples and types central to this cinematic national identity. Carlos Monsiváis calls them the “mythologies” of Mexican cinema and includes the participants in the family melodrama, the masculine *charros* of the *ranchera* films, the victimized female beauties played by María Félix and Dolores del Río, the indigenous peoples of Emilio Fernández’s films, and the Cantinflas’s *peladito* (urban miscreant). These figures are inducted into the space of the nation: the pre-modern hacienda of the *comedias rancheras*, the revolutionary battlefield instigating the nation, and the modern dance-hall of the *caberetera* films. These films portray an ethos, a set of peoples and a particular set of paradigms through which each type plays its role to fruition.

Fernando de Fuentes’s *Allá en el Rancho Grande* and the *ranchera* genre more generally narrate the entrance of “Mexican” themes during the Golden Age era. The films are set on the ranch during the nineteenth century and are not (Hollywood) westerns but develop particularly Mexican narratives. *Rancheras* are usually musicals, and the hero is not an outcast but a functioning member of the productive *hacienda*. The *charro* glorified “in the machismo of the nation, drawing a link between the patriarchal hacendado, the state, and paternalism” (Hershfield 91). The *ranchera*’s narratives are often set on the farms of one or two (rival) families and, often, the film’s end coincides with the marriage between the hero and one of the ranchers’ daughters.

In 1936 *Allá en el Rancho Grande* opened to modest success in Mexico but was also quite popular in Latin America and was one of the earliest Mexican films subtitled into English (García Riera 128). The film’s success would allow the induction of Mexican genre films with its iconography and national themes nationally and internationally. In *Rancho Grande*, singer Tito

Guízar plays the ranch foreman and *charro* (singing cowboy) José, who falls in love with the orphaned Cruz and competes for her love with the owner's son Felipe. The film ends with the marriage of Cruz and José. Shot by cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa, the film inaugurates Mexican film's iconography of national and cultural self-identification: cock fights, dances, horse races, and singing duels (de la Vega 83).

Despite this enthusiasm for the genre, the films were often considered retrograde, even by filmmakers such as Fuentes who directed them. The hero is not a radical figure; the *charro* regularly embodies the characteristics of rural aristocracy. Often light-skinned and wearing the embroidered riding suit, the *charro*

glories in his masculinity and he exercises it not so much to right a wrong but rather to enhance his male self-esteem and social prerogatives . . . the *ranchera* was generally not trying to initiate social change but rather to maintain the status quo. He came to represent the traditional and Catholic values in defiance of the leftist, modernizing tendencies emanating from the cities. (Mora 47)

As Mora and Hershfield note *rancheras* are key cinematic figures of national identity. Not only did the *charro* evoke a highly classed, rigid social regime, but also the figure is invested in maintaining this colonial order. The films' mythology evokes a unified national past, where paternalist class structures protected peasant and rancher alike, and the emblematic *charro* appears in the guise of Mexico's true representative identity.

*Allá en el Rancho Grande* speaks to the ways in which nationhood functioned as a primary catalyst for films produced in Mexico during that era. After box-office success both at home and abroad, Mexican theaters were deluged with similar films of national iconography. According to García Riera, "the lesson of *Allá en el Rancho Grande* was clear: of the 38

Mexican films produced in 1937, over half were folkloric or nationalistic glorifications” (131). The film gave concrete cinematic expression to an idealized version of rural Mexico that appears to exist outside of historical events and national politics/policies: “*Allá en el Rancho Grande* idealized everything: the purity of the maidens, the character of the peasant farmer, the kindness of the hacienda-owners, the perpetual jollity of the fiesta, the advantages of living on the margins of modernity” (Monsiváis 118).

### 1.3 NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS

I have barely alluded to the qualities, types and industries of Mexican national cinema, and I have not at all explored its audiences or international receptions. Other issues not thoroughly discussed include national cinema’s relation to modernity, international socialism and the avant-garde. In my following chapters, I discuss some of these phenomena, but Mexico’s national cinema becomes the primary backdrop for my larger discussion of Mexican cinema’s transnational influences. While, as Andrea Noble suggests in her introduction, the national is “an appropriate paradigm through which to approach this regional cinema as an institution” (23), a national cinema approach does not exclude the significance of transnational peoples and effects to that cinema production. Moreover, I show in the following chapters that these transnational effects gesture toward a different way of thinking about particular clusters of films, apart from notions of citizen/other that Hayward suggests. My investigation into transnational cinema proposes reimagining notions of center/periphery, East/West (or North/South), and national/foreign. By examining the transnational networks through which filmmaking

techniques, aesthetic phenomena, and cultural practices flow, my project seeks to address those tensions, variations and paradoxes at play in regional, national and global cinema.

Mexico's Golden Age cinema is characterized by its recurring, central images and portrayals of a coherent national identity. However, this does not eliminate the significance of international political, financial and social factors beginning at its inception. In its Golden Age, Mexican cinema's national and international influences are best understood as a series of tensions that suffuse its portrayal of a cohesive Mexican national identity. While these tensions were largely negotiable—in fact profitable—for the studios during the first half of the twentieth century, they essentially became an expression of dissatisfaction with the national studio production by the 1960s and 70s.

These significant attempts to disseminate Mexican identity, however, did not mitigate the importance of Mexico's influence on the larger international cinematic community; more exactly, the projects worked together. Mexico's cinema still engaged in complex mediations between the dissemination of national images and its financial and aesthetic relations with Latin America, Europe and the United States. Hollywood considered the 1910 revolution a cinematic event, and the ensuing republic caught the eye of European socialists and avant-garde artists alike. During the first half of the twentieth century, figures as distinct as D.W. Griffith, Sergei Eisenstein and Antonin Artaud sought to visually capture the mythos of the new Mexican nation. And while most of these artistic works returned with their creators to their countries of origin, the works' influence continued to be felt long after their creators' departures. This interest was

reciprocal; Emilio “Indio” Fernandez’s *indigenismo* films take much of their visual aesthetics from Eisenstein’s early renderings of Mexico’s history.<sup>2</sup>

Simultaneously, even as foreign artists sought to artistically capture the emerging Mexican nation, Mexico’s own film studios exported images of Mexican national identity and that of Latin Americanism, providing the bulk of Spanish-speaking films for the American markets. In addition to exporting Mexican-themed films, they attempted to engage other American markets by telling specifically “Latin American” stories and using pan-American casts and crews. Some of these films often emphasized Latin American unity at the expense of Anglo counterparts, and others used noted pan-American stars and “exotic” shooting locations (López 9). While particular emphasis on Latin Americanism declined as Mexico-based narratives became more accepted as southern entertainment, these films nonetheless illustrated Mexico’s dominance in early- to mid-twentieth century American film markets and its interest in exploiting early pan-Latin Americanism. These phenomena do not comprise an open or non-national cinema industry; these occurrences do, however, aptly demonstrate a complex navigation between the industry’s attempts to sculpt a national cinema and simultaneously maximize its international interests.

In fact, historian Seth Fein argues that the Golden Age, which rapidly expanded at the onset of World War II, was not a uniquely national project, but most appropriately understood through the United States’ investment in Mexican ideology. Fein examines stars like Pedro Infante and their involvement in “pro-war” films as part of a larger industrial formation between

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<sup>2</sup> For more on Eisenstein’s influence over Mexico’s classical era, see Acevedo-Muñoz 26-7.



U.S. and Mexican interests during the increasingly conservative Ávila Comacho regime (1940-1946). He concludes these Golden Age films to be part of a nexus of transnational production:

Official Mexico's production of mythological markers, of signs of cultural nationalism, reproduces a transnationalized system of production, of which Golden Age cinema is but a fragment. Rather than cultural imperialism, though, it is part of the ideological dialectic of the Mexican state, which depends on pseudo-anti-Americanism to fortify its own rule based on a half-century of elite collaboration with the United States (191).

Regardless of the depth of American involvement in the construction of national cinema, it is clear that the Mexican film industry was never wholly insulated from outside interests. But it is important to note that these national and international interests were well balanced during the Golden Age—in that neither deposed the other's interests and effects. The delicate balance between the two corresponding forces, however, did become more conflicted as the studio system fell into decline.

Later eras were characterized by a marked deterioration in cinematic quality and exportation to premier Latin American cinema houses. Scholars, critics and filmmakers cite many reasons for this decline, including nepotism (Charbroil 52), increased formulism (Pérez Turrent 94-5), and the industry-wide closed door policy toward new talent (Michel 46). Failures in investment, profit siphoning and insular policies of the filmmaker's union (Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Producción Cinematográfica de México, or STPC) all served to encourage inflexible and stale mechanisms of filmmaking. This cinematic decline coincided with increasing conservatism in the Mexican political sphere, the “onset of an ultraconservative era and an increasingly paranoid anti-communism culminating in 1968, when the government-backed paramilitaries were sent in to suppress student demonstrations in the [Tlateloco]” (Noble 12).

Unlike other Latin American countries, Mexican filmmakers never formed a strong “Third Cinema” that used conventions of realism and art-cinema to project a radical message. The sixties has been distinguished by a political radicalization in countries such as Cuba, Brazil and Argentina, all of which developed a cinema predicated upon social change circulating widely in Latin America and Europe. “Although in Mexico there were a number of young and amateur filmmakers struggling to redefine the cinema... their efforts would not circulate outside of Mexico City and had almost no impact upon the work of the dominant commercial producers” (López 11). Of course, some Latin American states were not always supportive of these radical political filmmakers, but, nonetheless, the milieu of cinematic expression had clearly changed as to embrace leftist pan-Americanism. However, Mexico’s static studios still ruled over its production far into the late 60s and 70s. Significantly, the studio’s disrepair merely shifted, rather than eliminated, extra-national influences on Mexican cinema. Although the Mexican studios no longer commanded the Latin American market, the question of Mexico’s exportation of national identity remained highly significant after the Golden Age. Even if the films of the mid-twentieth century remained distinct from Latin America’s emerging political cinema, the question of circulation was still central to emerging critiques of Mexican cinematic nationalism. Filmmakers were indeed quite aware of the problems of disseminating such a nationalist cinema on the international filmmaking scene (particularly in Europe), and this problem of Mexico’s stale renditions of itself seeped into Mexican cinema as studio production declined and independent cinema increased.<sup>3</sup> The orchestrations between national and international continued

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<sup>3</sup> Luis Buñuel, Luis Alcoriza and Carlos Fuentes claimed that the exportation of Mexico’s national ethos was one of the central issues of 1950s and 1960s cinema. See interview with

during the late 1950s and early 60s as the studios themselves became mausoleums of archaic filmmaking practices.

Mexican cinema had something of a renaissance during the 1970s at the inception of the Luis Cheerio Alvarez regime (1970-76). Although Echeverría's possible involvement in the Tlateloco massacre shaded his incoming presidency, his regime did herald a certain loosening of censorship and courting of leftist intellectuals. Echeverría's policies toward filmmaking centered on the expansion of production, and his brother Rodolfo, who headed the entirely nationalized Banco Cinematográfico, emphasized an "artistic" national cinema along the lines of European national cinemas. The regime formed nationalized production companies (CONACITE I, II, and III) emphasizing the entrance of younger, more radical directors and giving them more freedom to eschew traditional studio practices. "Regarding cinema as a means to promote Mexico throughout the world, [Echeverría] set about supporting Mexican film and seeking to raise it to international prominence once again. This resulted in the unprecedented financial and infrastructural backing of filmmaking by the state and a relaxation of de facto censorship" (Berg 29). Most of these changes dissipated during the succeeding presidential term, and these films never reached the 1940s' heights of international distribution.

#### **1.4 POSSIBLE ROLE OF THE TRANSNATIONAL**

My project focuses primarily on the 1950s-70s era of Mexican film production. This era, I argue in my chapters, illustrates a shift in the relationship between transnational impulses and

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national identity. While films previous to and during the prolific Golden Age emphasize the significant project of national identity, these later films represent a more ambiguous relationship to it, and, in part, form the basis for the later films of the twenty-first century. My project attempts to define the unique tenets of transnational film of the 1950s and 1960s, arguing that this era evokes the questions of the national without gesturing toward a unified national body. Instead, it uses the tensions of the nation to call forth the problems of a consolidated national body. My project attempts to define the transnational through aesthetic practices that disrupt a cinematic national identity, and also through the role of the émigré filmmaker.

In my project I examine the works of several émigré, exiled and visiting filmmakers working in Mexico during this period of cinematic transition. In my first chapter, I examine two earlier Russian/Soviet filmmakers, Sergei Eisenstein and Arcady Boytler, to trace earlier international impulses in Mexican cinema and to chart the differences between this earlier work and the later films through images of Mexico's emerging cinematic national identity. Eisenstein is primarily known for his Soviet films, but his unfinished film project *¡Que Viva México!* (1930-31) gestures toward early struggles around the formation of national identity and Mexico's corresponding relationship to other modern nations. I examine the film in relation to Eisenstein's interests in "interframe montage." This style of montage emphasizes Eisenstein's aspirations to connect the Mexican nation with indigenous peoples and revolutionaries, to link the popular national body and revolutionary political action with a larger, transnational revolutionary class. In a similar vein, Boytler's early Mexican melodrama *La mujer del puerto* (1934) underscores the significance of international modernity to the formation of a national cinematic identity. The film expresses what Aurelio de los Reyes calls a Mexican "cosmopolitan nationalism," or the idea that what creates Mexico's national identity is its formation at the forefront of twentieth-

century modernity. *La mujer del puerto*'s Veracruz, the international city in which the second half of the film's narrative takes place, becomes a setting that makes post-revolutionary Mexico national. Even though rural Mexico remains the standard Mexican milieu during the Golden Age, significant and highly popular films, such as *La mujer del puerto*, point to the complexity in Mexico's formation of its cinematic national identity. While *¡Que Viva México!* was made outside of the studio system, and *La mujer del puerto* was made as the system was being more concretely formed, both films demonstrate the significance of international aesthetics to Mexican cinema's formation.

My second, third and fourth chapters concern several films produced after the onset of the studio system's decline. The films I examine utilize transnational aesthetic styles and intellectual strategies to create a cinema highly critical of the unique Mexican identity projected during Mexico's Golden Age. My analysis begins with the films of Spanish exile Luis Buñuel. The filmmaker fled Spain during the Spanish Civil War and, after a hiatus of over a decade, reestablished himself as a filmmaker within the Mexican studio system. Although Buñuel is best known for his links to the surrealist world, I examine his works through his use of allegory and cruelty in several of his films, including *Nazarín* (1959) and *Símon del desierto* (1965). I deviate from examinations of surrealism, not because I see that mode as insignificant to the films' transnational impulses, but in an attempt to understand his integration of material events and national specificities to institutional phenomena such as the Catholic Church and authoritarian regimes. Buñuel's use of allegory, I argue, accentuates and tightens his critiques of these dynamic institutions. I demonstrate Buñuel's concern with real world events, even as he avoids imposing dominant ideological categories. Buñuel's Spanish-tinged Mexican cinema should not

be viewed as the work of a Eurocentric continentalist, but as a demonstration of the flexibility of transnational intellectual and aesthetic projects.

Buñuel's unique cinema and bombastic personality helped spark a significant film community among Spanish and other European exiles living in Mexico City during the 1940s, 50s and 60s; his work influenced Mexico's foreign and native filmmakers. In addition, he helped other émigrés enter the profession and fervently supported Mexican experimental cinema. My third chapter concerns one of those apprentice émigré filmmakers, Buñuel's screenwriter Luis Alcoriza. A fellow Spaniard and Civil War exile, Alcoriza wrote several of Buñuel's early genre pictures, such as *El gran calavera* (1949), and also several of his more "serious" films, including *Los olvidados* (1950) and *El ángel exterminador* (1961). In this chapter I examine the grotesque characters of Alcoriza's screenplays and directed films. Although Alcoriza wrote within the studio system, his later screenplays and directed films deviate from studio projects and strongly criticize the film industry. In films like *Tlayucan* (1962) and *Mecánica nacional* (1972), Alcoriza's grotesque characters satirize the strong, pathetic tropes common to genre films. In doing so, these films negate one of the strong themes of post-1950s cinematic criticism: the idea that Mexican film was once outstanding but had since fallen into crisis. This notion of cinematic crisis strongly parallels much of Mexico's then-current political atmosphere; the consistent return to crisis strongly drove 1950s political discourse. Consequently, while Alcoriza's films take aim at its film industry, its formal adaptation of the grotesque also attacks mythologizing the revolution. By rendering past and present, rural and urban, Mexican and outsider equally grotesque, his films critique the strong ideological associations that mitigate the contradictions of the institutionalized revolution.

My fourth chapter concerns the filmmaker perhaps least involved in the Mexican cinema industry, Alejandro Jodorowsky, but whose films nonetheless speak significantly to changes in Mexico's avant-garde and genre films. A Chilean of Russian-Jewish descent, Jodorowsky arrived in Mexico, via Paris, firmly ensconced in avant-garde theater production. In France, Jodorowsky, along with Fernando Arrabal and Roland Topor, created "Panic Theater," a type of avant-garde performance based in part on the writings of Antonin Artaud. Jodorowsky brought his theatrical stylings to the stages of Mexico City and commented extensively on the need to have an authentic Mexican theater, thinking this would bring the Mexican experiences and philosophies together with a violence of expression that transcends European theatrical narratives. In his cinema, Jodorowsky attempts to link the philosophies of Artaud's "Theater of Cruelty" to a Mexican national form by enjoining genre styles, avant-garde techniques and Mexican imagery. Specifically, I trace the emergence of Jodorowsky's national form and its transnational elements through two aspects of his films: the use of the "chili western" form in *El topo* (1970), and the use of theatrical shock in *The Holy Mountain* (1973). Much of the films' thematics, aesthetics and philosophies are based on the adaptations of various transnational forms to Mexico. For example, his "chili western" is a re-appropriation of the Italian western, which is in itself a re-appropriation of the Hollywood form. This reintegration of the western via Europe is distinctly different from both Mexican *rancheras* and Hollywood westerns set in Mexico. In doing so, Jodorowsky circumvents traditional cinematic binaries in order to create a shocking Mexican cinematic experience.

I conclude the project by exploring certain trends in Mexican cinema that end the twentieth century and begin the twenty-first. By examining the earlier films in the bulk of my dissertation, I provide the basis for examining the current circulation of Mexican transnational

cinema. There are many significant questions that arise when examining Mexican cinema's most recent explosion of international hit films. For example, the success of *Amores Perros*, *21 Grams*, and *Babel* (2006)—all Iñárritu films—expose the high mobility and easy fecundity of the popular Mexican melodramatic tradition. In my conclusion, I use the lens of horror to examine the extended effects of the émigré films of the 1950s, 60s and 70s. In recent cinema, horror has become a flagship genre for illustrating global cinema's flexibility and its ability to absorb national and regional traditions. I examine several films from the later twentieth century in regard to their aesthetic connections to these earlier films. I trace the mutations and shifts of several of these aesthetic practices as they enter into the twenty-first century. These practices, I argue, can allow us to think about inventions in global cinema that draw from past surrealist, absurd and cruel styles. Consequently, we can begin to think of Mexico's cinematic entrance into global circulation, not merely as a part of cinema's Hollywoodization, but as part of complex negotiations of homogenization, globalization, regionalism and cosmopolitanism.



## **2.0 INTERNATIONAL MODERNITY AND “COSMOPOLITAN NATIONALISM”: THE PARADOX OF MEXICAN CINEMA IN *¡QUE VIVA MÉXICO!* AND *LA MUJER DEL PUERTO*.**

### **2.1 THE UNFINISHED PROJECT OF *¡QUE VIVA MÉXICO!***

In this chapter I argue several that one of Mexico’s archetypal national films—Arcady Boytler’s *La mujer del puerto* (1934)—illustrates the complex and reciprocal relationship between Mexican identity and cosmopolitan nationalism in the emerging film industry. In fact, much of its early studio cinema creates and portrays a national identity based on the cohesion among Mexican, European, and international phenomena. Mexico’s 1930s film is characterized by its tendencies to utilize transnational themes, tropes, and ideologies as an integral—and unique—part of the new, post-revolutionary nation state. I examine both *La mujer del puerto* and Sergei Eisenstein’s *¡Que Viva México!* (1931-32) as early mediators of these cinematic projects in Mexico’s cinema. However, before my close examination of these films, I would like to briefly describe the production history of *¡Que Viva México!*, the unfinished cinematic assemblage that was conceived as the story of Mexico’s emerging post-revolutionary nation. This story sheds light on the concerns of early national images, and poses certain questions that form the bulk of my later analysis, questions of cinema and images of national identity, and the larger circulation of techniques and philosophies of modernity during this time period. The film

is emblematic of the practical problems associated with filming a newly emerging republic whose national imagery was still in flux, and the intellectual concerns of attempting to create a cinematic national teleology.

In 1929, director Sergei Eisenstein left the Soviet Union to make films in North America, but he found Hollywood inhospitable to his proposed projects. He had established a working contract with Paramount but the studio refused all of his scripts as too politically volatile; in turn, Eisenstein was continually frustrated by Hollywood's general anti-communism and emphasis on "commercial" cinema (Seaton 184-5). As he reached the end of his leave from the Soviet Union, the director grew desperate to salvage something from his trip to the Western Hemisphere. The opportunity arose from a chance meeting with author Upton Sinclair (and his wife Mary Craig), who loved the director's earlier work, wanted to become involved in filmmaking, and eventually agreed to partially fund and produce a film about Mexico, initially for the rather miniscule sum of twenty thousand dollars.

Actual production stretched from early 1931 through 1932 as the project expanded and Eisenstein and partners Grigori Alexandrov and Eduard Tissé encountered a series of event that forestalled the project's completion. The proposed film was massive in scope; they conceived of the piece as nothing more or less than a cinematic rendering of Mexico from pre-colonization to post-revolution; in the film's treatment, the filmmakers attempted to articulate the anticipatory, unrealized promise of a post-revolutionary, non-"western" nation-state.<sup>4</sup> Simultaneously, the filmmakers wanted to capture the expressions of religious ecstasy at play in Mexico's omnipresent images of life and death. While this monumental project started well, it ended

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<sup>4</sup>See Goodwin 129.

quickly in disappointment and discord. Sickness, natural disaster, and legal trouble plagued the expedition; by 1932, production costs had skyrocketed exponentially, and the film had become politically inexpedient in the United States for producer and financier Sinclair.

Even as Sinclair withheld financing and insisted upon the crew's return, Stalin ordered Eisenstein back to the Soviet Union. The director had to leave his Mexican footage behind in New York. Sinclair promised to send it along, but he instead allowed Paramount to cut and edit the footage into segmented films that belied Eisenstein's artistic and political vision. Later, posthumous reconstructions varied from Hollywoodesque dramas to classically revolutionary narratives. For example, the first distilled feature that emerged from the footage, a shorter film called *Thunder over Mexico* (1933) edited by Paramount, appeared more in sync with the United States' conception of Mexico than with Mexico's images of itself.

The film is not traditionally considered part of Mexico's national canon, perhaps because of its Soviet director and U.S.-American funding, or perhaps because there is no such thing as a completed project called *¡Que Viva México!* Yet, even though it remains an unfinished example of a failed national artwork, the film nonetheless persists as a lucid surface through which the political, aesthetic and intellectual tensions of early Mexican national cinema are revealed. In Mexico, the film was understood as a significant vehicle to enhance the image of the new Mexican nation. Eisenstein's reputation as a world-renown filmmaker made his presence a significant boon for Mexico's emerging international status. Given its relative importance to the state, the film was subject to surveillance, censorship and approval. Simultaneously, Mexico's institutional and cultural elites were clearly interested in both contributing to and exerting control over the film's images and narratives (control that occasionally clashed with Eisenstein's vision). The film's story was unformed at the beginning of production, but by the end of 1931 Eisenstein

understood the piece as a cinematic expression of Mexico's historical development. The film was to trace the emergence of socialist statehood from Mexico's imperial Aztec formation through its Spanish colonization and subsequent expansion into a network of rural *haciendas* to its decade long popular revolution. Eisenstein's vast cinematic vision oscillated between an intensely nationalist project and one that would combine an international socialist spirit with a sense of aesthetic ecstasy.<sup>5</sup>

However, the filmmakers could not or would understand the difficulties of filming in this emerging republic, and, with the case of *¡Que Viva México!*, these failures of imagination were both logistic and conceptual. Even as Eisenstein struggled to imagine the extent and imagery of a cohesive national story, he failed to navigate the political and financial turmoil which surrounded the film's production. Significantly, Eisenstein and Sinclair grossly underestimated the intra- and extra-national political intricacies that rendered this film impossible to complete. Sinclair grew increasingly frustrated with Eisenstein's inability to remain within budgetary limitations or even to provide a skeletal storyline. For example, he could not understand why the production shot such an enormous amount of film (not being able to process the film in Mexico, the crew shot many aspects of several scenes two or three times). Also, while initially enthusiastic about the director's grand artistic visions, the producer's frustration peaked as the film's spending spiraled out of control. Where Eisenstein saw one great epic, Sinclair saw five individual pictures. He became increasingly suspicious that Eisenstein was gouging his bank account in order to make multiple films. And Eisenstein's seemingly erratic film-style, pro-Soviet politics, and mild eroticisms became untenable for Sinclair. Even as Sinclair doubted Eisenstein's political

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<sup>5</sup> Eisenstein, *Nonindifferent Nature* 141.

affiliations, tensions grew in the Soviet Union over the director's modernist sensibilities and his lengthy absence. These apprehensions only increased as he remained in North America and culminated in charges of desertion from the USSR (Goodwin 138-141).<sup>6</sup>

These disparate political and economic factors significantly impeded the production's completion, yet at the same time these extra-national causes were not the only reasons for the film's failure; they were augmented by intra-national political concerns. The Mexican government and bureaucracy initially viewed the production team as highly suspect, even briefly interrogating and arresting the crew for no apparent reason. Arguably, this minor incarceration did not actively delay the production, but it began the constant governmental regulation and censorship that plagued the subsequent shooting schedule. Both David Siqueiros and Diego Rivera traveled extensively with the production team at the request of the Secretariat of Public Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública, or SEP). Although they shared very similar artistic visions with the Soviet director, their presence assured the preservation of Mexican interests vis-à-vis the film's themes and aesthetics. More intrusively, the Mexican government attempted to censor the production directly based on what Eisenstein shot. As Eisenstein navigated the fluctuating new regime—a complex web of intrigues, ascensions, and falls from political grace—Mexican censors were resolutely concerned with the images of political figures that were about to be loosed in Europe and America.

The most telling tale of censorship concerns the filming of the epilogue, which Eisenstein secretly planned as a satire of Mexico's current regime. During his extensive travels in Mexico,

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<sup>6</sup> On November 21, 1931, Sinclair received a telegram noting that Stalin had claimed that Eisenstein was “thought to be a deserter.” See Geduld and Gottesman 212.

Eisenstein shot footage of the notorious, increasing conservative ex-president General Calles and current president Obregon, along with other wealthy and politically-salient Mexicans.<sup>7</sup> While the censors did not oppose sequences glorifying the current administration, Eisenstein had no plan to use the footage in such a laudatory manner. In discussion with Mary Seaton, Eisenstein claimed that “[t]hrough montage these shots were to appear satirical when intercut with the shots of Death Day figures,” (211) using the carnivalesque milieu of Death Day (also known as El día de los muertos or All Soul’s Day) to lambaste the contemporary politicians. His friends and colleagues, however, were scandalized by such footage, fearing his political affiliations were shifting considerably. Sinclair eventually used such footage against him to garner both radical and conservative support against Eisenstein; he argued that such footage could be used against the Mexican Government, and yet he simultaneously argued that the materials were inherently fascistic in nature. This balancing act between pleasing the censors and Sinclair and keeping true to his own vision and politics proved an impossible task even for Eisenstein, and what passed institutional inspection alienated his supporters (Seaton 212).

Even this brief account shows how the unfinished *¡Que Viva México!* brought together a host of disparate historical entities that could not be readily reconciled: figures as distinct as Calles and Stalin, economic policies seemingly as varied as international socialism and North

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<sup>7</sup> Eisenstein was in Mexico during Calles’ shift toward a more conservative ruling position.

General Plutarco Elias Calles, president from 1924-1928, had become increasingly authoritarian while ruling essentially *de facto* in the National Revolutionary Party. At the moment that Eisenstein was filming Calles, the communist party had been banned and land redistribution halted.

American capitalism, and uneven infrastructures between rural and urban Mexico. These factors were not merely distinct but were impossible to mediate. Far from being mere idiosyncrasies of *¡Que Viva Mexico!*'s poorly executed production, these situations illustrate the consistent, systematic problems in Mexico's early attempts to create an iconographic national consensus. Understood in tandem with the larger discussion of Mexico's new national identity, these events illustrate the often impassable barriers that forestall Mexico's cohesive national representation. Even as *¡Que Viva Mexico!* attempted to create an overarching story of the new nation-state, both practical and intellectual forces made such a project impossible.

This film has also been a notoriously difficult work to examine as unique aesthetic object or piece of auteur cinema. Scholars and critics comment on what the film was supposed to have been, which illustrates the difficulties of examining unedited footage. However, the failure of completion reflects not only the struggles of an author (or authors) but a larger struggle of forming national images coincident with the formation of national identity. *¡Que Viva México!*'s disparate images were supposed to show the nation as a collective but still singular entity, and in failing to illustrate unity it points to the paradox of any attempt to represent a seamless nation. The film's entirety—the reels of footage, the several different released films, the attempts to secure funding from various sources, Eisenstein's inability to complete his original project, and the political struggles between Eisenstein, Sinclair, Paramount Pictures, and Stalin's administrative regime—brings to light the contradictions of a national cinema.<sup>8</sup> With a Soviet

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<sup>8</sup>The attempts to realize Eisenstein's proposed project are as yet still ongoing, as there has been a recent attempt by director Lutz Becker and the Mexican Picture Partnership Ltd. to make another

director and U.S.-American financing, this image of a popular revolution relied on Eisenstein's earlier, popular revolutionary cinema as much as it did on Mexico's own engagement with national identity. Furthermore, the film underscores the significance of foreign intellectual projects—including Europe's socialism and indigenous exoticism—on Mexico's own attempts to create a unified national identity after its post-revolutionary reconsolidations and reconciliations, and charts the difficulties and failures of such constructions.

Eisenstein's failure to produce a complete national film does not mean that a successful (if contradictory and often sometimes incoherent) national cinema was not produced in Mexico. And yet, as I argue in this chapter, Mexico's early, successful national films have much in common with Eisenstein's supposed failure. In this chapter, I think through these important concerns of national cinema by examining some of the footage of *¡Que Viva México!* and *La mujer del puerto* (1934) and illustrating what their important similarities and differences say about Mexico's cinematic identity of the era. Both films equally point to the contradictory tendencies of Mexico's nascent national identity. Their similarities speak to the use of international modern aesthetic traditions. However, the two films' divergent histories have somewhat masked their significant connections. The film's fates are radically different; the earlier film languished in Paramount's vaults for nearly forty years while the later film is celebrated as the first 'national' Mexican film. In its failure to achieve completion, *¡Que Viva México!* raises a myriad of concerns about possible formation of coherent national narratives. On the other hand, *La mujer del puerto*'s minimization of traditional Mexican themes of indigeneity

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version of the film, filming the yet undone scenes and merging them with the previous footage.

See [http://www.quevivamexico.com/site\\_home.htm](http://www.quevivamexico.com/site_home.htm).



and revolution for an international nationalism emphasizes the non-national (European and U.S.-American) technologies and infrastructures at play in creating a national identity. The two pictures together illustrate the fluid and contradictory national identity which appeared to subsume heterogeneous variation during the first half of the twentieth century.

## **2.2 EISENSTEIN'S SERAPE: BINDING INDIGENOUS TO MESTIZO**

While *¡Que Viva México!*'s external difficulties hindered the project's completion, they were not the only impediments to a rapid, successful conclusion. As I noted earlier, the film was to be an examination of the new, socialist state as a national collective, a project that was enormous in scope, and difficult given the variation within this aggregate of peoples and cultures. This desire to film the different peoples of Mexico led the filmmaker to radical changes in his own style and aesthetics. Eisenstein's modes shifted to accommodate what he understood as Mexico's unique collectivity. In a letter to Sinclair, Eisenstein famously used the metaphor of the serape to describe his style of cinema-making that was particularly attuned to Mexico. The serape—an indigenous blanket worn by many peoples in the country—emblemized the co-existent temporal clashes that he experienced on his journey throughout Mexico's distinct regions. Similar to the iconic blanket,

so striped and violently contrasting are the cultures in Mexico running next to each other and at the same time being centuries away. No plot, no whole story, could run through this Serape without being false and artificial. And we took the contrasting independence of its violent colours as the motif for construction of our film; six episodes following each other—different in character, different in people, different in animals, trees and

flowers. And still held together by the unity of the weave—a rhythmic and musical construction and an unrolling of the Mexican spirit and character (Eisenstein *Film Sense* 251).

For Eisenstein, the emblem's significance lay in its embodiment of two important details of Mexican life: the simultaneity of pre-history and history and the importance of indigenous people's rites and rituals to a cohesive post-revolutionary existence. In Mexico, he found that peoples of pre-history (the lives of some native peoples), pre-revolution (on the *haciendas*) and post-revolution could all exist at the same time and that this non-synchronous development was a central and unusual characteristic of Mexico's new national identity. The expressed goal of the new republic, the director implicitly claimed, is to gather the significant spiritual and cultural factors of pre-history—the character of the bucolic indigenous peoples—into modernity and modern life.

Eisenstein specifically saw the enduring myths, rites, and rituals as a formative part of Mexico's new nation. Even though he thought indigenous peoples should be brought into modernity, he considered indigenous spirituality to be nonetheless necessary in the new revolutionary society. In this film, an emphasis on revolutionary ideology is not inconsistent with its reliance on indigenous spiritual rituals, despite the often oppositional relationship between secular revolutions and religious beliefs. While the cruelty of colonialism—and its problematic economic traditions—must give way to a popular revolution, the film assures us that the spiritual rituals of pre-history and the monotheistic ecstasy of the Catholic faith are paramount to Mexico's post-revolutionary existence. This significant joining between popular socialism and religious spiritualism, which Eisenstein highlights in his serape-metaphor, is displayed through the film's proposed structure. Eisenstein initially described the film as consisting of six unique

parts: a prologue, an epilogue, and four distinct sections. Each one would contrast against the others yet run parallel, similar to the swaths of cloth woven into the blanket. As he indicated to Sinclair, the four sections would be spatially distinct and incorporate different temporalities. The initial chapter, “Sanduga,” appears outside of colonial history and “Fiesta” occurs in a vaguely colonial, pre-revolutionary era, while “Manguay” occurs more specifically at the end of Porfirio Díaz’s dictatorial regime (1876-1910) and “Soldadera” during the revolution (1910-1919). In contrast to the historical specificity of the latter chapters, the prologue and epilogue link pre-history and future post-colonialism together through images of spiritual ecstasy. The two underscore the significance of life and death to the spiritual and philosophical traditions of Mexico; in addition, the temporal flexibility of the two emphasizes spiritual consistency, which attempts to illustrate through a unique composition

Eisenstein emphasizes Mexico’s singular post-revolutionary character through the use of interframe unity, in which the formal composition of the film as a whole is reaffirmed in each particular shot (Goodwin 130). For example, life’s “eternal circles” appear both thematically, through the cycles of birth and death; and structurally, through the circular construction of both montage and individual frame. Earlier images reappear later in the film, either literally or through homologous objects; for example the skull motifs in “Fiesta” reappear throughout the film and comprise the closing images of the Death Day scenes. The circle likewise appears to underscore life’s circular structure: in the movements of the toreador’s cape during “Fiesta” and in the rotating Ferris wheel of the epilogue, to name two examples.

Even more explicitly, the film expresses Mexico’s unique and multi-temporal development through a pyramidal structure, which evokes both the ancient architecture of the Aztec and Mayan empires and contemporary post revolutionary society. As his biographer Mary

Seaton notes, “*¡Que Viva México!* was Eisenstein’s distillation of the compositional essence of the country where the pyramidal form dominates: in the formation of the mountains, the pyramid temples built by the Toltecs, Mayas, and Aztecs, the formal shape of the sombrero hat and the folds of the sarape hanging from the shoulders of the Indians” (213). Particularly, the images of the film’s ‘Prólogo’ emphasize both the film’s interframe unity and its use of triangular/pyramidal framing positions. The film’s famous initial sequence juxtaposes the profiles of Mexico’s contemporary indigenous citizens with those ancient statues and pyramids of their Aztec and Mayan ancestors. The shots are not all the same; in several, the man’s profile is rendered colossal and placed next to the diagonal line of the ancient pyramids, while in others the living subject is framed in relation to the gods’ statues. Through the facial/structural similarity, the cosmic link between ancient and modern emerges as a continuum of pre-history into the present. As Masha Salazkina notes, “The ruins are presented as structures of permanence, a permanence then further emphasized by the resemblance between the stone carvings and the figures of the Indians whose bodies, and more specifically faces, becomes the sites displaying the continuity of time” (39). By connecting man to both the architectures of the past and the gods’ that populate them, the film suggests an inherent cosmic unity in which Mexico’s imperial past and its revolutionary present form a mythic symbiosis between people and land.

In the film, this connection bridges the gaps between urban and rural, or *mestizo* and *indigena*: “the shots that juxtaposed the profile of the man and the stone here suggest the similarity, if not the unity, of the man with the people who built the pyramid and the unadulterated mystical link between the man and the godhead” (Podalsky 35). However, by connecting contemporary man not only to the ancient gods but to the pyramidal architecture, the

film reveals the physiognomic aspects of ancient man in both the architectures of the past and in Mexico's contemporary and future people. The film extends the cosmic link to the plastic arts—and an implicit connection between the architecture of the past and the photography/filmmaking of the present. Both of these arts can disclose man's true countenance and his links to the gods and the natural world. In shots of contemporary peoples, one can see the architectures of the past and man's true self.<sup>9</sup>

Although aesthetic changes marked a deviation from Eisenstein's usual techniques, these sections of the film were not the most difficult to complete. The aesthetic concerns posed by the prologue proved more solvable than the financial constraints of the more traditional narratives of revolution. The images that were to tie the nation to the film and to its own history were far too expensive and complex, and the project had run on far too long. By the time Eisenstein was ready to film "Soldadera," the episode that would have recounted the revolution through a soldier's wife's journey, he had overspent drastically and Sinclair was unwilling to secure more funding. The inability to film "Soldadera" points to some of the early struggles in completing an impermeable and cohesive national narrative, yet both his newer conceptions of interframe unity and the narration of the 1910 revolution are propelled by a similar project: the joining together of multiple regional and ethnic affiliations to form a singular post-revolutionary national identity. Even though Eisenstein was committed to showing varying temporal registers in the various chapters, "Soldadera" was to join together all of these distinct eras under the yoke of the 1910

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<sup>9</sup> Eisenstein's shift toward interframe unity represents a significant change for him as filmmaker; these effects are visible in Eisenstein's later works such as *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible, Part I*.

revolution, in a sense completing the film's pyramidal structure. In a similar vein, the chapter was to unify the northern *mestizos* and the southern *indigenas*, two separate armies with unique political goals. The episode that was to merge the various other tendrils into cohesive whole, then, was ironically the one that was impossible to finish. The chapter that was to create a unified nation out of disparate peoples, and bring them into the modernizing present (in other words, the section that was to show the nation-state) was the section that proved impossible.

The term *soldadera* refers to a female soldier who took up arms against the Díaz regime in the early years of the revolution; however, it can denote—as it does in this case—the family members who followed behind the armies, which were tolerated in order to keep desertion to a minimum. Eisenstein's chapter was to follow the story of a *soldadera* named Pancha as she travels on the fringes of the revolutionary armies, first with one husband, then with a second after her first is killed. This episode would have been the largest, most time-consuming, and most expensive of all the episodes—although Eisenstein swore to Sinclair that he only needed another month. The episode, which takes place during the civil war directly after the 1910 uprising, would have required a mass mobilization of peoples for battle scenes and more film stock than any of the previously completed chapters.

Although the piece was never filmed or even staged, it remains significant because of its proposed scope and because it speaks to the interests in consolidating the factions that emerged as the revolution entered its “institutional” phase. Importantly, Pancha's two loves come from two different, sometimes opposing armies: her first husband was a member of the northern/Pancho Villa army and her second was a member of the southern/Emiliano Zapata army. The father of Pancha's child is both absent and ambiguous, but Pancha's two husbands from two different revolutionary armies metaphorically suggest that the child has two fathers.

Symbolically, the two armies merged through the figure of Pancha and her child, thus suggesting that Mexico will thrive only when the divergent populist groups unify; in his treatment he pens that “Pancha... placed humanitarian sentiments and the fraternity of the people above the senseless and sanguinary discord of those whose hatred should have been directed against the forces of reaction and of oppression” (quoted in Seaton 507). In this instance, Pancha is positioned as the embodiment of the newly emerging nation, just as her child would symbolize the presumed consolidation of the varying classes, ethnicities, and peoples that will comprise the future nation in the wake of the Revolution.

As it was imagined in Eisenstein’s 1931 treatise, Pancha’s *soldadera* story expresses the possible utopian future of the socialist state and builds upon rising national ideologies. While most of the earlier sections were unmoored from concrete time, Eisenstein imagined this particular narrative as located in a specific moment: the epochal upheaval of the 1910 revolution. The section’s temporal concreteness places it squarely within the story of Mexico’s political present. In this urgent moment, the *soldadera*’s child becomes the literal and symbolic figure of Mexico’s post-revolutionary future. While on the one hand, the emblem of the mixed child imagines a semi-utopian consolidation between Mexico’s southern indigenous farmers and northern industrial workers, on the other it explicitly supposes the notion that the real hope for the new nation-state lies in a mixture of the old (Indian) and the new (Spanish and/or modern), a mixture that came to be personified in the figure of the *mestizo*.

In fact, Pancha’s iconic *mestizo* child is characteristic of the new, national archetype celebrated in the discourse of Mexico’s post-revolutionary bureaucratic intelligentsia. The *mestizo*—that individual of both Spanish (Creole) and Indian blood—was the inheritor of Mexico’s history and representing, in image and culture, the symbolic intermingling of the

various peoples who have inhabited Mexico since colonization. This multi-ethnic *mexicanidad* marked a decisive shift from past conceptions of nationhood, heightened by its almost instantaneous permeation into Mexico's post-revolutionary milieu. From the latter half of the nineteenth century (and the ends of colonialism) through the end of *el Porfiriato* (Porfirio Díaz's regime), the dual trends of liberalism and positivist social theory supposed that Mexico's march to national statehood would progress not because of its indigenous population but only at the suppression of its barbarous traits.<sup>10</sup> The Positivist élan that flourished under Díaz—and under Comtian-influenced bureaucrats such as Gabino Barreda— emphasized so-called 'practical' solutions to Mexico's 'chaos'; the unwieldy country must be tamed with civilization, including the forceful assimilation or even eradication of the Indian peoples.<sup>11</sup> The liberal state explicitly

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<sup>10</sup> Nineteenth-century Positivist social theory dominated much of Mexico's post-colonial political thought and institutional development, particularly in the realm of educational policy. There are several distinct influences that shaped this particular mode of thought, including the European traditions of positivism and liberalism (particularly August Comte and Herbert Spenser), "social Darwinism" and its antecedents, and contemporary European constitutional law (Hale 205).

<sup>11</sup> The Positivist concern over the indigenous populations was complex and consistently shifting depending on the political and economic concerns of the time. Internal strife and rural violence—propagated by indigenous populations—was met by force to quell the sentiments of "barbarism" (Hale 224), yet broader social initiatives in education insisted, in principle, on a universal, liberal education for all, including rural and indigenous populations (Hale 226). Later



claimed that indigenous populations were uncultivated and irrational, and needed to be held back from a dangerous, populist fervor either through persuasion or violence. The discourse equated indigenes with savagery, as well as physical, emotional, and societal weakness. Adopting not only European but North American values and industrial practices, the Positivists hoped to produce a nation of Mexican *gringos*, or Spanish descendents that adopted the Protestant values and rationalist philosophies of the United States.<sup>12</sup>

The post-revolutionary vision of nationhood stood in marked contrast to the nineteenth-century Positivist concept of Mexican identity. Unlike earlier attempts to define the Mexican nation primarily through its European descendents, the post-revolutionary ethos characterized itself as drawing extensively from both native and Creole sources. We can see Eisenstein's "Soldadera" as an attempt to create a cinematic vision of this contemporary racial imagery, and in fact his vision to a certain extent coincides with the artistic visions of others. In fact, both

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critics of Positivism, however, took pains to emphasize the social Darwinist interpretations which cast the Indians as irredeemable, antiquated, and degenerate. Evolutionary social theorists used Spenser and Darwin to justify its social position and the means it had used to gain it. On the basis of social Darwinism, said Vasconcelos, the people were denied the right to hold their own opinions and to defend their own interests. Anything that contradicted the laws of the survival of the fittest was condemned. According to Darwinism, the fittest always survived in the struggle for life (Zea 16).

<sup>12</sup> Despite the recent war with the United States and the loss of the Northern territories, there was a strong admiration for North American liberalism, which dovetailed with the movement's anti-clerical sentiments (Hale 243).

cultural and intellectual leaders viewed the new nation as the amalgamation of the unique potential of all races (including indigenous Americans), a marked contrast from the earlier elite's racial exclusive policies. These significant figures spanned cultural and state institutions, including political writers and state bureaucrats (Daniel Cosío, José Vasconcelos), artists (Diego Rivera, José Orozco) and famed novelists (Mariano Azuela, Martín Luis Guzmán).

More specifically, significant Mexican philosophical texts of the period sought to disentangle the nation from an association with racial purity. Importantly, this disengagement from these exclusionist policies does not presuppose a nation unformed by race. However, it does drastically alter the use of race in nation-building, shifting the discourse from one of exclusion to a dominant image of race-mixing, or *mestizaje*. For example, the important extended essay *La Raza Cósmica*, written by state intellectual, Minister of Education, and 1929 presidential candidate José Vasconcelos, cites racial variation as crucial to the emergence of a new, more perfect people—or the cosmic race. Vasconcelos espouses the supremacy of national-racial heterogeneity, even invoking Darwinist language, a rhetoric that had been used to justify violent colonialism, to refute nineteenth century testaments of European superiority over native peoples. Vasconcelos argues that our future great nations will be built not upon homogeneity and segregation but on the integration of each people's most auspicious traits. Importantly, this mixing of peoples only bolsters and enforces the possibility of nationhood within Mexico's nascent republic. He extensively criticizes the idea of any particular national race as chosen, either by God or History, to be the world's future nation (33). Yet, he nonetheless understands Southern America as the *only* location for the development of future nations; it has the land, resources, education, and potential for spiritual growth, elements lacking in violent Europe or exhausted Asia: "Only the Iberian part of the continent possesses the spiritual factors, the race,

and the territory necessary for the great enterprise of initiating the new universal era of Humanity” (38-9), which also now contains within itself the racial stocks of Europe, Africa, and America.

Similar to other constructions of national identity, Vasconcelos evokes the ancient past to justify his argument of a mixed future. He points to the ancient civilizations of Greece, Rome, and Mexico, all heterogeneous empires. The essay claims that contemporary societies must look to these models of disparate peoples—and not the newer, more homogenous French and German nation-states—in order to produce more advanced civilizations. And, as these ancient civilizations are intrinsically necessary for more fulfilled societies, the indigenous American’s place in the new nation is symbolically assured. This physical descendent brings the best of the Mexican people—their ancient traditions and the pre-historic spirit—into modernity. This notion of the nation’s inherent indigenous-identity is paramount for Mexico’s national culture (similar to many other Central and South American countries). The correlations between nation and race are well-established and meticulously documented in the formation of national identities more broadly; the mechanism of race in Mexico’s national identity is significant to both its notion of its own historical continuum and as well its artistic integrity. Crucially, the assertion of indigeneity is not oppositional to a *mestizo* nation and there is no call to embrace indigenous culture at the expense of the historical developments that have occurred since colonization: “[In] Mexico, as in other Spanish territories in the Americas, the Indian heritage was absorbed into the dominant Creole (the Mexican-born, white bourgeoisie) social structure, becoming the glue, so to speak, that bonded together the different components of the national identity” (Acevedo-Muñoz 18). Modernity—particularly European and North American modernity—is the political and economic structure that builds itself upon a foundation of indigenous history.

Vasconcelos's essay is a microcosm of the larger philosophical policies of cultural institutions such as the SEP, which Vasconcelos headed from 1921-24.<sup>13</sup> There was the dissemination of "official culture"—the distribution of values, mores, and cultural phenomena from both the offices of government and individual artists and bureaucrats (Bartra 4). This association between artist and bureaucrat does not presume that the state and artists shared identical philosophies (although that was true for some) but that there is a strong interrelation between the construction of official culture and its dissemination. Such institutions not only espoused a coherent national culture but also promoted and disseminated literary, printed, and plastic arts that underscored this view of Mexican national culture.

Mexico's famous muralists, David Siqueiros, José Orozco and Diego Rivera, are perhaps the most famous tactile artists associated with early artistic application of national culture. A paradigmatic example is Rivera's expansive mural that covers the interior corridor of the *Palacio Nacional*, Mexico City's presidential residences. The multi-paneled mural, called *Historia de México: de la conquista al futuro* (*History of Mexico: from the Conquest to the Future*), provides a pictorial account of the *mestizo* both as an integral part of Mexico's past and a key to its revolutionary future. The first set of panels depicts the *mestizo*'s mythic origins; in the same scene in which the *conquistadors* fight the Aztec soldiers, Cortez's enslaved translator and mistress Malinche carries her mixed race baby, whose pale blue eyes illustrate his iconic status as the original corporeal effect of colonization. Despite such inauspicious beginnings, the panels picture the *mestizo* as the leader of the new social (and socialist) utopia. The final panel depicts the *mestizo*, under the hand of a god-like Marx, shepherding Mexico toward a future that unifies

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<sup>13</sup> For the explicit relations between the SEP and Mexican cinema, see Acevedo-Muñoz 22.

the mechanics of modernism with the spirit of the ancient regimes. Silver and clean, the new machines of the age form an equal part of the future landscape. Rivera's *Palacio* murals offer an extreme vision of a national ethos that simultaneously illustrates various strands of history that, woven together, were to produce a revolutionary future. Eisenstein in fact wanted to dedicate each chapter to a different muralist: for example, the prologue is a cinematic rendition of Siqueiros's "Entierro de un obrero" ("Burial of a Worker") (Seaton 198).

### **2.3 MODERNITY AND MEXICAN FILM: THE ARCHITECTURE OF A NATIONAL CINEMA**

The literary and plastic arts were clearly instrumental in the formation of Mexican identity—one was based on particular political and philosophical phenomena coincident with the end of the revolution. Similar to the other influential arts, film was considered a pivotal part of national culture; it gave *mexicanidad* some of its most powerful visual and auditory elements. Mexico's emerging national cinema closely mirrored the ideology and iconic mythologies of its murals and other significant artistic forms such as the revolutionary Social Realist novel. Like other arts, cinema linked the nation of Mexico to its ancient empires and indigenous past. Much of its iconic imagery sprung from indigenous mythology and revolutionary events, and it also, sometimes, pictured the revolutionary struggles as the inaugural stage of a modern, post-revolutionary future. Film, however, is unique in several ways. Film's reputation as a foreign (European and U.S.-American) intervention at first rendered it a suspect medium for national iconography. Vasconcelos dismissed film—especially feature-length fiction film—as a potential

national artistic practice, claiming that film was a U.S. cultural product that could not be made into a national form.

Vasconcelos's perspective highlights larger anxieties concerning role of foreign materials and technologies in the formation of national identity. Early in the twentieth-century, most films shown in Mexico came from New York or Hollywood.<sup>14</sup> Even as films flowed in from the north, the new apparatus connoted old colonial relations with Spain and France, a past that was to be rejected along with Díaz's legacy and the old liberal order: "Mexican filmmaking was limited in the prerevolutionary period to what we would now call 'propagandistic' features designed to enhance the glory of the dictatorship" (Mora 13). Certainly, Mexican cinema's earliest images were aligned with the powers of the *porfiriato*: "The first films photographed in Mexico... were not landscapes or street scenes but carefully orchestrated views of Porfirio Díaz (recently reelected for a fourth presidential term), his family, and his official retinue shot by Lumière cameramen von Bernard and Veyre in 1898" (López 60-61). But in a broader context, Vasconcelos's dismissal of cinema speaks to tensions between regionalism/nationalism and cosmopolitanism/internationalism in Mexico, dichotomies that reach back to the country's colonial years. Shortly after its separation from Spain, the country was eager to establish its own national identity and regional dominance. However, it nonetheless looked to Europe as the standard-bearer of modernity and progress.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The French Lumière brothers are credited with bring cinema to Mexico in August, 1896 (Mora 6).

<sup>15</sup> For more on the history of Eurocentric thinking in early Mexican arts, see Martin 36.

Mexico's Golden Age negotiated this paradox in two ways. On the one hand, it continued and enlarged the pervasive dissemination of iconic images begun by the other arts, and it often did so through very conservative texts. These films draw upon the country's pre-colonial prehistory and present indigenous populations to produce its initial images of Mexican nationhood. Thus, much of Mexico's cinematic national imagery is based on the collusion of disparate images of empire and indigenusness. The various topographies of Mexico—northern mountains, southern jungles etc.—are aligned together through Mexico's indigenous past. Although historically and politically distinct, the imperial pyramids (Teotihuacán and Chichén Itzá) and the bucolic, southern farm life connect the contemporary Mexican citizen to the land and cement his place on the continent. As I note in the introduction, the staple genres, in particular the *comedias rancheras* and the revolutionary war films, add to the romantic and bucolic Mexican national imagery. Revolutionary melodramas almost always included romance and battle—two staples of Hollywood genre pictures. Although they of course concern the revolution, the event that ushered Mexico into the modern era, the narratives usually are formed around a populist uprising of sympathetic, iconically white-clad peasants. Likewise, *comedias rancheras*, which gained prominence after the debut of *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (1936), are similar to the Hollywood western but reinforced a more traditional, rural status quo. The *ranchera* often extols the virtues of compromise between traditional values and the broadly modernizing influences of colonialism, as shown in film such as *La Madrina del Diablo* (1937) and *¡Ay, Jalisco no te rejas!* (1940).

On the other hand, Mexican cinema often used these images as a backdrop from which a more modern society would spring. Although the soul remained rural, the country itself would modernize, particularly through images of education and (to a far lesser extent) industry and

politics. Many of the industry's most significant films and its copious national genres pictures bring together Mexico's indigenous past and its modern present to indicate a future, more just nation-state. This need to modernize but remain Mexican is particularly visible in Mexico's "prestige" pictures and the films of the great studio directors such as Emilio "el Indio" Fernández, Roberto Galvadón, and Alberto Gout. Fernández's multiple- award winning *María Candelaria* (1944) is an archetypical example of these national post-revolutionary prestige pictures and clearly illustrates the integration of indigeneity with the modernizing impulses. In the film's narrative the young María Candelaria (Dolores Del Río), a poor but beautiful young woman, attempts to raise enough money to marry her beloved Lorenzo, and struggles to pay her debts to the unkind, *mestizo* store owner Don Damián. At the same time, she is pursued by an urban artist who wishes to paint her portrait, claiming her to be the symbolic essence of Mexico's beauty.<sup>16</sup> She is stoned to death by those of her village, however, who believe she posed nude for the portrait. The film ends with her flowered, picturesque funeral and bereaved mourners lamenting the loss of the young girl.

Although the film distinctly creates sympathetic portraits of native Mexicans, a rarity among films of that era, it nonetheless continues and exemplifies the idea that Mexican national

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<sup>16</sup> Although in the film the artist claims that María's is a pure pre-Colombian Indian, Noble notes that the film also positions María as the post-Columbian Virgin of Guadalupe. Noble notes that, in a scene at the church "[t]he camera cuts from María Candelaria, with her hands in a gesture of prayer and uplifted face framed by her shawl, to the statue of the Virgin in order to draw a clear visual analogy between the two figures" (82). This connection between María and the Virgin associates María with *mestiza* figure in addition to the indigenous peoples.



identity is both indigenous and modern. *María Candelaria* sympathetically portrays native populations as poor but virtuous, yet it also stresses the need for modernization (through universal education, for example) to prevent violence and disaster. María, despite her coding as indigenous and her strongly native, if light-skinned, facial features, is invested in the production of the modern nation. Her similarities to the Virgin and her preventable death indicate the spiritual and practical necessity of colonial and post-colonial unity to Mexico's future path. This notion of modern/indigenous unity is further exemplified in Fernandez's *Rio Escondido* (1947), the film which essentially serves as propaganda for the SEP and the Alemán regime. The famous film tells the story of a heroic school-teacher who attempts to bring education to the poor, indigenous populations of rural Mexico.

*¡Que Viva México!*'s imagery stands at the threshold of this particular alliance between national imagery and modernity. The film is quite similar to other early national pictures in its portrayal (or promised portrayal) of patriotic depictions of the revolution (similar to, for example, *Vamos con Pancho Villa* [1935]) and by attempting to situate contemporary images of Mexicans in an indigenous milieu (*Redes* [1936] or *Janitzio* [1934]). One of its central chapters, "Manguay," is set on those same haciendas that would dominate the singing cowboy *rancheras*, although, importantly, its imagery is radically less conservative than that genre. While the hacienda films stressed reconciliation between workers and owners (one of the dominant images is the marriage of worker and owner's child), the shocking ending of "Manguay" poses no sympathy for owners. The section "Manguay" tells a story of field workers who attempt revenge on the cowboys that attack one of the workers' fiancé. The workers are captured, buried alive, and stomped to death by the cowboys' horses. The horrific violence that comprises the workers' deaths leaves little sympathy for the hacendado or his cohorts, but

Eisenstein's images would form the iconic landscapes of the prestige pictures. Mora notes that "[Eisenstein's] unrealized film was to have an important influence, even if indirect, on subsequent Mexican filmmakers who were to develop a 'national' style of cinema, especially Emilio 'El Indio' Fernandez" (19), noting in particular *¡Que Viva México!*'s camerawork which would be emulated by the Fernandez-Figueroa filmmaking team.<sup>17</sup>

*María Candelaria*, the other prestige pictures, and the similar genre films display a kind of consistency in their iterations of current political, aesthetic, and cinematic ruralism. While general attempts to consolidate national imagery were perched precariously upon the pyramids of an earlier age, actual filmmaking projects and policies engaged in complex mediations between the bureaucratic SEP and Mexico's financial and aesthetic relations with Latin America, Europe, and the United States more broadly. As centered as it was upon iconic national and indigenous images, the cinema was nonetheless deeply influenced by a myriad of international forces, including nineteen-and twentieth-century European intellectual modernisms; World War I and the Spanish civil war's varying effects on film production, distribution, and immigration; and early international nature of film itself, including Europe and Hollywood's struggle for cinematic dominance during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> García Riera notes that Eisenstein "permitted various Mexican cineastes more or less solidarized with populists currents to create a style which would be characterized by meticulous camerawork (concentrating on clouds and maguey plants) and would gratuitously pay tribute to a hieratism by which they pretended to portray a national essence" (Mora 19).

<sup>18</sup> Of course, Mexico's 1910 revolution coincided with the rapid and pervasive world-wide dissemination of cinema. From its beginnings the revolution was a cinematic event, and

Miriam Hansen's discussion about "vernacular modernisms" may be helpful in thinking about early Mexican national cinema in a global context. Hansen's argument is that early "classical" or studio cinemas are inextricably intertwined with the experience of modernization and modernity. While this argument, as she claims, is in and of itself not incredibly radical, her argument provides significant addendums in three areas of film scholarship: it enlarges the discussion of modernism to other media affected by the process of modernization, it intervenes in the binary between psychoanalytic and cognitive approaches to classical Hollywood cinema, and it (most importantly for this argument) speaks to the question of Hollywood cinema's early global hegemony during the 1920s-40s. In this last discussion, Hansen speaks of Hollywood's flexibility in appropriating an amalgamation of diverse domestic interests in its inauguration of mass audience. In an addendum to this, she notes:

American movies of the classical period offered something like the first global vernacular. If this vernacular had a transnational and translatable resonance it was not just because of its optimal mobilization of biologically hard-wired structures and universal narrative templates, but because this vernacular played a key role in mediating competing

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American filmmaker D.W. Griffith made Pancho Villa a movie-star before the end of the war by filming the northern army's battles. Griffiths and Frank Thayer (producers of *The Life of General Villa* [1914]) even exchanged financial support for exclusive filming rights, reportedly asking Villa to restage battle scenes for better more extensive shots. The revolution proved lucrative for Hollywood during the conflict and later as the background for dozens of American films such as *Viva Zapata* (1952), *Villa Rides* (1968), and spaghetti westerns such as *Giù la testa* (*Duck You Sucker*, 1971).

cultural discourses on modernity and modernization; because it articulated, brought into optical consciousness (to vary Benjamin), and disseminated a particular historical experience. (12)

Hansen points to Hollywood's early ability to process and create a particular narrative of the technologies of modernization, and its ability to create a unique sensory-historical experience of modernity.

In her article on Shanghai cinema, she claims that this modern vernacular may have relevance to other, non-Hollywood areas of production; these models of a particular contradictory experience may be applicable to other modernized metropolises. With regard to Shanghai cinema, she notes that, "Tracing a wealth of intertextual and intermedia relations both within individual films and in Shanghai film culture makes it possible to recognize the films' modernist aesthetics as linked to vernacular forms of modernism—graphic artistic, and literary—outside the cinema, rather than judging the films by the narrow standards of literary-intellectual modernism" (14). This enlarging of her argument beyond Hollywood to other cinemas can be useful to thinking through the rapid modernization associated with dual emergence of cinema and national identity in Mexico. As Salazkina notes, Hansen's argument illustrates how cinematic vernacular made the local more available for circulation in a global medium (8). As the local became significantly integrated into the transnational technology, so too did the transnational technologies become central to local circulation. Mexican national cinema had to have the ability to incorporate European and North American technologies and their corresponding notions of progress but establish these phenomena as Mexican—not foreign. As I discussed previously, Mexican cinema brought "foreign" elements into its cinema even as it exported its own sense of Mexicanness. During the World War II era, Mexican film provided the bulk of Spanish language

cinema in North and South America as production declined in Argentine and Mexico benefited from an increase in U.S. film stock. Even as European intellectuals and anthropologists sought the exotic other in Mexico's post-revolutionary politics and its indigenous ethos, Mexican arts capitalized on the induction of modernized European technologies and philosophies.

In the following section I will discuss how these tensions between modernity and localness in fact form part of the basis of early Mexican national cinema. Although Mexican cinema sort is rural ethos as the significant aspect to Mexican sensibilities, the cinema's nevertheless predicated itself on its modernizing tendencies. Mexican iconography was rural, yes, but it also was becoming modern that paralleled the modernizing aspects of the revolution. Just as Mexico shed the worst of its colonialist past, so to would it enter into a technological modernity, and make that modernity particularly Mexican.

#### **2.4 COSMOPOLITAN NATIONALISM: EXCESS AND MODERNITY IN *LA MUJER DEL PUERTO***

As Mexican cinema attempted to negotiate this complex web of social, cultural, and technological markers of an emerging modernity, Arcady Boytler's *La mujer del puerto* (*The Woman of the Port*, 1934) became renowned as the primary inaugural instance of Mexican national cinema. Carlos Monsiváis calls it "the first singular Mexican film" (quoted in Mora 38), and Andrea Noble cites the film's national reputation as the initiation of a Mexican national

cinema industry.<sup>19</sup> *La mujer del puerto*'s status as an iconic Mexican film is rather strange in and of itself; it lacks the regular and recognizable markers of *mexicanidad* such as the strong themes of indigenusness or images of revolution. Instead of the people's uprising or the iconic images of the ancient Mexican peoples, *La mujer del puerto* deals more explicitly with the perils of modernity and the camaraderie of national cosmopolitanism, a phenomenon that shows Mexico as national through its embracing the institutions of international modernity (trade, commerce, and technology). This initial categorization of this film as the emblematic Mexican film pose questions about generic impulses of its national cinema, in that its themes appears at odds with strong rural, revolutionary, and indigenus tendencies of other national filmmakers.

How did the Russian Boytler (given name Arcady Arcadievic Boylter Rososky) succeed at forming national imagery through a French short story of alienation and cosmopolitanism? The director was one of the early artists who immigrated to Latin America in the first half of the twentieth-century. He moved to Mexico in the 1930s and worked with Eisenstein's production team during their ill-fated Mexican excursion. However, he is not famous for his work with Eisenstein but is primarily known as the director of many significant Mexican comedies and genre pictures, including *Águila o sol* (*Heads or Tails*, 1938), the film that inaugurated the

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<sup>19</sup> Noble cites Boytler's interviews, as transcribed in De La Vega's monograph on Boytler: "I can see a great future [in Mexican cinema]. Each good film that comes out will be a great push forward; and it will also make us recognize the errors that we have made involuntarily" (32). Noble continues to elucidate Boytler's adoption of 'cosmopolitan modernity,' in *La mujer del puerto*, primarily through the internationalization of the films star Andrea Palma and the tragic, melodramatic ending.

comedic stylings of Mario Moreno, otherwise known as Cantinflas. Originally from Moscow, Boytler spent his early career honing his craft as a theater actor, mime, dance and vaudevillian performance. He left Moscow for Kiev in 1917, where he first met his wife, and when the revolution's turmoil reached Kiev, the two fled to Odessa and subsequently Berlin. While early accounts of the director's career are at best threadbare, some materials still exist from his early work: film stills and early reviews for his *Arcady against Chaplin* and *Arcady against Boredom* (approx. 1920) (de la Vega 20-1). He left Germany for the Western Hemisphere shortly thereafter.

Like other actors and directors, the emerging cultural space for young artists, theater directors, and cineastes drew Arcady and Lina Boytler to Latin America (de la Vega 22). In Santiago and Buenos Aires, the couple actively participated in stage and screen, most notably producing, directing and starring in stage reviews, plays, and films, including the director's first feature-length production, *El buscador de fortuna* (*The Fortune Hunter*, 1927), a comedy similar to his earlier shorts. The couple continued north, traversing Latin America by stage, actually skipping Mexico for New York, where the couple at first enacted their vaudevillian stage performance and also worked in Spanish language film production in both New York and Hollywood (de la Vega 26). While it is not clear when the couple arrived in Mexico, photographs place Arcady Boytler at the filming of Eisenstein's "Fiesta" and "Manguay." Boytler claims that he knew Eisenstein in Russia—highly unlikely since Eisenstein was still an engineering student when Boytler left for Ukraine—and that he reestablished contact in Hollywood. The two were in Hollywood at the same time and likely would have met; it is also possible that Boytler left the United States for Mexico in order to work alongside his compatriots (de la Vega 31). Clearly, however, the two were known to each other by the time Boytler arrived

in Mexico, and that he was an active participant in the production of *¡Que viva México!* Photographs from the production shoot show him behind the camera and he also appears as an extra in some of the film's footage.

While the mere coincidence of two Soviet nationals meeting in Mexico is not significant in and of itself, their engagement with Mexico's budding political and cinematic institutions speaks to the international fluidity of Mexico's cinema at the emergence of its industry, and the two directors' parallel projects of Mexican national identity underscore the successes and failures of its early national cinema. While the projects are radically different in scope and tone, Eisenstein's effect is clearly noticeable in Boytler's philosophies and aesthetics of filmmaking. Although Boytler's work often embodies Chaplin's comedic stylings and German Expressionism's dark moods and angular aesthetics, Eisenstein's emphasis on editing and even pro-filmic unity are quite clearly expressed in the director's early work—particularly in *La mujer del puerto*, which was produced soon after Eisenstein left Mexico and most closely embodies Eisenstein's philosophies of filmmaking. The film debuted a mere three years after Eisenstein left Mexico. Although significantly shorter and much less epic, the melodrama accomplished what *¡Que Viva México!* could not: it became Mexico's first "national" film. In addition, the film catapulted star Andrea Palma to fame and secured her place as Mexico's transnational star, and institutionalized the *cabaretera* as a national genre. The *cabaretera* (or cabaret) film is known for its song-and-dance numbers, its melodramatic tendencies, and its debauched urban atmosphere, all tropes that dominate this early instance of the genre. Regarded as one of the greatest classic films of Mexico's early studio production, the film was remade twice, first by Emilio Gómez Muriel in 1949 and most recently by Arturo Ripstein in 1991.



Based on Guy de Maupassant's short story, "Le Port," *La mujer del puerto* recounts the life of a young woman who turns to prostitution after her father dies. Rosario (the first starring role for Andrea Palma) is the daughter of an infirmed, humble coffin maker and the fiancée of her upstairs neighbor. A beautiful but naïve girl, she flees her small town after she discovers her fiancé's infidelity and inadvertently causes her sickly father's death. Time passes, and the film shows Rosario's turn to prostitution in the well-known international port town of Veracruz. Her routine existence of sex and ennui is broken by a recently arrived sailor named Alberto Venegas (Domingo Soler), who saves Rosario from a lecherous attack by another sailor. She then invites him to her rooms, and the two spend the night in growing emotional and sexual intimacy. Their tryst turns into tragedy, however, when the two realize that they are actually long estranged sister and brother. Horrified, Rosario finds her way to the rocks that ring the port, and throws herself into the waters. The film ends with Alberto finding the corpse among the waves.

The 1934 film, and the *cabaretera* genre that would emerge from its success, rests upon a subtle mediations of international modernity and Mexican national imagery. More precisely, it appropriates certain aspects of trans-continental cosmopolitanism as Mexican national identity. Certainly, the film employs the images of Mexican iconography in the service of its story. In particular, the icons of death—images that are part of the traditional Mexican imaginary—are woven through the film's earliest scenes. Rosario's father, who has become ill and is unable to work, had previously made his living as a carpenter for the town's local funeral home. In one of the film's earlier scenes, Rosario attempts to secure a loan from her father's boss. As she pleads for help she is surrounded by a plethora of identical, wood-carved coffins. In a later scene, her father's death and funeral coincide with the town's *mardi gras* festivities. The parade and town is filled with the universal *mardi gras* puppets and decorations and the liveliness of carnival. Life

and death literally collide during Don Antonio's funeral process when the horse-driven coffin crashes into the parade's costumed revelers. Initially, the partiers pay no attention to Rosario's anguished cries, until one tells the others to stop, as it is "the funeral for Don Antonio—the *carpenter*" (emphasis mine).<sup>20</sup> Of course, Don Antonio was a carpenter—a maker of coffins for the local funeral home. The announcement of his profession, however, turns him from a carpenter to *the carpenter*—and the funeral procession into the march toward Calvary. We see the faces of the parade as each strip off a grotesque mask to reveal the mourner underneath. Slowly, the parade turns funereal as they follow the coffin toward the cemetery. The turn from *mardi gras* to funeral parade mimics Eisenstein's final epilogue. This section illustrates the interconnected circle of life and death, thus the latter film illustrates the earlier film's theme. As *¡Que Viva México!* uses the chapter form to connect the passions and ecstasies of life to the inconsolable pain of death, the collision of passion and desolation in *La mujer del puerto* resurrect a similar circularity of existence.

However, the film more explicitly illustrates Mexico's emerging modernity. The film's entire second half occurs in a night-club in the urban shipping town of Veracruz, and the assembly of Mexican, European, and North and South American peoples emphasize the film's international make-up. Of course, an interest in broad cosmopolitanism (both European and Latin American cosmopolitanism) was characteristic of Latin America's small elites for hundreds of years.<sup>21</sup> For example, the aforementioned nineteenth century Mexican Positivism is a clear example of the adoption of European philosophy, as is concurrent interests in Vitalism. But

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<sup>20</sup> "Es el entierro de Don Antonio--el carpintero."

<sup>21</sup> Martin 4.

Mexico's twentieth-century, post-revolutionary cosmopolitanism is distinct from earlier models, in part because the nascent state was attempting to show itself as poised on the cusp of modernity and the cutting edge of the project of development and civilization. No longer content to follow European or U.S.-American models, Mexico instead attempted to assume the mantle of the world's future. Andrea Noble, citing Aurelio de los Reyes, calls this confluence of regional allegiance and aspirations for international status at play in *La mujer del puerto* "cosmopolitan nationalism." Here, "modernity and nationalism converge in Boytler's film, which, as a cultural product, is involved in the manufacture of a national image that is intended for both internal and external consumption that bespeaks Mexico's status on the cutting edge of the 'civilising horizon'..."(Noble 32). As Noble explains, this cosmopolitan nationalism is not an attempted imitation of Europe but instead a cinematic projection of a new, unique Latin American modernity, which would enfold international cosmopolitanism into its post-revolutionary ethos.

In the film's milieu, the thriving international port is the center of colliding cosmopolitanisms and heterogeneous nationalisms. Maupassant's short story takes place in Marseilles, but the film shifts the narrative to the city of Veracruz, a significant port on Mexico's Atlantic side. Historically, the colonial city had been the launching point for the steady flow of raw materials to Spain and, during the years of the republic, remained the country's center of international shipping. The city's financial success depended on its lucrative ports, so much so that the city was often called the *puerto de Veracruz* to distinguish it from the eponymous larger state. The city has had a long and complex history as a strategic military site primarily because of its location as Mexico's primary water route to both the United States and Europe. In fact, the United States occupied the port twice, once during the U.S.-Mexican war and again during the revolution, a mere fifteen years before the film's production. It is this Veracruz—which is

dominated by flows of commerce and bodies—that becomes the locus of modernity in *La mujer del puerto*.

The port, in both film and literature, has long provided a milieu for international commerce and trade. In eighteenth and nineteenth century literature, the port has been the locus of capitalism in all its forms, particular signifying the expansion of European trade through colonialism and slavery. In Jane Austen's novels they are the locations through which British Empire expands itself, while in Joseph Conrad's works they are borders between colonial civilization and savagery. In early cinema, however, they are a location of contemporary technology, travel, and the moment of peoples through immigration and commerce. Early films showed tourist landing on the ports of Italy and fishing vessels coming into harbor.<sup>22</sup> And, like the train, the ship brings cinema to peripheral continents and countries such as Mexico. Of course, *Battleship Potempkin* (1925) brought the revolution to the port and located the desire for freedom from tyranny deeply within its milieu, while early narrative films such as Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919) establishes the port as the place which fosters intellectual exchange and the human spirit.

In *La mujer del puerto*, this international locale—in which transients look to spend their nights in debauchery before returning to their various trade routes—proves to be an appropriate place for the now disgraced Rosario to settle and work. The endless ships provide a constant stream of customers for her, and the fluid nature of shipping guarantees their anonymity. Instead of beginning the film's second half with Rosario's entrance into this world, however, and therefore accentuating the depths to which she has fallen, the film undertakes a lengthy montage

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<sup>22</sup> *Tourists Landing at Island of Capri* (1903), for example.

of the sailors' appearance at the port city. The scene depicts their joy upon arrival, elucidated through the din of sea shanties and the murmur of numerous languages that vocalize their anticipation of the upcoming evening's activities. In this particularly lengthy montage, the film shows the camaraderie among sailors from places as diverse as France, the United States, and Argentina. Although they trace their origins to different countries, these sailors are not foreign to each other. Instead, they are shown as integral parts of a larger community of workers and significantly aligned with the equally marginal bartenders and cabaret women who entertain them.

In this crucial opening to the film's second half, the scene begins with a fade in announcing the section's international nature: a Honduran flag mounted upon a ship named *Tegucigalpa*. The ship is still off-shore, but only a few days trip from Mexico and Veracruz. As two sailors stand on the deck, perhaps scouring the horizon for land, they discuss the possibilities of returning to their native homelands. While the Mexican sailor says that it has been too long to remember home, the Argentinean fears that he will never return but acknowledges it to be a sailor's life. Both express the idea that their real home now exists only in mobility and transience. The film then shows the day-to-day, working existence of a sailor: the crew members work, sing, and engage in their various maritime duties. Shots of the expansive, endless ocean are juxtaposed against images of the workers steering, manipulating the engines, and shifting supplies. That is, until one of the sailors spots Veracruz, the end of a long journey and the possibilities of on-shore entertainment. We glimpse Veracruz through the perspective of the captain and the arriving ship; it shows the lighthouse, the city's seemingly endless jetties, and the various other ships with names displaying their countries of origin. The images of the ship's long docking process evoke the smog, dirt, and detritus of modern urban space. The beauty and

brutality of modernity are displayed in the power and mobility, as well as amidst the rot and decay, of those very piers which shelter progress and its vices.

Clearly, the men hail from international waters. They speak many languages, including English, French, Russian, German, and Spanish with varying national accents. The camera lingers on a discussion between our Mexican sailor and a U.S.-American friend that he encounters; likewise, the sailors sing competing national anthems, including a drunken rendition of “La Marseillaise” by an elderly Frenchman, although it is equally significant that he sings it under a ship called the *México*. The sailors’ multiple nationalities effectively illustrate Veracruz’s position as the cosmopolitan milieu, and literalize the significance of a modern vernacular. If we understand that, in this film, Veracruz becomes a microcosm of the imagined national milieu, then the port-and by extension Mexico—is a place where all of these various languages and peoples can thrive through a commonality of idiom and song. Far from limiting the workers’ bond, the national ethos is the imaginary location of international workers’ solidarity.

Although these men are from disparate and often antagonistic nation-states, they are brought together by their very foreignness in a place where the alien, the exile, and the nomad are understood and considered the norm. Their fraternal singing and friendly jokes indicates the brotherhood that exists within the anonymity of transience. The film’s extended montage of a life and home at sea extends to encapsulate the transient nature of Veracruz’s many workers, including those working women who have arrived from all over Mexico. On the shore, two working women discuss their boredom; the film juxtaposes these figures to the group of sailors ready for their shore leave. Like the men, these women are transients, rootless and mobile. As the men meet the two smoking, chatting women, the film further links all of these workers together

as being harnessed together in same economic yoke. The workers' concerns—their desires, needs, and wants—transcend artificial national borders, and the connections between these workers are augmented by the positions of exile from their countries of origin. The workers' camaraderie, and the parallels drawn between sailor and prostitute, simultaneously illustrates the alienation of modern capital economies and position of relative equality between working men and women.

*La mujer del puerto*'s expressions of international brotherhood—its extended display of the joys and pains of the modern worker—in fact revives the modernist unity that Eisenstein attempted in the early chapters of *¡Que Viva México!* In doing so, the later film calls to mind the earlier text's use of photography as the mechanism through which the nature of man can be discovered. *La mujer del puerto* evokes the larger social collective through the port-town's most down-and-out denizens, similar to Eisenstein's scenes of nameless figures (*Battleship Potemkin*, for example, or *Strike*[1925]) or depictions of the anonymous human as uniquely connected to his ancient brothers (*¡Que Viva México!*). And, like his countryman's earlier films, Boytler's film adopts this particularly modernist use of the photographic image. This kind of image-making, as described in Walter Benjamin's "Little History of Photography," enfolds the (anonymous) human entity into the collective. Twentieth century photography's great democratic potential, according to Benjamin, resided in its ability to penetrate human social history. The essay examines the relationship between this emerging technology and social class, beginning with the early portraits of the bourgeois subject in the mid-nineteenth century through to its radical reformulations fifty years later. Early photography is indelibly linked to temporality, in that nineteenth-century portraiture firmly connects the unique human subject and to its technological "aura." The "aura"—the darkness created by early photography's lengthy exposure

to light—indelibly solidified the portrait’s subjects to their domestic milieu. Early photography’s exposure times lasted minutes, so each portrait was physically marked by the subject’s infinitesimal shifts in space. These “auras” reconcile the bourgeois subject to his or her domestic milieu—we see him in his own time and corresponding intimate sphere. With increased shutter speeds, however, the aura is banished, much as the aura of the bourgeois subject “was banished from reality by the deepening degeneration of the imperialist bourgeoisie” (517).

Technological shifts and shifts in subject matter and composition eliminated the era of bourgeois photography as auratic portrait, but photography remained a staple within the bourgeois economy. Even as nineteenth-century portraiture vanished, professional photography exploded via the introduction of fashion, commercial, and art photography to twentieth century economies. Benjamin contrasts this contemporary “arty journalism” (526)—or de-contextualized photographs that bring together two incongruous elements for the sake of style—with empty surrealist cityscapes or the observational, topical photographic studies of August Sander. These political photographs, he argues, are markedly distinct from fashion photography. The surreal photographs empty the world of subjects, while Sander’s studies of various workers show the unified countenance of class through a series of anonymous faces. In both, photography becomes a collective creation. By replacing the unique, individual entity with the human collectivity in relation to class or to the empty urban space, photography unleashed its connections between new, quicker technologies and the modern era in which it now exists. Benjamin heralds Russian filmmakers such as Eisenstein and Pudovkin, who affirm this categorical nature of modern photography and scatter their films with those anonymous faces that “had no use for their photographs” (519) or, more specifically, were not the *portraits* that



dominated the mid-nineteenth century. Like the other filmmakers, Boytler's photographed peoples are anonymous citizens, except of course for Palma herself.

These non-portraits are the indigenous faces of the new republic at play in the prologue of *¡Que Viva México!*; as I noted before, these faces show both pre-history and contemporary post-revolutionary society—indigenous, Mexican, in the case of the contemporary, becoming modern. In *La mujer del puerto*, the anonymous countenance is folded directly into a linear narrative. These images are most prevalent during the early scenes at the Salon Nicanor, a run down dance hall near the ports. The initial dance hall/song sequences in fact enact several complex gestures simultaneously, clearly indicating the paradoxical nature of national cinema production. The film's initial bordello sequence shows the anonymous faces of Veracruz's prostitutes and their clients, while only later does it mold Andrea Palma in the role of international film star. The film's first "adult" images of Rosario show her smoking in the streetlight, slouching in an abandoned doorway, a sharp contrast to her earlier naïve appearance. Her posture and position call to mind not Mexico's actresses but Hollywood's most infamous seductress, Marlene Dietrich, a parallel that Palma claimed was intentional (Noble 36-7). This imagery places the film squarely within cinema's international circulation of stars and aesthetics. The earlier and later sequences, however, cement the film not in Hollywood's enchantments but working man's—and working woman's—less glamorous pleasures.

The ragtag group of sailors from the *Tegucigalpa* and their French, German, and American friends stumble to the Salon Nicanor for drinks and other entertainments, led by the Argentine and the Mexican protagonist Alberto, who know the bar's owner. As the group enters the bar, the film shifts to the song and dance sequences, in which the locals show off their skills. First, one of the women performs a dance with a partner, and then two sailors play instruments in

an impromptu concert. These scenes cement the musical quality of the genre, although later films will have more elaborate, expensive and star-studded musical numbers. During and after the musical performance, the camera shows a series of looks between the local women and the recently arrived sailors. The film cuts between them, using the coupling of shots to show the burgeoning desires between the two groups. Simultaneously, it explores the idea of the anonymous countenance of class—the projects of Eisenstein and August Sander. The film cuts between nameless men and women in pursuit of sex, entertainment, and commerce, but in doing so solidifies the categories of class through the faces of multiple races, ethnicities, and nationalities. In other words, this categorical faciality denotes the sameness of workers in this fluid and modern world. It is not only possible for photographic technology to capture such a phenomenon; it is the film's primary occupation—to use its mechanics to show the breadth of anonymous faces.

This photographic predisposition is emphasized by the film's press previous to the film's release, which notes that these faces are not only actors but the faces of the women who live in Veracruz and work these very jobs on the same docks now serving as the film's setting:

The director Boytler, who wanted to inject a shade of realism into the his film, hired all of the port's courtesans and, even though the docks were filled with steamers and tourists, the nightclubs were left empty, because the [prostitutes] had been leaving to film instead of amusing the travelers from distant lands. In *La mujer del puerto*, it was peculiar to see a group of courtesans, assembled with the stars and the extras who came from the capital, posing before the camera and perfectly reciting their 'lines'—stylized in cinema jargon". (quoted in de la Vega 51).

The magazine calls the insertion of non-actors a gesture of realism (*realismo*), but the article also points to the use of technological modernity in establishing the countenance of Mexico's new republic. First, this article illustrates the induction of film as an intervention into modern life. The article cites those new aspects of modernity—steamships, tourists, and nightclubs—but notes that women are thrilled by a newer technology: the film camera. Simultaneously, the film uses technology to perceive the similarities and beauties of Mexico's unified and modernizing working classes. Although the project is expressed in a radically different manner than Eisenstein's "Prologo," it nonetheless continues the attempt to express an explicit national identity through the collective identities possible in modern photography. In *La mujer del puerto*, the film uses the face as an expression of genuine and authentic national identity, only here Boytler brings together the local countenance with a modern one.

Of course, the sailors in this interchange were not born in Mexico; they are primarily from other countries. But at this moment their faces, when juxtaposed against those of the Mexican women, nonetheless call up that "cosmopolitan nationalism" to which de los Reyes refers. The characters' multi-national backgrounds are in fact necessary for establishing the film's very *Mexicanness*. The film's *mexicanidad* is centered within its location as a new site of international cosmopolitanism. Here is that paradoxical national identity that is both uniquely Mexican and also explicitly international: the phenomenon of emerging Mexico is cemented through international modernity (cinema) and economic multi-nationalism. In fact, the camera give accessibility to the nation—the ability to construct it as such—through this international modernity. Benjamin's interest in photography as collector of physiognomic truth is particularly related to class—to a democratization of the image via international modernity.

The film's national and international success illustrates that Mexico's national imagery was not distinct from European modernity and modernism but predicated upon a negotiation of national and international elements during the early part of the twentieth century. The film's reputation as iconic, early Mexican cinema continues as to the nascent film industry's embodiment of national identity, in terms of production, publishing, aesthetics, tropes, and styles.

## 2.5 CONCLUSION

While incomplete films such as *¡Que Viva México!* exemplify the inconsistencies at work in a national film project, *La mujer del puerto*—finished and successful—provides not an antithetical but complementary example of the paradoxes of national cinema. Eisenstein and Boytler both attempt to construct a unique national identity, and those identities both draw extensively from Mexican iconography and modernizing and modernist notions of the nation-state. On the one hand, Eisenstein's grand narrative is unconstructable. On the other, Boytler's film lays the groundwork for "national" genres—the brothel, the music, the focus on the woman, the isolation, the plight of the worker here and emphasis on melodrama. However, even as Boytler's film displays certain traits that become emblematic of Mexico's national cinema, it nonetheless displays the aesthetic and politics of international modernism from which it draws. I have examined the *La mujer del puerto*'s relative successes as an innovator of Mexico's national cinema and the comparative failure of *¡Que Viva México!* as a finished piece not to explain a particular model of what national cinema *should* look like, nor am I claiming that Boytler's expression of national film is somehow more coherent, workable, or authentic than Eisenstein's

earlier blueprint. Instead, the two films simultaneously illustrate gestures the significance of international modernism to the formation of a national cinematic imaginary, regardless of their varying degrees of success.

Significantly, a national cinematic iconography is not created as an antithesis to international modernism but as a continuation of it. Mexico's early construction of national cinema was a complex and often paradoxical financial and institutional project, created through national interests but maturing through the vehicle of early twentieth-century modernism and the techniques of multi-national cinema. As *La mujer del puerto* shows, contemporary notions of cosmopolitanism and class unity fit well with Mexico's particular national *mestizaje*. Mexico's burgeoning nation-state, although unique in that it was the first populist state in Latin America, nonetheless was predicated on cosmopolitan notions of modernity. Mexico's cinema could be an indigenous, hyper-modern, and popularly-socialist simultaneously.

Although indisputably linked, this early "cosmopolitan nationalism" is in fact far different from later, transnational elements of Mexican cinema that will arise after the end of Golden Age cinema. The transnational filmmaking practices that emerged later, I will argue in the subsequent chapters, did not use modernity to celebrate the cohesion of nation-state but instead to question its supremacy. *La mujer del puerto* emphasizes the place of the international milieu in the formation of national identity; later film projects destabilize such a notion. In doing so, they deemphasize the role of cosmopolitanism in the modern nation-state and instead augment the role of transnational variation in the fragmentation of national identity.

### 3.0 LUIS BUÑUEL'S SPANISH TINGE: ALLEGORY AND CRUELTY IN TRANSNATIONAL CINEMA

#### 3.1 EXILE IN MEXICO

Mexico's transnational filmmaking is intrinsically linked to its relaxed immigration policy for European exiles and war refugees; the country was particularly hospitable to Spanish expatriates who fled the Civil War and the Franco regime for the more socialist new republic. Beginning in the 1930s, Mexico became a haven for political exiles and the country welcomed them in large numbers for decades. In 1938, Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40) declared that he would grant as many as sixty thousand Spanish refugees amnesty in Mexico.<sup>23</sup> He was referring specifically to the many republicans and leftist sympathizers fleeing from Franco's nationalist forces during the height of the Spanish Civil War and the emerging autocratic state, using this gesture to cement his political position both at home and abroad. Although Cárdenas was certainly dedicated to the republicans and saw them as ideological allies, this event was also a result of very pragmatic decision making that helped fortify the political position of the PNR (Partido Nacional Revolucionario, later to become the dominant PRI).

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<sup>23</sup> For more information on the specific numbers of exiles and the various decrees by the Cárdenas regime, see Faber *Exile*, 16-20.

The Spanish Civil War began while the Mexican Republic was still fairly new. Consequently, the Cárdenas government still feared a military intervention from the United States, despite assurances from the Roosevelt administration that it would tolerate Mexico's emerging democracy. Cárdenas and his advisors reasoned that a public declaration of support for the Spanish republicans would demonstrate a consistent administrative policy promoting national self-determination, both in Latin America and elsewhere (Powell 60). At the same time, the new refugee policy bolstered relations between the left-leaning, dominant PNR and communist syndicates such as the PCM (Partido Comunista Mexicano), an agitating force that threatened the leftist support of the ruling party (Faber 13-14).

These exiles enriched the cultural and intellectual landscape of Mexico. The first waves of émigrés included children, political exiles and intellectual refugees, including famous intellectuals and artists such as eminent philosopher José Gaos, writer Max Aub, and surrealist painter Remedios Varo. By embracing Spain's war weary republicans and leftists, Mexico's academic institutions inherited much of Spain's artistic and literary community. Spanish intellectuals quickly entered into a wide range of Mexican cultural and political institutions, including the universities and arts. The leftist political leanings of the émigrés and the newly emerging Mexican republic led to symbiotic intellectual relations between Spanish and Mexicans. For example, Gaos began courses that radically shifted the philosophical landscape toward existentialism and taught students who would become Mexico's preeminent public intellectuals, including Octavio Paz (Fagan 64). The Spanish intellectual institutions *en abstancia* benefitted the left-leaning Cárdenas government and were generally supported by the regime. For example, the regime wholly supported the creation of La Casa de España, an educational institution founded in 1938 by Mexican diplomat and political theorist Daniel Cosío Villegas. In

the next two years, La Casa de España—eventually to become the prestigious El Colegio de México—housed a group of Spanish intellectuals who wrote over forty books, gave two hundred courses, and employed the first full-time academics ever in Mexico (Faber 17-18). Spanish republicans played a dominant role in Mexican intellectual life, from the late 1930s until Franco’s death in 1975, and arguably until the present day.

This milieu proved a fertile climate for these writers, artists, and intellectuals to continue their work, although the circumstances radically diverged from life in Spain. The shared culture proved both a boon and a detractor for these exiles. They spoke the same language and had a similar intellectual lineage, but Mexico was still incredibly foreign and its population steeped in both European and indigenous traditions: “For the Spaniards, Mexico was both strangely familiar and ungraspably distant... And since [the Spanish] had been raised with, and never really doubted, the idea that imperial Spain had ‘civilized’ its colonies, they had a hard time accepting the prominence given to Mexico’s indigenous heritage in the nationalistic discourse of the revolutionary regime” (Faber 221). They were also more likely to be suspicious of Mexico’s emerging nationalism. Being strangers, they were in a unique position to see the stark differences between rhetorical allegiances to Mexico’s indigenous history and the radical class divisions and relative poverty in which indigenous populations lived. Sebastiaan Faber, for example, writes about the work of several Andalusians writing in Mexican exile. He claims that these poets write from a place of contradiction; they are bound by their political allegiances to Spain’s republic even as they negotiate their own role in Mexico as perpetual foreigners. Although most claimed that Mexico’s conservative centrality was not the same as Franco’s authoritarian regime, there were nonetheless tensions that became exaggerated as republicans understood that they could most likely never retake power in Spain. And, the shift from the Cárdenas regime to the more



conservative Ávila Camacho regime brought more conservative policies that the Spanish exiles often distrusted. They watched Mexico's increasing conservatism during the 1940s and 50s from this position of voyeur, in certain ways able to comment on the politics of their host country and other ways always marginalized (Faber 222).

It is from this position as exile and outsider that I would like to begin an examination of Luis Buñuel's films. Buñuel, a Spanish émigré during the civil war era, is also arguably known as one of Mexico's greatest filmmakers, despite his European origins. Buñuel's position in Mexico is somewhat different from other Spanish intellectuals; while others flocked to university settings or academia, Buñuel was welcomed into the film industry, which did not rigorously keep foreigners from holding top creative or industrial positions. He also eventually became a citizen, making his sojourn in Mexico permanent. He worked extensively with Mexicans and exiles, including filmmakers Luis Alcoriza and Arturo Ripstein, and Mexican filmmakers continue half a century later to laud his influence over Mexico's filmmaking culture. In discussing the image of a rooster from his *El espinazo del diablo* (2000), Guillermo del Toro claims that "After Buñuel a chicken is never just a chicken" (DVD extras). In this instance, del Toro points to the pervasive influence of Buñuel's *Los olvidados* (1950) on two generations of Mexican filmmakers.

But Buñuel always claimed an ambivalent, highly ambiguous relationship with Mexico. In his autobiography, the thirty-seven years he spent working in Mexico is shortened to a few pages, almost an aberration from his larger career. His position as transient outsider likewise significantly affects equally his art pieces and his regionally-themed works. *Los olvidados*, his famous depiction of inner-city Mexico, owes much of its style to the picaresque genre and, as Andre Bazin notes, Spanish painting. In this chapter, I explore these difficult negotiations among

Buñuel's various national and regional styles and his incorporation of European aesthetic strategies.

I examine how Buñuel's transnational aesthetics highlight the director's incorporation of material events, specificities, and histories into his highly non-realist, often allegorical cinematic forms. In doing so, I argue that these aesthetics engender his particular filmic politics. This argument begins by examining the diversity of his work and of criticism concerning his texts; as a body, Buñuel's work defies categorization. His early *Un chien andalou* (1929) and *L'age d'or* (1931) are perhaps best described as experiential and surrealist work, as they show the way that pre-history returns in the modern era. Works such as *Los olvidados* and *Subida el cielo* (*Mexican Bus Ride* 1951) are mired in the local and are considered expressions of naturalism, while other Mexican, French, and Spanish works explore the institutions of Christianity and capitalism. Buñuel's films appear equally driven by chance and fate, by real events and artistic genres, and by the cruelty of the material world and the parables of the religious imagination.

I examine the appropriation of two particular strategies, naturalism and allegory, which serve to enjoin material event of the present together with myths and parables of the past. These strategies, I argue, characterize his later Mexican works, and illustrate his ability to bring together the particulars of Mexican society with his transnational concerns of fascism and authoritarianism. *Nazarín* and *Simón del desierto* show this dual incorporation of transnational filmmaking practices and Mexican material events. *Nazarín's* varying milieus and its use of cruelty and allegory directly engage with Mexico's institutional national identity. Although *Simón del desierto* does not concern Mexico explicitly (in terms of its milieu), its allegory nonetheless revisits *Nazarín's* struggles with authority, institutions, and the position of exile and power.

### 3.2 EUROPEAN AVANT-GARDE AND MEXICAN GENRE FILM: BUÑUEL'S HETEROGENEOUS OEUVRE

I would like to briefly turn to scholarship concerning the director's body of work, particularly the writings about his Mexican films. Buñuel scholarship has examined his films through either the lens of the European avant-garde or through his relationship to Mexico. It creates a split between the director as artist, and director as part of the mechanics of national cinema, and often has difficulty connecting those two Buñuels. I will touch on the connections between national specificities and larger artistic concerns particular as Buñuel shifted from the Mexican studio system to France and Spain. Buñuel made over half of his films in Mexico; some, such as *Los olvidados* and *El* (1953) were heralded by critics as genius, while others such as *Abismos de pasión* were quickly forgotten. He never permanently returned to Spain (although he made several films there in the 60s and 70s), but traveled between Mexico, Spain, and France until his death in 1983.

Until recently, most Buñuel scholarship focused primarily on his early surrealist films and his post-1960s French and Spanish work such as *Belle de Jour* (1967) and *Le Charme Descret de la Bourgeoisie* (1972), ignoring the Mexican genre films. The varied and abundant essays, books, journals, and films dedicated to Buñuel's work appeared even before *Un chien andalou* screened in 1929 and remained strong well into the late 1970s. The past decade, however, has produced several new books and many published articles reevaluating his work, specifically the films of his Mexican era. In addition, the newer scholarship has focused less on the idea of Buñuel as auteur to examine Buñuel's films as complex products of political ideas, historical events, and economic and cinematic battles with studio bureaucracies and distinct political regimes.

In the introduction to their anthology *Luis Buñuel: New Readings* (2004), Peter Williams Evans and Isabel Santaolalla note that it is necessary twenty years after his death, “to take a fresh look at Buñuel’s films and career, attending as much to form as to content, to archival, unpublished materials as well as to recent critical theory” and to “examine specific works in the light of current critical and theoretical debates” (6). In addition to formal analyses, contemporary scholarship has refocused on the relations between director, studio, and the corresponding political milieus. After his death, Buñuel’s “lesser films” have gained a certain currency, in part because these films shed light on the relations between one of Europe’s genius filmmakers and a considerable if often ignored national studio system. Similar to Evans and Santaolalla, Ernesto R. Acevedo-Muñoz’s *Buñuel and Mexico: the Crisis of National Cinema* (2003) attempts to place Buñuel’s Mexican films squarely within the context of Mexico through what he calls a “crisis of [Mexican] national cinema” (8). Acevedo-Muñoz argues that Buñuel’s films are articulations of the increasing disconnection between Mexico’s genre films and its radically modernizing populations. Acevedo-Muñoz re-imagines Buñuel’s less critically acclaimed films—for example his earlier Mexican pieces such as *Susana* (1951)—as metaphors of the cultural and economic changes of the 1950s that render Mexican generic conventions of filmmaking archaic: “Buñuel’s *Susana* is a parodic regression to the rural settings of the old revolutionary melodramas...it shows both the deceptive nature of Porfirian morals and the clashes between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ Mexico of the 1950s” (93). Consequently, according to Acevedo-Muñoz’s analysis, Buñuel’s significance is located within the history of Mexican cinema, not as a marginal, foreign artist but as a commentator on the norms of classical cinema that were slowly being displaced.

The significance of these newer texts lies in their investigations of the popular and genre films of Buñuel’s body of work, not only in relation to Mexico’s larger relationship with

modernity but also to his artistic sensibilities. In other words, they attempt to see his Mexican films not as aberrations but as part of his filmmaking practice. If his Mexican films emerge from his earlier avant-garde philosophies, it is also possible to look at his European pieces as equally invested in their historical milieus and political realities. Julie Jones, J. Francisco Aranda, and many other likeminded critics, scholars, and writers claim that even Buñuel's most esoteric, playful and absurd works are grounded in very particular instances of material reality (Jones 20).

These divergent readings may reflect differences between generations of scholars but also point to the eclectic nature of Buñuel's own work. Although his films are often suffused with similar (anti-clerical, anti-bourgeois) themes, the multifarious nature of their presentations has appealed to a myriad of scholarly practices, from psychoanalysis to historicism to formalism. These diversities may also be understood as a product of Buñuel's incredibly mobile career, his position as a perpetual exile, and his ability to engage with multiple film industries, audiences, languages and cultural milieus. While several of his films produced in Mexico seemed to be small pictures made for local distribution (*El gran calavera* (1949), *Susana*), others appeared unwatchable to popular audiences, not only in different languages but with European, Mexican, and North American cast members. For example, *La mort en ce jardin* (*Death in the Garden* 1956) was filmed in Mexico with a Mexican crew but in French and with a French and Mexican cast. *The Young One* (1960)—one of his two English language films—has an American cast and is filmed on a Mexican location but outside of the studios' reach. The film explores the vestiges of slavery in the U.S.-American South and appears far more concerned with North American racism than Mexican iconography and nationalism. Films such as these are clear examples of the difficulty of ascribing a national face to the entire body of Buñuel's Mexican works. Even politics determines nation in Buñuel's works. *Viridiana* (1961) was produced in Spain at the

request of Spanish filmmakers. However, the Franco regime's total rejection of the film forced it to *become* Mexican in order for it to be distributed in Europe and elsewhere (Edwards 144).

Topic and tradition seems far more indicative of national interest than cast or crew; few would argue against the importance of the Mexican nation to the narrative of *Los olvidados*. Likewise, films such as *El gran calavera* and *El bruto* (1953) are clearly made in the model of the Mexican studio picture and therefore firmly entrenched within the confines of that particular institution; *La mort en ce jardin* and *The Young One* draw from other national histories and cinematic traditions. His later Mexican works—those made either directly before he returned to European filmmaking or even as he was also directing in Europe—were often made with international casts and a more avant-garde style. *Simón del desierto* (1965) travels from Mexico to New York, and *El ángel exterminador* (1962), while critical of bourgeois Mexico, also clearly resembles the later *Le charme descret de la bourgeoisie*. These latter works are often considered more “European” than “Mexican.” For example, Acevedo-Muñoz stops short of thoroughly discussing films like *Nazarín* (1958), as he sees this film to be placed firmly in the avant-garde co-productions dominant in the latter half of the twentieth century, and the film's nineteenth century milieu limits its indictment of contemporary political shifts. My argument attempts to intervene in this moment, between “Mexican” and “not Mexican” works, which I claim needs to be more complexly understood as a consistent play between a variety of different aesthetic concerns and local interests. Buñuel's later Mexican films are positioned among several distinct phenomena: the particularities of Mexican studios and decline of the studio system, the politics of Mexico's “institutional revolution,” and, indeed, even Buñuel's increasing interests in European cinema and avant-garde aesthetics. Indeed, these films were produced at a crossroads:

Buñuel, who had become a Mexican citizen years before, was on the brink of re-entering French and Spanish cinema.

### 3.3 *LOS OLVIDADOS*: BUÑUEL'S EXILIC FILMMAKING

I would like to briefly examine Buñuel's *Los olvidados* before turning to the later films, *Nazarín* and *Simón del desierto*. This film is significant because it marks Buñuel's reentrance to the international stage, but it also illustrates the pervasiveness of Buñuel's Spanish gestures in his Mexican cinema. Buñuel directed films in Mexico before his infamous and monumental *Los olvidados*, two genre pictures, *Gran Casino* (1947) and *El gran calavera*, but the brutal examination of Mexico's street children secured the filmmaker's prominence and financial stability in Mexico. *Los olvidados* follows a gang of street children around the shantytowns of Mexico City as they attempt to avoid starvation and carve out lives for themselves. More specifically, the film follows the magnetic, powerful and cruel Jaibo—who has just been released from incarceration—and his younger and weaker friend Pedro. After Jaibo kills a boy who betrayed him to the police and steals from Pedro's place of employment, Pedro's loyalty to Jaibo falters. Accused of the theft, Pedro is placed in a reform school, and appears interested in redemption. Jaibo engineers Pedro's failure, yet again, ensuring that Pedro cannot leave his life as a street child. In a violent altercation at the end of the film, Jaibo kills Pedro, and neighbors dump Pedro's body in a massive refuse heap.

As Buñuel himself notes in his autobiography, its initial Mexican reception was quite disastrous and the original Mexican run only lasted two weeks (Buñuel 237). Mexican viewers typically found the film disturbing to the point of repulsion, in part because of its depiction of the

middle classes and social welfare systems as inherently flawed and its portrayal of the Mexican mother as unsympathetic (Foster 8). Nevertheless, the Mexican film industry's reception grew increasingly warmer in response to the lavish international praise and a "best director" award conferred on Buñuel at the 1951 Cannes festival. Despite Mexico's relatively large film production during and directly after the Second World War, Cannes had not showcased a Mexican work since Emilio Fernández's *María Candelaria* in 1946. Whatever the opinion of his work, Buñuel's award was a boon to the Mexican industry—which by 1951 was already beginning to show signs of age. Buñuel's newly won position in the director's union (STMPC) and his ability to move between studio work and several more independent productions likewise gave him more creative control over his subsequent productions.

From the outset, the myriad of international criticism linked *Los olvidados* to his earlier European works. In particular, the film's initial European reception consistently alluded to two earlier films: *Las Hurdes (Land without Bread, 1931)* and (to a lesser extent) *L'age d'or (The Golden Age, 1929)*. The topical associations between *Las Hurdes* and *Los olvidados* are noticeable even from a cursory glance at both films. *Las Hurdes* is best understood as an avant-garde, pseudo-documentary in which an ethnographic film crew creates a disturbing film about a poor, mountainous region in Spain. It also deprecates and insults the Hurdanos, the destitute population that lives there. The film never explicitly shows its fictive, satirical hand. Nevertheless, through subtle camera movements and a cruel and an ironic voice-over narration, the film undercuts the self-importance of documentary and casts doubt on its potential truth claims. Shot at the moment when burgeoning fascism was overtaking Europe, it is neither a leftist polemic nor right-leaning justification of nationalism. As James Lastra argues, "By minimizing leftist critique, [Buñuel] shames us and prevents us from blaming [the Hurdanos],



but by dehumanizing them he prevents an easy, liberal empathy, too” (209). Through the radical equivocation of the Hurdanos and the larger Spanish body, the film mimics nationalist xenophobia in order to overcome it. The film engages with Spain’s unique nationalist history even as it reconstitutes truth in cinema, and, simultaneously, lays bare the emerging anti-Semitism in an increasingly fascist Europe.

*Los olvidados* parallels the earlier film both conceptually and stylistically. Although constructed in a more narrative fashion, the film likewise plays with the cinematic eye as it follows the day-to-day life of Jaime, Pedro, and their indigent neighbors. And like the earlier film, *Los olvidados* similarly critiques projects which rather naively attempt to examine, diagnose, and thereby “help” the poor. Upon reviewing the film’s premiere at Cannes, André Bazin, in his short essay “Love and Cruelty in *Los olvidados*,” reflects on the continuities between the Mexican film and Buñuel’s older European works. Although Buñuel had disappeared from the international realm of film production, *Los olvidados* still exhibited the same social and political critiques present in his earlier work. Bazin writes that “eighteen years later and 5,000 kilometres away, it is still the same, the inimitable Buñuel, a message which remains faithful to *L’age d’or* and *Las Hurdes*, a film which lashes the mind like a red hot iron and leaves one’s conscience no opportunity for rest” (208). In praising Buñuel’s new film, Bazin establishes an interrelationship between the later work and these early pieces. The sameness Bazin cites lies in the cruelty at play in both *Las Hurdes* and *Los olvidados*. In both films “the cruelty is not Buñuel’s; he restricts himself to revealing it in the world” (211).

In this instance, the “cruelty” is a hyperrealist examination of a particular milieu without the provision of sympathy from the filmic image. Similar to Antonin Artaud’s “Theater of Cruelty,” the weight of suffering is passed through the image to the audience without being

softened or mitigated by compassion, by violently awaking the consciousness of the spectator. The depictions of Mexico City's impoverished children and the subjection of the Hurdanos are similar expressions of explicit unmooring of the spectator. Like *Las Hurdes*, the spectator of *Los olvidados* cannot position herself vis-à-vis a particular national or political ideology. Instead, the film's excesses and dreams awaken the horrors at play without situating either viewer or character. But, in addition to continental aesthetic theories, Bazin locates Bunuel's merciless depictions of the city to his Spanish roots, in effect separating the director from the film's more local influences: "Over and beyond the accidental influences (which have no doubt been fortunate and enriching ones), in Buñuel surrealism is combined with a whole Spanish tradition. The taste for the horrible, the sense of cruelty, the seeking out of the extreme aspects of life, these are also the heritage of Goya, Zurbaran and Ribera..." (214). By comparing Buñuel's films to Goya's cruel, fever-filled dream-scapes, Bazin enfolds Buñuel's work into Europe's lengthy history of artistic masters.

While Bazin's emphasis on a Spanish tradition could be seen as the comments of a Eurocentric film critic, part of his essay's importance lies in this link between Spanish aesthetics and Mexican filmmaking. Buñuel's Spanish past does not simply allow him to make Mexican films in a Spanish style. In other words, he is not repeating *Las Hurdes* in Mexico; clearly the earlier film speaks to Spain's particular concerns of national unification and sovereignty as civil disruption looms large over the state. In a similar manner, *Los olvidados* is predicated on the particular historical contingencies of Mexico (for example, the flood of rural peasants into Mexico City during the first half of the twentieth century). However, Bunuel's cruelty brings the filmmaker's scepticism of emerging national modernities to the unique concerns of the post-revolutionary Mexican state. Buñuel's position as exile brings to light certain dangerous

continuities between European modernity and Mexican nationalism and allows his views of Spain to overlay onto his particular recounting of Mexican existence.

I draw on his earlier Spanish work not to universalize *Los olvidados* but to illustrate specificities that link Spanish and Mexican nationalisms in Buñuel's films. *Los olvidados*, like *Las Hurdes*, concerns cinematic cruelty vis-à-vis the mercenary nature of national identity. I will briefly juxtapose the film's beginning and end to introduce the director's intervention into Mexican national cinema; these images illustrate his critique of national identity via an illustration of the cruelty of modernity. The film's first set of monuments in comparison with the film's final image of refuse raise the question of the relationship between the iconic tropes of the nation and the effects of modernity. *Los olvidados* begins by surveying the skylines of some of the world's most populous and power-rich cities and focuses on the icons of powerful modern nation-states: Paris's Eiffel Tower, New York's Empire State Building, and Mexico City's Palacio Nacional. The initial shots are overlaid by a dry, monotonous narrator who describes the "social issues" of the urban poor; like *Las Hurdes*, the effect is distancing and alienating, reminiscent of documentary anthropology.<sup>24</sup> While the film will later prove these remarks

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<sup>24</sup> "Las grandes ciudades modernas, Nueva York, París, Londres, esconden tras sus magníficos edificios, hogares de miseria que albergan niños malnutridos, sin higiene, sin escuela, semillero de futuros delincuentes. La sociedad trata de corregir este mal pero el éxito de sus esfuerzos es muy limitado. Sólo en un futuro próximo podrán ser reivindicados los derechos del niño y del adolescente para que sean útiles a la sociedad. México, la gran ciudad moderna, no es la excepción a esta regla universal, por eso esta película, basada en hechos de la vida real, no es

untenable (much in the manner of *Las Hurdes*), the scope of these images is clearly referenced in the film's final moments.

In the final scenes of the film, Pedro attacks Jaibo on the streets in front of a large crowd. As the crowd gathers to watch the brawl, Jaibo, the larger of the two boys, brutally thrashes Pedro into submission. Utterly frustrated as Jaibo thwarts each of Pedro's attempts to defend his own life, Pedro passionately denounces him as a murderer to the crowd. And the bystanders—eager to rid themselves of Jaibo's cruel presence—disperse to inform on both children. Jaibo, despite needing to flee the police, seeks revenge against the one who condemned him. Hiding in Pedro's sleeping space—the barn of a neighbor family—he beats Pedro to death, pushes him off the side of the loft, and leaves him for dead. In the ultimate scene of the film, a young woman named Meche and her grandfather toss Pedro's corpse onto the piles of refuse that line the outskirts of Mexico City. Hidden amidst the dust of the garbage heap, that corpse is what remains of the film's young protagonist. The pair does not seek to disrespect Pedro or eliminate his memory, but their understanding of the law and the relations between the police and the locals force them to dispose of the body without attracting the attentions of the authorities. They hide the body under blankets and take it to the refuse pile at the limits of the city. Filling the screen, this site far exceeds the conventional designation “dump,” an area in which trash (or refuse, unusable material) is separated from the more productive spaces of society. In this image, there is no distinction between refuse and productivity. From one edge of the screen to another,

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optimista y deja la solución del problema a la fuerzas progresistas de la sociedad.” (*Los olvidados*)

the image (and therefore the world shown) is nothing but garbage. The film's entire world, in its last moment, is trash.

*Los olvidados*'s final image of garbage mirrors those initial, iconic images of Paris, New York and Mexico City through its distancing long shots and unemotional pans. The film posits a similarity here through its parallel, unaffected imagery; the tower of detritus appears as blank as the looming faces of the esteemed, iconic national monuments of France, the United States, and Mexico. Through its creation of similar imagery, the film casts doubt on the conventional associations ascribed to either the initial monuments or the final refuse heap. With this sequence, national symbols are not deployed with their common associations such as pride. Likewise, the image of the waste site is not relegated to the margins of society; it overwhelms the visual imagery as the dominant place within the nation. In the film, these two milieus are of the same kind. They are positioned as equals; neither cause and effect, nor locations where events occur, they are merely the end points fusing together contingent historical forces.

These two distinct sets of images, linked together by their blatant lack of visual romanticism, intervene into nationalist images at the time that those images were actual quite stable and normalized.<sup>25</sup> *Los olvidados* is an unusual film, one that challenges conventional notions of the recent past; that is, it questions the idea that Mexico's revolution has given way to a coherent, post-revolutionary national body. It imagines the cruelties as linked to the treacheries of the past. The present is filled with garbage, but that doesn't mean that the country should be

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<sup>25</sup> I'm referring here to Mexico's economic miracle of the 1950s and its relatively—and publically—stable image of nationhood that preceded the student massacres of 1968 and the national economic failure of 1982.

nostalgic for the past. In other words, a narrative of progress is not replaced with a more critical history of failure, or what post-1970s Mexican historians call the “revolution to demolition” narrative.<sup>26</sup> It does not attempt to chart a historical narrative, and is outside of the trenchant critiques of Latin American realist narratives beginning to emerge in the latter half of the twentieth century. Even though the film is predicated upon Buñuel’s personal investigations into urban slums, the film’s oneiric milieus—including the voluminous trash heap— Pedro’s famous dream sequence, and the half-created, half-decaying ruins of the murder scene, make *Los olvidados* an anti-realist film, one that juxtaposes surreal imagery with the dominant narrative’s documentary structure. Similar to *Las Hurdes*’s glaring falsities and cruel lies, *Los olvidados* obscures the motivations and desires of its denizens. We see Pedro’s dream, but when he is confronted with the camera alone, he throws an egg on it, refusing to allow the lens to penetrate his psyche. The film’s lack of psychological realism allows its non-realist imagery—its latent content—to resonate as a stronger, more material critique.

These two crucial sets of images from *Los olvidados*—the monuments and mountains of refuse—are not visual gestures of authenticity but an articulation of a larger critique of national

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<sup>26</sup> The “revolution to demolition” is an alternate narrative of Mexican history’s “revolution to evolution” narrative. The latter “[asserts] Mexico’s gradual attainment of political stability and a modicum of democratization, as well as an impressive threshold of economic development, all under the aegis of a modernizing, nationalist postrevolutionary regime” (Joseph, Rubenstein, and Zolov 4) whereas the former (a more current-post1970s strategy) asserts that, from the revolution, there has been a downward trend in political democratization in the Mexican social and political sphere.

discourse and the unique attributes of Mexican nationalism. On the one hand, the images are explicitly tied to forms of modern European nationalism (as seen through the monumental images of the Eiffel tower). On the other hand, the film's narrative folds particular Mexican icons (for example, individual mother as Virgin Mother) tightly into its more pointed criticisms. The multifaceted articulation of nation is not unique to this piece. *Los olvidados* illustrates Buñuel's intervention into the Mexican project, but the exploration of modernity and national ethos is not relegated to this specific film. Indeed, it is possible to glimpse the images of *Los olvidados* as the beginning, as one vital layer of Buñuel's larger Mexican corpus. The film acts as a catalyst through which it is possible to unearth the analysis of history present in the larger scope of the directors' filmmaking.

The film's narrative structure and circular imagery critiques the "revolution to evolution" notion of history, and substitutes a fragmentary, ruinous mode of history as a potential way to understand the past. The life among the ruins may point to Buñuel as cinematic allegorist; this position, I argue, is critical to the construction of his later films. Allegory appears particularly significant here because it is an example of Buñuel's ability to shift between historical milieus while retaining his critical impulses. Also, however, it places pressure on the unified and coherent sense of history by glimpsing the fractures and ruins that dot even the most rural of landscapes.

### **3.4 NAZARÍN: NATURALISM AND ALLEGORY**

Based on a Spanish novel by Benito Pérez Galdós, *Nazarín* follows the meandering, nomadic journey of an impoverished priest (Father Nazario Zaharín) from the slums of Mexico

City to the equally penurious, diseased countryside. The film begins with the priest's life in a miserable boarding house, surrounded by derelicts and prostitutes. He is an outsider even among Catholic priests, as he has no diocese or particular position within the larger institution. He occasionally leads services for alms and counsels the peasants that walk by his boardinghouse window. Father Nazario—called Nazarín—dispenses banal moralisms to those looking for spare change, and appears oblivious to the struggle for survival that defines many of their lives. Chance, or from his perspective, grace, dictates his relationship to the world; he is apathetic to his own survival. The priest's indifferent but placid life deteriorates when he is branded an accomplice to murder and arson. As Nazario finds himself thrust into criminal life and eventually exiled to the desolate countryside, he becomes entrenched in events which refute his known paradigms of morality. He ferociously struggles to retain his understanding of good and evil in an amoral universe. The film is not particularly interested in assaulting the priest's character; it instead initiates a fluid critique of the institutions that have made Nazario's life an absurdity and a failure. These varied encounters do not only demonstrate the amorality at play in the world; they also emblemize relations between Church and State, between present and past, between authoritarian power and revolutionary politics.

I would like to introduce what I argue are the film's two dominant (and apparently incongruous) tendencies: its proclivity toward naturalism and its allegorical mode of chronicling history. The film's pencil drawing of Mexico City's Cathedral (Catedral Metropolitana) visually inaugurates the film's naturalist tendencies, whereas the film's "Laughing Christ" gestures toward its allegorical impulses. Similar to *Los olvidados*, *Nazarín* establishes the location of the narrative through the iconic image of Mexico's Zócalo, the plaza in the center of Mexico City that houses its cathedral and national palace. In the earlier film, a bird's eye view of the plaza



connects the physical manifestations of the state to the larger structures of the social and political institutions of 1940s Mexico. In contrast, *Nazarín*'s opening credits are superimposed upon a clearly-drawn pencil illustration of Mexico City's cathedral circa 1900. The image illustrates the film's departure from the novel's location (Spain) and earlier time period (mid- to late-nineteenth century), moving the film's narrative to the early twentieth century, at the apex of Porfirio Diaz's regime (1876-80, 1884-1911). The *Porfiriato* appears only intermittently in Buñuel's films, either mentioned (*Los olvidados*, *Subida al cielo* [1951]), or in flashback (*Ensayo de un crimen* [1955]), but it is rarely the explicit setting of a film. This shift in milieu—and the fifty years between the original composition of the novel and the subsequent film—points to a significant change in the story. The film creates an investigation into the images of the past—here, set up as a tension between religion and the evolving modern nation, specifically between the archaic church of Father Nazario and the institutions of Diaz's Mexican state.

But this image also importantly illustrates the naturalism of both film and novel. The drawing, which situates the film's milieu amid horse drawn carts and wood burning food stalls (examples of late nineteenth and early twentieth century modes of transportation and economics) and firmly within the Porfirian regime. The drawing then melds seamlessly into live-action film, fusing the series of iconic, frozen drawings with the photographic, active footage which initiates the narrative. The images are gradually magnified; the image is at first a picturesque vista of the Zócalo and the top of the Cathedral that gradually tightens until it reaches the street level minutiae. The film introduces its naturalist gaze through this expansive introduction of the turn of the century milieu and the film's predilection for its invasive, diagnostic eye. The drawing illustrates two significant aspects of naturalism. First, the film is establishing the milieu of a particular world, in this case, the world of Mexico City's most impoverished denizens (for

example, its thieves, murderers, scoundrels, and prostitutes). Second, magnification of the drawing illustrates that the film casts its eye diagnostically, illustrating the effect of this brutal world on the people who try ineffectively to change their lives. The examination into this degenerate milieu reiterates throughout the film. In the film's first half, it shows the plight of prostitutes, thieves and the homeless, while in the second it illustrates the diseased world of an impoverished countryside.

Similar to the works of literary naturalists such as Zola, Buñuel's naturalism portrays a society that inflicts suffering upon its characters. The novel *Nazarín* emerges from this tradition; in part the film relies on its source-material's emphasis on milieu. However, there is a concurrent understanding of Buñuel's work as expressly naturalist. Sebastian Faber's "Between Cernuda's Paradise and Buñuel's Hell: Mexico through Spanish Exiles' Eyes," for example, explicitly refers to Buñuel's techniques in *Los olvidados* as naturalist: "One could... argue that *Los olvidados* is less indebted to the tradition of tragedy than to that of Zola's naturalism. Its characters' fate, after all, seems completely determined by that famous triad of *milieu*, *moment*, and *race*—that is, their environment, historical moment, and genetic make-up" (236). In fact, Faber sees this gesture toward naturalism (and the Spanish traditions behind the move) to be a problem characteristic of the cinematic and literary projects of Spanish exiles:

Naturalism has a notorious tendency to explain social problems—and the classes affected by them—in purely medical terms, reducing individual subjects to passive victims of fate. In addition, naturalism presupposes a radical distinction between the observer, whose clinical gaze is presumed to be scientific and therefore "sane," and the observed (237). In other words, by rendering the characters' problems to be endemic to their social situations, naturalism mitigates the potential for human agency. Characters' dismal fates express their

inability to act, and align the viewer with the film's observational gaze—which attempts to examine the film's milieu from a bird's eye view instead of through the character's perspective.

Faber proposes that the works' naturalist tendencies render them problematically fatalistic, viewing the indigent of Mexico as victims of their “*milieu, moment, and race.*” Because of this preponderance of fate, human agency becomes impossible. However, he also underscores that *Los olvidados* renders the gaze of the observer problematic. The infamous image where Pedro throws an egg at the camera illustrates one of those moments in which characters reject this invasive viewing. Although Faber's general idea that the film shifts between optimistic progressivism and desperate fatalism puts too much stock in the film's narrative authenticity, his point—that the film's naturalism is mitigated by this refusal to penetrate into the characters' inner selves—is important here. The film establishes a particular naturalist world but at the same time undermines its own diagnosis by refusing the presence of the diagnostic gaze. In other words, despite its gesture toward a fatalist naturalism, Buñuel's diagnostic turn is not incompatible with more active and incisive critiques of political projects and policies.

Gilles Deleuze's discussion of naturalism and Buñuel's cinema may prove more productive in understanding the significance of the emblematic milieus and relations to time. He extends Buñuel's naturalism towards temporal allegory even as he elucidates the film's relevant leanings toward a societal diagnosis.<sup>27</sup> Cinematic naturalism, for Deleuze, is “not opposed to

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<sup>27</sup> This chapter does not discuss the distinct naturalist tendencies of the novel *Nazarín*, on which the film is based. The 1895 novel, penned by Spanish “master realist” Benito Perez Galdós, is noted to be one of the most “naturalist” of Galdós's works. Enormously popular in Spain, Galdós

realism, but on the contrary accentuates its features by extending them in an idiosyncratic surrealism” (124). Realism and naturalism are linked in their ability to make what he calls determined—or highly specified—milieus, but their differences lay in naturalist cinema’s eruption of an originary world. While realist cinema and naturalist cinema both produce highly constructed, intricate worlds, naturalism always has behind it a degraded, fatalist world in which animalistic impulses determine human behavior and time is negotiated as an eternal return. All individuals—saints and sinners, priests and prostitutes—cannot escape the violent and degrading impulses that emerge from this primordial, elemental universe that stands immanent to the ‘real’,

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wrote a massive number of novels, many of which—like *Nazarín*—chronicled the minutiae of late nineteen/early twentieth century Spain. The novel *Nazarín* is divided into five sections, narrated by a chronicler, an observer who attempts to tell the story of *Nazarín* through an exploration of the Madrid slums and the impoverished countryside. Simultaneously realistic and self-conscious, the novel shifts from a documentary account to a discourse on the weight and possibility of religious faith.

The novel’s first section especially marks a continuance of realistic concerns for Galdós, and, he extends these concerns in *Nazarín*:

Descriptions of the Madrid *pueblo* and their living conditions had appeared in his most Zolaesque or Naturalist novels, from *La desheredada* to the *Torquemada* tetralogy. In *Nazarín* this interest is extended—for the first time—to people and conditions in the countryside surrounding the capital... Galdós does not include these details for mere social economic colouring, but rather to provide a backdrop of reality which to place the more important spiritual development of his characters... (Bly 89).

historical world. Deleuze's naturalism, like other conceptions of the form, is primarily critical; it decries civilization—in that it displays it as primarily violent and always imbued with the brutal impulsive acts of the primordial sphere. The impulses, actuated in the space of the civilized world, are the “symptoms” of the illness which is civilization. Thus, the films “diagnose civilization”—in that it is not the cure, but the sickness.

Deleuze's analysis, however, lends itself toward allegory as it negotiates Buñuel's extension of the naturalist impulse into other possible realms. Always imbued with the violent impulse and elemental milieus of the originary worlds, these film's civilized spaces are always imbued ruins and fragments of modernity: “In the poor or the rich, impulses have the same goal and the same destiny: to smash into fragments, to tear off fragments, gather up the scraps, form the great rubbish dump...” (130). The dump, the ruin, and the empty space form the basis for the allegorical gestures that dominate Buñuel's parabolic films such as *Nazarín*, *Simon del desierto*, and *La voie lactée*. In addition, naturalism's ‘originary worlds’ allows time to become epochal, monumental, and cyclical. In Buñuel's *L'age d'or*, the film begins in a primordial time, when scorpions sting their prey into submission, and ends with the emergence of Jesus from the castle of Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom*, but time has not progressed; instead, the impulses have returned to a non-chronologized epoch, simply set in another location. Likewise the images of the monument and trash in *Los olvidados* are similar repetitions; the trash is another epoch apart from those beautiful monuments to modernity. In fact, Deleuze characterizes *Nazarín* as the cinematic image of the degraded cycle of Good and Evil, in which the saintly man, like the thug and the criminal, cannot escape (131). Within these cycles, the emergence of fate is not a pathology (as Faber claimed), but the positioning of the film's human actors within the

“repetition that ruins and degrades us” (131). The films use the allegorical image by placing the degraded man at the center of this recurrence, from pre-history to the modern era.

These repetitions and recurrences of ruin and degradation form the basis of Buñuel’s allegorical imagery. Allegory emerges early in Buñuel’s works as a consistent cinematic trope; *Nazarín*’s and *Viridiana*’s peripatetic priests and *La voie lactée*’s absurdist religious pilgrims clearly evoke the medieval morality plays, while *Simon del desierto* portrays an analogical relation between distant past and present. Although these films are mired in these allegorical traditions, they of course are not medieval Christian allegories. They do not thematically join Old and New Testament, nor do they attempt to convey proper morals to their viewers. Instead, allegory’s fluidity comes into play as the allegorical images of the past recur in the secular present.

The use of allegory in discussing cinema is particularly tricky, in part because the term allegory is used to convey several different, even occasionally incongruous, ideas. Broadly, it has been used to merely denote an extended metaphor; more specifically, the definition of allegory speaks to the heart of literary notions of representation. With regard to Buñuel’s work, allegory grants its audience a fragmentary—as opposed to cohesive—experience of the world: “By resorting to a fictional mode literally of ‘other-discourse’ (*allegoria*), a mode that conceals its relation to its true objects, allegory shows a conviction that the truth resides elsewhere and is not detachable in relations between sign and signifier” (Cowan 59). For Buñuelian cinema, allegory’s cinematic significance lies in coincidence between form and history. As allegorist, Buñuel draws fragmented and scattered images of a world that already exists in ruin. Consequently, the interruption of the modernized world with the intrusion of an archaic object or image is appropriate in Buñuel’s films because the modern world is fragmented. In this way, it is

possible to see Buñuel's narrative interruptions or sly dream images not as unconscious desires but as the fragmentation of the present made manifest. Herein lies the importance of the recurrence of time, event, and parable in the films; time is cyclical because the past is unfinished and continuously erupting into the present. In other words, it makes no attempt to forge a unification between representation and experience; it instead can only refer to a previous image that also refers to a previous image. In these allegories, time always emerges as a rupture, as difference, as that gap which cannot be filled. The signs of these allegories are the literal signs of the passage of time, death and decay: the corpse, the skull, and the ruin. In Benjamin's view of allegory, these are the manifestations of the inability of the allegorist to no longer find redemption in the symbolic. In Baroque allegory, ruins literalize the mode of thought appropriate to that current moment (178). But in the modern era (in the writings of Baudelaire, and perhaps, modern filmmakers and writers), the allegorist turns his attention to the commodity—the sign of the ruin in bourgeois civilization. In Buñuel's cinema, these ruins are appropriate demonstrations of the cruelties of past and present. Allegory is not merely a metaphor for another time or place. Instead, it is a particular moment where a shattered form of language or image cannot be re-inscribed with wholeness and therefore an apt metaphor for expressing history. In *Nazarín*, Father Nazario's fall into despair is allegorical of the larger fall of redemption in the face of the secular world. Of course, Buñuel is no devout Catholic. The allegory points to a larger critique of institutions amid modernity.

The "Laughing Christ" from *Nazarín* particularly illustrates ways that sacred icons form the basis of Buñuel's allegory. The film introduces a picture of Jesus that precipitates Nazario's fall into degradation and poverty. In the boarding-house where Father Nazario lives with the morally and financially destitute, a prostitute named Andara—who earlier mocks Nazario for his

overt piousness— kills another woman in a knife-fight over stolen buttons. Although he does not commit the deed, Nazarín struggles over informing the police about the identity of the murderer. Desperate and wounded, she asks Nazarín to hide her in his rooms, begging forgiveness for disparaging him that afternoon. The priest, visibly angered and upset that she has committed murder, encourages her to turn herself in; but he also perceives Andara’s seeming remorsefulness as an opportunity to convince her to return to the Catholic Church. Andara at first agrees to accept his reproach merely because she is terrified of the police, but then becomes interested in more theological discussions as she becomes aware of the strangeness of Nazarín’s sacrifices for her well-being.

During Andara’s partial convalescence in Nazarín’s quarters, the film shows an iconic image of Christ twice—once as a traditional painting and again as an eruption of allegorical image. Previous to Andara’s entrance to his room, the priest paces in front of an iconic Christian painting: Christ is crowned in thorns with a noose around his neck. The piece is a representation of the Christ who has already been tried and sentenced to execution; it is the Christ who labors, weighed down by a cross on his back, stumbling toward Calvary. However, this Christ-image will fundamentally alter in the following scene, when Andara wakes from her feverish sleep. In the darkness, she hears a *mea culpa* in her head (the voice of the speaker is the priest, but he is reciting the *mea culpa* at another location). Her gaze turns to the picture of the Christ, which—although still radiant—is laughing at her. It remains a still image; the Christ is in the same position as before, but now the mouth is agape in a twisted grin, rendering the image both repulsive and knowing. The insertion of the “Laughing Christ” is a recurrence of that other discourse (in this case, the myths of Christianity) into the industrial world. The doubling of the Christ highlights the dissolution of trust and faith in Christian icons.



This image is allegorical in that it portends the decay at work in the film's present; it makes the decay of the past (the adulteration of the painting) coincident with the encroaching decline of Father Nazario. The image in fact fragmentizes the moral stability of Nazario himself, even as it denotes the secularization of this symbolic Christ. As the painting can now express pleasure at Andara's suffering, it leaves behind its own symbolism, the suffering of Christ. Entirely directed toward Andara, the Christ's laughter evokes the absurdity of her situation, and an inability for her experience to meld with Christ's eternal nature. Herein lays the secularization of the sacred imagination, and the impossibility of the secular to reach the clarity, unity, and wholeness of the sacred image.

The allegories in Buñuel's films lead to repetitions and recurrences: because no particular action can ever allow the characters to achieve redemption, they will continuously repeat themselves. In *El ángel exterminador* (1961), for example, the film literally repeats images frame by frame. We see the guests of a party enter, and then they enter again. The outcomes are mildly different; sometimes a character laughs and sometimes she doesn't, or a character will choose to go left instead of right. Regardless, these repetitions never lead to an achievement of redemption or wholeness. Instead, these repetitions indicate the discontinuity of time in the world.

In another example from *Nazarín*, a character's repetitive interactions with her lover in both dream and reality point to these discontinuities even as they create visual disjunctions. Early in the film, in one of the boardinghouse sequences, a despairing resident named Beatriz fantasizes reconciling with the lover who cast her aside. As two prostitutes fight over buttons, Beatriz dreams that she is kissing her former lover Pinto. She blinks rapidly and deliberately, and the film shows the two kissing as Beatriz sadistically deflects Pinto's advances. She laughs at his advances, with both pleasure and disgust, claiming "that's how I want to see you, you scoundrel,

coming to beg for what I'm not going to give you." In her fantasy, Pinto tells her the truth: that he will sleep with her, and then leave her. Unlike her real despair, her fantastical self finds this amusing. She bites him and he bleeds heavily from the mouth, and Pinto is stunned, incapable of leaving her. As the film flashes back to the courtyard, it is empty of the brawling women and the crowd that watched them. Instead, Beatriz, her eyes closed, writhes on the ground. Her face is peaceful, but her body twitches. Her position is reminiscent of both sexual pleasure and religious rapture. The film layers two images of night and day over each other, which renders them discontinuous. The switch in time, from the nighttime brawl, to the empty courtyard of the morning, evokes both the pleasure of religious awakening and the perils of modern womanhood. Reminiscent of both the sexual pleasure that she desires with Pinto and her later religious ecstasy in relation to Nazarín, her rapturous body slips away from the possibility of a symbolic register. Instead, the religious pleasure is infected with profane, sexualized desire.

In fact, Beatriz and Pinto's passionate embrace is repeated twice. In the first repetition, Pinto attempts to recapture Beatriz's affections (after her religious conversion in which she becomes one of Nazarín's followers); despairingly, she fights Pinto in order to avoid her "bad nature." In the final instance of the embrace, she has accepted her relationship with him as they drive away together from Nazarín and his ferocious pleasures over religious asceticism. Despite the fact that she kisses her lover, the embrace appears far more banal than the ecstasy of religious pleasures. In other words, repetition never leads to a unification of spirit or soul. She kisses him in the first instance for passion, and in the second for domesticity. Both moments, however, are inherently incomplete and flawed. Instead, the embrace becomes disjointed, mechanical, and unlike an affective image of love or even a consistent notion of desire. As Pinto drives away in his cart with Beatriz, her final position of domesticity appears equally dissatisfying.

This repetition between ethereal and mundane—a breach that parallels the incongruity of religious thought in modernity—is best exposed in his didactic relationship with Andara. As she hides herself from the police, she casts herself as an egregious sinner in need of reconciliation; thus she is eager to placate Nazario by asking him to explain religious phenomena. She claims that he is the most knowledgeable of God and the afterlife, and begins asking questions about life after death. This initial thread of questions evolves into a series of more absurd concerns that allude to both theological and mundane existence but are explicitly concerned with neither one. She asks him a series of earnest questions. Some of her concerns are mundane and superstitious (“Why are three vultures bad luck and two good?”) whereas others are insightfully cunning (“Why do souls leave Purgatory when one gives money to priests?”). The questions are sharply dichotomous, in that some are based in local superstition, whereas others question the political policies of the church. Pointedly, none are actually theological. Instead, Andara’s questions, as earnestly directed toward the priest as they are, recreate a futile pattern in which the priest expounds a fundamentally archaic Christian narrative to an uninterested population. As he subtly changes Andara’s initial question from “How is it that one is born?” to “Why are we born?” the visual image shifts from Nazario’s quarters to the kitchen, where the boardinghouse mistress boils chicken feet. The camera lingers for several seconds on the disembodied claws, gesturing toward the priest’s inability to converse with those he intends to counsel. On the one hand, the disembodied chicken feet return to naturalism: the fetish situates itself within the film’s determined milieu. On the other hand, the feet expose the fierce inconsistency of Christianity to reconcile dogma with the practical milieu. The priest here continues to reach toward an impossible location of meaning. Through his subtle direction of the comments, he refuses to

engage with the political situation of the church with regard to its impoverished practitioners. He desires then, to explain and render meaningful and whole what is fractured.

The priest's journey into the countryside functions as an incarnation of religion's inability to reconcile a coherent morality and its own dogma. After fleeing the city, Nazarín wanders through both the urban space and country, unable to dispense religion as he sees fit and therefore redeem his bodily existence. This trope is clearly established through the film's continuing repetitions; the recurrences destabilize relations between the first half of the film and the second while showing both country and city as irredeemable. Nazarín's inability to create a seamless relation with the divine is repeated in the film's second half. His journey from city to country builds upon the earlier schisms between divinity and mundane existence and similar layers are imposed but gain no coherent end result.

If the first half of the film disturbs Father Nazario's smug relationship with his indigent flock, the subsequent portion alienates him from religious, political, and social institutions. Despite his self-congratulatory attempts to educate Andara into accepting a Christian system of morality, she responds to news of her impending arrest by setting fire to the boarding house in which Nazario lives. Thus deprived of his residence, the priest begins a country pilgrimage to live with the people in what he considers their abject reality. Nazarín's country journey, accompanied by his "two Sanchos," demonstrates the priest's inability to engage in meaningful ministrations, in part because he cannot understand the population and in part because his work lacks coherent meaning. This tension between Nazarín's "mythical" religious nature and the

Porfirian state begins as he enters a plague-ridden village.<sup>28</sup> Nazarín's religious support holds no weight with either governing institutions or its devastated citizens. The priest arrives at the plague-ridden town accompanied by Andara and Beatriz, who follow him because they believe that he can enact miracles. A dying woman refuses to accept his ministrations, either to save her life or soul. As he begs her to examine her conscience while approaching death, the woman only begs for her lover. The close up of her beautiful face—she is by far the most radiant woman of the film—is marred by spittle and, arguably, her disgust that the priest has arrived. After her lover reenters the house, she again implores Juan to dismiss the others, and therefore, allow her to be alone with him, while Nazarín perceives his actions here as a complete failure. The next sequence brings the government's health department, causing the three to leave the town. While, in its essentials, this scene is directly from the novel, the priest's relative displeasure at their arrival—as well as the apathy within the narrative's structure—is unique to the film. The government arrives to cure the people, and yet it is impossible, within the confines of the film, to see this as relief. Obviously, neither Nazarín nor the government is desired by the dying woman, who only wants her lover. Likewise, Nazarín's subtle displeasure over his failure does not create sympathy for his moralizing position.

The film's final scenes reiterate this inability to bridge the gap between the priest's mystical religion, the people, and the state which claims to encompass the needs of its citizens. The three hide among ruins, completing the allegorical image of the decay of the soul and the

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<sup>28</sup> Characterized as a “liberal regime”, the Diaz presidency was dominated by a turn toward scientific liberalism and positivism, the first of its kind after Mexico's inception as a non-colonial nation-state.

spirit in Nazario's terms. Although Andara, in order to save her earthly self, wants to flee, her spiritual advisor refuses. However, despite the priest's seemingly unwavering faith, the divine has no place at the end of this narrative. He has changed the will even of his disciples. Andara, despite her adoration of Nazarín, illustrates her refusal to accept God's love as she fights and abuses the law which eventually captures her. Beatriz, although not violent, has simply replaced her desire for Pinto with a desire for Father Nazario, illustrated succinctly with her speech to the priest as they dwell among the ruins: "When these troubles come, I ask only to pass them with you. And if I can rid you of them by piling them on myself, then I will pile them on myself, because I am bound to you." The use of the word "la ley" in this instance means a bond, but it is not entirely separate from its meaning of law. The laws of the country, the worldly law, even of marital or sexual law, cannot be absent from their understandings of faith. Even as Nazarín fights to preserve his sense of Christianity, the film illustrates that the mystical center of faith cannot be divorced from the decaying, mundane and ephemeral world.

Nazarín's failure is completed as he attempts, even while incarcerated, to turn others to God. He picks as his final convert the convict who performs a "good" act by thwarting violence in the jail cell. Other convicts, horrified by the priest, attempt to beat him senseless. An unnamed convict stops the violence, and Nazarín begs him to become good. The convict, far from accepting Nazarín's ministrations, understands that the priest merely acts without purposes in an increasingly amoral world. These final moments of the film, it would seem belie the notion that the film is a Catholic text.<sup>29</sup> A bystander offers him a pineapple on the road to Mexico City, which he at first refuses. He takes it, however, after a moment's hesitation; he receives the fruit

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<sup>29</sup> An idea propagated by the US Catholic Film Board.

even as he acknowledges that the woman's gift does no real "good" in the world. He takes it simply because it is there. Thus, like *Los olvidados*'s bookend images, the layers of discreet images present in *Nazarín* do not depict one particular totally. The "Laughing Christ," Beatriz's dream, the gifted pineapple, and the ruins under which Nazarín attempts to justify his faith are not expressions of a true or authentic early twentieth century. They are allegorical images, in that they evoke both historical occurrences (the profound class differences, for example, between the state and its citizens), and they are fractured, melancholy, and ruinous.

Here allegory bears a unique relation to history, and this may be the specific point through which the ruins of faith and the tensions of empire and institution collide. The recurrences and repetitions in *Nazarín* disassemble the unity of historical narration. This is how *Nazarín* speaks to Mexico's past. By critiquing Mexico's dictatorial past, the film bridges the rhetorical gap between Mexico's pre-revolutionary past and its current post-revolutionary regime. While the film's shift in setting has been considered a studio choice which has no thematic or critical effects (Bly 105), the film nonetheless provides a window into the secular world as well as the religious. The overall narrative of religion holds; however, the film is also critical of its regional milieu. The work speaks to Mexico's present as it unearths the layers of the past. For example, the itinerant priest destabilizes the institution of Catholicism even as the film undercuts Mexico's social and political institutions. Due in part to the merging of Spanish novel and Mexican history, *Nazarín* links construction of its "new" (socialist and democratic) present to its authoritarian past, the Diaz regime. In doing so, it disrupts the progressive narrative of the present. Robert A. Rosenstone, historian and film theorist, in his essay "The Historical Film: Looking at the Past in a Post-Literate Age," suggests that the historical film can illustrate a new way of regarding written history: "[historians] have not treated written history as a mode of

thought, a process, a particular way of using the traces of the past to make that past meaningful to the present” (52). The film, according to Rosenstone, is a uniquely different way of marking the incidences of the past, one that is often in conflict with written history. We see these kinds of conflicts here, only turned toward Buñuel’s new country. Similarly to Buñuel’s other films, *Nazarín* is an example a loss of faith in the narrativizing of secular history, and the understanding of its dangers to the present. In *Nazarín*, the traces of the past do not form a coherent whole; they cast doubt on the rhetoric of the contemporary moment.

*Nazarín* breaks the present through an exaggerated tension with the past. The film takes place in 1900, but the role of the past is not a matter of literary authenticity. The question becomes, what is the significance for the present? Buñuel was notoriously critical of contemporary religious affiliations and institutions, so why turn to the past? The film charts the significant tensions between liberalism, religion, and real radicalism, and attempts to use the historical milieu to intervene in the contemporary uses of institutions and religions. Even though the film satirizes *Nazarín*’s religious dogmatism, it never allies itself with the liberal state. In other words, it does not conceive of either Catholicism or liberalism as the potential *savoir* of the country.

The film is set during the height of Porfirio Diaz’s power, at the moment when power struggles between elites would soon turn into the populism of the revolution. In my previous chapter, I mention the significant differences between late nineteenth century views on indigenous populations with post-revolutionary ones. The earlier views on the indigenous populations, I note are part of a project associated with Mexican Positivism, a progressivist, liberal philosophy that dominated political thought and bureaucracy during the mid-nineteenth through early twentieth century. This philosophy was influenced by several modes of thought,



including the European traditions of positivism and liberalism (particularly August Comte and Herbert Spenser), “social Darwinism” and its antecedents, and contemporary European constitutional law (Hale 205). This prevailing philosophical trend emphasized liberal education, law, and above all, progress toward an ultimately free regime. Practically, the system allied the government, economic elites, and technocrats (particularly the department of education, headed by Gabindo Barrera) in very strong, centralized policies that allowed power to congeal around a few sources.

With regard to traditional religions, the positivism defenders attempted to compromise, claiming that their philosophy should guide Mexicans in terms of material matters while it should take no interest in spiritual matters. Simultaneously, the need for personal views and liberties would be disregarded if need be to constitute order. The new society depended on reason’s permeation into all civic arenas. According to historian Charles Hale, the leaders claimed that “the success of the Diaz positivist tradition [would] depend on the formation of a scientific plan of administration and politics, based on the knowledge of the biological, social, and economic conditions of the country” ( 31). In its attempts to grab or maintain power, the Church was often ostracized (Schmitt 204). However, the church was still tolerated in that it could serve the interests of the state. Particularly, the Church was charged with maintaining order among the unruly masses, in those spaces where reason could not yet take hold. In the film, reason is clearly at war with Nazarín and his moral nature, but the film is importantly neither an explicit critique of Positivism, nor a reassertion of older forms of Catholicism. Buñuel’s distrust of Catholicism is well known and documented, and, of course, positivist tendencies were long dead by *Nazarín’s* production in the 1950s. Critiquing positivism itself would be politically redundant by the second half of the twentieth century. Instead, the film charts the emergence of

rationalism as a story that is in itself impossible, and explores the story's usefulness for the creation and maintenance of power.

The film alludes to the scientific, medical, and liberal organizations of the state throughout the film, from the liberal gentlemen who observe Nazarín in his boarding room to the state officials who come to the village to cure the plague. Similar to institutional figures in other Buñuel films such as *Los olvidados* and *Las Hurdes*, these people are not explicitly evil or deceptive. But, like the other figures, they are completely unable to understand the subjects on which they choose to focus. They use the voice of authority to account for elements of the world, while the film illustrates the opposite to be true. The exchange of money as the gentlemen speak with Nazario at the boardinghouse, for example, confuses progress and begging. The government's attempts to save the town from the plague emphasize the removal of traditional Church roles. It is a sly reminder that social-scientific institutions were supposed to erase the mystical ministrations of the clergy present in Mexico's colonialist period. Here, the film shows the desire of the government that would replace the archaisms and savagery of earlier eras with a "new order."<sup>30</sup> Mysticism must be replaced by rationality and science. The presence of the

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<sup>30</sup> In the famous positivist, Gabino Barreda's, Independence Day speech in 1867, he claimed that "the metaphysics of liberty was triumphing over the theological spirit implanted by the colonial order to give place to a new order." In Barreda's comments, as paraphrased and interpreted by historian Leopoldo Zea,

Gabino Barreda spoke of this history.... It was the triumph of the positivist spirit advancing the march of Mexico along the road to progress. The struggle of which Mexico was the scene is but a phase, a part, of the struggle developing in the entire history of

plague (and the horrible image of a lone child at sea in the plague's detritus) casts doubt on the administration's superiority. Despite the fact that the old spirit of the church is overshadowed by the dominance of empirical science, neither can mediate the problems of the human social organization. Instead, the film illustrates the limits of both paradigms. The plague scene crucially draws out the limits of social progress, and juxtaposes this philosophy with Nazarín's failure.

In *Nazarín* the state is cast as authoritarian even as it attempts to shed its traditional roots. During his wanderings, Nazarín encounters a colonel, his wife, and a priest; the party waits, stranded, as their driver attends to a collapsed horse. As Nazarín assists the driver in raising the horse, the colonel abuses a peasant walking past. Infuriated, Nazarín chastises the colonel for his rudeness and subsequently departs, while the driver continues to struggle with the prostrate horse. The film leaves Nazarín's perspective to remain with the colonel and other priest. The priest tells the colonel not to bother about Nazarín, that he is a heretic, and that he is the kind of priest sent in from the north. The encounter between the colonel and the peasant renders the historical perspective ironic. The colonel, furious that the peasant does not properly address either himself or the priest (the wife is not mentioned), forces the peasant to apologize and re-encounter them on the road. The peasant, shamed, agrees to do so, retracing his steps and greeting the colonel with an appropriate "Buenos días patroncito." The colonel greets the peasant, who continues on the road without further incident. Despite the staged nature of the pleasantries, the colonel has no further problem with the peasant. As long as the markers of class remain intact, the meaning behind them is irrelevant. Thus, the previous instance is erased in the

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mankind, between the negative spirit and the positivist spirit. The triumph of Mexican liberalism is but the triumph of this spirit in the history of mankind. (222)

mind of the administrator via the correctness of its repetition. Again, the annulment of the incident by the colonel is at odds with the proliferation of repetition in the film; the colonel, a figure of the Mexican state, erases time.

Also, the response of the colonel's priest illustrates more obviously the distinction between the priests of the Diaz administration and a deviant priest such as Nazarín. In general and in form, the clerical factions of Mexico were unsurprisingly hostile to the new political order.<sup>31</sup> In fact, socially minded Catholic leaders were charged as communists (Schmitt 207). And yet the bourgeois priest's submission to the colonel demonstrates a continuing collusion between Church and State in the interests of consolidating power. The church, of course, never lost its relative dominance over the country in the latter half of the nineteenth century and in fact was deemed necessary to the social order. In response to the pair, Nazario claims that a peasant has as much dignity as any past, present or future despot. Despite claims to reform, the colonel and priest distrust the peasantry. In this instance, the bourgeois priest is marked as an obsequious follower of the colonel, against the peasant and allied with the state. Yet the priest is neither a false nor true representation of the Church as a whole. Instead, both the false and true lie within the figure. Of course, the tension between these two priests does not suggest that either is the "true" man of God and minister to the people. Although Nazarín is perhaps the truer believer, the effect of his moral outrage is ironic. Though he claims to be the priest of the peasants, the driver is left to contend with the fallen horse alone.

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<sup>31</sup> See Hale, 154. 196-7: "'Positivism is not only a blasphemy,' wrote an outspoken ecclesiastic from Puebla, '[it is] the most atrocious calumny that can be launched against Catholicism'" (154).

The early twentieth century church (and its conservative traditions) and Nazario's popular Christianity appear equally worthless in the face of the newly emerging liberal regime, which itself died long before the film was produced. The film suggests that *Porfiriato* is already decaying, perhaps even foretelling the imminent revolution; the squabbles between conservatives and the liberal order will soon pass away. The allegorical structure becomes the basis of the critique; the film evokes multiple eras through its fragments of horrific eras and their inability to form a cohesive historical narrative. The film takes place during the early twentieth century, yet the present is not absent, as illustrated when Nazario speaks of the past, present, and future governments and political eras. The film creates tensions between the older regimes and contemporary powers for control over the story of Mexico's history. The liberal government's victory over the history—the story with which Nazario so vehemently disagrees—is already a thing of the distant past. However, even after a revolution and regime change that displaced the philosophy of positivism in Mexico, certain mechanisms of power remain.

In this example, we return to 1950s Mexico. As I noted in the introduction, many of the Spanish émigrés were concerned with the increasing conservative shift away from socialism after the end of Cárdenas's regime. During the Ávila Camacho regime (1940-1946) and the Alemán regime (1946-1952), political discourses are dominated by a fundamental shift from a socialist vision to a more explicitly developmentalist one.<sup>32</sup> Although this move to increase capital is not

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<sup>32</sup> This increasing trend toward North American capitalism occurred in part with the distancing of Ávila Camacho from the socialist regime of Cárdenas and the explicit prioritizing of the government's relations with the business community. The more current "pro-business attitude" of Ávila Camacho was seen in his public demands for more investment in business capital. For

necessarily indicative of a corrupt regime, the burgeoning business ethos was matched by its conservatism; the presidency of Alemán was marked by “increasing corruption, labour repression and, as the Cold War broke out, a fervent anti-Communist bent” (Faber 222). So entrenched was the dominant paradigm of PRI as revolutionary, in fact, that investigations into political practices did not begin until the twenty-first century (Niblo 253-7).

Historian Stephen R. Niblo calls the 1940s a time where “the history of Mexico seems to have ended” (xvii). This glib reference to Hegel seems to re-invoke the idea of the Spirit’s struggle and subsequent historical completion. Niblo here means that Mexico, since it had achieved revolutionary statehood, could now excuse its encroaching conservatism. This historical “end,” according to Niblo, is part of why Mexican history of 1940s and 50s was so long unchallenged by historical scholarship. Citing a reluctance to investigate the political and economic tensions of the recent past, Niblo calls for a more complex understanding of Mexico’s post-revolutionary era, which is far more heterogeneous politically than the PRI’s narrative claimed (xxi).

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example, in an interview he characterized his government’s orientation as “ample guarantees to capital; help to the worker and to the peasant; development of industry; improvement of justice; better diplomatic and commercial relations with the other countries of the world...” (quoted in Niblo 89). Alemán himself directly invested in businesses and their links to foreign investors (ibid 212). Karl Schmitt likewise notes that “national development” had always relied heavily on foreign investment, and that the 1940s marked a time in which the relations between the Mexican State and its foreign investments surged (though often with contradictory effects) (42-44).

Like the other Spanish exiles, Buñuel's personal history was framed not by a socialist revolution but by an ever-present, encroaching authoritarian national identity that he saw as a central destructive element within his own, native Spain.<sup>33</sup> This film alludes to the burgeoning conservative ethos that can emerge from popular culture. In fact, even though the film's narrative never leaves 1900, its struggle between old (conservative Christian) and new (dictatorial), between the negative spirit of "mysticism" and the positive spirit of rationality, slyly suggests repetition. The impulse to repeat is always present. The colonel's need to make the peasant repeat himself is one instance, Beatriz and her repeated embraces with her lover is another. Here, the repetitions of the authority figures (of colonel, of priest, or of lover) allude to the present moment. It calls into question the strong national narrative in Mexican cultural and historical discourse which suggests that authoritarianism is over; limited particularly to pre-revolutionary occurrences.

The film's allegorical treatment explicitly rejects a dominant national narrative; it is no surprise that *Nazarín* emphasizes ruins as opposed to monuments. In the film—allegorical ruins dissolve the nation's crumbling rhetorical formation. The skirmish between Nazarín and the state, between his mystical understanding of Catholicism and more bureaucratic Church institution admits the impossibility of any unity between experience and a totality of history. Discarding the struggle between old forces and new ones for the domination of the spirit of mankind, *Nazarín* instead poses the ruin as the dominant trope of national history.

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<sup>33</sup> Though copious examples of his anti-national thinking are expressed consistently in his film, his autobiography *My Last Sigh* claims it to originate with his viewing of the nationalist parades in Spain during his early childhood (42).

### 3.5 *SIMÓN DEL DESIERTO: THE ANTIDELUVIAN IN THE CONTEMPORARY*

With *Simón del desierto*, Buñuel returns to *Nazarín*'s image of man among (or in this case above) the ruins and detritus of contemporary society. The film is based loosely around the story of Saint Simeon Stylites and recounts the mundane and diabolical temptations of an ascetic named Simón, who lives atop a pillar in the desert. While the film is certainly not ignored by film scholarship and history, it resists categorization within Buñuel's heterogeneous oeuvre. Buñuel shot it quickly in between the filming of two of his most famous French pieces, *Le journal d' une femme de chambre* (*Diary of a Chambermaid*, 1964) and *Belle de Jour* (1967). Although produced in Mexico, it was produced after the Mexican era, at the moment that he returned to making European art films. It lacks the specificity of iconic Mexican imagery; the bulk of the film takes place in a desert that stands in for emerging Christian empires during the early reign of the Christian era. When the film does leave the past behind for the present, it resituates itself not in Mexico but in New York.

Because the film does not take place in Mexico (in fact, much of it occurs before Mexico existed), the film is usually not categorized as Mexican, but it is not a part of Buñuel's European oeuvre. As Michael Wood points out in his recent introduction to the Criterion Collection's new DVD, *Simón* was made in Mexico with Mexican actors. It also garnered the attention of Latin American radical filmmakers; Glauber Rocha ended up with a small role in the film.<sup>34</sup> It was

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<sup>34</sup> Glauber Rocha's involvement with this film gestures to the continuing relationship between Buñuel and Latin American (or "Third") cinema, even toward the end of his Mexican career. The Brazilian was friends with Juan Luis, Buñuel's eldest son, who introduced him to Rocha, who then put him in a scene. Of Buñuel, Rocha claims that "[Buñuel] is a personal, Latin American,



produced through Mexico's Estudios Churubusco-Azteca by Gustavo Alatriste, who saw the film as a vehicle for his wife Silvia Pinal. Pinal, who plays Satan, had several of her best roles in earlier Buñuel films and wanted to work with the director again. Claudio Brook, who plays Simón, also worked in a minor role with Buñuel and would later emerge as one of Mexico's significant character and art-cinema actors, working with Arturo Ripstein, Juan López Moctezuma, Guillermo del Toro and Paul Leduc. In addition, the film's larger crew is from the Mexican studios, including famous cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa at the height of his career.<sup>35</sup> As Wood notes, Figueroa's style matters; the thinness of *Simón's* parable is matched by Figueroa's strained and empty desert milieu. The film's strong narrative and stylistic similarities to Buñuel's earlier Mexican works is also important, and in fact illustrates the strong parallels between his Mexican and European works. Like *Nazarín* and *La voie lactée*, *Simón del desierto* incorporates Christian parables:

We might also see [*Simón del desierto*] as the middle work in a religious trilogy... we would find in *Nazarín* the story of a priest who wanted to be a good and simple man, only to learn that the world had no use for his brand of goodness and simplicity. In *The Milky Way*, we would discover the elaborate unreason of Christianity, the endless ingenuity and

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Spanish, Iberian filmmaker, who has his own language and a profoundly critical vision of the underdevelopment of the people, of the moralism of the middle class; for this I believe that Buñuel is the ultimate expression of "iberico/latino/americana" culture in cinema" (quoted in Torres 60).

<sup>35</sup> Figueroa had worked with Buñuel several times before, including *Los olvidados*, *Nazarín* and *El ángel exterminador*, and famously had a productive and difficult working relationship.

invention it has put into the maintenance of its extravagant claims. And between the two—between failed simplicity and delirious complication—we would glimpse Simon on his pillar... (*Simón* insert)

*Simón*'s satirical take on Christianity and its simultaneously sympathetic and absurdist view of the ascetic *Simón* underscores the intersections of Buñuel's Mexican cinema past and his European future. Just as this period of Buñuel's career is marked by shifts between national industries, this period of his filmmaking also indicate stylistic and political shifts away from genre pictures and toward larger allegories of Christianity and civilization. However, we can also see a strong connection of this predilection for allegorical images, something that I suggest bridges Buñuel's films from Spain, to Mexico, to France and is especially important to his later Mexican and post-Mexican European filmmaking.

The character of *Simón* is inspired by Saint Simeon Stylites, an ascetic of the fifth century from the newly emerging Byzantine Empire, now Syria. The original Simeon embraced a life of extreme penitence, eventually leaving his monastery to live on higher and higher pillars to escape the sins scattered on the earth. The holy Anchorite preached to his disciples of the dangers of excess and the rewards of austerity, and would not even allow women to approach the pillar. His death spawned many imitators, and the original saint is actually one of three sanctified Simeon Styliteses. The *Simón* of Buñuel's film is not Simeon Stylites but one of the many ascetics that populated the desert during the early Christian era.<sup>36</sup> This ambiguity of the figure makes it appear as if the early Christian desert was awash with religious ascetics. Instead of

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<sup>36</sup> The film refers to Simeon Stylites as his "Father" although that word could also be hyperbolic and metaphorical, *Simón*'s figurative parent.

making the Simón the original or ‘historical’ Simeon he is one of many possible Simeons, thus shifting the story from an accurate recreation to parable characterized by possible historical events rather than the specificity of hagiography.

The film satirizes both the emerging dogma of Christianity and the saintly Simón himself, without showing Simón to be either corruptible or dishonest. The film begins as Simón is moving from his established pillar to another, larger pillar donated by a wealthy patron. As a priest notes, Simón has stood atop this shorter pillar for six years, six weeks, and six days. Now, a benefactor has given Simón a larger pillar that will allow him to be further away from the sin that collects beneath him. The priest of course remains ironically ignorant; Simón’s time spent on the pillar is 6-6-6, which is the mark of the devil. Also, he has shifted to the higher pedestal because of someone else’s worldly wealth. The film continues to satirize these priests and their ignorance, naïveté, and dour seriousness. Even as Simón remains steadfast, the priests appear loyal and dogmatic but exceptionally unintelligent. For example, a monk becomes overwhelmed by the devil in an effort to cast doubt on Simón’s saintliness. This monk becomes possessed and tries to show Simón as a fraud. He stuffs Simón’s satchel with foods such as cheese and wine, trying to show that the ascetic is a hypocrite who gorges himself when no one is watching. The other priests still believe Simón, and pray with him.

As the accusatory priest finds himself unable to pray, he verbally attacks the other priests, claiming that he will eventually make Simón blaspheme against the Holy Sacrament and the Virgin Mary. He then begins a series of attacks on all things that the priests hold sacred, calling “Viva Satana” and “Muera Jesu Christo”. The priests then respond with the opposite call (“Muera Satana” or “Viva Jesu Christo”). At one moment the accursed priest yells “¡Viva la apocatastasis!” to which the others respond “¡Muera la apocatastasis!” One priest looks at

another and asks “What is apocatastasis?” and the other priest merely shrugs. The devil understands Christianity better than the monks; for the monks, it is not important to be knowledgeable, merely contrary. In addition, one priest becomes confused in the Viva/Muera calls, accidentally yelling “Muera Jesu Christo” in response to the devil. The slip of language here points to a juxtaposition between dogma and belief. Equally ironic is the actual meaning of the apocatastasis, the early Christian idea that even Satan will eventually return to God’s fold. This sparring between the priests and the Devil illustrate the subtle slippage between past and present that dominates Buñuel’s parables. Declared an Anathema in the year 543, the apocatastasis was not considered accursed previously but was part of theology. While not part of dogma, it nonetheless was not technically against dogma until the sixth century. In other words, although the devil claims “Long Live the Apocatastis,” he has no interest in returning to God’s kingdom. At the same time, priests during the era Simon Stylites would not have been opposed to such a possibility. Their dogmatic responses previous to the creation of law indicate the presence of the now in the past, just as this era outside of history will thrust itself into the present.

By turns vain, inept, or wholly corruptible, the priests of the film illustrate the failure of institutional Christianity to engage with the rules and laws it espoused. The priests are unable to adhere even to their own laws. One priest glances at a woman and therefore considered too weak of flesh to pray with Simón. Another priest, who is young, elegant, and good-looking, offends Simón by his neatness. As Raymond Durnat notes, this moment corresponds not with the notion that cleanliness is next to godliness but that early Christian devotion was characterized by dirtiness and grossness of body (165). The priest’s cleanliness is an instance of sin not of purity. Like many characters in Buñuel’s films, this handsome, well-shaved priest is offended by the sin

of others even as he himself sins.<sup>37</sup> While he is vain, he is hypocritically offended by the goatherd's pleasures. During one of the film's scenes, the goatherd is aggravated because his goat cannot be milked. The priest is sympathetic until the shepherd claims that he enjoys the physical sensation of rubbing the goat's teats. Disgusted by this subtly sexual moment, the priest turns from the goatherd and tells him to behave in a Christian manner. Even though he himself enjoys pleasure, he condemns it in others. The goatherd is much the same, he rejects Simón's blessing because the Saint does not distinguish between himself and his goats. The goats, he insists, are animals unlike him. Although the goatherd is himself a sinner, he still considers himself above God's other creatures.

Even the corresponding peoples of the desert—those who revere the saint from afar—are tarred with the same brush of corruption and ineptitude. One man, a reformed criminal, asks the saint for the return of his hands. His hands were chopped off, he claims, as punishment for stealing. However, he insists that he is reformed and needs his hands back for planting crops. Simón prays and the thief's hands are restored. However, when his child questions the nature of those hands ("Are those your old hands?"), the thief immediately hits him. Much like Nazarín's failed attempts to help Andara and Beatriz, Simón's help does not necessarily indicate any kind of spiritual or Christian improvement in those that he assists. Again, the gap between intent and practice points to the religion's façade. Simón's belief, also unwavering, is useless and lacks the ability to minister effectively.

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<sup>37</sup> The quintessential example shows the old street musician, Don Carmelo, complaining about sin even as he gropes young girls and beats his helper.

Simón not only rejects sin but also avoids any physical being or personal pleasure for fear of being tainted. Although the character is never shown as wavering in his faith, he is nevertheless self-absorbed and often quite obtuse in his relationships to others. For example, as he switches pillars, his mother comes up to embrace him. He is made so uncomfortable by women that he cannot abide even his mother's presence, telling her that they will meet again in another life. He likewise tells a priest that his sinful lust means that he must not pray with him at all. Even his feces is inhuman and otherworldly; he tells the goatherd that, as he simply eats lettuce and only drinks water; his feces is just like that of his goats. This begins a continuing satirical theme that lasts throughout the film: Simón's disgust with physicality and its correspondence to sin. Simón's denial of others' needs and his repulsion for the corporeal parts of man underscores his inability to interact even with those who firmly revere him.

He is also removed from worldly affairs and even the language that describes them. One monk brings news of the world to Simón. He climbs a ladder to the tower to ask forgiveness for lusting after a woman. Humorously, Simón forgives him for this, while earlier in the film he condemned a man for doing the same thing. Like the earlier *El ángel exterminador*, Buñuel inserts incongruous repetition into the film. After gaining forgiveness, the monk then brings the saint news of worldly matters: that the hordes are invading Holy Rome and will soon be in the desert. The monk attempts to wax philosophically with Simón, noting that "Man always destroys man for the accursed 'yours' and 'mine'." Simón cannot understand these words that have no meaning for him. The monk attempts to explain with Simón's food bag, saying, "This bag is yours, right? If I take it, we'll fight." He attempts to fight with Simón over ownership of the bag, but the Saint, still not understanding, says "Okay, [the bag] is yours." Simón's obstinate refusal to even understand the existence of possession makes him useless in this world, symbol or no.

Satan's temptations into sin, however, form the film's strongest allegory, create the film's theatricality, and thrust this pre-history into the present.<sup>38</sup> His disembodied and impractical spiritualism almost makes it appear useless for Satan to attempt to tempt him into sin, because he is an irrelevant figure already. And yet, following the structure of the parable, Satan comes to tempt him three times before finally wrenching him unwillingly from his pillar. In the first attempt, Satan appears dressed as a young girl (although still in the body of Silvia Pinal). Playing a child's game with a hoop and stick, she sings a song that starts out quite sweet and then tempts the saint by lifting her skirt to expose her stockings and garters. When he refuses her, she changes to a naked old hag, giving him a rude gesture and walking off in disgust. The second time she appears in the guise of God as Shepherd. In this famous image, Pinal has a short beard, a man's hairstyle, and a lamb in her arms. Through God's voice, she tells Simón that she is displeased with his asceticism, and to please her he must indulge himself and return to the pleasures of the world. In a fantastically disconcerting moment, she kicks the lamb in anger when he refuses to yield his position. The third time that Satan arrives, she arrives in a coffin. Unlike the rest of the film's magical or miraculous events, this one is particularly staged. Accompanied by trolley sounds, the coffin slides up to the pillar "like a cross between a lizard

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<sup>38</sup> The term "pre-history" here does not literally mean before human history. Instead, it is a time before the modes of history of the present. Simón's time is without nation, without modernity, and without specific markers of identity. In a certain sense this "pre-history" of Simón's era mimics the similar pre-history of the earliest episodes of *¡Que Viva México!*, which are not literally out of time but outside of a Western colonial hegemony.

and a torpedo” (Durgnat 167), and then the devil pops up like a reanimated corpse. She asks once more if Simon will yield, and of course he refuses yet again.

These temptations re-enforce the allegorical notion of temporal decline. In the first instance, Satan demonstrates the decline of man (or in this case woman). The beautiful body of the woman (and her playful, girlish dress) hides within the decaying human body, almost ready for the grave. In the final instance, the coffin indicates the real place of man, far away from Simón’s self-aggrandizing, skyward reaching pillar. In this final iteration of temptation, the coffin’s theatrically also points to the façade at play in these Christian parables. The coffin, the image of death re-appears not as sadness or mourning but as a piece of horrific theater.

When he refuses to yield, she forcibly removes him from his pillar and they end up at a nightclub in New York. He can only claim that he doesn’t like it and wants to go home, and she responds that someone has already taken his place. Not being the original Stylites, it seems appropriate that he is quickly replaced, exactly as he had replaced the original Simeon. The Buñuelian cruelty resurfaces here; although Simón wishes to be egoless, his insignificance becomes excruciating as he ends up in his own version of hell.

The film shifts from the unrecognizable desert to the skyline of New York in what is a temporal and spatial rupturing of the film milieu. After Simón refuses Satan for the third time, she tells him to get ready, because they are going to Black Mass. After claiming that “They are coming for us,” both characters gaze up, and then the image switches to a shot of an airplane passing by in the sky. After the airplane departs the screen, the film returns to Simón’s pillar, only now the pillar stands empty. Even though the sequence is cut together as if it follows a seamless trajectory between the characters’ eyes and the position of the plane, the background of the shots do not match. The two skies are completely different. The jarring of the image, then,



occurs through a juxtaposition of content and background. Simón's pre-industrial milieu does not correspond with an airplane, and even the skies don't match. The seamless shot connection, however, only exaggerates the shock of the image. This particular jarring brings a collision of past and present. Here the radical shifts in mise-en-scene emphasize the theatricality and falsity of the Christian parable. Simón's platform is indeed a stage setting. The momentary return to the pillar foregrounds the loss of Simón's world. Despite Simón's desire to be one with God and allied with him is not only thwarted but resolutely impossible. The devil acknowledges this fact when she explains to Simón that he cannot return to his beloved pillar. Thus, the gap in time is understood as a loss for Simón, although for the Devil it is understood that the loss of understanding is a renunciation of a particular fantasy.

This theatrical finale is not the same as the radical end of *El ángel exterminador*. In that film, its final scenes show the bourgeoisie trapped in a church as the masses riot in the middle of a city. The clash of these rioters is the image of the catastrophe spilling out over the film's narrative, which the jarring shock of *Simón* is the effect of a fracturing of what was once presumed whole. However, both indicate the impossibility of particular ideas of morality and society in the face of chaos. While *Simón del desierto*'s allegorical images are not explicitly images of ruin and death (like the ruins and corpses of *Nazarín*), they are nonetheless the images of that which cannot be, if only because Simón's steadfast faith is a performance of religious purity that is, in fact, unsustainable. The final sequence, the Devil's dancing at a fairly banal club in New York City, is the Black Mass but it is also the funeral for Simón's faith.

Given its blank and strained mise-en-scène and its parable structure, does *Simón del desierto* have any relation with Mexico at all? The difficulty in classifying it points toward this answer. First, it gestures toward Buñuel's filmmaking in Mexico itself: picaresque, episodic, and

always moving between different aesthetic styles and intellectual projects. However, the film's actual production provides a microcosm of Buñuel's larger difficulties of producing in Mexico and his status as an inside-outsider.

The film is episodic in part because he ran out of money; perhaps this is an apt metaphor for the sporadic nature of Buñuel's Mexican film production. He made many films, but not without financial strain and struggle to keep his vision in place. While *Simón* lacks the particulars of the Mexican milieu, its allegorical nature is indicative of the filmmaker's past informing his present cinema. Although *Simón* is far less specifically tied to a historical point, it continues *Nazarín's* episodic, allegorical structure, it also elides moral absolutes, either Christian or secular, and it engages with its subjects only by surveying the ruins; the film is mechanism for engaging with the present, modern world through the outmoded morality of those who attempt to traverse it.

### 3.6 CONCLUSION

*Nazarín* is explicitly concerned with the intricacies of past and present Mexico, while *Simón del Desierto* exists almost entirely in a non-historical, parabolic universe. However, both films clearly pose a figure of faith within the amoral world of religion, and both of these figures end up paralyzed by the milieu that they inhabit. In addition, neither film attempts to return uncritically to the possible unification between man and belief. Instead the religious man is an anachronism that cannot even understand that he stands among faith's ruins.

It is possible to understand these allegories as an attempt to negotiate his exile in Mexico and in cinema. As ruptures and repetition, allegory proves an appropriate aesthetic mode for

Buñuel, who examines the world of nations as a traveler, one who is exiled and welcomed, loathed and loved in his own countries. He brutally examines the regimes and hypocrisies of both left and right. He is concerned with material history but rejects dogma. In *Las Hurdes* and *Los olvidados*, he casts doubt on realism's perceptions of the poor, even as he contends with real material conditions. Through these two films, he narrows the gulf between transatlantic political entities, showing the sanctimoniousness and absurdity of both Spain and Mexico. This same rejection of left and right can be applied to his later "Christian" films. The Catholic Church is ridiculous, absurd, and mockable in these films, but reason and order provide no panacea. Simón and Nazario are "good," they are incorruptible but also useless, and archaic. We can neither empathize with nor condemn them. Instead, through these elusive figures, the films explore the ways that the modes of the past recur in the present. *Nazarín* confronts the authoritarian nature of the early twentieth century Mexican milieu as both specific to that moment and also as an impulse of a particular formation of a dictatorial society. The Spanish origins of the book *Nazarín* and even the priest himself serve to underscore the transitory nature of the film. Its shift to Mexico—indeed its necessary specificity of the Mexican milieu—follows even as the references to Spain are maintained in the film. Allegory remains both an apt technique for these particular films and a useful method of negotiating and eliding the rigors of borders. Even as *Nazarín* recasts Spanish literature as a film whose political associations remain present in both Mexico and Spain, *Simón* could demonstrate the inability even to clearly demonstrate a unique and absolute image of the politics of Mexican filmmaking.

#### **4.0 MEXICAN CINEMA AND THE ANARCHY OF TIME**

##### **4.1 CRISIS, NATION-BUILDING, AND NATIONAL CINEMA**

In my previous chapter I explore Luis Buñuel's films vis-à-vis Mexico's increasingly conservative political era and focus primarily on his later films rather than the bulk of his genre work from inside the studio system. In this chapter, I examine the interactions between transnational filmmaking styles and Mexico's classical filmmaking styles at the decline of the cinema's Golden Age. Specifically, I look at the work of one of Buñuel's screenwriters, a younger Spanish émigré Luis Alcoriza. Although he is still a relatively unknown filmmaker in the United States, Alcoriza's own projects are well-known in Mexico and Spain, and he is understood in Mexico one of the few excellent filmmakers working during the relative lull of the early 1960s. In this chapter, I present Alcoriza's work as a critique of the entrenched national iconography of the Golden Age from within the studio system. I assert that his early films present a counterexample to the Golden Age's story of Mexico and a rejection of the larger story of Mexico's cinematic production. Alcoriza's cinema, I argue, does not explore a stable narrative of Mexican identity but an anarchy of time. While never considered a master like Luis Buñuel, Alcoriza's films speak against the dominant idea of cohesion in national cinema and the national culture more generally. At certain times generic satire and at others surrealist invectives against

the state, Alcoriza's films eschew tradition, instead cementing his cinematic narratives in grotesque characters, modernist ambiguities, and theatrical milieus.

In a 1965 interview for the French cinema journal *Positif*, Alcoriza (along with Buñuel and writer Carlos Fuentes) decries the near impossibility of producing independent or intelligent films from within Mexico's national studio system, which by the early 60s had effectively shut out emerging young filmmakers and fallen into dull, reiterative patterns. The three point to numerous institutional sources for its intellectual vacuity, including the difficulties of securing funding and the overly restrictive, insular bureaucracy of Mexico's filmmaker's union (Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Producción Cinematográfica de México, or STPC). But in addition to institutional limitations, the filmmakers cite the significance of national concerns; in order to please foreign, particularly European, markets, the films needed to sell a particular image of the Mexican nation—bucolic, post-revolutionary, and exotic.

According to Alcoriza, the ossified images of the 1950s and 60s do not emerge in response to the decline of Golden Age cinema; rather, they are inherently linked to Mexico's most productive moments of filmmaking. He links the 1950s production concerns with the earlier, post-war films, which are part of the pre-war cinema structures of the late 30s. By evoking the earlier era, he criticizes both the project of a coherent national cinema and the international audiences that venerated it:

I can tell you what happened to Mexican cinema. It's after [World War II] that it became famous, right? Everywhere else, they had made films of war, 'brutal' propaganda film, and, at this time our films were presented in Europe, in the United States. They were 'calm,' they showed very beautiful landscapes—very bucolic, no?—told stories that were not very realistic, *soi-distant* poetics on the Indians, and introduced people who were

unknown for the rest of the world. Mexico was not known at this time, and the foreigners accepted this as something which was “different”. (53)

Significantly, Alcoriza cites the post-World War II moment as a problem given to Mexico by its prolific national cinema, particularly tying national cinema to national interests. The Mexican studio system, in its exportation of exotic difference, continued to produce a body of work that reified the 1910 revolution as the necessary outcome of the state.

Alcoriza’s synopsis of recent cinematic history makes several subtle but key points with regard to Mexican national cinema. The genre films, for example the *cabaretera* and revolutionary melodrama, consistently retell the narratives of the past. The films lack either the horrors of the current world stage, or place the traumas of war within a clear-cut setting of oppressor versus victim. At the same time, those bucolic landscapes immediately evoke the work of Emilio Fernández, whose rural landscapes, romantic Indians and sweet maidens had won big at Venice and Cannes. During the post-war era, foreign audiences found the bucolic landscapes and earnest peasants to be the new exotic, outside of the current political turmoil and fighting a much less sophisticated battle.

Alcoriza’s position, however, is somewhat distinct from other notable criticisms of 1950s and 60s Mexican cinema. Like Alcoriza, cinema scholars regularly criticize the Mexican studio system’s insular and stultifying bureaucracies as detrimental to Mexican filmmaking. However, they consistently use the term “crisis” to cement their critique. The members of the radical group *Nuevo Cine*, for example, begin their revolutionary journal by noting the emerging crisis of

Mexican cinema.<sup>39</sup> Likewise, in the 1965 polemic “Mexican Cinema: A Panoramic View,” notable film critic and screenwriter Manuel Michel claims that “Mexican cinema has been in a crisis for more than ten years. The films which we send forth from our studios belong on the lowest rung in the scale of artistic and expressive values” (46).

Although seemingly slight, the differences between Alcoriza’s statements in *Positif* and Michel’s “Mexican Cinema,” are firmly established through the notion of cinematic crisis. Alcoriza sees the flaws of 1950s and 60s Mexican cinema to be based out of the impossible promise of national cinema itself—that is, the idea that it can speak of a coherent national culture. Michel’s iteration of crisis establishes a particular linear temporality, restated through his statement “for more than ten years,” which places the crisis in a narrative of cinematic history. Whereas during the Golden Age, Mexican cinema was aesthetically interesting, it has since declined into a moment of crisis. Conversely, for Alcoriza, the form of national cinema production gives rise to the “vicious circle” of Mexican filmmaking, in which campestral pictures make money overseas, which is then returned to the studios that made more bucolic

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<sup>39</sup> Several young filmmakers formed the group *Nuevo Cine* in 1960, a group which positioned itself against the union. Similarly to other (Latin American) new cinema movements during the 1950s and 60s, the *Nuevo Cine* participants and supporters found Mexican cinema’s institutional aesthetic flaws to be linked to its economic policies. Critics charged 1950s Mexican institutions with producing a *bureaucratic* cinema, which *Nuevo Cine*’s anti-formulaic projects attempted to destabilize. Their manifesto is published in the first issue of their journal, *Nuevo Cine*, and, with the help of established filmmakers and writers such as Buñuel, Alcoriza, and Carlos Fuentes, they organized the first Mexican experimental film festival in 1965.

films (53). During the 50s, Mexican cinema was caught, frozen with its simple *charros* and turn of the century, romanticized revolutionary peasants who had, by the 1950s, become the entrenched symbols of the stagnant bureaucracy and the PRI. Their static formation, however, was formed long before the “crisis” that enveloped Mexican cinema in its later years.

This question of “crisis,” I contend, is not an arbitrary discussion of terminology but an investigation into the form and production of cinema, at a moment when the Mexican nation was itself fraught with instability.<sup>40</sup> Cinema critics’ gesture toward crisis, in fact, is wedded to dominant (if often retroactive) understandings of the larger Mexican culture. Even by radical Mexican film scholars, and even at alternative cinema’s most radical moment, the notion of crisis linked film criticism to Mexico’s conservative rhetoric far more firmly than those critics would have liked. In Mexico, the term has consistently reappeared in Mexican public discourse as a call for radical political change, but it has equally been deployed as a tool of conservative retrenchment. I will illustrate that the term’s consistency in Mexican nation discourse may say much about the unreachable and often conventional expectations of national cinema.

According to the studio’s most emphatic critics, the corruption of the process of Mexican filmmaking has led to the crisis at hand. When scholars such as Michel and the members of *Nuevo Cine* take up the term crisis in the 1960s, the word alludes not only to historically Mexican usages but also a Marxian context of a crisis of capitalism. The crisis of mid-century Mexican cinema, according to Michel, is a larger problem of Mexican (and more generally of

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<sup>40</sup> These many discussions of the quality and scope of Mexican cinema take place only a few years before the massacre at Tlateloco, which is widely acknowledged to be the effect of years of state corruption and instability. See Joseph, Rubenstein, and Zolov, 3-4 and 10-12.



Latin American) development and deepening corruption, as well as economic strategies that have led to dependency on the first-world. Thus, much of the critical work unfavorably equated studio practices to corrupt political and economic political practices of the 50s and 60s. For example, Michel introduces a particularly succinct economic corollary into his “Panorama.” Similar to the Mexican government’s increasingly corrupt bureaucracies, particular studio heads have been gaining wealth even as production financing disappears. Michel adds that

[I]n spite of the industry’s bankruptcy, the collapse of internal and external markets, the lack of investments and the difficulties of recovering invested capital, and despite the constant complaints of producers and technicians, some important fortunes have been made in the movie industry. It is not through a desire of self-sacrifice that many businessmen remain in the film industry” (46)

Michel draws attention here to the increasingly strange relationship between national cinema production and its myriad of markets: even when films lost money, certain producers could still make a profit. Critics of the Mexican industry (including both veteran and novice filmmakers, writers, and cinematographers) cite the collusion among studios, corporate and financial sectors, and the aging and sedentary union leaders. Mexican cinema’s remaining old guard had held tight to the financial and creative reins, thereby controlling creative input and managing national and international distribution (Baugh 28). Well-entrenched studios executives dominated all modes of mid-century cinema production, and their position as primary progenitors of domestic cinema was fully protected by the federal government, which fortified the exclusionary tactics that the industry promoted. Michel analogizes the studio to “a pump which extracts money for the benefit of a limited group of privileged people who have made fortunes while sheltered from risks by government agencies” (53). In particular, the Banco

Nacional Cinematográfico distributed funds for picture production based potential earning power and star recognition than creative merits (Michel 53). This pattern of film production, according to Michel and his youthful contemporaries, stemmed from a general crisis on an underdeveloped economy and the attempts to produce cinema from this particular economic position.<sup>41</sup> The 1950s and early 60s crisis of filmmaking, then, paralleled Mexico's burgeoning economic crisis. The filmmakers, dependent on external investment, used the international profits to benefit both themselves and their external investors, to the detriment of intellectual creativity and artistic quality.

Even though Alcoriza worked for this system on and off during this era, I argue that his cinema launched a radical critique of both the Golden Age and 1950s cinema. Alcoriza's intervention into the narrative of Mexican cinema can be seen through his use of several avant-garde traditions, including narrative techniques such as non-linear narratives and the introduction of chance. I also emphasize his use of the grotesque, not only because it counters the traditional figures that populate Mexican film but because it bridges differing aesthetics and tropes without resolving the intellectual tensions between them. Through the grotesque, Alcoriza's films bring together Spanish, French, and Mexican cinematic traditions but without moderating their inconsistencies. This use of the grotesque and other aesthetic strategies intervenes into the strong narrative of prolificness, crisis, and recovery at play the narrative of Mexican cinema. In doing

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<sup>41</sup> For more on the relationship between Mexican cinema and particular economic theories (such as development and dependency theories), and as well the particulars 1950s and 60s cinema's financial development strategies, see Michel, pages 47-53, Baugh 27-30, Berg 37-44.

so, it portrays Mexican as far more chaotic and heterogeneous than the earlier cinema proposes. More than that, it celebrates a cinematic anarchy that the Golden Age film forecloses.

I follow his urgent critique of Mexican cinema from his later screenplays to his earlier directed films. I examine his last screenplay *El esqueleto de la señora Morales* (1960), in tandem with *Los olvidados*, to explore the emergence of his grotesque tropes. I continue by examining how these grotesque tropes intervene into Mexico's cinematic "crisis" in three significant films, the campesino satire *Tlayucan* (1962), the indigenous drama *Tarahumaras (Cada vez más lejos)* (1965), and the comedic globalization film *Mecánica nacional* (1972). These films, I argue, are the most acute critiques of national cinema and those that most actively thwart that cinema's notion of progress and decline.

#### 4.2 ALCORIZA'S THEATRICAL CINEMA

While biography cannot begin to explain a body of cinematic work, the effects of Alcoriza's personal history form the basis of a discussion of his heterogeneous filmmaking style, which brings together several various aspects of inter- and intra- national film, literature, and theater. His nomadic young life, his early career in theater, and his personal and professional relationship with Luis Buñuel and the Spanish diaspora are strongly evident in his cinematic worlds. Born in Badajoz, Spain, Luis Alcoriza de la Vega's early life was spent traversing Spain's disparate landscape as a child-actor in his familial nomadic theater troupe, "La Compañía Alcoriza." The company's range of works varied from classical Greek drama to contemporary Spanish works, but the troupe specialized in *teatro de policíacos* (police theater), noir-styled crime thrillers. In its later incarnation, the family troupe enlarged its repertoire to

include most other forms of traveling spectacle, including: flamenco, song and dance numbers, and mime (Pérez Turrent 9). The family's theatrical evolution occurred primarily as a means of survival; as the political situation in Spain continued to deteriorate, the troupe traveled farther and incorporated a wider range of styles and genres. In 1936, La Compañía Alcoriza fled Spain to avoid the emerging conflict between nationalists and popular front republicans. The troupe established themselves at first in Tangiers—performing in Tangiers, Morocco, and other Northern African countries, then eventually immigrated to Latin America before migrating north and establishing themselves among the Spanish exiles in Mexico City.

In Mexico City, the young actor's career became less nomadic and more established as he began to perform locally in small productions, particularly passion plays and other styles of religious theatre. During this early period of his adult acting, he alternated between stage and screen, first appearing on film in a small film role in a 1943 production of *Les Misérables*. His experience in religious theater (and the styles and techniques associated with them) help launch his acting career through an alluring and provocative rendition of Jesus Christ in Miguel Contreras Torres's *María Magdalena* (1945).<sup>42</sup> Although the film was conceived as a star vehicle for Madea de Novara, the role of Christ made Alcoriza famous. His performance could have launched a serious career as a film actor, but his rather insurmountable portrait of Jesus would also be the pinnacle of his acting career. Shortly after his stint as Christ, Alcoriza met

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<sup>42</sup> Quite popular, the big-budget depiction of the life of Mary Magdalene was sold as an epic melodrama. The film is known for its marked chemistry between Jesus and Mary, demonstrated most viscerally when Christ evacuates Mary's body of the seven deadly sins, which the film evokes using seven expressionist superimpositions.

Buñuel through mutual Spanish acquaintances and began his writing screenplays for the infamous director.

This well-established link to Buñuel proved to be both an advantage and a drawback for the young director. On the one hand, working with Buñuel established Alcoriza's reputation both internationally and in the Mexican studio system; his breakout film, *Los Jovenes (The Youths* 1961) received a fairly sizable budget and screened at the Berlin film festival, a feat unknown among new Mexican directors at the time. However, his association with Buñuel also effected reception of his films; Alcoriza's work has always been compared to his friend and mentor's cinema. Despite winning several international awards for directing (including awards at Cannes and Berlin), many critics judge his works only through the lens of Buñuel's films.<sup>43</sup> Often, his interviewers and critics focus on either his personal experiences with Buñuel or the difference between Alcoriza's own cinematic style from the other's forceful, iconic imagery.<sup>44</sup>

There are certain, important differences between Buñuel's and Alcoriza's work. In my previous chapter, I argue that Buñuel's European-inflected Mexican cinema offers a particularly brutal version of the national ethos that was at odds with that projected through Mexican cinema. Buñuel's cinema engineers a recurrence of the past, in which the authoritarian repressions of the nineteenth century regime re-emerges in the increasingly bureaucratic 1950s Mexican state.

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<sup>43</sup> For example, one interview compares the later *El oficio más antiguo del mundo* with Buñuel's *Belle de jour* (1967), even as Alcoriza attempts to evade the problem of comparison (Pérez Turrent 54-5).

<sup>44</sup> For example, in *13 Mexican Directors*, one section of Alcoriza's interview is called "Portrait of Luis Buñuel."

Alcoriza continues the critique of Mexican nationalism, but his films are even more removed from the specificities of Europe. Instead, his satires engage explicitly with what he terms the peculiarities of the Mexican ethos but incorporate a myriad of European and Mexican styles to create his films. Much less overtly avant-garde than Buñuel, one of the most significant and interesting attributes of Alcoriza's film is the uneasy tensions of European modernism, national parody, and theatrical staging. The films are at their most relevant when these tensions reveal the flaws in the concept of national cinema itself. And, while the two filmmakers shared common social and political interest; their films illustrate a certain divergence in tone, as Tomás Pérez Turrent notes in his series of interviews, the eponymously titled *Alcoriza*: "There are similarities between Alcoriza's and Buñuel's aesthetics, even apart from the surface details. [They have] the same conception of love, family, religion and their influences on men, but the manner of development is completely different" (53). Buñuel's illustrations of Mexican culture, as well as the brief moments in which he satirizes it, illustrate the ambivalent relationship between Buñuel and the country he lived in for most of his adult life. Despite Buñuel's scathing depictions of the Mexican bourgeois, its clergy, and its general deployment of nationalism, Buñuel forever considered himself a European filmmaker, distant from the minutiae of Mexico's national cinema—an outsider who was paradoxically also a member of the filmmaker's union. Alcoriza's best films, on the other hand, are firmly guided by a constant satirical attack on Mexico's national media institutions and the climate of censorship that propagated the notion of a whole and unique culture.

If Buñuel is Mexican cinema's accidental filmmaker, then Alcoriza is one of its most deliberate, in that he labors over the paradox of national cinema more than almost any other filmmaker in Mexico. From this point, it is possible to fully grasp the real difference between

Buñuel and Alcoriza's films, the earlier mentioned "tonal" difference. Alcoriza's firm stance from within a project never entirely destroys the idea of "nation" in cinema and lacks the cataclysms of Buñuel's Mexican oeuvre. Although both directors re-engineer the story of history firmly entrenched in Mexico's cultural imagination, Alcoriza avoids the final moments of catastrophe so evident in Buñuel's films (the world-as-garbage ending of *Los olvidados*, for example, or the recapturing of the bourgeois in their cathedral at the end of *El ángel exterminador*). Instead of the calamitous disintegration of meaning that characterizes Buñuel's cinematic universe, Alcoriza's fictive milieu is never entirely emptied of significance. As Charles Ramirez Berg argues, redemption is at least theoretically possible in Alcoriza's films—even if liberation never actually occurs—and in fact is always remote from those who reside in the films' milieus (186). This ambiguity of meaning, I argue in the following pages, is derived from Alcoriza's particularly theatrical style of character and setting formation, a style, from a substantial integration of European avant-garde and modernist styles.

#### **4.3 THE GROTESQUE IN *EL ESQUELETO DE LA SEÑORA MORALES***

Distant intellectuals, officious bureaucrats, drunken *machistas*, and callous, naïve U.S.-American tourists are recurrent figures in Alcoriza's films. These tropes are markedly different from the archetypal figures of Mexico's Golden Age; they deviate from what David William Foster calls the 'pathetic mode' typology common to earlier era (Foster 57). While most visible and clearly exaggerated in *Mecánica nacional*, these exaggerated, tragi-comic figures are present throughout the whole of Alcoriza's directorial projects and screenplays. The distinction here is a subtle but significant digression from earlier uses of Mexican types. In the early moments of the

post-revolutionary state, Mexico's national intellectuals, muralists, and writers strove to define and represent figures of Mexican identity in the decades following the revolution. In a similar manner, the film industry successfully deployed visual images of national types. Much of this national cinematic imagery was disseminated through particular cinematic types, for example the suffering mother, the down-trodden cabaret dancer, and the thieving but good-natured *pelado*. Sympathetic and unable to transcend class or societal limitations, these tropic figures often affirm their society's status quo. For example, Roger Bartra argues that Mario Morena's popular *pelado*-figure Cantinflas subverts individual authority while never attempting to undermine the structures that cement its dominance: "the verbal confusion of Cantinflas, rather than serving to criticize the demagoguery of the politicians, actually legitimizes it" (Bartra 39). Figures such as Cantinflas resolve tensions through laughter at pain without changing the underlying corruption and inequality that his laughter acknowledges.

In contrast to the loveable miscreants, Alcoriza's unsympathetic, typical figures adopt varying grotesque characteristics and stylizations. These burgeoning grotesque figures emerge first in his many collaborations and then in his own directorial projects. For example, his early collaborations with Buñuel produced these figures in varying nascent or completed forms. While Buñuel and Alcoriza collaborated on nine films together, their most famous, *Los olvidados*, clearly illustrates their interest in shifting tropic cinematic figures from constructive to critical. The acclaimed *Los olvidados* thwarts conventional conceptions of Mexican types; in particular, the figure of the mother is particularly dismantled and renegotiated. As opposed to the usual trope of the de-sexed, long-suffering mother, *Los olvidados*'s mother figure is sexualized, selfish, and occasionally cruel. The possibilities of the grotesque, however, are most recognizable in the figure of Don Carmelo, blind street musician abused and humiliated by the street gangs. Despite



being beaten and robbed, Don Carmelo is not a sympathetic figure but a highly disturbing one. His calls for a more traditional “Porfirian” society underscore his passion for dominance and cruelty, as does his thwarted attempts to grope a young, neighborhood girl and his abuse of a meek orphan. Don Carmelo’s turns toward depravity and cruelty even as he attempts to characterize himself as the harbinger of society’s coming amorality renders him only absurd and despicable, a deviation from indigent characters of Mexico’s earlier cinema.

Even apart from his partnership with Buñuel and the attempts to manipulate earlier genres, Alcoriza’s other collaborations affirm the screenwriter’s predilections toward the creation of grotesque characters and tropes.<sup>45</sup> Significantly, his collaboration with Rogelio A. González’s on *El esqueleto de la señora Morales* appears quite relevant for understanding this move toward more absurdly grotesque characters and their importance for a larger societal and cinematic critique. This focus on *El esqueleto* does not mitigate the importance of Alcoriza’s collaborations with Buñuel or any other director. In fact, it is arguably the former’s close working relationship with the latter (and producers Oscar Dangiery and Antonio Matouk) that allowed him to move into directing (Mora 106). The relation between collaborators is always complex; it becomes difficult to ascertain what the relation is between script and film.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> See Acevedo-Munoz 29.

<sup>46</sup> Although screenwriters are not usually considered the “author” of any particular film (and I am not attempting to establish either their authorship or a director’s), the vast number of Alcoriza screenplays (and their certain similarities) make their examination productive in understanding certain figures that reoccur in both his directed works and in works he wrote for others. Also, it is important to note that in 1940s, 50s, and 60s Mexican cinema, screenwriters were considered

Significantly, however, *El esqueleto*'s script is clearly evident in the final cinematic product, and critics agree that he was a significant force behind the film: "[In the film] the social satire was mixed with a witty sense of the macabre. Everything was sardonic, morbid, and in it there was the germ of Alcoriza's future work in this register. Rogelio A. González, who at one time gave the illusion of a 'man with a gift for comedy'... limited himself to illustrating the script." (Pérez Turrent 13). *El esqueleto*'s grotesquely conceived characters foreground Alcoriza's later stylings; in this film, the grotesque emerges as a transnational bridge between national tropes. In other words, the trope allows for the critical co-existence of the films' black humor, local satire, theatrical milieus, and surrealist tendencies, a co-existence that creates an intellectual tension without resolving difference. I argue that the grotesque changes the notion of action in film, removing from the narrative of crisis and instability and instead articulating a realm of multiple existent possibilities.

From its neo-classical inception, the grotesque has encompassed a myriad of definitions and uses, but it is defined most simply as an artistic element that brings together two incongruous

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quite pivotal to the creative production of the film, for several reasons. First, many would-be directors were kept from directing from the rigid STPCM, and screenwriting became a potential location of creative power (in the same manner, famous cinematographers such as Gabriel Figueroa would also vie for creative control). Second, many screenwriters were also internationally recognized novelists from both Mexico and Latin America (Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, and Juan Rulfo, to name a select few), and lent their international reputations to Mexican film productions. Often better established than the directors themselves, novelist could retain much more creative control than other screenwriters in the U.S. and Europe.

effects: for example, mirth and horror or allure and disgust. Considered at once a trope, effect, and style, it produces an affective disjunction; it is a form which resists a seamless unification of various physical and emotive responses. This excessive style disturbed Renaissance tastes, and the reactions produced by such disjointed sculpture were characteristic of “the mixture of attraction and repulsion, of emotional closeness and aesthetic distance [that] is still a hallmark of those phenomena we [today] address as the grotesque, and nearly their only predictable constant” (Remshardt 6). In literature, it has much the same function; the technique is often present in varying genres and is frequently a renegotiation of how they are expressed. Thus, the effect emerges in works as distinct as the political satire of Swift’s “A Modest Proposal,” the romantic tragedy of Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and the radical metaphor of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. Likewise, the effect is expressed through exaggeration of characters and archetypal figures. In many literary examples, highly monstrous and exaggerated populations dominated the landscape. Emblematic examples of such exaggerated figures include the Lynch family in Beckett’s *Watt* (which epitomizes biological denigration from madness, poverty, and inbreeding) and the Ubu royal family in Alfred Jarry’s *King Ubu* (which is nothing but ravenous hunger).

For literary critic Philip Thompson, the grotesque is both formal and cognitive, the rupture that occurs when something becomes horrifying precisely because it produces laughter (Thompson 7). On the other hand, Ralf Remshardt defines the term both formally and theoretically; the text produces the grotesque in the gaps between reason and language (Remshardt 5). In Kenneth Burke’s description, the grotesque is a reoccurring style that resurfaces at exceptional moments in history. At times of radical realignment of the structures of power, an era’s turbulent forces render classical aesthetics false and dissatisfying. During these

shifts, the regularity of the classical approach is deemphasized. Artistic and literary variations replace the attempted consistency of traditional styles, and the uniformity of generic work is profoundly disturbed. Instead of the laughter which relieves the tensions in traditional comedy, incongruities are produced *without* the relief of laughter (Burke 58-9). For Burke and Remshardt, the grotesque appears as the clash of opposites appropriate to an expression of existence at moments fraught with political and social complexities.

Without attempting to concretize a definition, it is nonetheless possible to trace these various elements and possibilities within the highly visual medium of cinema. Many of the possible effects that characterize the grotesque—the propensity toward radical visual metaphor, the disturbance of classical aesthetics during history’s more complex moments, and the tendency toward exaggeration—flourish in cinema. The grotesque often appears in celebrated “high modernist” traditions of cinema (for example, Federico Fellini’s and Ingmar Bergman’s most exaggerated pieces), and in smaller, avant-garde projects (including various instances of expressionism and surrealism). Luis Buñuel, in fact, is commonly acknowledged as a key grotesque filmmaker; in his films, the consistent pattern of alignment between sex, religion, and death creates the dissonant affect that constitutes this form.

The grotesque in Alcoriza’s films arises from tensions and collusions between appetites and piety, religion and sexuality, and deformities of both body and soul. *El esqueleto*—adapted from British Author Arthur Machen’s “The Islington Mystery”—chronicles one man’s desire to plan and execute the perfect murder. In the film, the victim in question is the man’s shrewish, pious wife. Pablo Morales (Arturo de Córdova), a happy-go-lucky taxidermist with a taste for the finer things in life, suffers under the dominance of Gloria (Amparo Rivelles), his physically crippled and overly-religious wife. After she steals his money for alms, breaks his camera, and

accuses him of domestic abuse, he murders her and deftly destroys her corpse in his taxidermy shop. But when her priest spies a deformed skeleton in Pablo's shop window, Pablo is arrested and tried for murder. He is acquitted, however, after medical experts confirm that the skeleton is not Gloria's. Pablo celebrates his victory, confessing that the skeleton was made of spare parts. By instigating the trial and focusing on the skeleton, the priest in fact ensures Pablo's legal victory. Pablo's celebration is short-lived, however, as he (along with the priest and Gloria's shrewish friends) dies from accidentally drinking the same poison that killed his wife. A brief examination of these two central characters—the sanctimonious Gloria and the prurient Pablo—illustrates the formation of Alcoriza's grotesque in his writing and also elucidates the importance of the monstrous and bizarre to Alcoriza's radical reorganization of Mexican intra-national types and the amalgamation of incongruous elements so central to the grotesque.

It is possible to analyze the film through these figures, whose grotesque appearances emerge from their status as neither sympathetic miscreants nor tangential foils. Instead, the film's composition of Pablo and Gloria are emblematic of the commingling of various national tropes and styles upon which the film's absurd style rests. Gloria is on the one hand a conglomeration of stereotypes—her religiosity and officiousness are hyperbolic instantiations of the Mexican middle-class. She tortures her husband mercilessly, criticizing his hedonistic nature and insulting his love of photography and taxidermy. In addition, she refuses his romantic intentions, gives all his money to a rigidly moral priest and his gaggle of parishioners, and tells her brother-in-law that Pablo physically abuses her. She is constructed as an abhorrent, flat figure who is obsessed with spiritual and bodily purity. Even though her lameness is a source of pity, the story calls attention to the grotesque pleasure of her disfigured leg; she forces the attention on it by making her husband place two different shoes on the artificial foot. Although she is

rendered abhorrent by her denigrating moralism and abject piety, she is recognized as grotesque from her ruined body. Her leg is the moment of recognition, but, in this case, the part (her deformity) and the whole (her person) are the same. Her desire to be sexless, antiseptic, and bodiless is impossible. She is in fact known by her deformity, even by the priest who is always gesturing toward the heavenly afterlife where the soul can exist without the suffering of the body.

In a similar manner, Pablo is the personification of a genial Mexican stereotype; he is a quintessential image of easy-going, lascivious, and pleasure-seeking *machista*. The characters' exaggerations reference the many grotesque literary and theatrical figures that came before *El esqueleto's* satirical, Anglo source material. Like Swift's upper-class gourmand and Jarry's *Ubu*, for example, Pablo's appetites refute realism or depth of character. At the same time, the film reimagines the trope of the grotesque *criminal* which consistently recurs in nineteenth and early twentieth-century British detective fiction and horror, the genre from which Arthur Machen's story emerges. Machen's main character is fascinated with the idea of enacting the perfect crime, not unlike the villains and protagonists in Arthur Conan Doyle's detective fiction from the same period. Like Conan Doyle's work, the crimes are understood as *grotesque*, as violent and abusive beyond what could be called 'normal' or logical criminal activity.

*El esqueleto de señora Morales* liberally uses elements of the theatrical and literary grotesque (for example, satire and absurdity). In fact, the film combines several styles of humor: what Alcoriza calls "Anglo-Saxon" black humor, Mexican satire, and Spanish characterizations all form its biting and unnerving comedy (Pérez Turrent *Alcoriza*, 13). This black humor is perhaps most transparently evident in the scene Gloria's vivisection; at the film's most unnerving moment, a dead body becomes the film's eponymous object when Pablo spends a long, blissful

afternoon in his taxidermy workshop cutting and sectioning his wife's murdered corpse. At times both amusing and terrifying, the scene's humor emerges from its exaggerated desecration. As a jaunty tango plays, Morales sings and cheerfully chats with Gloria's dead body, as previously stuffed animals (and Pablo's still living pet hawk) look on stoically and without judgment at their creator. He looks to them both suspiciously and for approval, but of course, they've already taken their turn on the taxidermy table. Although their blank eyes cannot actively support the act, we know that he at least gains tacit approval; at least they will not disclose the gruesome act before them.

As he prepares to crack Gloria's ribcage, he smiles cynically and tells her "Oh, I forgot that you like me to wash my hands with rubbing alcohol." With this biting comment, Morales refers back to earlier moment in the film in which he attempts to seduce his wife into bed. An accidental view of her in the shower leads him to lusty feelings that he thought were already deadened due to her routine verbal abuse. He waxes nostalgic on their better days, before the accident and loss of her right leg made her angry and bitter. At first, she appears taken with his words of wooing. She lies down to submit but at the last moment says, in the voice of the suffering martyr, "please, at least wash your hands with alcohol first." After his long, skillful attempts to draw her into bed, her hyper-clinical understanding of sex revolts him, and he becomes disgusted with the prude that she has become. In the darkly humorous manner that underlies the "autopsy" scene, he acquiesces to her demands of cleanliness only in the process of eviscerating her already dead body. Our murderer laughs at his own joke, and his grotesque laughter is contagious in this scene, even though we are laughing with a killer.

The amalgamation of the *El esqueleto's* grotesque figures speaks to a larger merging of national stylistic elements in which the film engages. The film derives specific images that

clearly resonate with its British source material, “The Islington Mystery,” particularly in its appropriation of the criminal as grotesque and in its recurring images of stuffed and mounted dead animal. Although made most famous in *Psycho* (1960), the Hitchcock’s penchant for dead, displayed animals appears earlier, in *The Man who Knew Too Much* (1956). The potent, recurring image of the skeleton, however, is entrenched in the visual iconography of Mexico, a trope so recurrent in Mexican cinema that it had become cliché. The Day of the Dead skeleton—particularly the skull—links the worlds of the living and the dead, and Señora Morales’s supposed skeleton is the ever present reminder of the morose woman’s unhappy life and brutal death. Pablo emphasizes the significance of the skeleton’s previous “life” by talking intimately to skull as if it were his wife. Thus, the skull and the dead animals prove to be similar links between life and death: while the skeleton emblemizes the murdered remains, the dead animals reflect Pablo’s clinical dispassion with regard to his wife’s killing.

In contrast to the rather terse style of ‘The Islington Mystery’—in which more of the narrative is devoted to the very typical newspaper story frame—*El esqueleto* introduces several character types which clearly satirize Mexico’s wealthier classes. The priest is constructed as a Mexican religious despot and freeloader, while Pablo’s brother-in-law is a proto-typical Mexican bandit type with a gun on each side of his waist. The man threatens to kill Pablo if he leaves Gloria, because then the brother-in-law will be reduced to having this woman in the house. These excessive, tropic Mexican figures are not incongruous with the style of black humor that the film takes from the British short story; instead, because they are both rendered as burlesque absurdity, the two types function not as a release of cruel tensions but as an augmentation of them.

In *Esqueleto*, we have at hand a series of doubles: Pablo and Gloria are incomplete images of each other; Gloria’s soul is a mirror of her grotesque body, which is itself a doubling



of her deformed leg. Each fragment makes no sense alone. And yet, each fragment cannot fully stand in for a complete whole. For example, when the priest attempts to understand “Gloria’s” skeleton from the lone deformed lower leg, he finds that his argument cannot stand. The film likewise stands as a conglomeration of parts which do not form a centered whole. The Anglo-Saxon dark comedy stems from the original, British short story, the topical characters such as the priest and his parishioners and inherently Mexican figures, and theatrical exaggerations have roots in the European grotesque. All these myriad of differences together illustrate grotesque gaggle of incomplete forms that can only glimpse themselves in the other. Far from formulating the pleasure of closure, or the laughter of catharsis, the film produces no relief. And although this early film (again, a screenplay not directed by Alcoriza) does not introduce the question of cinematic crisis, it points to its critique, which Alcoriza illustrates more succinctly in his later Mexican satires.

#### **4.4 TLAYUCAN: MIRACLE AND CRISIS**

After *El esqueleto de la señora Morales*, Alcoriza quit writing screenplays for others to focus on directing his own films. While prolific, he had difficulty receiving consistently good reviews or large audiences. Some of his early films were considered witty satires, yet others appeared to repeat the same rigid patterns as other studio films. In examining their structures carefully however, the films’ abrupt ruptures, inchoate narrative turns, and grotesque machinations consistently undermine the seemingly simplistic cause and effect narrative styles. While most of Alcoriza’s films still retain much of their classical narrative structure, their use absurd images and satire to displace the importance of action, allowing the primacy of narrative

to falter. This particular complexity can be understood as a struggle through the larger problem of crisis in Mexican cinema. In the films I will discuss, *Tlayucan*, *Tarahumara*, and *Mecánica nacional*, a rejection of crisis not only speaks to the state of the Mexican film industry but to larger concerns of the narrative of Mexico as revolutionary state.

The earlier Mexican scholars' and filmmakers' tendencies to see cinema as "in crisis" can be firmly linked to the notion of crisis in Mexico more generally. Both historians and political theorists acknowledge that states with a history of revolution have often retroactively pointed to a crisis as the catalyst through which the emerging revolution gained its foothold.<sup>47</sup> The ubiquity of crisis in nation formation is predicated by its particular connections to time. Benedict Anderson argues that nation formation is built on a homogenization of time.<sup>48</sup> If the nation progresses, together, in a homogenous time, then crisis forms the particular nodal point through which the homogenous time of the nation is realized. Crisis marks the homogenous time of the

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<sup>47</sup> For example, Balibar and Wallerstein allude to this crisis, most specifically, when analyzing the effects of Marxism on class struggle. Balibar claims that the impact of Marxism has particularly contradictory aspects with regard to national movements. But in this moment, Balibar also links the crisis of capital to national liberation struggles more generally (155).

<sup>48</sup> "What has come to take the place of the mediaeval conception of simultaneity-along-time is, to borrow again from Benjamin, an idea of 'homogeneous, empty time,' in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment but by temporal coincidence" (24). This temporal coincidence, all of those in the nation moving together, is marked by various, specificities of narration, for example, the dates on a newspaper, or the novelistic form.

nation in the narrative in history. The significant correlation between crisis and time, according to historian Reinhart Koselleck, surfaced during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, concurrent with European Enlightenment and the solidification of the secular nation-state.<sup>49</sup> The term—originally used in both medical jargon and Christian eschatology—gained its temporal turn as it became emblematic of national political instability and a perpetual state of anxiety:

“Crisis” became a fundamental concept for the philosophy of history, which ushered in the claim to interpret the entire course of history from a particular point in time. Since then, it is always one’s own particular time that is experienced as critical. And reflection upon one’s own temporal circumstances not only arrays the entire past for judgment, but displays the future for prognosis as well. (15).

In other words, vis-à-vis national identity, crisis solidifies the story of past, present and future. Crisis is a trial, or an occasion through which future history will judge the past. The political events of the future will be the effects of present day arbitration of calamities. Thus, to point out or articulate a crisis is always to position oneself (or one’s nation) in history, to see one’s present as the judgment of the past. Seen in the sense where history is the subject that judges the events of the world, “crisis” is the fulcrum through which history unfolds on the world’s stage. Thus, crisis’s temporal element is central to its use in a world dominated by the nation-state form, in that crisis presumes a linearity of history necessarily to the consolidation of a national body into the political form known as the nation-state.

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<sup>49</sup> In particular, Koselleck examines the term in concurrence with the emergence of the German state (13).

In Mexico, crisis and stability has dominated much of the political discourse from Spanish colonial rule to the new revolutionary republic. Most prominently, crisis served as a rhetorical catalyst through which nineteenth century positivist philosophers and state intellectuals attempted to solidify the nascent state under the guide of liberal philosophy. Like the nineteenth century European political philosophers, liberal factions understood Mexico's crisis to be a temporal one, that is, the nation's crisis must be overcome so that a future coherent Mexican nation could exist. However, liberal claims to crisis were neither primarily economic nor political but spiritual.<sup>50</sup> For those who sought to define the crisis, Mexico suffered from uneven development between populations. While urban centers developed industrial capitalist institutions and a small middle class, the outskirts were dominated by indigenous villages or semi-feudal farms, remains from the dominant Catholic orders of colonialism. In order to create a unified national body, liberals sought to bring all of Mexico's disparate populations to the "present" or emergent modernity. The positivists claimed that Mexico's indigenous people and its urban citizenry existed in different historical time; while some were born into modernity (and all that it confers), others, like Mexico's various tribal peoples, lived in the Stone Age.<sup>51</sup> Thus, they desired a normalization of time, a rejection of haphazard or anarchical impulses for a homogenization of time: all cultures living together in modernity. Notably, in this case the crisis is rooted in a particular temporal discrepancy: Mexico's instabilities emerge from a temporal difference, or from the inability to merge these varying populations into one historical age, therefore joining the populations into a national community. They called for a consolidation of

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<sup>50</sup> See Lund 79.

<sup>51</sup> See Zea 187-9.

these “slower” segments of the population into the national body; they called for a containment and dissipation of the perceived weaker, elderly, and dying populations.<sup>52</sup> From this particular nineteenth century example, several relevant points emerge concerning the use of “crisis” in the Mexican lexicon. Notably, this instance illustrates the concept’s fluidity while simultaneously adhering the term to a narrative of past, present and future. In other words, although the most significant aspect of the crisis is not material, per se, its most tangible element is its link to the national narrative of time. Thus, crisis’s link to linear temporality is assured, even as its subject remains flexible.

Due in part to its fluid nature, “crisis” and its use in political discourse remained even as revolution fundamentally changed the intellectual make-up Mexico’s state institutions. The 1910 populist revolution swept out much of the liberal fervor of the previous century; liberal ideologies, associated with the Porfirio Diaz dictatorship (1876-80, 1884-1911), were at least rhetorically minimized as material issues such as land reform and industry nationalization earned prominent positions in the national imaginary. Crises, by the mid-twentieth century, were predicated less on issues of soul and more on problems of material conditions. Discourse surrounding both the land reform crisis and the multiple economic crises of the latter twentieth century reflected the post-revolutionary regime’s more nuanced—but sustained—use of the term.<sup>53</sup> Quite rightly, Scott Baugh states that “the uses of the term with respect to Mexico’s economic history are too numerable to note... crisis appears as a malfunction in systemic

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<sup>52</sup> Lund 83-4.

<sup>53</sup> See Chávez 280-282.

operations, an interruption to the ordained and fundamental process, necessarily eliciting angst over the uncertainty of the outcome for sharers who strive for stability” (25).<sup>54</sup>

The crux of the issue of the term “crisis” is not whether or not there are particular financial or political problems in the complex and corrupt bureaucracy that underlay Mexico’s studio cinema and its unions. Neither can it be supposed that “crisis,” in its use in Mexican public discourse, is a blank term, an empty signifier that can be filled with any meaning whatsoever. The significance of crisis lies in its temporal register; the fact that crisis locates a moment where history must move forward. And specifically, terms is brandished specifically for national cohesion, whether in the guise of a nineteenth century liberal plea for modernity at the expense of the “Stone Age” Indians or a twentieth century call for the rejection of “development theory” on the part of emerging third-world nations. The common link from these examples is that past and present times must be adjusted in light of the future history of the Mexican nation.

Alcoriza’s films subvert the Mexican use of crisis in two ways. First, they use the grotesque figures to thwart those famous cinematic paradigms of earlier Golden Age cinema. The peasants, *campesinos*, and indigenous peoples of Alcoriza’s films are no longer the sweet but childlike creatures of the earlier age, but often cruel, complex, smart (or ignorant). By creating these grotesque figures, he pulls them outside of the romantic age and into the contemporary moment, consequently thwarting the images of the past. In doing so, he removes the crises of history from the story of Mexico’s progress to the revolution. Secondly, his narratives lack an apex, instead replacing crisis with chance events. Any event that even hints at

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<sup>54</sup> As Baugh’s comment illustrates, Mexico’s crisis, economic and otherwise, emerged not at the chaotic moments of revolution but at instances of relative stability.

crisis is farcical and spurious, even further undermining the idea of a turning point or event that will lead to revolution. In his films, coherency of the narrative's action is undermined by an equivocal propensity toward inaction in those same films. It is true that many of Alcoriza's films have endings that maintain the status quo (*Tlayucan* and *Mecánica nacional*, for example) and this rather conventional formal convention has in part encouraged generalist Mexican film scholars to read the films almost exclusively through their plots, judging potential radicality or conservatism through final outcome of events (Berg 186).

However, these same films nonetheless undercut the stable cause-effect structure of action, demonstrating contingent occurrences that usually exist outside of the logic of historical time. *Tlayucan* provides perhaps the most incisive example of this cinematic slight-of-hand, in which the narrative's pivotal crisis clearly proves its own absence at the point of which crisis *should* occur. Called his most surrealist film by scholars and critics, *Tlayucan* is able use the milieu of the bucolic melodrama, even as it manipulates the genre's conservative impulses.<sup>55</sup>

The ringing church bell ushers in the first images of the film's initially romantic milieu. The opening images of *campesino* life—the men ride mules between the ruins of the old colonialism and a mother feeds breakfast to the pigs and the family simultaneously—recall the life pastoral of classical Golden Age cinema, in which peasants lived out their day to day lives surrounded by the stunning beauty and tranquility, an image often used unselfconsciously by the Figueroa-Fernández filmmaking team.<sup>56</sup> The film's central protagonists, a peasant worker

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<sup>55</sup> For example, Pérez Turrent and Alcoriza discuss the film's surrealist moments in *Alcoriza* 29.

<sup>56</sup> For example, Fernández (director) and Figueroa (director of photography) created *Maclovía* (1948), *Río Escondido* (1943), and *María Candelaria* (1944), which all begin with such pastoral

Eufemio (Julio Aldama) and his wife Chabela (Norma Angélica) are cloyingly sweet throughout *Tlayucan*'s first half; they love each other and their son Nico dearly, displaying little rancor toward their impoverished lives. The other few major figures are likewise exaggerated and typical: the miserly landlord whose house literally overlooks the peasant's huts and who won't pay a centavo toward the church's newly acquired pearl, the ornery blind man, the gossipy widows and old maids, and the money-hungry priest who is forever attempting to wrest pesos from the peasants through the appropriate tool of shame. Similar to earlier pastoral cinema, an unanticipated chance intervenes into the peaceful and loving lives of Eufemio and Chabela.<sup>57</sup> Nico, however, develops a life-threatening disease, and his only hope for recovery is an expensive medication that the two peasants cannot afford. Eufemio and Chabela attempt to beg and borrow the money, but their attempts are fruitless. The malicious Tomás (the town's wealthy miser) suggests that he will give Chabela the money for carnal favors, but she cannot bring herself to touch him. The church cannot help (and the priest obviously remembers that Eufemio is derelict in tithing), and the priest suggests that he pray before the statue of Santa Lucia for this help that he so desperately needs. The priest's remarks are rather incongruous; he has already taken money from the peasants for the pearl in the saint's halo, the same statue before which

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scenes, characterizing the relationship between rural Mexicans and the land as being harmonious and natural.

<sup>57</sup> In many earlier melodramas and revolutionary melodramas, fate took the form of a conservative soldier or upper class man instigates the film's conflict, either by seducing the peasant woman, or attempting to do so and being rejected. However, in this case, as I will show, the event appears to be produced by chance rather than fate.



Eufemio will have to kneel to pray. Eufemio is driven steal the pearl to pay for his son's treatment. As we see in the aftermath, an absurd series of coincidences mock the idea of fate to which Eufemio and the other characters ascribe.

Even before the theft the film establishes the bases for a potential narrative crisis: the economic, social, and religious problems within the village have been told through the day-to-day lives of Tlayucan's citizens. Eufemio and his wife are destitute, unable to even to tithe. Likewise, Tomás's has already demonstrated his desire for Chabela, even to the point where he has slapped Nico for looking like his mother. In this manner, the film's narrative rather fluidly reaches its potential moment for narrative action: the entire story's various tendrils have led the film toward this particular outcome. Yet, the conditions at play during the theft are entirely distinct from the narrative that precedes it. In other words, although there are very specific material conditions that preclude the theft itself, the moment of the crime is not an act of a desperate man fully aware of the knowledge of the theft itself, but the result of a stochastic event, a 'miracle' outside of the narrative of history. The 'fate' that brings on this miracle is farcical, not a part of the film's narrative but a random occurrence. Instead of fate or decisive action, the film shows a commingling of grotesque figures that merely come together with no larger purpose, and the 'miracle' is a chance effect of this interaction.

A series of incidental occurrences precedes the theft. Simultaneous to the conversation between the priest and Eufemio, a group of American tourists (played by, among others, Janet Alcoriza and Jeanne Buñuel) wander among the broken-down church walls and overgrowth that surrounds it. The tourists have made their appearance previously in the film, at an earlier moment when Nico performed somersaults and danced in order to solicit pesos from lounging tourists. The film has already clearly illustrated the discrepancy between tourists and locals; like

all American tourists (*norteamericanos*) in Alcoriza's films, they are ignorant of the language, absurdly wealthy, and jarringly incompatible with the pueblo's milieu. Per custom, the tourists travel with expensive, frequently used cameras, and their trip to the church is no exception. In their tour of the church, they happen to gaze into the altar and find Eufemio, palms outstretched, praying to Santa Lucia to help his son. As he begs the saint for assistance, the tourists snap several photos of him, charmed by the image of a beseeching peasant and the iconic statue.

Although the tourists are fascinated by the stereotypical image of the kneeling peasant and the saint he adores, Eufemio's vision is much different. As he begs her for help, and asks for a miracle, a flash illuminates her new pearl, causing it to glow from the dark of the altar. He asks 'is it you? Should I take [a pearl]? Give me a sign...' and again sees a flash of the pearl illuminating from the darkness. Understanding this light as a sign from Lucia herself, he agrees with her that it would not be bad for him to take just one of her ornaments to help her son. Eufemio absconds with the pearl, as the American tourists look on in horror and dismay, shooting photos of the theft from the outer door of the church. As Eufemio runs away with the pearl, the tourists rush to the priest, who is uninterested in their English babble and attempts to dismiss them. Only when they drag him to the altar and show him the pearl's absence does the priest frantically attempt to catch the thief.

Even apart from the surreal visual pun that constitutes Eufemio's "miracle," the occurrence's insubstantial nature undermines the possible engendering of crisis and resolution.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Surrealist films are often infused with visual puns (for example, the sexual pun of the slit eye in *Un chien andalou*), and the "miracle" is perhaps the best example in Alcoriza's films. The visual pun is instigated by one, the flash, and two, the fact that the *norteamericanos* are the

The event's status of miracle (even a misunderstood miracle) lacks the motivations and causes of narrative itself. The statue, of course, has no motivation within the space of the story, a point that the film underscores by the repetitive images of her vacant face. Her utter blankness and disinterest are clearly demonstrated earlier in the film; during the celebration of the statue, all the peasants line up to kiss the feet and genuflect before the statue itself. As each person kneels, the film returns to the Saint's consistently void and unresponsive face no matter what occurs at her feet. Whether the blind man waxes poetically about her goodness, or the old widow brings out a handkerchief to wipe away germs, the statue remains inert. The iconic statue, like the miracle, lacks the motivations attributed to human actors.

The film reiterates the inhumanity displayed by the statue through following the pearl's journey after Eufemio returns home. Directly following the theft, he returns to his cottage and his family, only to see a mob of irate citizens coming toward him being led by the priest himself. Frozen with fear, he drops the pearl into the pigs' trough, where it is subsequently swallowed whole by one of the many pigs gulping greedily at the slop. Even as Eufemio attempts to return

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instigators of the flash. The image is a visual incarnation of the "Mexican Miracle," or the supposed economic miracle in which the Mexican economy grew exponentially in the decades after the revolution, in part because the government nationalized primary industries such as oil. Likewise, Mexican economy grew strongly in response to American investment, but its economic dependency on its foreign neighbor was strongly criticized by emerging leftists in the early 1960s, and especially—in the case of Mexico—by the artistic intellectual elite. The pun here is, of course, that the United State's "miracles" are all flash but without substance. See Niblo 24.

the pearl he is unable to do so, as it has already disappeared. The pigs—whose indifference equal that of the Saint—are reiterative of the random nature of both the preceding and subsequent events of the film. Only this time the disinterest is illustrated through the most base of forms: the detachment of the pigs' digestive systems.

The blunt and brutal equivocation of the Saint's benign love and the pigs' shit is by far the most radical disturbance of the notion of historical crisis that the film projects. Even beyond the blasphemous equivalence which the narrative posits, the parallelism of celestial events and bodily functions abnegates the idea of human intervention into the events of the narrative. At this moment, the film leaves the possibility of crisis and enters the realm of farce. The characters of the film, stereotypical in nature, do not develop; in fact, they barely have the potential to act. After it is understood that the pigs have eaten the precious pearl, the priest and his parishioners can only wait for the pigs to dislodge it from their bodies.

The *mêlée* that follows in fact proves this ineffectiveness to be the case. The citizens scurry around the pigs, waiting for one to drop the pearl, but the pearl remains unfound. At the height of their frustration, the peasants lock up Eufemio and attempt to prosecute and punish him, but his pathos with regard to his son elicits their forgiveness. At the same time, the miser Tomás agrees to fund Nico's medical treatment; he and Chabela broker a deal that allows this to occur. She agrees to let him watch her bathe, essentially to allow what has happened previously to continue, and he agrees to pay for her son's doctor's bills. After this return to "normal"—a relative way of being that essentially has remained unchanged—Chabela finds the pearl in the yard amidst the rooting pigs surrounding the trough. She gives it to Eufemio, who slyly returns it to the saint's halo without being seen. The first parishioner of the morning sees the pearl, and—

thinking its arrival constitutes a real miracle—rings the church bell. The rest of the town runs to the church to see the new miracle, and their re-articulation of faith ends the film.

The film's final miracle completes the farce. The final bell, which clearly evokes the film's beginnings, returns the notion of miracles to the forefront of the populace's minds after the crushing blow of the original theft. The repetition of the shot of the bell, far from providing closure, indicates the cyclical nature of miracles. That is, even if a miracle can be negated, another will reappear in its place. However farcical the reiteration of the miracle becomes, the film's most radical moment arrives clothed in the costume of the grotesque. While the film's major characters are defined primarily by their impotence, as opposed to any action or motivation, the only potential for action occurs only in the realm of the grotesque. On the night when all the town mourns the loss of the pearl, a spontaneous moment of drunken sex leads to the marriage of the film's two most grotesque figures—the angry, destitute blind man, Matias (Noé Murayama) and an overly sanctimonious, gossipy old woman, Sra. Prisca (Anita Blanch). The two characters' grotesque depictions stem from an exaggerated link between religious and sexual ecstasy.

In the specific case of Matias, his adoration of Santa Lucia is obsessive; he believes that only the saint truly knows him and can see through his dark attitude to his soul. In addition to being the patron saint of the laborers and peasants (who comprise the pueblo's population), Lucia is the patron saint of the blind; appropriately, the name is derived from Lucius, or "light" in Latin.<sup>59</sup> Matias perceives that her miraculous recovery of vision makes her especially

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<sup>59</sup> The third century Christian martyr's hagiography tells of her gift of sight. Even after being blinded through torture, she still had the ability to see.

empathetic to his plight. Ironically, it is his love of the saint—and his insistence of his own goodness—that leads him to violence. Matias initiates a fight among the pueblo’s blind and infirmed during the Saint’s Day celebration. As the blind sit upon the church’s steps at the end of the festivities, they argue whether or not the saint is a beneficent figure toward lowly sufferers such as themselves. Matias claims that he is the one deserving of her miracles, as he has adored her daily, cleaned the altar, and given his last centavos toward her pearls. Another blind man scoffs, saying that “she sees insides us, and it’s very black inside you, [Matias].” In a bout of rage called up by his defense of his own worthiness, Matias strikes the man who has made the defamatory remarks, hitting him squarely and causing the other to thrust his own walking stick about wildly. The flailing stick hits another blind man, who then reacts in the same manner. The blind thus attempt to beat each other with their own walking sticks, although their sightless inability to hit their marks or inflict any harm is both humorous and pathetic. This mad, horrific, and yet very funny battle continues on as Matias extricates himself from the situation. The fight itself underscores the absurdity of the scene and seems quite fantastic even for the film’s irreverent narrative. The proliferation of blind indigents only calls attention to the grotesque sexuality of the devotion, exemplified by their phallic “sticks” and the group’s propensity toward violence. The battle ensues because each of the wretched poor believes that he is more worthy of goodness and miracles than the next. Yet, despite Matias’s will toward violence, his miracle does occur eventually; his sight is not restored, but he falls in love with the old woman, Sra. Pisca. Matias’s miracle stems less from the idea that he is worthy than from chance merging of grotesque bodies.

During the evening in which all of the citizens mourn the loss of the pearl, the Matias and Sra. Prisca become roaring drunk together and end up having sex the floor of her house. The sex,

which is the “least Christian” thing she has ever done, is also the only real moment of action in the film. Even though it is a moment of debauchery and lacks a true motivation, it is the only event that leads to any possibility of change for any of the characters. Their wedding—made necessarily by their late night dalliances—is not a return to conservative tradition but a marriage of the grotesque, a fact even acknowledge by Sra. Pisca. As they lie in bed, she worries that he will find out that she is old, far too old to be marrying him. Here, she acknowledges the infertility of their loves and desires; if fact illustrating that their marriage is based not in tradition (like Eufemio and Chabela’s union) but in aberration. Even as they walk toward the church, the children throw rocks and old fruit at them, mocking the union of a disfigured, angry blind man and a harpyish old woman. The town sees the marriage as rather funny, a joke masquerading as the procreative union between two young, fertile lovers.

If a marriage between two lovers often ends rural melodramas, a marriage of the grotesque thwarts that particular pleasure the pleasure of closure here at the film’s end. Just as this marriage undermines cultural convention, the union of Matias and Sra. Pisca undermines the formal cinematic conventions of the marriage of opposite which leads to a fertile (in other words, productive) shift. Although Matias and Pisca have differing statuses within the community, the marriage cannot and does not symbolize the merging of various classes for the betterment of Mexican society. Instead, the marriage is characterized by a merging of grotesque attributes that cannot be reconciled into the narrative of Mexican consciousness. Instead, all the film gives us is a peculiar possibility outside of narrative of crisis, a potential for action mired in the grotesque and the absurd. The remaining townspeople do not change; they still live in the world of the miracles of Saint Lucia. Despite their faith, she bestows neither brilliance nor insight. She simply

stands over the ruins of the old church, uninterested in either the piety or decadence that unfolds outside of its crumbling walls.

#### 4.5 *TARAHUMARA AND THE ANARCHY OF TIME*

If *Tlayucan* thwarts crisis and its projection of a unified national narrative, then *Tarahumara (Cada vez más lejos)* changes the physical stage of national cinema. The film concerns a rather isolated indigenous community and its response to encroaching development. Literary outcasts, radical anthropologists, and state sociologists found the Tarahumara Indians to be a generative subject because relative isolation of the acrid, unapproachable mountainous regions of Chihuahua where the tribes live. The difficult, wide terrain perpetuated the self-segregation that kept *mestizos* (the Tarahumara call them “chabochis”) from local populations, although these geographical barriers were more psychic than real by the beginning of the Cárdenas regime.<sup>60</sup> Apart from the remote quality of the Tarahumara peoples, their use of peyote in the religious “Rite of *Ciguri*” reaffirmed the aura of indigenous exoticism that thrilled social scientists and literary figures alike, and the rite itself has been depicted both literary and

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<sup>60</sup> By 1940, railroads crisscrossed even the barren northern states, and close to 30% of national spending was invested in road construction to create distributions and flows of goods to the still rural areas of Mexico (Hernández Chávez, 268-9). The film’s images of North American tourists entering the Sierra Tarahumara underscore the buildup of infrastructure in the northern mountains, and the relative ease of access.



cinematic forms, from documentary (Antonin Artaud's theoretical-religious *Peyote Dance* [1947]), to camp and horror (Ken Russell's psychedelic film *Altered States* [1980]).

Like *Tlayucan*, Alcoriza's *Tarahumara* eschews the moments of narrative rupture and cinematic closure—only with a stronger impulse toward radical visual metaphor. *Tarahumara*, the cinematic interplay between the remote Tarahumara and outside forces affecting them, together with *Tlayucan* and *Tiburonerros* (The Shark Hunters [1963]), formed Alcoriza's "Mexican trilogy," three films that explored Mexico's rural outposts without the romantic tinge of rural melodrama. Unlike the two earlier films, however, *Tarahumara* received mixed reviews inside Mexico.<sup>61</sup> Even beyond negative film reviews, newspaper and journal articles expressed moral outrage that an outsider (noting Alcoriza's Spanish origins) could even attempt to describe Mexico's relations with its indigenous populations. One particular lament, published in *El Nacional* at the time of *Tarahumara*'s Mexican release, maintains that the director's hubris leads to erroneously believe that he could make a film about Mexico's indigenous. The filmmaker, according to the review, is a decent filmmaker but no genius, and his vanity has thrust him into believing that his tourism—with the Tarahumaras and Mexico more generally—makes him a credible witness:

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<sup>61</sup> Whereas *El Excelsior* calls it "the new breath of cinema," the *El Nacional* review was ambivalent, disliking the "imposition of unscrupulous [villainous] individuals," which it claims mars the film. However, as Noble notes, "Ayala Blanco finds a film that not only stands as a corrective to the folkloric excess of what he colourfully terms... 'the expressive terrorism of the 'Mexican School' of Figueroa and Fernández'" but "More than this.. 'In Tarahumara the glossy picture postcard is systematically avoided'" (136).

Has Luis Alcoriza the faculty to succeed [all Mexicans] in spirit of observation or had the luck of having arrived more at the heart of these people? He alleges ‘that he went fifty kilometers farther than any other mortal before, into the mountains.’ However, we reject this out of hand. Fifty kilometers in distance does not justify a centimeter of thinking. In one way or another it’s Alcoriza that pretends to know the race “like the palm of his hand.” (12)

Alcoriza’s vanity, the piece contends, has “taken him [too] far and that his tourist exploits of coexistence with Tarahumaras has given him an air of toughness...” that has rendered him and his work insufferable.

The *El Nacional* critique (of the director and his attempts to examine “our men” and “our races,” in other words, anger over a Spaniard examining Mexico’s relation with native tribes) clearly illustrates the myriad of complexities surrounding this particular film and larger relations between *mestizos* and *indios* in post-revolutionary Mexico. The article’s implicit point is quite clear: the Spanish have no moral grounds to criticize the Mexicans with regard to the complexities of native lands and indigenous sovereignty. Alcoriza and his cohort’s responses, however, are far more conceptual; they contend that the film brings Mexico’s indigenous populations into the present, and that the film is really the first to do so. The editors of the film’s published screenplay unequivocally state the film’s attack of Mexico’s particular cinematic “Indian problem”:

In terms of the indigenous, the moral ambiguity of most Mexicans is well-known. When they decide to articulate and emphasize the supreme values of the "national identity", they immediately begin to elucidate the "thirty centuries of splendor" of pre-Hispanic culture, motivated by pride in its monumental architecture and fabulous artistic

expressions. However, in terms of contemporary Indians, immediate Mexican society—except for counted and honorable exceptions—avoids them, going so far as to ignore them and to marginalize them permanently. (9)

Importantly, the majestic narratives of indigenous power are the stories of the Aztecs, Olmecs, and Mayans, whose societies have already been destroyed, although their histories still resonate strongly in current Mexican national mythology. The epochs of Mexico's ancient populations and their regimes of power had been finished hundreds of years before the birth of the autonomous Mexican state; therefore, they can more easily be subsumed into Mexico's current cultural and national narratives. As part of the past which must be ceded to and incorporated with a more revolutionary future, the story of the Indians is always firmly set far back in the narratives of history.

And most Mexican film, according to the screenplay's introduction, operates in much the same manner as its larger population: "Only two hundred [of the over 8000 Mexican films], or 2.5 % of the total, have taken up indigenous themes. And the majority of these have talked about the 'glorious indigenous past', in which the image of the 'noble savage' appears" (9). In Mexico's cinematic historical narrative, the indigenous peoples are always already finished: strong, but a different era and only relevant in terms of their past deeds and actions. This characterization of Mexico's films is not an exaggeration; these impulses to position Mexico's indigenous as purely Aztec are shown vividly in films such as the epic *Cabeza de Vaca* (1991). In fact, as Berg notes in *Cinema of Solitude*, what is most noticeable about contemporary Indians in Mexican cinema is their absence from the screen (138).

Although Alcoriza and his advocates reveal this not-so-hidden aspect of Mexican cinema, *Tarahumara* is by no means the cinematic savoir of Mexico's indigenous peoples. The

film, brimming with *mestizo* Mexico City film stars, tends toward expository documentary style at moments, allowing the outside world to “see” certain cultural aspects of the Tarahumara people that we already well known (their partiality for footraces, for example). This voyeuristic tendency, as some of its detractor’s claim, allows the film to make a better study of modern alienation than of the Tarahumaras themselves. But the uneven film’s most important aspect is neither its documentary inclinations nor its exotic tendencies. Instead, the film’s most unsettling aspect is its reevaluation of time. *Tarahumara* creates a two-fold disturbance in the previously mentioned temporal narrative. In a quite practical manner, the film questions the place of indigenous tribes in an increasingly modernized Mexico. But, more interestingly, its dual threads of modernist impulses and indigenous subject matter disconnect either (modern or indigenous) time from the narrative of Mexican history through radical visual metaphor. In these metaphors, modern *mestizo* time and the time of the Tarahumaras reflect each other, yet neither register evolves or illustrates a particular future for Mexico.

The film’s loose narrative—which strives to show both the indigenous culture and the political difficulties of the Tarahumara—begins as the well-intentioned but naïve bureaucrat, Raúl (Ignacio López Tarso), visits the Tarahumara in association with the federal government’s National Indigenous Institute (I.N.I.). Raúl enters the community with Tomás (Eric del Castillo), a developer building cabanas for wealthy, mostly European and North American tourists. Through a concerted effort, Raúl befriends two well-regarded Tarahumara, a young husband and new father named Corachi (Jaime Fernández), and his wife Belem (Aurora Clavel). His friendship deepens as his respect for the culture of the Tarahumara grows. However, he becomes disturbed and saddened by the manipulative actions of lumber companies and regional governments, who regularly profit from the ambiguous status of the tribe, and the I.N.I., a system

of bureaucracy that maintains the exploitative status quo and assists the wheels of capital to the detriment of the people who live there. Unable to entirely integrate himself into the Tarahumara community, and yet longing to reject the mechanisms of state power, he threatens the *mestizo* bosses and regional politicians. Raúl's plan, which he angrily explains to the others, is to publicly expose the corruption using his own resources in Mexico City. Climbing among the cliffs, however, he is shot at, falls, and is fatally injured. The film ends with a shot of Corachi mourning Raúl's death as his body is flown back to civilization.

Neither the film's rather ordinary plot nor its documentary impulses form the crux of the film's most unusual element; that is, its refusal to manage what Jose Mora calls Mexico's "anarchy of time." In the film, there is no attempt to bring the Tarahumara into Mexico's historical narrative; despite the critical, anti-establishment impulses of the film, the film does not (or more specifically cannot) insist that all peoples should join together to move forward in history. Neither, however, does it posit a romantic return to nature. Although the film contains within it a kind of anthropological enthusiasm, it is also deeply invested in high modernist European filmmaking styles. The two discordant impulses (which can loosely be called a critical artistic and critical realistic) propel the film's fragmentary notions of cinematic and historical time. The modernist, modernizing and native temporal registers circle each other; none move forward in history, and in fact none connect with each other at all. Taken together, these two temporal orders produce an anarchic sense of time, a lacunae which proves to be the opposite of crisis.

The figure of Raúl has more in common with the characters of European high modern cinema than the romantic or revolutionary populations of Mexico's Golden Age. Raúl embodies the concept of alienation through both his frustration with modern society and his inability to act

in any meaningful way. His enthusiasm and love for the Tarahumara people verges on exoticism, but his attempts to integrate himself within the population tends toward the absurd by the film's end. This absurdity undermines Raúl's often naïve and exoticizing responses toward the Tarahumara, making him simultaneously a sympathetic and silly character. Raúl's friendship with Corachi begins innocently—and rather romantically—over a series of events in which Raúl tries to prove that his interest in Corachi is genuine instead of exploitative. For example, Raúl attempts to help Corachi and his wife during childbirth, driving to the nearest clinic to seek help from a doctor. Raúl can't convince the clinician to come to the village, and is furious at the doctor's ambivalence toward the birth. Raúl stutters in frustration and helplessness, getting only a few pain pills and antibiotics from the doctor, who implicitly suggests that childbirth can take care of itself. When Raúl returns, he only enters the couple's cabin after the birth is complete. Corachi and Belem's son's birth is rather typical of the situations Raúl faces in the film. Any attempt to act is usually thwarted, but he finds a sense of outrage in the injustice of the system. He is disgusted by the disinterest of the Mexicans to help, and is in fact infuriated by the willingness of the *mestizos* to exploit the tribe, but he finds himself unable to act at all, groping ineffectually for ways to help that are untranslatable to Corachi and the other Tarahumaras.

Raúl's frustration—and his real discomfort with the Tarahumara culture—is most explicit the night that the community celebrates the birth of Corachi and Belem's son, festivities that begin afternoon with music and drinking, and run late into the night. As the night grows long and more of the revelers sleep drunken around the campfire, Raúl tries to seduce Nori, a pretty fourteen year old who flirts with him earlier in the day. Raúl, weaving unsteadily among the fires, stumbles upon Nori sitting, hidden, between several rocks. She moves farther into the shadows, wordlessly inviting Raúl toward her through her very complicit manner. Childlike and

patient, she lies down next to him on the rocks. Whereas her face is entirely blank, his reflects the obvious moral quandary that he negotiates. Even his drunken desires cannot overcome his ethical disinclination, and he leaves with a conciliatory gesture but without a word. Nori's interaction with Raúl is far more ambiguous. Although she invites him to be with her, her small turns of her head subvert her apparent interest.

Leaving aside for the moment the question of Nori's intent, Raúl's particular moral quandary reiterates the problem of urban alienation that Raúl faces. Unable to touch Nori, who he considers a child, he nonetheless considers his lack of action a failure. In the following scene, Raúl solicits sympathy from Corachi. He describes his history of failure, which he associates with the banality and frustration of modern life:

We had two [machines]... with shifts of eight or ten hours. Two years passed in a room. Because the machine needed me. Cleaning the memory twice a day. A memory of 130,000 nuclear magnets. The disgraceful machine was very important. I fixed it. I made nine-hundred pesos a week. And it... made 100,000 a month... how I hated it. I had no life. One day I won't return.

The allusion to the "nuclear" nature of the machine evokes the spectacular destructive of modernizing life. Fracturing and dangerous, the life of the machine is worth more than Raúl's work, which is not labor but repetition. Raúl contrast what he calls the "free" life of Corachi to his tired and repetitive mechanical life as an engineer (the life fraught with humanity's eventual destruction), and Corachi, sleepy and drunken, lets him continue to talk and murmurs sympathies.

Raúl's failure derives from his bondage to the wheel of modern existence. Funneled into a monotonous job and a banal life, Raúl sees real life as outside of the institutions and limitations

of modernity, which are bereft of passion and desire. Yet, he calls up the same parameters of civilization when he finds that another man slept with Nori the next day. The film constructs this act as a rape (in fact, several violent images of the rape were deleted from the film's final edit), but Corachi is not upset by the act. He sees Raúl's dismay as a sign of his sexual frustration. While Raúl attempts to describe this act as a violation, he is not able to explain how his own sexual desire for Nori is different. Raúl's inability to express his moral standing and inarticulate dismissal of Corachi's perceptions reaffirm the latter's statements. Raúl demands passion and "freedom," but is unable to reconcile desire and the effects that it produces: force and violence. According to Raúl's internal narrativization, the freedom he grants the Tarahumara contains within it a sense of natural and romantic purity. The eventual resolution of the rape, in which the village's leader Muraca insists that Nori's family be compensated forty pesos, further illustrates Raúl's still ingrained tendencies to separate savage from civilized. Raúl is horrified by the tribal verdict, but implicitly agrees with the other *mestizos* who claim the Tarahumara law is barbaric.

I would like to return to the specifics of these scenes, however, apart from their specific reference to Raúl's moral alienation. This series of images, I will argue, form the visual crux of time. If modern time—seen through the character of Raúl—is characterized in the film by stasis and repetition, then anti-modern time is seen as a register where past, present, and future are marked by coincidence. Antonin Artaud's opening phrases of *The Peyote Dance* may help to articulate this metaphor of time. Artaud claims that the Tarahumara people exist as if they were already dead (3). He does not mean that they live in degradation or poverty; he means that their traditions allow them to understand the contradictory forces of life and death. The marking of paths—or the physical placement of signs by the people themselves—according to Artaud, leads to a fuller understanding of spiritual life and death. Because they understand spiritual life, the



distinction between bodily life and bodily death is unimportant. Thus, by marking spiritual life, they can live as if they are physically dead. Death, he claims, is written onto the very nature of the world in which the Tarahumara exist. This iteration of death in the very life of nature stands as a superimposition (a sign) of being onto the very landscape, and that sign confirms the spirit of life apart from history and time:

when Nature obstinately manifests the same idea; when the same pathetic forms recur; when the heads of familiar gods appear on the rocks, and when a theme of death emanates from them... when the whole earth develops a philosophy parallel to that of its inhabitants... then surely one cannot continue to think that this is a whim (13).

This idea that landscape is the sign of human evolution is consistent with Artaud's idea of a theater of cruelty; a theater in the totem replaces language.<sup>62</sup>

Nori's rape present radical visual metaphors, signs which, in their incompleteness, reject homogenous time. The film is forced to rely on a series of partial images.<sup>63</sup> These partial signs do not entirely articulate the rape but nonetheless exhibit it more brutally through its absence. The day after Corachi and Belem's celebration, Nori is tending her herd in the mountains. A young Tarahumara named Roniali follows her into the forest, and makes a rather flimsy excuse to walk with her away from the village. The film then shifts to a lengthy scene of Corachi hunting a large buck elsewhere in the mountains. The shots show him tracking, but never catching, the animal as it leads him on an exhausting chase. After the film leaves the chase, the next image takes us to the living room of Don Eloy, a businessman intent on exploiting the

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<sup>62</sup> See Artaud's "Theater and its Double" p 242-244, and 268-9.

<sup>63</sup> Ironically, the more explicit rape scenes were censored.

natural resources of the immediate area. Raúl and several other *mestizo* characters are just finished being served drinks by Eloy's wife and daughter, who silently exit the room.

These images together, without the actual act of the rape, portray the event more cruelly than if the shots but also shift from chronological time. The scene previous to the act, in which Roniali asks to walk with Nori into the obscured scenery, illustrates clearly that the rape will occur. But the hunting scene proves to be a rich and complex after image. The buck does not actually stand in for Nori, if only because the film never shows the deer captured and slain. Instead, the scene of the hunt marks the possibility of violence that we know will take place. Thus, the metaphor stands incomplete but nonetheless present. In the following scene, Don Eloy's wife and daughter stand as silent observers of the destruction of the Tarahumara lands. The two go about serving the men as they jovially discuss the fate of the Tarahumaras and disassociate themselves from any guilt over the Indian's fate. Yet the two women also cannot stand in for Nori. She is neither the spectator nor a symbol of the degradation of the Tarahumara peoples.

Nori herself escapes definition by the slippery nature of her role. She definitely flirts with and is interested in Raúl, and yet her face is blank and disengaged as he attempts to seduce her. She is also resigned to the "morality" of the people who judge her; after the public scolding of Roniali and the restitution to her family, she joins her violator in marriage and at the family hearth. She is neither the hunted deer nor the silent *mestizo* woman. Just as Raúl's desire to categorize as an innocent child fails, any attempt to understand her as a symbol for the plight of the indigenous people also slips away in the final analysis. Her fate is simply played out by the end of the film, and she is neither angry nor distraught, but simply distant.

Lacking the narrative exposition of the rape, the images gesture toward certain meanings and significances, but never fulfill an economy of meaning. The film's cruelty lies in its variances of motivations left incomprehensible; the final outcomes simply work themselves out with little regard to motivation or inclination. In an equally brutal manner, this idea is echoed in Raúl's death. Despite being shot at, Raúl is never actually shot. He slips on the surface of the rock; it is the mountain—not the bullet—that finally kills him. Even the shooter is never identified; he could have been one of several land owners or developers that had to keep Raúl from speaking. The images of the mountain parallel the initial, regal images from the film's opening credits. Similar to Artaud's claims, the film attempts to show signs of death from the mountains themselves, hence their distance and breadth from the film's beginnings.

Thus, the film illustrates two instances of time. The time of modernity, repetitive and futile, is empty and fruitless. As illustrated by Raúl, the attempts to "use" time are hollow and constricting, lacking the freedom possible in human existence. However the time of the Tarahumara is both distancing and inaccessible; it is too cruel for naïves such as Raúl. The utter incompatibility of time is finalized in the last images of Belem, Corachi's wife. Sympathetic to Raúl's sexual frustration, Belem sleeps with him at the moment that Raúl exhibits his greatest frustration toward the situation of his own fate and that of the Tarahumaras. At the moment that Raúl decides to leave Chihuahua to return to Mexico City, Corachi tells him that Belem is pregnant. Raúl asks Belem if the child could possibly be his. Belem responds that no, it is Corachi's child. Despite his pleas to think about it, she suggests that he simply take his request to Corachi. On the one hand, this could be an illustration of sexism. However, it is also a simple inability of cohesion between two different understandings of time. In this case, Raúl's time of conception has no meaning for Belem, Corachi has been and is forever her husband.

The film's multi-faceted critique thus deals with both national cinema by dealing with the narrative of cohesive time so prevalent in such a cinema. On the one hand, the film's inclusion of contemporary indigenes collapses the narrative of a united nation at the moment that the nation was in its worst, post-revolutionary "state of crisis." On the other hand, the film does not attempt to re-enter indigenous peoples such as the Tarahumara into the narrative—the film's disarticulation of a coherent time and its visceral, cinematic images of cruelty refute such a possibility. Thus, the film gives us an anarchy of time, in which times coexist without either crisis or a submission to a national narrative.

#### **4.6 CONCLUSION: *MECÁNICA NACIONAL* AND THE MEGALOPOLIS**

I would like to begin my conclusion with some comments on *Mecánica nacional*, arguably Alcoriza's most famous film. Made in 1972, the film is produced after the massacre at the Plaza of Three Cultures/Tlateloco, the moment that symbolized the irreconcilability of the people of Mexico with this idea of a coherent national body. Gathering together the cultural disillusionment, *Mecánica nacional* examines Mexico in which a cohesive identity has never been possible, in a way prefiguring later films like *Y tu mamá también*. The film is made during the minor filmic renaissance of Echeverría's presidential *sexenio*, but it continues the grotesque themes and fractured narrative structures from the previous era. However, the film also gestures to the declining presence of a national iconography in late capitalism. Even as his characters are somewhat invested in the idea of national body, it remains, for the film, elusive and undesirable.

In his influential text on cinematic representations of Mexico City, David Foster claims that *Mecánica nacional* was Mexico's first film to launch a systemic critique that neither casts

Mexico as pathetic nor explicitly referred to pre-revolutionary injustices as the root cause of the characters' sufferings. From the previous examination of *Tlayucan*, however, the later film can be understood as a continuation of such a critique. The two films use complementary parodic strains, a stylistic similarity which Alcoriza mentions in a 1978 interview (Reyes Navarres 67). *Mecánica nacional* should not be understood as a break from the filmmaker's earlier work but an augmentation and exaggeration of his earlier grotesque stylings. Instead, the intensification of the grotesque is derived from a myriad of influences, including the hyper-expansion of Mexico's position in the global economy and President Echeverría's expansion of state-financed film production. Although the film was made early within the President's 1970-76 regime, it illustrates Echeverría's interest in cinematic revitalization. While production declined steadily during the President's *sexenio*, films by new directors and critical, often leftist works steadily increased under the government's renewed interests (Mora 116). State investments in films such as *Mecánica nacional* increased production values while not sacrificing their apt political commentary; Alcoriza's free rein over the film provided ample space to attempt a critical examination of Mexico with a grotesque milieu at its center.

While *Tlayucan* occurs in peasant village, a milieu where the 'miracle' development of the 1940s and 50s is visibly absent, *Mecánica nacional* takes place firmly within the milieu of global development. Refuse litters the screen, symptomatic of the ends of progress and the detritus of North American corporatism. The film's population is comprised of strangers from Mexico City and outlying areas who gather in a peripheral space to view an annual car race, the 'Mecánica nacional.' The effects of global economics are already decayed and suspect and the people are urban and scattered, as if they had never been cohesive. Yet, despite its metropolitan references and differing ethos, *Mecánica nacional* repeats many of the emblematic figures of

*Tlayucan*, we same shades of the same egregious, foreign tourists and mindless Mexicans. These tropic figures, however, search for a Mexico lost in the shadows of urban sprawl, a far cry from *Tlayucan*'s exoticizing tourists. While the former film's tourists are satisfied with the peasants 'rural' natures, the latter film's North American tourist significantly claim 'There's nothing Mexican here.'

While both films enact similar parodies, the differences in setting illustrate Mexico's continuing shift in population dissemination as its inhabitants migrated from rural spaces to rapidly expanding megalopolis of Mexico City. In a similar manner to *Tlayucan*, *Mecánica nacional* continues to amalgamate discrepant national types under the rubric of the grotesque. But while the surreal imagery and grotesque figures of *Tlayucan* are a series of local tropes enacted through European intellectual influences, *Mecánica nacional* brings forth another layer of types which epitomize the complexities of contemporary populations. The pollution, the abundance of trash, and the plethora of cars—in short, the effects of Mexico's recent urbanization—serve as a background for the litany of atomized individuals who flow on and off screen. The film focuses on the protagonist—a lower middle-class worker named Eufemio (like the peasant protagonist from *Tlayucan*)—and the absurd death of his acerbic and gluttonous mother (significantly played by the pre-eminent mother-figure Sara García). However, like *Tlayucan* the film's clearest attempts to recount the inexplicable and ambiguous nature of transnational global capital are illustrated through its peripheral figures. In this case, the film's other denizens provide its grotesque, instable figures which haunt the post-'miracle' Mexican state.

In particular, a tangential white-clad couple, the film's silent and surreal figures, epitomizes the attempt to characterize the country's radical changes and the inability to fully

formulate a stable narrative of nationhood in the complex space of a fluid and changing world. The unnamed couple does not interact with the rest of the characters and instead gorges themselves at a picnic as they wait for the famed race to begin. Dressed in white and played by Spanish actors Pilar Bayona (famously known as ‘Pili’) and Carlos Piñar, the two are removed from the rest of the film’s inhabitants and coded as a strange amalgamation of upper-class and Spanish. The film intercuts to the pair stuffing themselves on food and wildly kissing and groping each other on the blanket as other fans stroll around them. At once emblematic of the history of colonial plunder of Mexican resources and simultaneously an insidious mirror of the orgiastic local fandom that surrounds the race, the couple exemplifies the allegorical tendencies of the grotesque. That is, although the white-clad couple in some sense personifies the consumerist revelry that surrounds the event, it cannot symbolize the Mexican culture which creates the national car race or the historical colonial appetites of Spain. Instead, the bizarre coupling and insatiable hunger of the two figures gesture toward an irreconcilability of tensions between the two. Their consuming desire leads not to a unified whole of meaning but to a myriad of inconsolable animalistic actions.

Although the geographical displacements at play in *Mecánica nacional* underscore particular economic shifts significant to both Mexico and the larger global economy, Alcoriza’s emphasis on transnational cinematic styles does not emerge from this infamous film. Instead, it is possible to see this concern with transnational displacement emerging at first through cinematic styles and secondly as concerned with particularly mobile populations, and to understand that this emphasis on the transnational grotesque is augmented by the freedoms of the 1970s film industry and the corresponding stark images of Mexico’s rising metropolises. By casting Spanish actors as the couple in white, the film takes up the question of populations in the rapidly

urbanizing Mexico without leaving behind the same questions at play in films such as *Tlayucan* and *El esqueleto de la señora Morales*. In fact, the white-clad couple is an updated version of Sra. Pisca and Matias. Like the *Tlayucan* couple, the later couple is also unproductive and barren. Although they are not literally infertile like the two peasants, their consumptive style and distance from the rest of ‘Mexico’ renders them equally excluded from the fold of the Mexican nation.

Pablo and Gloria Morales, Matias and Sra. Pisca, and the couple and white are all figures personify the grotesque, and significantly none resolve the tensions of the cultural milieu in which they are placed. They are instead iconic moments of perversity. It is this perversity that forbids the seamless merging consistent with narrative closure and allows each specific instance to engage more broadly with particular historical moments without resolving the Mexico’s incongruities. These continual augmentations of tensions speak to the filmmaker’s disregard for uncritical, totalizing representations of Mexican national identity. On the one hand, these films are part of a group of films which critique or entirely refuse cinematic representation of the Mexican nation. On the other hand, these films also prefigure the later move of financially, aesthetically and politically globalizing Mexican film in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Like the latter films, earlier films such as *Mecánica nacional* conceptualize the nation as fluid—as always intersecting with both its colonial history and its present position in the emerging global economy. While Mexico’s earlier filmmaking practices were always international, Alcoriza’s films point to an emerging aesthetic interest away from the conception of Mexico’s identity and toward its influence on or by the larger transnational economic and social influences. As *Mecánica nacional* demonstrates, the moment of cohesive national imagery



had long passed by 1970s, replaced by images that were far less 'miraculous' and Mexican cinema appeared far more comfortable with its cinematic anarchy.

## **5.0 THE SPAGHETTI AND ITS DOUBLE: ALEJANDRO JODOROWSKY'S THEATRICAL CINEMA**

### **5.1 “YOU HAD TO BE *THERE*”—NEW YORK'S CULT CINEMA CRAZE AND MEXICO CITY'S EXPERIMENTAL CINEMA**

Even as Luis Buñuel and Luis Alcoriza pursued filmmaking goals that deviated greatly from the ideological traditions of the Mexican filmmaking industry, they nonetheless still worked from inside that institution. Buñuel and his associates struggled with Churubusco-Azteca over financial matters while filming *Simón del desierto* in Mexico but were still working under the confines of that system. Of course, not all films were produced under the auspices of that institution. While the experimental film festival (and its panel of senior filmmakers) provided guidance for some new directors (winners Alberto Isaac, for example, and Rubén Gámez), others worked entirely separate from Mexico's filmmaking world. Alejandro Jodorowsky, a Chilean that arrived in Mexico via Paris, is one such filmmaker whose relationship and connections with Mexico City's avant-garde theater was far more substantial than his connections to the filmmaking world. He is considered, by the world at large, a cult filmmaker and American counter-culture icon; his connections to Mexico have appeared superfluous. However, his interests in Mexican theater and his rather unique notions of national identity speak to a larger

significance of European avant-garde influences on national arts, charting a parallel course for national imagery that incorporates divergent cinematic and theatrical forms.

First, I would like to approach Jodorowsky's films via their cult status and somewhat refute its assumed association with the United States. Jodorowsky's New York cult reputation is partly engendered by the films critics, its initial screening location and its notorious history. The 2007 release of *The Holy Mountain* (*La montaña sagrada* 1973) and *El topo* (*The Mole*, 1970) marked the end of cult cinema's longest grudge war. The skirmish—a thirty year standoff between the films' director Alejandro Jodorowsky and producer Allen Klein—had left the films without distribution and crystallized their cinematic reputations as enigmatic cult phenomena. Although the films' reputations as underground art were heightened by the battle between the two excessive figures, their true infamy emerged from early showings in New York's experimental theaters. *El topo* was filmed in Mexico but opened at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1970. After the manager of the Elgin saw it, he booked the film at his theater as the city's first official "Midnight Movie." It became a smash sensation in New York's underground movie scene, playing at midnight on weekdays and one a.m. on weekends, ostensibly because it was too violent and troubling to be shown at any other time. The film's reputation spread by word of mouth, and the *Village Voice's* Glenn O'Brien notoriously called the film's screenings the "midnight mass at the Elgin" (Hoberman 93).

The midnight movie run proved to be a great boon to Jodorowsky's *El topo*; the timing and setting of the showings—as well as the seedy reputation of New York's Chelsea district—helped to create the film's status as a cult masterpiece (Hoberman 93). Klein, who was best known as John Lennon's manager, bought the rights to Jodorowsky's film and Lennon and Yoko

Ono lauded the unknown piece as one of the greatest films of the decade.<sup>64</sup> The music manager helped to arrange a wider—albeit brief—release of *El topo*, and then produced Jodorowsky's next piece, *The Holy Mountain*, at what was then considered an astonishing budget for Mexico (approximately 1 million dollars, although specific figures vary).

Despite these promising developments, Jodorowsky and Klein acrimoniously dissolved their working relationship while attempting another collaboration, allegedly a proposed adaptation of Dominique Aury's *The Story of O*. Jodorowsky claimed that Klein wanted him to adapt the erotic novel but that he refused to make what he considered to be an antifeminist film.<sup>65</sup> He asserts that Klein then engineered his own revenge, forbidding the release of the two earlier films. For thirty years, the two films circulated primarily as fuzzy, Korean-subtitled VHS bootlegs, keeping a loyal viewership but never achieving a particularly wide dissemination. The extreme sensationalism of the longstanding grudge added to the films' reputations as cutting-edge cinema, and the difficulty of obtaining even a bootlegged copy of either film preserved the aura of mystery. The films have garnered very little attention in the press or in trade journals; they are known primarily through bombastic interviews with the director, rumor and innuendo by producers and theater managers, and a stray article or two about the origins of "midnight movies" and cult fandom.

However, with the recent reconciliation between Jodorowsky and Klein, the two canonical cult films achieved wide-release in late 2006 and early 2007, and the release of

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<sup>64</sup> "Alejandro Jodorowsky: Return to Holy Mountain." Interview with the filmmaker. Posted May 1, 2007.

<sup>65</sup> "Q and A with Alejandro Jodorowsky." *Premiere Magazine*.

Jodorowsky's master DVD collection debuted on May 1, 2007. Although both films did receive a certain amount of press at their initial release (indeed, *The Holy Mountain* premiered at Cannes in 1973), the 2006–2007 release marked a shift from cult obscurity to a more widespread name recognition. The relatively marginalized cult filmmaker, poet, graphic novelist, mime, and theater director has garnered cinema reviews in magazines and trade journals that scarcely acknowledged the original releases.<sup>66</sup> The newest reviews of the films—those written for the films' re-releases—are both testaments to the films' cult reputations and forays into the psychedelic underworld of cult film. *The Holy Mountain* and (especially) *El topo* are viewed as artifacts of the hyperspiritual acid trip that constitutes the early seventies, and therefore, seemingly must be understood as such. J. Hoberman, the *Village Voice*'s resident *El topo* expert, writes in late 2006 that, in order to truly experience the film the viewer had to be *there* (at the Elgin in the 1970s):

*El topo* was a midnight Mass, a way of life—not least for Jodorowsky, who not only wrote, directed, and scored the picture but also played the eponymous holy killer–gunslinger saint. Although I vastly preferred Sergio Leone's spaghetti Westerns to Jodorowsky's peyote variant, I saw *El topo* twice—was this movie really as stupefying as it seemed? (Those were the days of acid fascism.) (*Village Voice* 12/6/2006 )

The *Tucson Weekly*'s James Digiovanna gives the more neutral rendition of the seemingly obligatory critical response when he writes that *El topo* is “the cult film that defines the genre” (*Tucson Weekly* 2/15/07 ).

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<sup>66</sup> The reviews in *Sight and Sound* and *Variety* are the most explicit examples.

While these reviews examine the films' content to some extent, all of them clearly situate *El topo* and *The Holy Mountain* firmly within the context of the cult cinema experience. They emphasize *being there*; in other words, the articles steadfastly link the films to the post-sixties counterculture. Of course, these reviews are for the North American releases, and several of the reviewers saw the films in their original runs. The midnight showings at the Elgin are indisputably a concrete part the films' histories; *El topo* is still revered in underground cinema circles as the film that began the midnight movie phenomenon. At the same time, the media focus on the historical specificity of the films' original New York shows leave little room to think of the films outside of the original viewers' supposed drug-induced states of semi-consciousness. As for the films themselves, many of the reviewers claim that they make no sense. Echoing others, Digiovanna claims that "nobody actually understands *El topo*" (*Tucson Weekly* 2/15/07) With its sometimes overbearing symbolism, overt religious mythologies, and often caricatural and exploitative figures, *El topo* is often considered a mishmash of Buñuelian surrealism and mythical universalism, with the result being a film too personal and egoistic to be truly radical. Foremost among the complaints was the idea that Jodorowsky, far from being a radical filmmaker, used surrealist techniques to create inherently moralistic and orthodox text. Whereas filmmakers such as Buñuel

cracked open conventional pieties, Jodorowsky used those techniques to support a sanctimonious view: Man-God tempted by evil, power-hungry woman abandons righteous ways and then, with the love of a good woman, becomes spiritual man, only to learn that the world is not ready for his spirituality (Kael, "El Topo-Head Comics" review, *New Yorker*, quoted in Hoberman 101).

This remonstrance, however, appears to only reiterate supposed attempts at universality conceiving of the project as inherently absolutist, as if it is necessary to take Jodorowsky's "I am God" seriously—and as rigid moralism—and to ignore any moments of historical worldliness that enter the film.

These consistent accusations of "surrealist commercialism"—bolstered by the mass countercultural appeal and Jodorowsky's predilections for giving stark and absolute meanings for his film's "symbols"—often exclude *El topo's* complex, multiple relations with Mexican, European, and North American political and literary histories and ignore the film's place in Mexican experimental cinema. At the same time that the films have been derided (or lauded) as North American cult, investigations into Mexico's own avant-garde and experimental cinemas have noted that, in addition to European and North American roots, Jodorowsky's films foreground the artistic history of Mexico and Latin America:

The occult fascinations of Kenneth Anger, the surrealism and ethnopoetics of Maya Deren, the beat hysterics of Robert Frank: all have interstitial moments in Jodorowsky's oeuvre. But just as strong, one could argue, are a myriad of other influences, from the *Theatre of Cruelty* of Antonin Artaud to the visceral and explicit strains of George Bataille, and on to the performances involving bodies and sculptural forms of the sixties/seventies, like Latin American conceptual artists Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark (González and Lerner 67).

Instead of characterizing the films in relation to New York's urban cinema viewing practices, *Mexperimental Cinema* attempts to understand Jodorowsky in light of Mexican experimental film and other avant-garde art that has constituted a parallel history to the country's mainstream cinema production. Although this brief statement is part of larger taxonomy of Mexican

experimental works and does not substantially discuss the film's connection to Mexico's avant-garde, it nonetheless begins to examine how the complexity of Jodorowsky's films are ignored and much of their relations to political and cultural history are still neglected. The films both draw heavily from Mexican art and architecture, and likewise their mark is clearly stamped today on the Mexican experimental, conceptual, and performative arts. For example, while the films are steeped in the obscure, 1960s "Panic Theater," they are also mired in the vast variations of ancient and modern Mexican art and architecture as well as European experimentalism. *The Holy Mountain* contains several examples of Mexico's most iconic architecture, including the modernist structures of *Ciudad Satélite* (part of the expanding middle-class architecture of Mexico City) and the ancient pyramids of Chichén Itzá and Teotihuacán. These cinematic surfaces are not merely pretty backdrops or simplistic symbols of religion or modernity; rather they constitute emblematic examples of the films' strange architectural strata of history, theater, art, and mythology.

In fact, Jodorowsky was quite occupied with Mexico's production of art, theater, and cinema during the ten years he lived in Mexico before the production of *El topo*. Although Jodorowsky's films are known for causing a stir amongst New York City's underground filmgoers and cult cinephiles, the Mexican premiere of his first film, *Fando y lis* (1968), continues to be a rather infamous moment in cinematic history. The film was banned after riots erupted at the initial showing at the 1968 Acapulco Film Festival, as the Mexican government claimed that it was a corrupting influence on the nation's youth. The film debuted only two months after the cataclysmic student massacre at Tlateloco. In addition, the cast of his films often included well-known Mexican actors, for example Alfonso Arau in *El topo* and David Silva in both *El topo* and *Holy Mountain*. Perhaps more significantly, the crew and producers



were composed of the filmmakers, cinematographers, and cineastes of Mexico's small independent and experimental film set, including Rafael Cordiki and soon-to-be infamous experimental director Juan López Moctezuma. Although Jodorowsky brought the highly influential Panic Movement to Mexico after he left Paris, the relationships between the Chilean director and his Mexican peers were highly reciprocal. Led by the group Nuevo Cine, Mexican film's experimental film renaissance expanded opportunities for the production and distribution of avant-garde and independent cinema, and Jodorowsky certainly benefited from the country's renewed interest in local cinema.

Equally significant, however, was Jodorowsky's involvement with avant-garde and experimental Mexican theater. Long before making a film in Mexico, he directed several premier theatrical productions, including plays by Ionesco and Beckett. In fact, his struggles with the production of European avant-garde cinema augmented his desires to see a Mexican national theater and informed his two manifestos on Mexican theater, "¿Qué pasa con el teatro en México?" ("What's happening with theater in Mexico?"), and "Hacia un teatro nacional" ("Toward a national theater"). Written in 1966, at approximately the same time as the filming of *Fando y lis*, the documents show Jodorowsky's preoccupation with national art forms and the fate of local themes and styles during a moment when European theater dominated avant-garde circles. His manifesto experiments with the idea of a national theater, one that does not borrow from either Golden Age Mexican cinema or the popular *telenovelas* of the day, but is nonetheless indebted to Mexican art forms.

Through an examination of his theatrical manifestos, writing on his Panic Theater, and his films from the same era, I argue in this chapter that Jodorowsky's idea of a national Mexican theater emerges in both *El topo* and *The Holy Mountain*. In making this argument, however, I

illustrate that his national cinema is always imbued with a myriad of other national forms and perspectives. His interest in local artistic, generic figures and national concepts of production become apparent not only in his writings about cinema and theater, but also in his body of cinematic work.

Of course, this equation between Mexican national theater and Jodorowsky's cinema is important in and of itself, for it destabilizes notions of Jodorowsky's attempt at a universal cinema and severely undermines his critics' complaints that he merely attempts to imitate Buñuel—and in fact does that badly. Equally significant, however, is the composition of this national interest in both theater and film. Very explicitly, his national artistic practices are *not* critiques of older European forms but are, in fact, attempts to create and augment new Mexican traditions. Yet, his program of national theater—and also of his own cinema—is in fact layered with a myriad of transatlantic and North American influences. This myriad of influences does not prove Jodorowsky to be a weak or naïve theoretician of national theater. Rather, we may think of him as seeing the kernel of the transnational in the very expression of Mexican theater and cinema.

I trace the convergence of Jodorowsky's national form and transnational influences through *El topo* and *The Holy Mountain*. In *El topo*, I argue that his use of the “chili western” constitutes a cinematic expression of his theories of national theater. Through the “chili western” style, he combines certain material aspects of Mexico spiritual and cinematic history with Antonin Artaud's idea of doubling, creating a national sensibility that is significant to Mexico yet is consistently shadowed by previous forms. *The Holy Mountain*, I argue, combines cruelty scenes from Mexican history, and therefore perhaps even more forcefully articulates Jodorowsky's enjoining of national content with Artaud's themes. I end with a reading of the

scene of the “Conquest of Mexico”—a cinematic rendition of one of Artaud’s writings. This scene explores both the potential and limitation of using Artaud’s transnational and transhistorical theorizations of artistic performance.

## 5.2 NATIONAL THEATER/LOCAL CINEMA

Despite reviewers’ emphasis on Jodorowsky’s spiritualism and altered consciousness, theater is undeniably the most significant structural and theoretical influence in the director’s cinematic works. As a young artist in Santiago, Chile, Jodorowsky worked as an actor in several theatrical troupes and also performed as a mime and circus clown. It is impossible to think of theater and mime independently when considering Jodorowsky’s work, since he never segmented the two forms into the customary categories of high drama and low-brow entertainment. In fact, the art of mime deeply informed his theoretical understanding of actors’ significance in creating theatrical performance. In particular, he saw parallels between an actor’s stage gestures and a mime’s emphasis on the body and expressivity. Jodorowsky became convinced that the static form of written plays limits the theatrical form’s possibilities of engaging with thoughts, ideas, and lived practices.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> After moving to France, Jodorowsky continued to explore the nature of mime; he apprenticed under famed mime artist Marcel Marceau, creating several of his most noted routines (including “The Cage”) and joining Marceau’s world tour in the mid 1950s (*Jodorowsky Constellation*).

Jodorowsky's new style of theater—with its emphasis on mime, the body, and expressivity—was crystallized in the “Panic Movement,” a artistic collective that he formed with Spanish writer Francisco Arrabal and French artist Roland Tupor in 1962. Within this movement, Jodorowsky attempted to conceptualize and enact his own notion of bodily and gestural performance. Named for the god Pan, the group's primary goal, unsurprisingly, was to produce a mixture of humor and terror, or “panic.” According to the *Constellation Jodorowsky* interview with co-founder Arrabal, the Panic Movement was situated in the realms of the irrational—skirting the dominance of societal reason for a primacy of corporeal experience. The group staged “happenings”—theatrical events that were not bound by scripts or schedules but by an attempt to shock the viewer out of complacency.<sup>68</sup>

In theory, the Panic Movement had neither artists nor creators; instead its participants claimed that it appeared at the moment of societal transition, at what Jodorowsky calls a “spiritual birth.” Its presence, according to Jodorowsky's treatise on the Panic Movement, “Método Pánico,” evoked the birth pains necessary to overthrow logical rationality and binarism: “In this time of spiritual change, philosophy must dissipate into an activity that does not provide cerebral technique for understanding the world but *integrated, bodily ones*” (84). Panic attempts to reject dualisms, including the binary between “art” and “not art”:

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<sup>68</sup> The “happening” starred Jodorowsky dressed in motorcyclist leather, rubbing chickens up and down a naked woman's back as she writhed on the floor. Other scenes included a staged murder of a rabbi, a crucified chicken, a giant vagina giving birth to Jodorowsky, naked women covered in honey and live turtles being thrown into the audience.

Panic must, before all else, abstain from the tendency to judge, to finish with the dualizations: pure-impure, good-evil, beautiful-ugly, thesis-antithesis, and also to end "abstract organizations." These organizations create an illusion called "the Painting" instead of colored surfaces . . . "Literature" instead of relations of letters, etcetera . . . (84)

Principally, Panic sought to remove the work from rigid categorization, in effect both closing the gap between distinctions of "arts" and attempting to reject the limitations imposed by moral philosophy (similarly to many other late modernist artistic movements, including early Surrealism). However, this rejection of artistic and moral categories is central to Jodorowsky's notions of theater and cinema, for it illustrates his abnegation of static, ideal artistic forms—central for his notion of theater and consequently for his notion of cinema as well.

Jodorowsky's resistance to rigid forms is taken further in "El objetivo del teatro" ("The Goal of Theater"), which rejects performative adherence to written text as rigid and stifling. According to his 1966 manifesto, conventional understandings of theater are flawed because theater has been considered an art and is therefore subject to notions of durability in the same manner as paintings, novels, and sculptures. Theater, however, cannot be judged through notions of constancy; performance is always limited in time, and one performance can never be repeated exactly. Thus, the inevitable accidents (deviations) that arise from live performances are not flaws but illustrations of the theater's unique essence: "Theatre should base itself on what has until now been called 'mistakes': ephemeral accidents. By accepting its ephemeral character, the Theatre will discover what it is that distinguishes it from the other arts, and through this, its own essence" (page 73). Much more than the other arts, the theater leaves a lasting impression on the viewer because it has no real durability (as an *objet d'art*). In other words, it is the ultimate gesture of impermanence: "The other arts leave written pages, recordings, canvases, volumes:

object-traces that are obliterated with time by a very slow process. The Theatre, on the other hand, should not last even a single day in a man's life. With its birth comes its death" (73). The accidents of the theater—the imperfections that render a traditional performance flawed—are in fact expressions of true performance. The goal of theater is not to render the performance of a written text perfectly, according to Jodorowsky, but to leave behind the written text altogether.

Jodorowsky's theorizations of theater were intended to be expressed on the Mexican stage, where during the sixties Jodorowsky produced new plays, classical texts, and radical interpretations, all with varying degrees of success. Although several of his productions played to rave reviews and packed houses (including a star-filled production of Ionesco's "Exit the King"), much of his work suffered from financial and political struggles. His relationship with Mexican theatrical productions was never consistent; in fact he often faced obstacles in bringing his productions to the stage. Despite several early successes, the director expressed his frustration over his attempts to produce European avant-garde theater in Mexico.<sup>69</sup> Specifically, he has complained that these contemporary European productions did not translate well onto the Mexican stage. While he did not imagine Mexicans to be too unsophisticated to understand European theater, he surmised that they had no entry into these texts. Moreover, the traditional reliance on the theatrical texts further alienated Mexican audiences from performances. In both of the aforementioned essays, he takes up the question of Mexican theater diagnosing the problem in the first and describing the possibility of a unique Mexican theater in the second.

The emerging appearance of Mexican theater, Jodorowsky claims, cannot follow the European avant-garde in critiquing the formal traditions of older European forms. Hamlet and

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<sup>69</sup> Interview with the director in *La Constellation Jodorowsky*.

Oedipus are not emblematic figures of Mexico—thus reinventing them still participates in a different, unfamiliar tradition. Avant-garde European authors, in particular the writers of French absurdist theater, were already firmly entrenched in a national theatrical tradition, and therefore, according to Jodorowsky, untenable for Mexico’s theatrical imitation:

How can we create a theater that destroys old forms when in Mexico we don’t have [a tradition of] old forms? What’s it worth to present a revolutionary interpretation of *Hamlet* by two actors if they neither know the classical interpretation nor even care? One cannot revolutionize theater where there is no theater. (115)

Instead, Jodorowsky proposes what he calls a “minor theater,” which will not be subject to the whims of advertising or spectatorship (like television) but instead will be predicated on the creation of theatrical ethos. This notion of a minor theater incorporates the attributes of Panic Theater and several of the significant concepts from “Goals”: impermanence, flexibility, and corporeality. These imperatives augment the minoritarian possibilities of an emerging national theater, in that they emphasize performances and gestures, while deemphasizing more established and traditional elements such as scene and text.

Jodorowsky’s elements of this “minor theater” include directives for author, actor, director, and patron, all of which emphasize a commitment to enriching local talent and expressing an attempted national essence. For example, the theatrical actor must reject the aura of stardom for the practice of bodily expression. Perfecting dance, mime, and vocal techniques—essentially, training the body’s biomechanics in the practice of theater—must be accomplished before an actor can participate in theater, and apart from the focus on stardom and ego (117). Thus, Jodorowsky imagines national theater to be made up of noncommercial actors who are trained to the task. In a similar manner, authors must do away with the sovereign impermeability

of static text and instead renegotiate the actor-author relationship (118). Similar to Panic Theater, Mexican national theater would be fluid, ephemeral, and dedicated to the movements of bodies on stage rather than the production of great theatrical texts.

Despite his overtures toward national theater in his 1966 and 1970 manifestos, Jodorowsky's frustration with censorship, small audiences, and the very powerful actors' union led him to declare the end of Mexican theater. In a 1970 interview with *The Drama Review*, he pronounced the theater unequivocally dead. Through his recent theatrical endeavors, he argues:

[W]e realize that we practice self-censorship and that our art is stunted. We directors know that we are in decadence, since we are only producing lukewarm work with no impact on the spectator. The reviews are decadent; they only protect a theater of assholes . . . the public sits there looking at literary works without the least conception of a new theater, a corporal theater, an ephemeral theater, an aggressive theater, a political theater, a sexual theater. (71)

Clearly, Jodorowsky's interest in a theatrical instinct has not changed in this interview. He continues to emphasize performance and bodily expression over the literary form and theater's transitory nature over text's permanence. However, censorship, audience disinterest, and aggressive responses to his productions have pushed the director away from theatrical performance. With this interview he admits that theater in Mexico is still wedded to the text and European traditions. And even a radical reinterpretation of textual performance, he argues, is unrealizable.<sup>70</sup> Between state censorship and occasional moments of outright hostility,

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<sup>70</sup> The problem with any experimentalism in Mexican theater, according to Jodorowsky, is that "All experimental theater is being done within a verbal theater, and within morality and the



Jodorowsky turned to film, which—despite its static form—could also travel, be showcased in different areas of the world, and most importantly be saved from the particulars of the moment’s (or nation’s) censorship: “Better to put your effort into films,” the director claims, “so that if it is censored, it can be stored in cans” (76).

It is possible, then, to return to his most popular films to examine them not as pieces that relinquish their location for universalism, but as attempts to create a cinematic version of a performative, *living art*. More specifically, *El topo* and *The Holy Mountain* are expressions of Jodorowsky’s national artistic form, theater made into cinema. The text is subordinated to the physicality of set and actor. The films were produced outside of institutional studios (predicated, as Jodorowsky would say, on the Hollywood studio system) and relied on nonprofessional actors and outcasts who are segregated from the profession. However, each film is also particularly illustrative of local traditions that rely extensively on the shadows of past Mexican, North American, and European artistic heritages. It is quite significant that *El topo* is based on a modification of a European genre (the Italian or “spaghetti” western), which is of course a modification of a Hollywood antecedent (the classical western). However, this formal play circles back to Mexico and Mexican film more broadly; the classical western is already inextricably intertwined with Mexican film production. Thus, the reconstructed form of *El topo* as “chili” western is simultaneously a national and transnational play on cinematic forms.

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‘good’ traditions of our society. No one wants to do a blasphemous theater, no one wants to do a pornographic theater, no one wants to do an anarchic theater . . . in other words, everyone wants to do experimental theater *and* be praised by the critics and society” (73). In other words, theater is (and will be) too limited by egoistic and cultural constraints to become truly experimental.

### 5.3 THE DOUBLE OF THE DOUBLE: THE WESTERN RE-EMERGES AS THE CHILI WESTERN

I would like to think through *El topo*'s articulation of Mexican art through use of the western as Mexican. *El topo* is neither a classical Hollywood western nor is it a classical Mexican *ranchera*. However, it forms what Jodorowsky asked for in his "Hacia un teatro nacional"—a national form that incorporates Mexican traditions and Mexican art forms such as cinema. By making a "chili western," Jodorowsky attempts to create those Mexican sensibilities that eschew European classical forms and also the more conservative, colonial Mexican ones. It is not the Hollywood western (for example it disregards special thematics such as East/West); it is also lacking the conservative impulses of the *ranchera*. Instead it forms a Mexican western genre using a tension between Mexican identity and U.S. imperial interests.

*El topo* opens with its ambiguously amoral protagonist and his prepubescent son happening upon the gruesome remains of a massacre. In a nameless desert town, the bodies of many slaughtered young women litter the streets, while their men are hung in the small chapel. With his young son behind him, the gunslinger El Topo attempts to track down the bandits who perpetrated the crime. However, the mercenaries find him first, and El Topo kills them all after discovering that their leader, merely called "the colonel," has overtaken a Franciscan monastery. The gunslinger then raids the monastery, freeing the monks and finding the colonel, an old man dressed in an operatic soldier's uniform (and played by famed Golden Age actor David Silva). El Topo challenges this bandit leader to a duel, disarming but not killing him. Instead, he humiliates him into suicide. He rides away with Mara, the colonel's woman, leaving his son behind with the monks and charging into the desert.

The second section of the film follows El Topo as he attempts to kill the four most powerful gunslingers of the desert, thus winning Mara's love and adoration. They are all eventually dispatched, but with trickery—not skill. During these travels to eliminate the desert's greatest fighters, the two are shadowed by a woman gunfighter who also wishes to challenge these masters. During this strange journey, Mara shifts her allegiance to the other woman, and together they dispatch El Topo, shooting him and leaving him for dead. He is rescued, however, by a group of outcasts, who take him to their underground home to recuperate.

In *El topo's* third section, the narrative returns, years later, to the trope of the gunslinger's revenge. El Topo has purged himself of his previous murders and begun a monkish life with a group of inbred and deformed cave dwellers. He has fallen in love with one of these downtrodden figures, a dwarf referred to only as "the small woman," who helps him dig a tunnel between the caves where her tribe lives and the town above. The townspeople who live above are malicious and repugnant; they repeatedly torture others for their own amusement, execute their hapless victims, and play dangerous, malevolent games under the guise of religious ecstasy. Despite the abusive acts and cruel tendencies of the townspeople, the small woman's people are still eager to escape the darkness of the underground. El Topo and the small woman dig a tunnel, busking as mimes to pay for supplies. Although the cave dwellers escape through the tunnel, they are brutally slaughtered by the townspeople. Following the massacre of the cave community, El Topo, alone and furious, kills every last one of the town's residents. Seeing the remains of both victim and oppressor, he covers himself with oil and commits an act of brutal self-immolation. The dwarf woman and El Topo's son, who has become a gunfighter himself and dresses in El Topo's old black bandit garb, escape into the desert, leaving behind the town's wreckage.

While J. Hoberman artfully calls *El topo* a “peyote” western, the film can much more productively be thought of as a chili western, the name for a spaghetti western-styled film shot in Mexico with a Mexican crew and actors. While Hoberman’s phraseology emphasizes the film’s psychedelic tendencies and emphasizes the possibility of individuated interpretations, the film nonetheless appears more entangled in western generic forms than such a qualifier would suggest. In other words, *El topo* is more inflected by the western genre and its complicated historical relationship to Mexico than by North American drug culture. Of course, western-themed pictures have been shot in Mexico since the late nineteenth century, but *El topo* is part of a newer tradition of western; the film is neither Hollywood nor Mexican studio. It is instead radically divergent from westerns set or filmed in Mexico. Its grotesque humor and characters, circular formal structure, and almost silent script evoke the 1960s-era, postclassical Italian western more than the earlier Hollywood counterparts of this form.

Although westerns were often shot in Mexico, the classical western—that “quintessentially” American genre long associated with Hollywood films—was a rare if not unheard of production for Mexican studios and audiences. During the Mexican studios’ most prolific period (the “Golden Age” of filmmaking (approx. 1935–1955), *comedias rancheras* comprised most of the *charro* (cowboy)-themed films. Unlike the classical Hollywood western, *comedias rancheras* were characterized by singing *charro* protagonists who attempted to reconcile conflict and uphold already established economic and social orders. Arturo Ripstein’s 1966 *Tiempo de morir* (*Time to Die*) could arguably be called the first “western” produced and distributed for a Mexican audience. Unlike *rancheras*, *Tiempo de morir* takes up the more traditionally Hollywood western themes of isolation, savagery, and revenge. Made soon after the early Italian westerns, Ripstein’s film appears more similar to Sergio Leone’s *Dollars* trilogy

than Mexico's high-spirited romantic *hacienda* comedies. *El topo* continues in the new chili western tradition started by *Tiempo de morir*, exploring themes of civilization and savagery, instead of the more cohesive, unifying impulses in the earlier Mexican genre.<sup>71</sup>

Furthermore, the chili western is unique—even among the proliferations of “food” westerns that emerged after Leone's films re-energized and globalized the rapidly aging western genre. While the later “food” westerns (the “curry” western of India or the “noodle” western of Japan) usually take place in their countries and experiment with their own national thematics, spaghetti westerns take place in either the United States or Mexico. By re-engaging with the Mexican settings, the chili western simultaneously takes up the problem of Mexico in Hollywood productions even as it reimagines its own nation in this redeployment of an older genre. In order to understand *El topo's* simultaneous investment in national and transnational cinematic forms, it is necessary to understand the film in light of the history of westerns in Mexico, and also in conjunction with the spaghetti's unique view on the Hollywood images of Mexico and the American West.

Arguably, *El topo* shares more similarities with the Italian western than with classic Hollywood examples from which the latter are modeled. Spaghetti westerns—Italian-directed and -produced westerns from the mid-1960s—are known for their thematic and formal

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<sup>71</sup> This does not indicate, however, that there are no similarities or connections between *El Topo* and the scores of *comedias rancheras* produced in the 1940s. For example, *El Topo*, like its Mexican predecessors, incorporates different moments in time at differing instances. In many of the *comedias rancheras*, nineteenth century clothing and imagery coexist with contemporary cars and outfits (see, for example, *Los Tres García*).

deviations from traditional North American works of the genre.<sup>72</sup> Made famous by Sergio Leone's *Dollars* Trilogy (*A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* [1966]), the films were once maligned by critics as poorly made derivatives of classic westerns but now enjoy a more distinguished reputation as complex interventions into popular cinema, Hollywood genres, and mythologies of the American West. Earlier critics derided the spaghetti films' "flaws" and "inaccuracies"—in other words, the aforementioned deviations from the classic western mode—but it is these aberrations that both characterize the spaghetti's highly critical genre revisionism and create the model that was later adopted by other national cinemas interested in making westerns.

Earlier critics of Italian westerns characterized the films as "violent, amoral, surrealistic, noisy, and naïve" (Parkinson and Jeavons, qtd. in Frayling 124), as well as overacted and overdirected. They also, according to numerous critics, play fast and loose with the history of the American West. Later critics and scholars, however, note the spaghetti films' critical impulses and alternative modes of engaging with American history. Christopher Frayling, for example, argues that Italian westerns are a mode of critical cinema, in part because of their popular roots and generic limitations: "In general, Italian Westerns do not represent a movement toward demythicization: many of them, for example, resemble parables. But they often criticize the mythology of the Hollywood Western, as a prelude to using its 'syntax' for Italian purposes" (126). In other words, the films often use the structure, forms, and myths of the western in order

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<sup>72</sup> Loosely, Italian westerns are defined as having American or Mexican setting and narrative but European directing, funding, and shooting locations. Most spaghetti's are filmed with an international cast, and the bulk of the early films were produced by Italy's Cinecittà studio.

to critically engage with the mythologies and archetypes of the American West.<sup>73</sup> Likewise, Edward Buscombe argues that spaghettiis articulate a 1960s Italian political view of American political intervention into the “third world.” In spaghettiis, there are “no more films about well-intentioned police action south of the Rio Grande, no more missions to save the poor and oppressed in the name of civilization and charity” (23). As these critics argue, the Italian western is neither an inferior imitation of the Hollywood western nor an exact recreation of themes of the American West, but a unique reimagining and critique of this American genre. Also, Italian westerns bring to the screen a healthy skepticism of American interventionism, especially into Mexico and Latin America.

Similarly to its Italian predecessors, *El topo* deviates from traditional western tropes, styles, and forms. Many of the self-conscious formal styles that characterize spaghettiis appear anew in Jodorowsky’s films. These deviations enable *El topo* to reflect the history of the western and shift its national imagination from a U.S.-centered perspective to a more “Mexican” one.

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<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, Italian westerns are not remakes in any sense of the word. Rather, as Marcia Landy argues in her analysis of *Duck, You Sucker* (1971), the Italian western has presented an investigation of Americanism in Europe. Further, it has illustrated that Americanism extends far beyond the borders of the United States, as it comes to represent contemporary conflicts of power on a global scale (82). And, as Frayling’s investigation into spaghettiis illustrates, Italian and American westerns took on a symbiotic relationship in the late 1960s and 1970s. Clint Eastwood, he notes, became a western icon only after the *Dollars* Trilogy. His development from relatively obscure actor to heroic American figure (and popular Hollywood star) was made through Italian, not Hollywood, westerns (47–8).

One of the primary, most notable aberrations is sound. Spaghetti sound is one of the most noted (and initially decried) formal divergences from traditional Hollywood westerns. Noise becomes heightened and non-naturalist, and often dominates the scene. Perhaps the most consistently noted example is the opening sequence of *Once upon a Time in the West* (1966), where three circumspect gunfighters wait for a foe to arrive on an incoming train. The three dispatch the local conductor and wait amidst the dust and debris of the empty station. As the tension builds, the ambient noise of the film escalates. The turn of a windmill, a continuous drip of water onto the brim of a hat, and an aggressive fly transform background sound into an exaggerated, rhythmic cacophony of sensory upheaval.

The cinematic artifice of the dominant noise appears at odds with the traditional western's propensity for realism. While conventionally the narratives of western expansion took place amid the fiercely *natural*, uncivilized space of the west, *Once upon a Time* denaturalizes authentic space. *El topo* further adulterates natural sound, creating noise that is both absurd and painful. Not only does such a sound mimic the dissonance of the spaghetti western but it also allows sound to function as a distorted reflection of the western premise. Similar to Leone's *Once upon a Time*, *El topo's* initial scenes profit from an amplified and distorted tension produced by sound. In one of the film's earliest scenes (when El Topo and his son enter the massacred village), the images are dominated by grossly exaggerated ambient noise. As the film shows the white-clad corpses that litter the street, we hear the dominant buzzing of hordes of flies, although there are no flies visible. In addition to the flies' buzzing, the soundtrack is augmented by the painful, jarring sound of geese (which are again not pictured in the film's milieu). As father and son enter the church—to glimpse upon what Jodorowsky calls "one hundred strangled bridegrooms" hanging from the rafters—the creaking of scaffolding weighed



down by bodies is added to the litany of flies that dominate the scene's sound. Similar to "spaghetti sound," the noise is not subordinate to the visual images but equal (or superior) to them in measure. The dominant sound is also underscored by its abrupt, occasionally clashing, encounters with the film's visual images. For example, the squeaking of nooses swinging from the support beams is only heard at the moment that El Topo enters the church, and the noise is instantaneously piercing, without escalation or development. In the same manner, the sound unexpectedly disappears as soon as the church door shuts. The film therefore highlights the artificiality of the fray, despite the fact that its origins are diegetic in nature.

Even apart from pure exaggeration, *El topo's* sound (both that which emanates "from nature" as well as from nondiegetic music and noise) is highly absurd. These sounds, like the earlier tension-producing noise of the flies and the geese, are highly hyperbolized and dissonant but are also a disconcerting jab at the emotional association between image and corresponding sound. In one example, the introduction of the bandits who conducted the raid on the town and El Topo's subsequent gun battle with the company becomes an exercise in auditory burlesque. As jaunty music plays in the background, the film shows the four bandits engaging their most exploitive activities. The first drinks from a woman's shoe, the second fiercely pares a banana and eats it, and the third draws a woman in the ground with stones and then gropes her. But when they glimpse El Topo riding in the distance, they stop all of these (non)activities to challenge and attack him. In an aural and visual homage to the beginning of Leone's *Once upon a Time*, one of the bandits takes a balloon out of his pack, blows it up, and lets it deflate. As soon

as the sound of the escaping air turns silent, the bandits and El Topo draw weapons and shoot.<sup>74</sup> While the use of the balloon as starting signal has all the indications of ritual, the anachronistic image of the balloon joined with the uncomfortably piercing sound heightens the absurd image of the colonel's evil lackeys.

This sonorous absurdity is most clearly realized in the initial scenes involving the "colonel"—the dominating, dangerous figure who engineered the massacre of the town, seemingly for no reason whatsoever. As the film continues its burlesque auditory and visual images of the colonel's band of mercenaries, his downtrodden woman dresses him, and he presents himself before his underlings. The colonel's exit from his pyramidal domicile is one of the film's clearest moments of its excess of signification, and this excess—like others in the film—takes on an auditory form. The colonel emerges from the doorway garbed in the showy, overly ornate uniform of colonial Mexico. The doorway is at the center of the screen, and as he steps into the light, scores of squealing pigs follow, fleeing the doorway in waves that spread out to the right and left of the colonel's standing figure. Similar to the earlier, feral animal noises, the noise of the pigs is dominant and deafening. On the one hand it may be possible to claim that the pigs symbolize the colonel (the idea that he is "piggish" is obvious from his subsequent actions), but on the other hand the pigs' symbolism is too heavy-handed, and the excessive symbolism becomes part of the absurdity. The extreme noise of the pig squeals, the intense artificiality of the colonel's centralized position, and his—and the camera's—pause in the film's action all serve to render this shot simultaneously significant and parodic.

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<sup>74</sup> In Leone's film, the three bandits shoot at the film's protagonist after the sound of the train whistle stops.

In these instances, sound functions as a marker of excess. It undermines the sincerity of the visual symbolic gesture, instead positing the image as both appropriate and grotesque. While a similar tendency is critiqued as surrealistic and inauthentic in early spaghetti criticism, Frayling notes that this looseness toward conventional U.S. western stories allowed spaghetthis to disregard the traditional Hollywood codes for the western and “free code” their own meaning—rearranging and transcribing the history of “the West” in a way that Hollywood would or could not do (125). Jodorowsky’s films similarly benefit from their counter-hegemonic style, which allows them to engage with the Mexico–United States relation in a markedly different manner from their Hollywood counterparts. Jodorowsky’s films do not attempt to create an alternative, materialist history to the Hollywood western, nor are they created as a primary critique of the western’s pervasive ideological strains. However, their formal styles and varied, often conflicting images and “symbols” create, particularly in *El topo*, a western space that is utterly unlike those produced in Hollywood. By integrating this spurious relation to historical fact into its dominant milieu, the film thus takes up the idea of “national” form that Jodorowsky espouses for theater in his theoretical essays.

*El topo*’s circular structure is of particular significance here as it stands in direct contrast to the themes of expansion that characterize many classical Hollywood westerns. The film’s three segments appear not to spread outward or progress but instead inwardly spiral. Despite the vast space of the northern Mexican deserts where the film was shot, the film’s milieu is not characterized by the extremely long shot of vast, expansive vistas, a technique omnipresent in most Hollywood westerns. In addition, the characteristic machines of expansion (railroads, stagecoaches, and the like) are also absent from the film’s setting. Instead, *El topo* crisscrosses the same physical setting as the protagonist gunslinger attempts to kill the four greatest gunmen

in the desert. The physical building that best embodies the film's structure is not a train station or post office but the tower where the first master resides. The tall circular structure, with its small window entrance, is appropriate to the film's milieu, which appears more constrained than expansive. The film's narrative is likewise predicated upon a circular return. The film's first and third acts mirror each other as El Topo returns to violence to exact revenge. While this circular narrative may parallel Jodorowsky's specific spiritual aspirations, it nevertheless not only contrasts with the more convention westerns but also intersects with the ambiguous intent of Hollywood's "Mexican" ones.

Of course, many Hollywood westerns were shot in Mexico; in these films Mexican shooting locations often stand in for the U.S. frontier. Given its close proximity to Hollywood and relatively cheaper prices, Mexican locations were often chosen as financially advantageous substitutes for U.S. sites, although there were other obvious benefits. Mexico's arid northern expanses were inexpensive yet visually analogous substitutes for the uncivilized wilderness of the American West. Hollywood studios profited from the cheap location shoots that expressed the exoticism, colorful character, and tensions endemic to a "third world" atmosphere (Frayling 222). Beyond its advantageous position as a shooting location, however, Mexico was also constructed as a thematic and spatial extension of the American West. While the country provided scores of bandits and other uncivilized miscreants who could be deployed in contrast to the rugged American cowboy, the exotic and "uncivilized" nature of the space itself was constructed as rich terrain for man's internal struggles between immoral desires and societal

responsibility.<sup>75</sup> For example, John Sturges's *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) pits a band of North American gunslingers (led by famed Hollywood actors Yul Brynner and Steve McQueen) against a brutal, roving band of Mexican outlaws in a rural borderland village. Likewise, in *The Treasure of Sierra Madre* (1948), three Americans attempt to negotiate the amoral world of prospecting in the Mexican interior; this story line aptly metaphorizes the fact that Mexico's revolutionary history provided a treasure trove of western narratives. Westerns often reworked themes of civilization and discord through Mexico's twentieth century revolution and the figures of its popular (and populist) leaders.<sup>76</sup>

During the prolific age of Hollywood westerns, Mexico's greatest boon to Hollywood filmmakers—other than an innumerable supply of disposable bandit-foes and exotic locations—

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<sup>75</sup> This tendency is especially (but not exclusively) significant during the latter half of the twentieth century, when filmmakers were much more leery of casting Native Americans as savage villains.

<sup>76</sup> Most often, these stories center on either of Mexico's two most popular *revolucionarios*, Pancho Villa or Emiliano Zapata (*The Treasure of Pancho Villa* (1955), *Villa Rides* (1969), *Viva Villa* (1934), and *Viva Zapata* (1952), to name only a few). These revolutionist westerns often are fashioned around an American gunslinger entering into the middle of the tumultuous political situation. In these instances, the hero—the outsider of the conflict—becomes the narrator whose perspective explains the moral position in the midst of chaos and calamity. Although initially disturbed by the “savagery” of these popular figures, the American outsider learns to appreciate the deep commitment between these leaders and their people, therefore gaining sympathy for the cause.

was the flexibility of meaning possible in Mexico's topography. Mexico's landscape was always portrayed as an inexhaustible space of savagery and lawlessness, whereas films set in the United States have traditionally divided the continental sprawl into the tamed East and uncivilized West. The metaphorical line between civilization and barbarism advances, according to the western's mythology, as United States boundaries move westward toward the coast. In Mexico, however, there is no metaphorical barrier between civilization and savagery. Hollywood's "Mexican" westerns therefore discard the genre's prototypical dual thematics (nature against civilization, isolation against community) by shifting the center of action to a location where this hypothetical line does not exist. Westerns set in Mexico are not constrained by either particular historical eras or by internal divisions. Films such as *Sierra Madre*, therefore, can easily move from exotic Acapulco to the arid northern deserts without disturbing the division between civilized space and the lawless world. This contrast is significant not only in that it illustrates the U.S.-American (and Hollywood) perspective of Mexico as a savage land but that it also demonstrates a significant difference between Mexican national consciousness and the U.S. conception of "Manifest Destiny." In most of these traditional "Mexican" westerns, Mexico is an extension of savage space that has never been tamed by civilization and society.

*El topo's* use of space disregards both of these structures; it neither creates nor affirms the spatial border between progress and chaos, nor does it understand Mexico as the more generalized space of violence and amorality. Rather, the film positions violence as endemic in both civilization and wilderness. Of course, this positioning is not particularly uncommon; many 1960s and 1970s Vietnam-era Hollywood westerns critiqued the earlier westerns' often simplistic binaries (*Little Big Man* [1970], *Soldier Blue* [1970]). *El topo's* semi-fantastical structure, however, points to the United States as the ultimate place of savagery and violence,

directly contrasting the earlier films' images of Mexico. The film's third section returns to the burlesque excessiveness that characterizes the images of the colonel and his mercenaries. In this last act, however, the antagonist is a western-styled U.S. frontier town, an image of the United States from within Mexico.

Mirroring the film's first part, its third section returns to the narrative of the gunslinger's revenge. After being shot and left to die at the end of his quest to become the greatest gunfighter, El Topo lies immobile in an underground cave for almost two decades, until he suddenly awakens due to the ministrations of a dwarf woman. Her people are trapped inside the underground, too enfeebled to leave through the opening in the roof. After years of sequestered inbreeding the unfortunate people want to tunnel from their underground confines and live with the townspeople above. El Topo takes the "small woman" (her only name in the film), climbs out of the caves, and leads her into the nearby town. There, the two perform mime routines on the streets, collecting small change to buy enough supplies for their excavation into the cave.

Significantly, the town is not cast as a Mexican village but as a grotesquely garish North American frontier town. The first images of the town show the locals violently branding their slaves with their mark—not coincidentally the pyramid/eye so closely associated with the U.S. dollar and freemasonry. The slaves, wearing simple, white peasant outfits of rural Mexico, are corralled and branded as the townspeople gaze lasciviously upon their marking. While the suffering slaves are dressed in white, the townspeople are conspicuously overdressed in gaudy nineteenth-century North American clothing. However, the clearest marker of this scene's North Americanism—apart from the consciously Masonesque symbol—is the racial makeup of the slaves. Although many of the impoverished and scapegoats of the town look like average Mexicans, the slave who comprises the primary focus of this incident is of African—not

indigenous—descent. Mexico was a significant hub for the African slave trade in the fifteenth century, but the population of black Mexican remains small—at approximately one percent—and there was no strong tradition of African or black slaves in Mexico during the nineteenth century. This particular focus on the black slave's branding and entrapment appears rather oblique, especially in comparison to the burlesque milieu that surrounds him. The reference becomes less obscure, however, when seen in tandem with the symbol of the American dollar prominently displayed throughout the town.

Staging the final scene in a North American town rather than a Mexican one is another instance of the film's use of visual and auditory excess. First, the U.S.-American milieu is not organic to the narrative; it does not appear as though *El Topo* has ever left the original desert. Also, the clothing and demeanor of the slaves and cave-dwellers are consistent with the rest of the film (and they evoke the traditional and cinematic appearance of Mexican peasantry). The emergence of the U.S.-styled frontier town in the heart of the Mexican desert appears overtly stagy; the film creates another burlesque performance at the expense of the United States frontier ethos. Similar to the earlier scenes of the colonel's bandits, the frontier town is portrayed as horrifically violent and grossly burlesque. For example, in a long performance of sexual violation, four residents—overly made-up, elderly women clad only in lingerie—take pleasure in having a slave tend to their petty needs. As the slave nears each of them, they touch him and simultaneously accuse him of inappropriateness. At first the touches are slight, but finally the four are groping him while accusing him of rape and molestation. The scene ends, not surprisingly, with the slave being strung up by his feet in the town square and shot in the head. This moment reinforces the strikingly inauthentic milieu and action that has so far characterized the film. On the one hand, this scene is clearly mocking racial and sexual categories, critiquing



the stereotype of the oversexed slave even as it recreates the figure of the lecherous matron. Yet, similar to the film's earlier scenes of roving bandits, this section is marked by its oversignification. The attempts to force the slave into submission are theatrical and extended; each woman accompanies her effort to molest the slave with grand gestures and a myriad of flourishes. The first woman forces the slave's head toward her as she exclaims "The degenerate is looking at my legs!" while another kisses him and yells "You can all testify that he kissed me by force!" There is a conspicuous absurdity to these lines; had the others looked, they would only see this woman force the man toward her as she gropes him. As the four women push the man down on the floor and rapturously grab and touch him, the sound of feeding tigers emanates from the background. Similar to the squealing pigs that heralded the colonel's emergence into daylight, the roaring tigers are simultaneously funny and disturbing. While the noise of voracious growling tigers underscores the carnivorous pleasures taken in power and torture, the sound nonetheless becomes absurd and humorous as the sonorous symbolism descends into hyperbole.

This performance of fetishistic desire ends not with the excessively ribald flourishes that began it but with a more disturbing, familiar image: the offending man is lynched and shot in the head. Yet even the brutal killing is theatrical and inauthentic despite its evocation of historical events. In the middle of the town, El Topo and the small woman perform their mime routine, a sugary act in their love is thwarted because he is too tall to hug her. From the corner, the slave runs from the women's house as they and other townspeople scream "murderer" and "degenerate" behind him. The townsmen catch him as he runs by El Topo and his friend, hang him by his feet, and shoot him. The angle of the shot, however, is set both above and to the front of the action, which underscores the camera's quasi-theatrical point of view. This particular use of the camera, in addition to the street's empty milieu and the corresponding images of the

mimes' performance area, illustrates the staged nature of the scene without undermining its effectualness.

The episode mirrors several others from the film's end; its absurdity does not detract from its violent significance but augments the sense of brutality. The scene refers, of course, to the historical narrative of slavery and its aftermath in the United States. Other images of this final section likewise engage with both current and historical imagery evoking the United States' relations with the world. El Topo's final self-immolation is perhaps the most disturbing historical reference; his body, prostrate in the street and engulfed in flames, calls to mind Malcolm W. Browne's infamous 1963 photograph of Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức, who burned himself to death in the streets of Saigon. The photograph became famous as a brutal image of the effects of U.S. intervention into Southeast Asia. Many of the film's other images recall an equally horrifying event. During an earlier moment in this terrifying town, four unnamed, white-clad peasants are forced to the ground and shot in their backs to the cheers of the excited townspeople. The event calls up the massacre of Mexico's students a mere few years before; Jodorowsky returns to this same image of carnage again and again in *The Holy Mountain*.

#### **5.4 ARTAUD'S THEATER IN *EL TOPO***

Certain effects of Jodorowsky's theater can best understood as derived from Antonin Artaud's writings and, through Artaud, from a particular French avant-garde tradition. While Jodorowsky rejects *Hamlet* as an appropriate text for Mexican national theater, he nonetheless explicitly suggests that Artaud's corporeal scream be part of the experience. But why is one European writer be affirmed while the larger theatrical canon of Europe rejected? The answer

lies in part in understanding Artaud's structures of theater and his interests in non-Western texts.<sup>77</sup> Jodorowsky's films embody certain facets of Artaud's pure theater, even as they reach the limits of cinema's corporeal, ephemeral experience. *El topo's* theatrical style attempts to evoke Artaud's double, both in terms of structure and through individual, emblematic figures. They also mimic certain elements of Artaud's theatrical experience; specifically they attempt to impart cruelty upon the spectator and participant alike.

Written in the early 1930s, *Theater and its Double* and the various manifestos of the "Theater of Cruelty" explore a theater radically different from the larger European tradition. This particular theater would subvert language and is instead dominated by gesture, noise, and bodily mechanics. In lieu of a concrete written text, Artaud proposes a theater that produces an alphabet of signs, which is a language of "sounds, cries, lights, onomatopoeia" (TD 90) that preclude already established semiotic meanings. The basis of the performance would be the hieroglyph, which functions as a heterogeneous sign that merges visual and auditory acts to produce a third relation. The bodies of the actors, in relation to sound and performance stage, would be one of

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<sup>77</sup> I am leaving aside here the applicability of Artaud's theories to film itself, in part because I've alluded to it earlier vis-à-vis Jodorowsky's struggles with the medium of film. As I noted previously, the problem lies in part with the medium of film. It is not the fluid, transgressive expenditure that Artaud venerates in *Theater and Its Double*. While not necessarily antithetical to pure theater, cinema nevertheless is bound by the particular limits of celluloid. Film is a finite and insular medium and a repetitive spectatorial experience, as Jodorowsky admits in his interview with the *Dramatic Review*. Nevertheless, Jodorowsky's films are strongly indebted—in detail, style, and spirit—to Artaud's approach toward a radical, lived theater.

the instantiations of such hieroglyphs. Artaud's hieroglyphs implicitly discard possibilities of distantiation, removed spectatorship, or rational articulation; they instead create a primary theatrical experience that the spectator must experience corporally. Therefore, this theater must be experienced in light of physical sensation born by the spectator instead of psychological or moral themes. To see the dreams, violence, and terror of the theater as substitutions for something else (a moral meaning or a state of mind) is to lose the real poetry and experience of the theater, for "if the theater is bloody and inhuman, it is . . . to manifest and unforgettably root within us the idea of a perpetual conflict, a spasm in which life is continually lacerated, in which everything in creation rises up and exerts itself against our appointed rank . . ." (*TD* 92). In the theater of cruelty's most perfect form, the extinction of traditional literary language and the predominance of the hieroglyph, would have the potential to shatter the spectator's perception of conventional reality.

This theater would be the double (true theater) of true life, and would thus be able to bring together stage performance with reality itself. This theater of cruelty would always lay bare the already present doubles, as Artaud notes in his letters to Jean Paulhan when he explains that "the title [*Theater and Its Double*] corresponds to all the doubles of the theater that I believe to have found over the course of so many years: metaphysics, the plague, cruelty. . . . It is on the stage that the union of thought, gesture, and act is reconciled" (*CW* 231) In Artaud's understanding, the shadow of the contemporary theater links that theatrical experience to true theater as it has been expressed in history: "Every real effigy has a shadow which is its double; and art must falter and fail from the moment the sculptor believes he has liberated the kind of shadow whose very existence will destroy his repose" (*TD* 12) Real theater, real art, is always haunted by the dark shadow of reality that is not glimpsed in quotidian existence.

Artaud saw the possibilities of this theater in the shadows of ancient theater—for example the nonverbal, gestural Balinese theater or what he calls the “oriental theater of metaphysical tendencies” (*TD* 72). But he also saw this potential in various other cultural forms, including the religious ritual of the Tarahumaras and Aztec histories. Artaud was one of many European thinkers who looked at Mexico’s histories and cultures as realm for examining the possibilities for a non-Enlightenment world-view. George Bataille appreciated the beautiful atrocities of Aztec sacrifices.<sup>78</sup> André Breton, who visited the country in 1938, became fascinated with both modern artists (such as Frida Kahlo) and indigenous works. Native arts and rituals, it seems, had much to say to Europeans about Europe itself.

Artaud wanted to enjoin Mexico’s new political socialism with its native sensibilities. He had grand expectations for the visit and thought the native people’s cultures would manifest his philosophical and theatrical expressions: “These [indigenous] cultures would possess a fierce, specifically physical language, which would suck all other languages into itself and would exist independently, without the need for texts or writing of any kind” (Barber 79). Although he was disappointed by Mexican artists’ Marxist fervor and the country’s certain disregard for indigenous myths, his trip to the Tarahumara region and his participation in the peyote dance nonetheless formed the basis for his *Peyote Dance*, which describes the possible ways that indigenous understandings of time and death could be expressed in the world of modern man.

While Artaud’s theaters reach back to the great primordial theaters, Jodorowsky’s films incorporate both ancient and contemporary gestures of Mexican culture. Robert Neustadt, in examining Jodorowsky’s graphic novels and other writings, examines the use of the double as

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<sup>78</sup> On Ethnographic Surrealism 546.

central to the author's work. Neustadt calls this tendency toward doubling the ultimate gesture of postmodernism, in which the author refers to originals that themselves gesture toward the copies from which they were supposedly created.<sup>79</sup> Although much of Jodorowsky's artistic works concern the quest for origins, the journey typically results in wild goose-chases and illusions (85). Neustadt never mentions Artaud, but what he calls a "(con) fusion of literary signs" (112)—this quest for another language that underscores these significant repetitions—implicitly suggests Jodorowsky's reliance on Artaud's theatrics, in particular the hieroglyphs. These hieroglyphs, or new theatrical signs that are considered separate from conventional textual language, became significantly more central to the director's films, especially as Jodorowsky became increasingly disillusioned with the production of radical theatrical work.

During the late 1960s—at the moment in which he definitively shifted from theater to cinema—Jodorowsky laid claim to the theatrical hieroglyph as the mechanism through which extra textual experience could occur. As Jodorowsky's frustration with the production of theater grew, he insisted that theater become more obtuse and heavy; it was the only way, he argued, that theater could escape the texts that continued to circumscribe it. In his interview with the *Dramatic Review*, he demanded that even literary theater shed the pleasures of the text for the pain of performance:

Since we cannot escape literature, let's have a theater spoken by paralytics. Put the actors in wheel chairs, put chastity belts on them, make them wear three-hundred pound diving suits, put weights on their feet like prisoners, cover them with chairs . . . and make a

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<sup>79</sup> Jodorowsky wrote his first published graphic novel, *Incal*, with Moebius, whose infamous "strip"—which has no beginning or end point—characterizes this artistic inclination.

theater based on sound, light, text written on stone blocks, inflammable material. But no one wants to do this.” ( 72).

This idea should sound similar to Artaud’s theatrical hieroglyphs. These suggestions are not metaphors for emotion or psychological pain. In order to make radical theater, Jodorowsky says, the performances must be literally weighted, constrained and limited. Clearly, this interview continues the train of thought illustrated in “Método Pánico” and “El objetivo del Teatro,” which borrow from Artaud’s theater of cruelty. The former two texts rely heavily on Artaud insistence that “it is essential to put an end to the subjugation of the theater to the text” (TD 89). But in asking for a “theater based on sound, light” Jodorowsky likewise explores a desire to see theater embodied with hieroglyphs and corporeal emblems.

Jodorowsky’s *El topo* is saturated with doubles. As I illustrated previously, *El topo*’s desert milieu, frontier towns, and vengeful gunslingers are already imbued with cinema’s past and iterations of Hollywood-style westerns and spaghetti westerns. The chili is a double of the spaghetti form, which is itself a double of the classical western. The gunslingers can themselves be thought of as corporeal doubles. El Topo, who begins the film as a black-clad gunfighter, is mirrored at the end of the film by his son, who takes on the black clothing of the gunslinger in order to enact his own revenge. The final town, however, is the double of Mexico and the cruelty of the contemporary North American realm. It is an American town, a Mexican desert, the world stage of North American intervention, and the historical space of U.S. power. The milieu is a stage in which the film’s theatrical figures can lay out these excessive and dangerous expressions. What could appear to be timelessness is actually an empty stage in which certain props imply echoes of media images and historical events. El Topo’s final act of self-immolation is established as an act of theater. The props of the setting—the buildings, signs, and clothing—

of a U.S. frontier town serve as catalysts for historical association but are still used as props, not as historical authenticity. By retaining the milieu's staginess, the film's narrative and images are consistently shadowed by the images that came before it. In other words, the film sets up a series of theatrical doubles: while it is a chili western, uniquely Mexican, it is also shadowed by its Italian and Hollywood antecedents. Even as it expresses a distinctly Mexican narrative it always contains within it the echoes of the previous cinematic styles. In doing so, Jodorowsky's film attempts to be an act of Artaudian theater, in which the viewer's total experience of the film links the spectator firmly to a visceral reality.

## 5.5 CONCLUSION: "THE CONQUEST OF MEXICO"

I would like to briefly conclude with a reading of one scene of Jodorowsky's *The Holy Mountain*, which is the culmination of Jodorowsky's attempt to bring an Artaudian construction of theater to the Mexican milieu. This film is more fragmented than *El topo* but the staging of Artaud's "Conquest of Mexico" gestures toward Jodorowsky's efforts to bring ancient civilization to the modern notion of cruelty. Like the earlier *El topo*, the director's third project documents an anti-hero's personal journey. While the former film charts the gunslinger as he negotiates frontier space, the latter illustrates a fool's journey to enlightenment, mapped through the constellatory paradigm of the Kabbalah. The film begins in the desert where a character known only as The Thief awakens to the friendship of a partially limbed dwarf. The story quickly moves to Mexico City, where The Thief and his companion perform for money on the streets and encounter many disreputable characters, including amused North American tourists who pay to have soldiers kill radicals and debauched men dressed as nuns. The Thief travels the



city holding a plaster statue of Christ, meeting derelicts and engaging in blasphemous acts. This street-level tour of Mexico City's derelict population ends at the base of the infamous tower of Ciudad Satélite, which The Thief then ascends, ostensibly entering into a new universe.

On the other side of the tunnel The Thief meets the Alchemist, a paradigmatic figure who purges the thief of his worldly excess and transforms him into a metaphysical being. The Alchemist then introduces the Thief his new realm's other greatest thieves, who are known by their planetary titles: Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Pluto, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune. As each figure is announced, the film tells of the (often dangerous and destructive) political, social, and economic power wielded by each. For example, Venus is a successful businessman, creating plastic bodies to replace desiccated and infirm natural ones. Likewise, Saturn sells ideological children's toys that guarantee a state of perpetual war; she makes toy guns and gadgets that condition children to hate their eventual enemies. Others included governmental ministers, art dealers, and high-level soldiers. These characters reject their earthly livelihood in order to undertake their spiritual journey, and the film shifts from an unwieldy critique of the hypocrisy of the contemporary moment to a traditionally mythic, otherworldly odyssey. The group travels to several ancient spiritual sites (including Teotihuacán and Mayan Chichén Itzá) before taking their final sea voyage toward enlightenment. At the film's end, these wanderers don't attain enlightenment but reach "reality" as the camera pulls back to recognize the film's own cinematic constructions.

Filmed with a substantially larger budget than *El topo*, Jodorowsky's third film appears to be the director's metaphysical magnum opus—his chance to cinematically portray his spiritual philosophies in grand style. The film is dominated by mythical symbols and references, a gesture that perhaps augments its individualist, moral reputation. Unlike the former film, however, the

latter's more segmented narrative and his lessening of generic conventions allows for the heavy, saturated theatrical turns to proliferate.

The film reproduces Artaud's "The Conquest of Mexico" early in the film's first act. Written in 1933 some time before his trip to Mexico, "The Conquest of Mexico" was to be one of the inaugural performances of the theater of cruelty, although he was never able to stage a performance. A loose interpretation of Cortez's arrival in pre-colonial Mexico, Artaud's "Conquest" is composed of four parts: "Warning Signs," "Confession," "Convulsions," and "Abdication." Far more enthralled with and sympathetic to the Aztecs than the conquistadors, Artaud begins his spectacle through the perspective of the indigenous people and ends it with an apocalyptic battle in which the Aztecs mount a fantastic revolt against the Spaniards. At the spectacle's end, "This unrest and the threat of a revolt on the part of the conquered will be expressed in ten thousand ways. And in this collapse and disintegration of the brutal force that has worn itself out (having nothing more to devour) will be delineated the first inkling of a passionate romance" (*TD* 131). This spectacle (at least theoretically) expresses the dominant motifs, themes, and forms of Artaud's theater of cruelty. It would be "the overlapping of images and movements [that] will culminate, through the collusion of objects, silences, shouts, and rhythms, or in a genuine physical language with signs, not words, as its root" (*TD* 124). It rejects "psychological man" as its theme, instead evoking what Artaud calls "total man" as expressed through images of tumultuous historical events drawn from ancient cultures

But *The Holy Mountain's* rendition of the event closely parallels Artaud's description, mimicking its structure and use of violent hieroglyphs as the catalyst for the performance's experience. In one of its early scenes, a troupe of street performers enacts Artaud's "Conquest of Mexico" for the various wealthy tourists in Mexico City's famous markets. The Thief finds

himself shoulder to shoulder with the multitudes of vagabonds and miscreants that busk in the streets, performing for European and North American tourists who appear fascinated with the locals' exotic and disheveled appearances. While The Thief and his legless companion snatch U.S. dollars from the hands of tourists, soldiers shoot students and protestors to the delight of the surrounding sightseers. These smaller performances, however, fade into the background as the film's camera settles on the "Toad and Chameleon Circus," a spectacle in which the Thief and his friend both play a part. Only today, according to the troupe's bilingual banner, will the crowd be able to see the world-renowned spectacle, "The Conquest of Mexico." The film's fool-protagonist croaks unintelligibly while the tourists circle around the raised stage complete with a replica of the Aztec city Mexico-Tenochtitlan. The "stage" is of course not a theater but a rolling platform; by being pushed into the square it allows panoramic access to the spectacle. The circus begins with a panoptic view of Mexico-Tenochtitlan's unsuspecting inhabitants—played by hundreds of artfully costumed chameleons. The "Aztec" locals crawl blankly over the plaster pyramids as in the background a wheeled armada fleet quietly approaches the main stage. The fleet appears rather tiny on the city's horizon but rapidly encloses on the cardboard replicas. The invaders (toads costumed in the detailed European garb—metallic armor with the conquistador crest for the soldiers, brown robes belted with tiny lengths of rope for the monks) swarm over the unsuspecting chameleons, seeming (by the film's/performance's perspective) intent upon devouring them. The toads treat the spectators to a very visual enactment of subjugation by swarming over the chameleon/Aztecs and appearing to physically subdue them in a manner both horrifying and absurd. Abruptly, at the circus's apex, the players blow up the pyramids, toads, and chameleons that populate the stage, showering blood over player, spectator, reptile, and amphibian alike.

There are, of course, several structural consistencies between Artaud's "Conquest" and Jodorowsky's later cinematic rendition. Both begin from the perspective of the Aztecs and Montezuma (in Jodorowsky's film, the chameleon Montezuma is illustrated through his overly ornate robes), and both end with a visual and corporeal annihilation of both armies. More significantly, however, the film's portrayal of the conquest mirrors the corporeal outpouring of the "exhaustive force" that signifies the end throes of the conquest. After the toads' "conquest," the subsequent explosion sends toad and chameleon body parts pelting the immediate area and covering the spectators and actors. The corporeal downpour is an apt articulation of the Aztecs' and conquistadors' exhaustive battle. The visceral repulsion of this final destruction (in which the sheer viscosity of toad innards become the spectacular effect) removes any element of spectator distanciation. Partially, this inability to disassociate from the spectacle arises from this mixture of absurdity and brutishness of using (and killing) real animals. And, the animals' blood and guts cover the primarily North American spectators; hence the specter of colonialism appears writ large over the film's violent present.

This particular cinematic and theatrical staging, one of the many disconnected events that dot the film's narrative, can be understood as a way of producing theatrical force outside of textual language. It is a physical rendition of what Jodorowsky demands in his interview with the *Dramatic Review*; a performance's physical details surpass verbal language. Although the film may lack a concern for "total man," the animals nonetheless forestall either psychologism or moralism; their blank faces and unintelligent nature refute cinematic psychological realism; likewise they appear to be amoral creatures. This of course does not prevent the scene from being mired in cruelty—the spectators' detritus-splattered bodies and corresponding reptilian remains enact the spasms of life and death that drive Artaud's theater.

The film's earlier "Circus" is mime-like; even the performance's barker does not really talk and the reptilian "actors" are likewise silent. The use of mime in both *El topo* and *The Holy Mountain* is a continuance of Jodorowsky's earlier work. In fact, his earliest film, *La cravate* (*A Severed Head*, 1957) was filmed entirely as a mime routine, using the conventional make-up and props. As David Church notes, Jodorowsky's silences underscore his interests in removing performance from text:

He often shoots from a stationary (or slowly moving) camera setup, depending upon pantomime and physical expressiveness to convey the force of action. Spoken dialogue tends to be used rather sparsely, often taking the form of aphorisms; while some critics have complained that these aphorisms seem trite and simplistic, their usage suggests an attempt by Jodorowsky to escape the film's written text by compressing a world of meaning into short philosophical declarations. (2)

While at first glance the silence of the mime would seem to be the opposite of Artaud's theatrical "primal scream," the lack of speech (engagingly irreverent in the era of sound cinema) allows for the indescribable hieroglyphic language to make its appearance. Despite particular physical differences, it is this mime-like quality of the film that finally illustrates Jodorowsky's cinematic hieroglyphs. In Jodorowsky's film—particularly in the section of the student massacre—this language is created through the juxtaposition of visual image and nonlogical, nonlinguistic sound. The visual images are dominated by both their historical associations and their mime-like imagery. The fruits, vegetables and tubes that are deliberately vivid resemble the traditional props that are used in any mime-routine (or in a film such as *A Severed Head*). The sound-imagery, however, is even more startling in its detail. Even over Neptune's "concerto," the tubes squirt colored paint and students retch. The music, the lack of dialogue, and the sounds

of agony expressed in this mechanistic way comprise the language outside of textuality to which Jodorowsky ascribes. The conquest of Mexico functions in much the same way. Lacking dialogue from the main “actors,” noise, music, and explosions combine with the images of slaughter in an attempt to form an experiential language.

The echoes of *The Theater and Its Double* in *El topo* and *The Holy Mountain* illustrate two rather oppositional strains in Jodorowsky’s filmmaking: an engagement with historical imagery and an equal fascination with and dedication to various transnational theatrical forms. In fact, it is the emergence of particularly national forms that illustrates the theater of cruelty’s impossibility. The fundamental issue of Artaud’s *Theater and Its Double* is its practical unrepresentability and the insurmountable problem of performing the theater of cruelty *as theater*. It is the same in Jodorowsky’s films; although the filmmaker claims to eschew representation entirely for an experiential cinema, the films nonetheless also illustrate the director’s past interest in forming arts particularly indebted to national traditions—even if he does so by illustrating the impossibility of concrete origins. This is of course the paradox of Jodorowsky’s cinema; while on the one hand it navigates the nomadic paths of national, generic cinema (which appear to lead directly through the Mexican landscape), on the other it illustrates that even the most national forms are always constantly formed and re-formed by a myriad of other national and transnational effects. These problems are negated only by the cruel affect of the film demonstrated through an explosion of toads and chameleons which cannot really represent Mexican, Aztec, or colonist.

## **6.0 THE EXILE'S PROGENY: INSECTS, INDUSTRIALISTS, MOTHERS AND MADMEN IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

### **6.1 REVIVIFICATION WITH NAFTA**

In my dissertation I examine how transnational intellectual, political and aesthetic strategies engender a shift in Mexican cinema's investment in, and portrayal of, national identity during the decline of the studio era. Earlier films, such as *La mujer del puerto*, emphasize cosmopolitan images and aesthetics and underscore the significance of international modernity to their particular renditions of Mexican national identity. Early studio images of "cosmopolitan nationalism" become part of the project of national cinema production at the cusp of emergent nation formation and illustrate the rather paradoxical collaboration between local affiliations and burgeoning modernity. Later films and filmmakers, I argue, incorporate transnational phenomena distinct from earlier international modernism in order to project critical engagements with a coherent Mexican national identity.

For example, Luis Buñuel's Mexican works aptly illustrate the significance of transnational filmmaking styles to his trenchant critiques of nationalism and religion, as well as his skillful negotiation of material events and political filmmaking practices. In cinema scholarship, the director's work divides into two categories: the first being local films with narrow and/or generic concerns, and the second a so-called "universal cinema," or modernist

cinema, with broad intellectual concerns and avant-garde aesthetics. I reject this binary in order to examine the transnational mediations that the émigré filmmaker brought to his Mexican works, and the ways they build upon the struggles of exile filmmaking. Luis Alcoriza's Mexican cinema—less infamous and more concerned with local issues than Buñuel's films—harnesses transnational aesthetic strategies to renegotiate Mexican notions of identity. In doing so, it criticizes both those individual characters so significant to Mexican studio filmmaking and, to a broader extent, certain philosophical tendencies of the post-revolutionary era. The films of Alejandro Jodorowsky, the only director of these three men who never worked in the Mexican studio system, continue to manipulate concepts of Mexican cinema and theater, even as the director rejects structures of conventional narrative cinema that characterize Mexico's studio pictures. Jodorowsky's films are attempts to engage with particular topography and myths of Mexican culture while simultaneously emphasizing corporeal cruelty and shock above representation.

The significance of these particular works, I argue, lies not only with the status of their émigré directors, but in their expressions of transnational intellections and aesthetics that have rapidly changed national cinemas. These post-1950s films negate a coherent national consciousness while aptly mediating the orchestrations of national and transnational cinemas. In other words, the films can be characterized by their illustration of cinema's abilities to move, shift and interact with both national and global phenomena. However, the films that I discuss are limited to a few filmmakers, and several of the works are produced outside of the scope of the national film industry. My emphasis is deliberate; I focus primarily on intellectual, political and aesthetic concerns as opposed to industrial ones. I emphasize particular intellectual and aesthetic circulations that create transnational cinema in order to illustrate and explore the significance of



flows of peoples and intellectual projects to the burgeoning new cinemas. Of course, industrial significances cannot be overlooked in understanding surges in transnational cinemas since the latter half of the twentieth century. For example, the creation of institutions Ibermedia (created in 1997) have increased co-productions in Hispanic countries at the cusp of the twenty-first century, and institutional regulation has definitively altered the languages, topics, structures and aesthetics of Latin American and Mexican co-productions as well as production crews and actors. Of course, Ibermedia is not the beginning of co-productions in Mexico; *Mecánica nacional* and *Holy Mountain* are two of the many co-productions made after the rapid decline of the studio system and Mexican cinema's rapid realignment from unified funding to variant (public and private) sources. I attempt to integrate these concepts into filmmaking's financial alliances and alignments as opposed to seeing intellectual and creative pursuits as co-extensive with from the circulation of money or peoples in transnational cinema.

My conclusion allows me the opportunity to briefly examine some factors that are outside of my mode of inquiry and to raise further questions regarding the role of émigré influences in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. I am interested in questions concerning Mexico's film industry and its later works given the increasing decline in Mexico's production during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In what ways do these strategies affect and emend the notion of national cinema and cinematic identity during the studio decline and the rather barren and unproductive milieu of the 1980s and into the late twentieth century? What is the nature of the relationship between these films and popular cinema? In addition, my project allows me to reflect on the present state of global filmmaking. Although I have begun to chart the ways in which transnational cinema practices can interrogate the national/global binary in relation to Mexico, my work rests primarily in the 1950s, 60s and 70s and does not explore the

more contemporary concerns of national cinema in the immediate global climate. Can this model speak to tensions between national and regional cinema more broadly, given the variation between the significance of national identity to other filmmaking regions?

I would like to think about some of these important questions through a brief examination of three films made by Mexican filmmakers that nonetheless continue to investigate and incorporate the earlier films' transnational sensibilities: Juan López Moctezuma's *La masión de la locura* (1973), Guillermo del Toro's *Cronos* (1993) and Arturo Ripstein's *Profundo carmesí* (1996). These films illustrate the various directions that these intellectual, aesthetic and political strategies have taken over the past fifty years, yet they also speak to some of the important questions regarding contemporary transnational cinema. First, these filmmakers continue some of the émigré traditions and are recipients of other transnational elements flowing into Mexico in the latter half of the twentieth century. Significantly, they also are closely related to the popular genre films of the late twentieth century. Although the films differ radically in their conception of popular cinema (del Toro embraces the idea of popular cinema more strongly than either López Moctezuma or Ripstein), they are all horror films that bring together these questions of film aesthetics, national and transnational politics, and generic implications. These films are part of a nexus of genre filmmaking that transcends national borders and may engender many aspects of global cinema.

It is no coincidence that the popular horror film provides an apt model for seeing the contemporary outgrowths of globalism in cinema. Although I am not claiming that horror is the only suitable vehicle for transnational filmmaking, the genre has been able to integrate the complexities of the contemporary global world-view with cinema's economics, production and circulation. By turns allegorical and surreal, untimely and primordial, horror films have the

ability to exceed certain national boundaries even as they extensively appropriate national tropes and figures. For example, we have seen the vampire—an aristocratic, quintessentially Eastern European figure—adapt to the rugged mountains of Alaska, the beaches of Acapulco, the factories of Mexico City and the bayous of Louisiana. In cinema, the vampire is a corporeal manifestation of the past intervening in the logical contemporary world. Consequently, the resurrection of the vampire mythos to transnational sensibilities appears almost pre-ordained; the creature can negotiate the world of nation-state formation, colonialism, and the struggle between reason and the unintelligible with a continued flexibility that eludes less fantastical figures.

Similar to the ways these dynamic vampire figures traverse the globe, many other styles and practices of horror also demonstrate fluidity as they adapt to regional and national locations. As John Kraniuskas notes, “horror movies, especially in the Americas, rest on a particularly postcolonial scenario which involves staging the return of the past—usually in the shape of the victims of colonialism and nation-state formation—as a nightmare demanding justice of the present” (143). Although he is writing specifically about the vampire, the proliferating figures of American horror can enact a similar pattern of disruption. In Mexican horror, the zombie is resurrected as forced labor (*Santo contra los zombies* [1962]), while accursed Aztecs seek to regain their own colonial power (*La momia azteca* [1957], *La cabeza viviente* [1963]). The horror films’ capacity for reviving a myriad of national thematics (European vampirism, American post-colonialism, the exilic Spanish community) propels its ability to transcend national or topographical borders.

In addition to these metaphorical possibilities, horror illustrates its ability to capitalize on its mobility of production. Like a few other “low brow” genres, horror’s cult appeal makes it approachable to an international market through technical and industrial techniques. For

instance, much of horror's transnationalism has flourished through consistent use of a singular language (English). While all horror films are not in English, of course, a substantial number of cult-horror films are produced in English and then dubbed into the languages of their countries of origin for domestic distribution. The use of English as the international language of cult-horror dates back to the 60s and 70s, including both art-films made in an international setting (for example *Repulsion* [1963]) and shock exploitation (Dario Argento's work including *Profundo Rosso* [1975] and *Suspiria* [1977]). The recent interest in exploitation cinema from this era illustrates its pertinent commentaries on both local politics and transnational cinema strategies. Mexican English language exploitation films like *Guyana: Crime of the Century* (1979) can consequently be seen as an exploitative retelling of Jonestown and a reworking of transnational media, while still understanding its significance to Mexico's cinematic politics and industrial practices. Co-productions and cult films, made for national and non-national audiences alike, often appropriate a wide array aesthetics, narrative structures and politics.

In contemporary cinema, conventions and aesthetics remain highly transferrable. In particular, the current cinema's highly mobile, transferrable networks of industrial and aesthetic models appear to be an extension of these earlier circulations. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, Japanese and Korean films and video games have been consistently remade into Hollywood fare. These same techniques also appear in European and Latin American cinemas. In other words, horror appears to renegotiate a center/periphery deployment for a wider circulation of filmmaking practices. Consequently, Hollywood models appear in India, while techniques from Bollywood and Korea emerge in Spanish and Brazilian cinema.

I would like to examine these horror films in order to extend some of the concerns of my previous chapters into more contemporary cinema and follow evolving questions of the

contemporary transnational cinematic era. I start with surrealism, one of Buñuel's legacies to Mexico and a tradition taken up by avant-garde and commercial filmmakers there. I do not extensively discuss surrealism in relation to Buñuel's cinema, preferring to explore his films in light of other, less-examined elements. However, surrealism is part of the legacy of Buñuel's works and has become one of the markers of transnationalism in late twentieth century cinema. López Moctezuma, for example, makes the claim that his films are not Mexican but surrealist. This association with European traditions—and the extension of those traditions into later twentieth century filmmaking produced long after the demise of the surrealist movement—points to the idea of surrealism as a bridge between experimental cinema and other European genres in Mexico after the decline of more regional ones.

I extend my examination of other previously discussed categories (allegory, the grotesque, and cruelty) in a similar manner. What new possibilities does allegory hold, I ask, long after the decline of the studio systems and the emergence of NAFTA? Similarly, how do grotesque characters change after they stop becoming a primary response to types and conventions of Mexican identity? My brief turn to these examples gestures toward ways these categories change during Mexican cinema's rapid integrations with Spanish, Latin American and other cinemas during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

## **6.2 PROFANE ILLUMINATION**

I examine surrealism as part of the mechanism through which filmmakers like López Moctezuma attempt to see their work as a continuation of transnational artistic traditions. López Moctezuma notably considers his own work more surrealist than Mexican, aligning his films

with avant-garde movements as opposed to Mexico's 1960s horror films that emerged from its insular studio system: "The Mexican tradition of [horror] films is very simplistic and very conformist, in my opinion, despite their surface delirium. I think my films belong much more in the surrealist tradition than in the Mexican one" (quoted in Greene 46).<sup>80</sup> He made several short films, but for various reasons—including the insularity of the studio system—shifted to theater and assisted in experimental stage productions.<sup>81</sup> Part of López Moctezuma's rejection of traditional studio genres stems from his associations with the avant-garde. However, his films' strange relationship to both surrealism and popular cinema point to a continuation of tensions between artistic and popular filmmaking styles. Similar to Buñuel's films, López Moctezuma's films are invested in similar manifestations of cinematic cruelty and surrealism and their

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<sup>80</sup> After the decline of Mexico's studio system at the end of the 1950s, the industry turned to horror, exploitation and genre films. Low budgets and high popularity helped horror and other exploitation films become the biggest cinematic outputs in the late 1970s and 80s. For example, the prolific studio director Chano Urueta became internationally famous for his Mexican B-horror, including *El barón del terror* (*Braniac* 1963) and *La cabeza viviente* (*The Living Head* 1963). Likewise, Rene Cardona Sr. directed melodramas during the golden age, but practically invented the 1960s Mexploitation period, honing the women's wrestling genre and directing several of the infamous *El Santo* films (Greene 92).

<sup>81</sup> While he was working under famed director Seki Sano, he met Alejandro Jodorowsky. He assisted the Chilean director on *Fando y lis* (1968) and *El topo* (1971) and took much from the earlier films' styles and aesthetics in addition to their actors and production teams, including director of photography Rafael Cordiki and actor David Silva. (Reyes Navares 106).

irreverent images of enlightenment rationality. But, like Jodorowsky, his surrealism and avant-garde techniques are integrated into genre cinema—in his case, horror.

In *La mansión de la locura*, the film's avant-garde mode incorporates the aesthetics and politics of surrealism and notions of cruelty even as it embraces 1970s exploitation cinema. Although radically different in application, its sensibilities appear similar to movies such as *Sweet Sweetback's Badass Song* (1971) or *Last House on the Left* (1972); it is positioned directly within the realms of exploitation, even as it adapts radical politics and aesthetic strategies employed by art and independent cinema. The film's narrative appears quite similar to other seventies' exploitation films, yet its violent milieu and anachronistic architecture enhance its cruel and surreal tendencies. The film is a rather loose adaptation of Edgar Allen Poe's short story "The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether," in which the nameless narrator visits a sanitarium in the south of France. In Poe's version, the story's nameless narrator decides on a whim to visit an asylum (La Maison de Santé), not knowing that the inmates have taken over and pose as doctors, clinicians and visitors. The narrator, a slow-witted medical doctor, tours the grounds and even attends a banquet with the patients, but never understands these "guests" are patients until they reveal themselves as such. He is severely beaten by the loosed inmates yet escapes when the hospital's real staff liberates itself and retakes the premises.

In the film, the nameless narrator is a journalist named Gastón Leblanc, a North American returning to the site of his father's incarceration for his mother's murder. He also brings Julién, a friend who owns the estate next to the asylum, and his beautiful cousin. Both are quickly separated from Gastón and subsequently attacked by inmates. In the facilities, Dr. Maillard proceeds to give Gastón a tour of the facilities, illustrating and explaining the very modern mechanisms that characterize his infrastructures and the newer additions to the older

“soothing system.” The film also introduces the character of Eugénie, the niece of Maillard, pretending she is mad. Once Eugénie escapes the staff, she tells Gastón that Dr. Maillard is actually M. Fragonard, a madman who has overtaken the asylum and imprisoned the actual Maillard. The two are recaptured and forced to endure a horrific banquet of grotesque and violent figures. At the end of the meal, Fragonard attempts to murder Gastón and Eugénie. Even so, the staff reclaims the asylum with Gastón, the real Dr. Maillard and Julién leading the charge. Gastón attempts to fight and disarm Fragonard. Julién’s cousin Blanche, disheveled from abuse, rises up and shoots him with a pistol, shouting “Vive le révolucion!” The sanitarium thus returns to reason after its riotous descent into madness. Despite the restoration of civilization, Gastón’s final voice-over negates the banquet’s conclusive ending. He claims to be unable to return to his previous existence, having now descended into madness himself.

*La mansión de la locura* integrates radical political and aesthetic strategies (including surrealism and absurdity) with conventional generic traits of the horror film. Its surrealist expressions are best illustrated through the modern detritus that litters its photographic surroundings. Its shabby, eviscerated locales evoke early surrealist photography, which is “less on the trail of the psyche than on the track of things” (Benjamin 4). In other words, in the surrealist dream, the importance rests on the manifest content of dream-objects rather than latent interpretations of them. The asylum is not vehicle for the unconscious, but an example of the outmoded garbage that forms its surreal imaginary. In Walter Benjamin’s early descriptions of surrealism, he writes that surrealist literature and photography portray obsolete things in order to propagate a “profane illumination”—the experience that emerges by perceiving outmoded objects through the lens of the marvelous (209). In surrealist literature, the incorporation of those obsolete things matters far more than expressions of transcendental ideal phenomena. In



illustrating these decaying material objects and granting them significance, it is possible to view the architectures of modernity: “No one before these visionaries and augurs perceived how destitution—not only social but architectonic, the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects—can be suddenly transformed into revolutionary nihilism” (210). Surrealist photographs (and writings) produce politically salient “images” in that they are images of historical progress as catastrophe.

The film’s setting is scattered with the litter of a defunct factory (it was filmed on-location in an abandoned textile mill), but the garbled steel piping and polymorphous tubes seem prophetic from the perspective of late nineteenth century rural France. Certainly, López Moctezuma’s mansion of madness particularly clashes with Poe’s “fantastic *château*, much dilapidated, and indeed scarcely tenable through age and neglect”, the dark asylum that “inspired dread” in Poe’s naïve narrator (331). Instead of his antiquated darkness, the film’s mansion—at least the section above ground—is saturated with an emerging modernity: machines, compartmentalization and mechanics. The mechanics never work, of course; they are instead part of the soothing system, in which the inmates enact their elaborate and insane fantasies. Consequently, the setting’s mechanistic decaying objects form the film’s surrealist imagery. The madmen attempt to manipulate machines already decaying, even though this machinery should still be new. This slippage in time—the difference between the falsified “age” of the setting and the film’s nineteenth century environment—enacts the film’s uncanny imagery. In one notable representation, the asylum’s inhabitants play on electrical wiring towering above house rooftops. The inmates, clad in esoteric tribal/religious garb, attempt to fix twentieth-century mechanics without even understanding they are twenty years too early for such

contraptions. The banality of the mechanics constitutes its profane imagery, while the madmen, dressed in elaborate French garb, underscore the not-yet-invented objects' relegation to the past.

The film's banquet scene brings together its horrific cruelty and marvelous surrealism at the height of this profane imagery. The imposter Fragonard hosts an enormous dinner, seemingly for the benefit of his captives Gastón and Eugénie. The scene repeats its opening credits: a naked woman rides a horse through the asylum's large banquet hall, while tables previously housing textile looms dominate the grey factory floor. Fragonard has decorated with *tableaux vivantes* locked in wrought-iron cabinets. The individuals held within the cabinets are his prisoners; they are the asylum's staff and families that hold the frozen positions of popular, nineteenth-century stage images.<sup>82</sup> These *tableaux*, refuse from the nineteenth century, are reminiscent of the surrealists' displaced mannequins that litter the storefronts of the twentieth century. The *tableaux* are doubled by the banquet's mad guests, many of whom hold dolls, mannequins and ventriloquist's dummies. The uncanny emergence of the still, human-like figure underscores the film's investment in surreal imagery while retaining the disturbance of horror. These uncanny plastic and wooden corpses approximate the surrealists' use of mannequins as the uncanny expressions of industrialization.<sup>83</sup> Here, the marvelous imagery is augmented by the madman's

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<sup>82</sup> Popular nineteenth century *Tableaux Vivantes* recreated paintings on stage with living participants. In England, these erotic stage events often portrayed nude or semi-nude figures from such titles as "Nymphs Bathing." The film's scene has nude *tableaux vivantes* such as these described here.

<sup>83</sup> The surrealists' ambivalent relationship to technological innovation was captured through several mechanized and automated figures such as the mannequin: "The Surrealists were

(and madwoman's) incoherent relations with the objects; each one's ill-fated attempts to utilize modernity's objects illustrate the objects' tenuous connections to the era of enlightenment that costuming suggests.

The hall's floor and banquet tables are covered with garbage and, what once were, luxury items. The tables are flush with food and drink, mirroring the dinner scene in Poe's short story. In Poe's narrative, the banquet is lavish and beautiful; the narrator is aghast only at its expanse of food: "The profusion was absolutely barbaric. There were meats enough to have feasted the Anakim. Never, in all my life, had I witnessed so lavish, so wasteful an expenditure of the good things of life" (335). In contrast, the film's bounty resides not only in the volume of food and extravagant items of the French *Nobless*, but in the variety of items both fine and quotidian: animal corpses, vegetable waste, bird cages, instruments, dinnerware, doll parts, mechanical objects and animate bodies. Much of the clutter is not actually edible. In one of the film's most absurd sequences, Fragonard asks his lackeys to bring forth a box of vegetable scraps and asks, "What's under the celery?" revealing the actual Dr. Maillard covered in trash. Here, trash is the aggrandizing paraphernalia of a madman's outsized Napoleonic fantasies. And, as a woman chants among forks and spoons, the rituals of the past, interspersed amid the detritus of the present, gesture toward the unraveling of modernity.

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fascinated by such figures, and this is so primarily because these figures evoke a doubling of the body; but not just any doubling: its estranging as machine and commodity under capitalism. Although this estranging tends to be gendered as Man-Machine and Woman-Commodity, both figures are considered 'marvelous'" (Foster 51).

*La mansión de la locura* is of course not surrealism; it predicates itself far too much on the titillating shock and production values of 1970s exploitation cinema. In fact, it is possible to imagine that, in this example, exploitation cinema is the mechanism for surrealism's resurgence. Similar to the earlier surrealist photography, the film's snapshots capture the outmoded objects still at play in the world. The film's cheap budget and horror conventions allow for the detritus of the twentieth century to emerge in nineteenth-century France.

The film's cruelty, on the other hand, asserts itself through violence and terror on the body, evoking Artaud's affective "Theater of Cruelty" and an attack on the senses as espoused by the author. As I discussed in an earlier chapter, Artaud's theater predicates itself on corporeal experience as opposed to psychologism, moralism, or intellectualism. Instead, Artaud insists that theater should "manifest and unforgettably root within us the idea of a perpetual conflict, a spasm in which life is continually lacerated, in which everything in creation rises up and exerts itself against our appointed rank . . ." (92). The poetry of theater lies in bombarding the spectators with pain and inhumane suffering, refusing abstraction or distantiation. López Moctezuma's mentor Jodorowsky emphasized this notion of cruelty in his own theater, noting that since we cannot have theater without the spoken/written text, we should physically weigh down language so that it is an incarnation of physical agony (172). The horror genre is a fecund landscape for the expansion of cruelty in cinema; it is the cinematic theater of physical punishment, particularly on deviant bodies.

In this film, the cruelty is enacted through Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether's punitive techniques that have replaced Maillard's "soothing system." The imposter takes Gastón to the dungeon, where he reveals the "less soothing part of his soothing system." Fragonard introduces Gastón to a male prisoner manacled to a stone wall, dressed in rags and strikingly emaciated. The

victim's sparse body is positioned higher than his torturers, set above them on a dais and lit from above. While his staging is itself theatrical, the cruelty is manifested through physical torture laid on his desiccated body. This weight upon the body evokes the cruelty espoused by Artaud and Jodorowsky. Dr. Tarr's torture dungeon incorporates the heaviness of cruelty upon actor and spectator; it enacts the on-stage physical pain that replaces language and speech. The sadistic horror of the film's flogging is underscored by the emaciated thinness of the actor whose character is being tortured. The expressed physical cruelty is mirrored by the psychic cruelty exhibited on Dr. Maillard as he is pelted with trash during an attempted attack on reason in his execution scene. Although incredibly absurd, a feathered dance of Gastón's imminent execution and Eugénie's Balinese dance evoke Artaud's discussion of Balinese theater. They attempt to inculcate a collusion of image, dance and gesture fuse "hallucination and fear" into spectacle (Artaud 53). Artaud is writing particularly of the Balinese theater; a spectacle of the dance minimizes spoken language and uses gesture to batter the reason of the (European) spectator. Eugénie's dance is from "Java" (another Indonesian island), while the executioners' are "primordial."

The cruelty at work in Ripstein's *Profundo carmesí* is more like Buñuel's moral (or amoral) cruelty. In *Las Hurdes*, *Los olvidados*, *Nazarín*, and many other of Buñuel's films, cruelty is directed at both characters and viewers. *Profundo carmesí* is no different. The much-awarded *Profundo carmesí* illustrates a more coherent interest in the fate of the national body. It uses cinematic cruelty to lay bare the brutalities at play in the larger milieu. The film is based on the U.S. story of the lonely-hearts killers, where from 1947 through 1949, real-life couple Raymond Fernandez and Martha Beck romanced and murdered unattached women. Ripstein's film keeps the time period of the original accounts, but moves the setting to small cities and arid

deserts of northern Mexico. In *Profundo carmesí*, an unattractive and isolated nurse named Coral Fabre answers a personal ad from a man who describes himself as the “Spanish Charles Boyer.” The man that wrote the ad, a beautiful charmer named Nicolás Estrella, scrapes a meager living seducing rich and lonely women. Although he considers Coral far too poor for romance, he sleeps with her and steals her money. She follows him home and abandons her children in an orphanage in order to be with him. Quickly she learns the true goal of his lonely-hearts ads and becomes his willing accomplice. Posing as his sister, Coral helps Nicolás seduce women in order to separate them from their wealth. He romances several unsuspecting women: a rich *gringo’s* wife, a Catholic Spanish expatriate and a beautiful widowed mother. At some time during each romance, Coral becomes enraged with jealousy and deviates from the plan by violently killing these women. They then continue to move farther and farther into the desert to meet more victims. Their killing spree culminates with a young widow’s murder and Coral’s subsequent drowning of the widow’s daughter in the bathtub. Despondent, Nicolás turns Coral and himself into the police. After a night in police custody, the detectives decide it best to shoot the couple as they attempt to escape. The film ends with the murderers lying prostrate in a pool of blood in the middle of the desert.

Coral and, to a certain extent, Nicolás become an extension of those grotesque types from earlier films, although these characters are given significant differences. The film heaps indignities upon Coral even as she becomes consistently more grotesque. In initial scenes, Coral is cast as monstrous and offensive. She is fat, speaks incessantly of her bad breath and is incredibly sexually aggressive. Early on she attempts to seduce an enfeebled old man bound to a wheelchair. In this moment, Coral does not touch *him*, but places his hand on her; she only has interest in being molested herself. As she forces the man to grope her, his furious daughter enters

and carts him away, telling Coral that she will expose her lecherous ways. The cruelty exercised upon her stems from her inability to be even the passive recipient of eroticization; the film conceives of her as so vile, she cannot take part in any salaciousness. Her interest in lecherous behavior resurfaces with Nicolás Estrella. Although he cannot date her (for Nicolás, she is too poor), he sleeps with her and steals what cash she has. She accepts this easily; she claims it is her payment for being so fat. The film likewise commits humiliations upon Nicolás' lack of hair. During a ride into the desert, his toupee falls onto the side of the road. He scours the dirt for it, finding what looks like a dead rat's body after being hit by a car. His devastation over the loss is underscored by the fact that he is also too poor to buy more hair. The film continues to inflict degradation and pain on its two main characters while they continue their monstrous killing spree.

This cruelty—the notion that suffering is endemic to both life and cinema—recurs with each atrocious crime. Coral does not kill because she wants to; for her, the murders are merely outcomes that must occur. In delineating her series of crimes, one even more heinous than the last, the film captures her excuses as both pathetic and atrocious. For example, after Nicolás says he cannot afford children, she simply leaves them at an orphanage. She cries terribly, clutching her sobbing children, and yet claims that she must leave them. Like Pedro's famous mother in *Los olvidados* who chooses sex over the welfare of her son, Coral is an abhorrent figure that belies the traditional image of Mexican mother from cinema's Golden Age. However, as films such as *Los olvidados* and *Mecánica nacional* have shown, there is a parallel, if much smaller, tradition of the grotesque mother that runs through films of the latter half of the twentieth century. In this film, *Profundo carmesí*, the difference comes from the viewer's complicity in the

grotesque act. It is difficult to castigate Coral for leaving her children because once she is done with them, they vanish from the film.

Coral continues to be the horrific, unnatural mother by committing the film's most heinous crime: she kills the toddler daughter of the already-murdered widow. The daughter sees Coral kill her mother and screams uncontrollably. Coral then takes the child into the bathroom, undresses her and prepares her for a bath. She sings to her, cuddles and mothers her, and—off-screen—kills her. In this scene, the film produces the vilest mother possible: one who essentially kills her own child. While horror abounds with abhorrent, gruesome mothers (*Carrie*, *Psycho*, etc), Coral's especially evil characterization stems in part from her insistence that the child love her, even as she is killing her. Like *Los olvidados*'s earlier cruelty, *Profundo carmesí*'s production of cruelty rests on both the horror of the crimes and the ability of the film to extend them to the spectator. The cruelty emerges, almost primordially, from the figuration of motherhood itself. The myth of the suffering mother is taken to its excessive, extreme end.

### 6.3 THE CONTINENTAL GROTESQUE

Inarguably, popular Mexican cinema has been dominated by its figures of “pathos,” desolate characters populating Mexico's studio films. In the majority of Golden Age studio pictures, these types were consistent: the long suffering mother, the happy poor and the good natured derelict, to name just a few examples. As I have previously discussed, these types are significant to the construction of a cinematic national identity. These figures, according to scholars David William Foster and Roger Bartra, are united in their inability to alter the hierarchical, gendered and racialized strata that surround them; although they may or may not



triumph and improve their situation (depending on the particular genre), they are happy with the striations of society, and their figuration does not command a larger critique. Later films either undermine or satirize these particular types (*Los olvidados*) or produce their own typical characters (*Mecánica nacional*) based on less sympathetic Mexican stereotypes. These latter films take the lovable miscreants, tragic mothers and indigent families as examples of the grotesque. In doing so, the films parody the ossified pictures of national identity at play in Mexico's culture industry.

Unlike films such as *Los olvidados*, in which the parody of types is localized to Mexico, del Toro's *Cronos* illustrates that the grotesque Mexican figures are now in negotiation with the expansion of transnational capitalism. In this case, the film orchestrates these questions from within NAFTA-era Mexico City. The film's horrific world view is far from either the famous *El Santo* series or López Moctezuma's exploitation cinema. Shifting the European vampire tradition to contemporary Mexico City, *Cronos* is in a unique position to comment on Mexico's contemporary tensions between an old nationalist order and the perils of free-trade and multinational capitalism (Waldron 15). In the film's story, an elderly antiquities dealer acquires an angel statue that hides an alchemical device. The *cronos* device, the name for a golden, mechanized scarab created by alchemists in the colonial era, grants the user the ability to live forever. The antiquarian, Jesús Gris, finds the scarab and inadvertently uses it on himself. He becomes addicted to the machine, as well as its youth-producing properties. At the same time, an American manufacturer named de la Guardia, seeking the scarab, learns of Jesús's acquisition. De la Guardia's nephew Angel attempts to retrieve the machine several times, eventually beating Jesús and shoving his car off a cliff. Presumed dead by his family, Jesús is given a funeral, a wake, and prepared for cremation. He rises and escapes, however, to become a vampire

(although the archaism “vampire” is never used in the film). He returns to his house, where his silent granddaughter, Aurora, hides him. He returns to de la Guardia’s factory to find answers about his condition in the alchemist’s notebooks. Instead he enrages de la Guardia, as he attempts to steal, cajole and/or force the cronos device from Jesús’s hand. Just as de la Guardia gains the device and attempts to pierce Jesús’s heart, Aurora hits him unconscious. Angel finishes killing his uncle, taking the device for himself. Jesús returns for the device, struggling for the scarab on the roof of the de la Guardia factory. Jesús grabs Angel and launches them both over the side of the factory roof. The fall kills Angel and leaves Jesús severely wounded. While Aurora offers her own blood to save Jesús’s life, he insists that she kill him by piercing his heart, thus ending his vampiric and corporeal self.

*Cronos* extends grotesque characterizations to the denizens of late-stage capitalism. Its archetypal Mexican characters still produce tensions, but are more firmly situated within the conditions of grotesque capital. None of the film’s major characters are traditionally Mexican; Jesús and his wife are Argentinean, and the de la Guardias are from the United States. The only possible Mexican character among the main characters is Jesús’ granddaughter Aurora, who displays the characteristics of an innocent child and only speaks one word in the film.

Jesús and the de la Guardias are nonetheless rendered physically and morally grotesque, literally decaying through their associations with the cronos device. Having obtained the Alchemist’s papers necessary to operating the cronos device, de la Guardia searches Mexico for the scarab. Due to cancer, his body decays beyond repair, and only the cronos can bring him life and vitality. His sterilized living quarters mirror his Howard Hughes-like obsession with germs that only the very visceral act of drinking blood can alleviate, although it questions whether or not he has enough blood and guts left in him to activate the device. His nephew, Angel de la

Guardia, has not fared much better. Every time he makes a mistake, his uncle responds by breaking his nose. His face becomes a caricature of the American thug, and his only dream is to save enough money to get a new nose. Angel is played by Ron Perlman, an American actor already known for playing physically grotesque characters; the beatings received in this film, however, render him even more disturbing.

Neither figure, though, decays as rapidly as Jesús, who illustrates precipitous physical and social degeneration following his first engagements with the vampiric scarab. The scarab at first allows him to appear somewhat younger, but his refusal (and/or inability) to drink the blood of the living obstructs his eternal youth. After he becomes a living corpse, his body begins its rapid decay with skin peeling away layer by layer to expose an even more bone-like and withered countenance. His physical decay parallels the increasing humiliations that transpire as his need for blood grows. In the strongest image of grotesque degradation, Jesús licks blood off a public bathroom floor after following a man with a nose bleed into the men's room. The bathroom is shown as glittering and immaculate, mirroring the banquet hall, in which Jesús and his wife are celebrating the New Year. The white and gold-gilded tiles only highlight the place where blood has fallen. Jesús is simultaneously disgusted, aroused and hungry as he glimpses the sanguine spot. The character's debasement is in fact augmented by his concomitant opulent and base surroundings and magnified by the beating he receives while he is on the floor, suggesting that this humiliation is also watched by others.

While these characters establish the grotesque and insidious nature of the contemporary vampire, the film's short, yet significant, return to Mexican types points to its ambiguous relationship to national sovereignty in the wake of NAFTA. The clash between the gross nature of neo-liberalism and traditional tropes of Mexico begins, appropriately enough, in the mortuary.

In the previous sequence, Angel has killed Jesús by pushing his car off a cliff. The film shifts from the site of the car's wreckage to the mortuary, where the assistant listens to *ranchero* music as he sculpts Jesús' face and dresses him for the funeral. He discusses with the mortician the artistic merits of his ministrations upon the rapidly decomposing corpse. He staples Jesús's skin together before covering it with putty. The character's overtly cavalier attitude toward death underscores his particular Mexican identity. His gestures seemingly accept death, but are actually empty; this is why he becomes enraged by the idea that the corpse will be cremated and his artistic accomplishments soon destroyed. His placid acceptance slips into fury as his art is questioned.<sup>84</sup> His stereotypical identity is rendered both extreme and gruesome. He licks his bloody fingers before sculpting the putty, somewhat paralleling Jesús's earlier moment on the bathroom floor.

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<sup>84</sup> The mortician's assistant embodies the relation with death that Octavio Paz suggests in *Labyrinth of Solitude*. Paz writes that Mexicans have a corresponding indifference to and fascination with death, born of the isolating meaninglessness of modernity that evade both Catholic and Aztec traditions: "The Mexican indifference toward death is fostered by his indifference toward life. He views not only death but also life as nontranscendent... We kill because life—our own or another's—is of no value. Life and death are inseparable, and when the former lacks meaning, the latter becomes equally meaningless" (58). Whether or not this is an apt categorization of Mexican culture, this tradition of an ambiguous relation to death, rendered cinematic through images of skulls and bones, is a staple of Mexican literature, drama and cinema.

The assistant is most certainly a derided figure, but he is not without his charms, particularly in a film in which the past is viewed with a certain amount of ambiguous nostalgia. Jesús, an antiquities dealer, is tied to the past through his occupation in direct contrast to de la Guardia's predatory, American capitalism. The mortician's assistant is also a marker of a past that enters into the present. His music, clothing and comedic acceptance of death are encounters with an older cinematic tradition. The film's inclusion of such a figure brings about a kind of tension-filled, ambiguous nostalgia, marking an interesting shift in the nature of the grotesque. Once a critique of overly-simplistic cinematic identity, here the grotesque functions as an interrogation of faltering identities at the moment of globalization. On the one hand, the finger-licking, narcissistic death-artist is a revival of the grotesque; he is not the loveable figure of older Golden Age films and would fit into Alcoriza's satiric comedies. On the other hand, his presence in the film—similar to the presence of the antiquated Jesús—harkens back to a pre-NAFTA Mexico.

The contending images of the grotesque in this film point to significant differences between local cultures/national identity and global media at the end of the twentieth century. De la Guardia's obsession with the endurance of the body directly contrasts the humorous grotesque of the mortuary. De la Guardia fixates on living at any cost; his nephew wryly comments, "all the man does is shit and piss all day and he wants to live forever?" Although also based on images of decay, the corporate magnet's extension of his biological life provokes a sterile revulsion that lacks the gross affection present in the image of the mortician's assistant. Despite the behavior, however, the mortician's assistant proves little more than an idiosyncratic anachronism. The film allows him to be likeable because he does not really matter. Aurora, the mute granddaughter, remains the film's most significant Mexican character, and she remains

resolutely silent. The traditional notions of Mexican identity no longer appear relevant after the post-national economic concerns of NAFTA (and, postdating this film, the collapse of the one-party system that was instrumental in creating recognizable notions of Mexican identity). And, perhaps most importantly, the film remains mute with regard to the function of national identity in the increasing post-national, technocratic, political and economic spheres.<sup>85</sup>

While *Cronos*'s outdated characters re-imagine the grotesque tradition in Mexican film, they also demonstrate the recurrence of allegory and its ability to bring the past into moments of the present. Del Toro himself calls his film an allegory of the NAFTA treaty and neo-liberal capital's entrenchment into the Mexican economy. While the United States has long been a key player in the Mexican economy, de la Guardia's apparently multinational corporation (manifested in the generic factory setting) and the *cronos* device's strange transatlantic circulation gesture toward the multi-national model that far overshadows the narrower image of pure U.S. economic imperialism. Here, the role of Mexico in an emerging "post-Mexican" setting brings the question of Mexican identity into its present concerns. It addresses the role of Mexico in a new global order and questions the complex flaws and dangers of national identity, even while considering the encroaching models of North American cultural imperialism. The

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<sup>85</sup> I am borrowing the notion of a post-national Mexico from Roger Bartra's recent *Blood, Ink, and Culture* in which he muses on the possibilities of a Mexican identity formed after the dissolution of revolutionary nationalism. He writes that the interest here lies not in becoming Anglo-American, but in understanding how "ironfisted nationalist unification smothered multicolored Mexican society and legitimized underdevelopment and authoritarianism" in order to open up a "rich and democratic multiplicity" (63).

past is not romanticized in this instance; instead, the *cronos* device serves as the object that brings the dangers of the past into the present. The object is found among the ruins of the Alchemist's home, a piece of the past that resurrects older eras of Spanish colonialism and domination. The *cronos* device links colonialism and contemporary neo-liberal orders together, but does not presume to illustrate an unbroken historical thread between the two. The scarab's colonial past provides the crumbling stage on which the present imperial situation attempts to stabilize itself. The place for an insular, complete or autonomous Mexican nation is, in this instance, always illusory. Like the mortician's assistant, it appears only to exist as a pure yet clichéd image, without any kind of fixed location. The alchemist's ruined mansion and the corresponding destroyed factory portray a grim image of Mexico's contemporary possibilities: the refuse of Spanish colonialism and effects of Anglo-American capitalism.

*Profundo carmesí*'s historical allegories likewise link the transnational articulations of the present to Mexico's authoritarian past. The film's interrogation of nation is underscored by two important points: firstly, its allusions to the dangers of intimate national affiliation, and, secondly, its acknowledgement of the ways that national identities are always caught up with international influences and understandings. Despite the film's northern Mexican location, its stories, characters and images are always from elsewhere. The narrative itself, despite having an Hispanic tinge, is a retelling of a U.S.-American story (the "lonely hearts" murders). Coral writes to Nicolás because he calls himself a "Spanish Charles Boyer", Boyer being a French actor that made many Hollywood films. These details are pertinent in that they indicate the influence and significance of transnational media at play, even in the 1940s. Coral, obsessed with Hollywood, has no interest in truth—Nicolás' actual baldness and disingenuous intentions—behind the façade.

Nicolás' "Spanish" identity allows him entrance where he otherwise might be denied. He seduces an elderly Spanish exile named Irene—a Catholic elitist who is driven by both religion and desire. She at first refuses sex because they are not married, but then insists on Nicolás' passionate embraces. Her desire and snobbery makes her blind to his dangerous plans. Upon first meeting, the film illustrates Mexico's transnational ethos during the forties and underscores the exile's often contentious relationship with the Mexican nation. Irene meets Nicolás and Coral in her home but in the company of another, presumably European, exile named Sara Silberman. Irene significantly casts Sara as an outsider (here, another term for Jew), dismissing her opinions and warnings. Her desire for elite European society, even as she lives as an isolated outcast, and her prurient religiosity render her a less than sympathetic figure. Nonetheless, her eventual fate is horrific and shocking. She marries Nicolás quickly—without the consent of her priest—so they can rapidly consummate their marriage. Coral, mad with jealousy, proceeds to tie Irene up and beat her to death with a statue of the Virgin Mary. In this bloody series of events, different moments of history collide: the emigration of the Spanish to Mexico with the history of Catholic violence in Mexico and elsewhere.

The institutions of the past persist in present space, and existence violently continues. These histories are Mexican, but not only Mexican—they include the colonial structures that perpetuate Spanish elitism and the insidiousness of Anglo-American imperialism. Although the film is set in an historical era, these events raise the questions of a "post-national" Mexico in its present state. After capturing Nicolás and Coral, the police are unsure of how to handle such strange and abhorrent creatures. The detectives, emissaries of the Mexican state, can only think to reign in such aberrations by summarily executing them. Their attempts to exorcise abnormality from the purity of the state suggest an utter inability to understand the various



outside influences that contaminate the nation. Despite the lovers' monstrous nature, their succinct and lawless execution suggests the state's reluctance to understand its own heterogeneous constitution.

The film does suggest, through its indictment of Hollywood and the north, that (international) cinema itself has become a transnational horror. Mexico, once the slippery and effective space for critical impulses, is now a pale ghost of Hollywood. In a 2003 interview, Ripstein claimed that “with each day, movies resemble more and more a hegemonic model; not all of them, but those selected as the most important or determine new directions do conform to certain models. All of them share something in common: they all imitate gringo commercial films” (Solorzano 47). Despite the fact that Mexican (and Latin American) cinema was never coherent, it is losing its heterogeneous variation—that which made it essentially not Hollywood or global cinema. While the censorship and limitations of state-run filmmaking are, for Ripstein, problematic, they do not compare to the increasingly all-encompassing homogenization of Hollywood filmmaking.

However, even as cinema becomes horrific, it remains possibly self-critical and grotesquely productive like the horror genre in which Ripstein so often participates. The director locates this possibility within the realm of digital cinema. He speaks in subsequent interviews of digital cinema as being the first of many new possibilities for filmmaking in Mexico:

The good thing about video is that you worry about the audience less and less; you start doing work because you think the work is important and good, not because you know it will be successful. Video films are so cheap that if they find a small niche . . . the monies allotted to the film will be quickly reimbursed. So you don't have to think about audiences that much anymore. You can think about the work's own value and worth, and

[this] is sort of a rupture with what has been going on until now. I seriously believe this will be the first artistic revolution of the twenty-first century (Sterritt 40).

Ripstein, a careful and critical filmmaker, does not particularly believe that digital technology will eliminate the contentious problems of making heterogeneous films from within an increasing homogenous filmmaking world. But he sees in video production a landscape for re-examining the primary tensions of Mexican cinema. While Hollywood limits the productive regional affiliations of cinema, digital work can incorporate those national and regional interests without necessarily ossifying them. As these filmmakers have shown, radical and critical projects have blossomed in their ability to absorb and renegotiate transnational phenomena without adhering to the aesthetic and intellectual limitations of globalization. Whether or not Mexico's itinerant, local and exiled artists can continue to do so may depend on their ability to continue to work as both strangers and intimates of its convulsive national identity.

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