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El México rojo: Entropic Humour, Naturalism, and Death in Luis Buñuel's *El río y la muerte* and *Ensayo de un crimen*

Este artículo analiza la muerte, la violencia y el machismo en dos películas mexicanas de Luis Buñuel, El río y la muerte *(1954) y* Ensayo de un crimen *(1955), partiendo de una perspectiva naturalista (Deleuze, 1986) y aplicando el concepto del humor "entrópico" (O'Neill, 1990). Pese a muchos estudios sobre el humor surrealista en sus películas, es necesario investigar cómo su "peculiar" humor negro funciona, tanto en sus obras naturalistas como en México, "el país elegido del humor negro" (Breton, 1941). Sostengo que ambas películas vinculan satíricamente impulsos violentos y construcciones culturales estereotípicas entorno a la muerte en México.*

Palabras clave: *Buñuel, México, Naturalismo, humor, muerte*

This article analyzes death, violence, and machismo in two Mexican films by Luis Buñuel, El río y la muerte *(1954) and* Ensayo de un crimen *(1955), starting from a naturalist perspective (Deleuze, 1986) and applying the concept of "entropic" humour (O'Neill, 1990). Despite numerous studies on surrealist humour in Buñuel's films, it is necessary to investigate how his "peculiar" black humour operates, both in his naturalist works and in a Mexican context, "the chosen land of black humour" (Breton, 1941). I contend that both films satirically link violent impulses and stereotypical cultural constructions surrounding death in Mexico.*

Keywords: *Buñuel, Mexico, Naturalism, humour, death*

In this article, I analyze two of Luis Buñuel's Mexican films, *El río y la muerte* (1954) and *Ensayo de un crimen* (1955), taking Gilles Deleuze's (1986) ideas on naturalism in Buñuel's cinema as a starting point and applying the concept of "entropic" humour as proposed by Patrick O'Neill (1990). Deleuze regards naturalist authors as "physicians of civilization" (129), diagnosing social problems stemming from impulsive acts of violence whose goal is to "smash into fragments … and bring everything together in a single and

identical death impulse" (134). By portraying the comic disintegration of national ideological systems from within a naturalist framework, I argue that both films satirically undermine stereotypical cultural constructions relating to death and machismo in Mexico.

Buñuel's use of black humour in his films to satirize bourgeois society is well documented.[1] However, there is an added complicating factor when it comes to the analysis of humour in these two films. The problem is that stereotypical attitudes towards death and machismo in Mexico themselves contain elements of black humour, the same elements which influenced the surrealist poet André Breton's definition of black humour (*l'humour noir*) in his celebrated anthology (1941). In this case, we might well ask how Buñuel's films escape from this conceptual and analytical impasse. The answer may lie in an observation by Víctor Fuentes when he refers to Buñuel's "*peculiar* humor negro" (*Mundos* 95; emphasis added) in *Ensayo de un crimen*. The use of "peculiar" suggests that there is an added aspect to Buñuel's black humour, which allows these works to satirically engage with the idea of death as a marker of Mexican identity. I contend that Buñuel's "peculiar" type of black humour contains elements of what O'Neill refers to as entropic humour, "the humour of uncertainty, lost norms … the humour of disorientation" (50). When applied to the arts, O'Neill considers entropy to be "a metaphor for the crumbling of ordered systems, the breakdown of traditional perceptions of reality, and the erosion of certainty" (8). These features clearly resonate with Deleuze's description of the characteristics of Buñuel's cinematic naturalism: "attrition, degradation, wastage, destruction, loss, or simply oblivion" (132). I first outline some of the main features of Buñuel's humour and O'Neill's concept of entropic humour. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of both films.

Carlos Fuentes outlines the wide range of cultural and political influences on Buñuel as a filmmaker as follows: "His intimate legacies, often conflicting, are always there: Spain, Catholicism, surrealism, left anarchism" (77). In the Spanish aesthetic tradition, we have the picaresque novels of Benito Pérez Galdós, which would inspire *Nazarín* (1959), *Viridiana* (1961), and *Tristana* (1970). The genre of *esperpento*, containing elements of *lo goyesco* and exemplified by the satirical works of Ramón María del Valle-Inclán, would also prove influential.[2] According to Dominique Russell, Buñuel's humour is "tragic, black, macabre, cruel. The sheer ferocity of its edges contributes to our laughter and makes it hesitant. We are provoked to laughter with the provocation as important as any laughter that might ensue" (Russell 62). Caroline Francis suggests that the provocative use of black humour with "an emphasis on disturbing themes and images, juxtaposed with images and themes of a comical nature … became one of the greatest tools of the Surrealist cinema" (74-75).

While these are all useful critical approaches, the aim of this article is to focus on the entropic dimension of Buñuel's "peculiar" use of black humour in a Mexican context. This dimension is central to understanding his naturalist works given that they often feature destruction and degradation of the milieu depicted. It is also worth noting that the concept of entropy can be seen as a property of anarchism. Indeed, according to Marcel Gutwirth, anti-establishment humour has "origins in acts of anarchy … revolts against authority and propriety" (7). Although many of his films deal with eternal repetition rather than total disintegration, Deleuze suggests that "Buñuel's cycles form as much of a generalized degradation as Stroheim's entropy" (130). While both films under consideration in this article depict cycles of violence and obsession, they do not approach the degree of narrative repetition found in some of Buñuel's later works, such as *El ángel exterminador* (1962) and *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972). As such, I suggest that the term "entropic," as it relates to degradation, is a useful methodological tool with which to analyze these earlier works.

In the diverse range of comic forms, Andrew Stott argues that satire is the most overtly political: "Satire aims to denounce folly and vice and urge ethical and political reform through the subjection of ideas to humorous analysis" (109). Normative satire sets out to identify a particular social problem and offers a possible solution to the reader/audience *within* the value system of the dominant ideology.[3] In contrast, O'Neill suggests that entropic satire identifies a particular social issue but does not offer a solution to this problem within the framework of the dominant ideology. He argues that one of its salient characteristics is a lack of belief in the ability of the moral and social mores of the dominant ideology to adequately deal with the "vices" that are exposed in the narrative, thus limiting itself to "the purely deictic gesture of identification and demonstration" (O'Neill 143). Whatever solution might be applied to the issues raised is left to the individual judgement of the audience/reader. As he puts it: "Where normative satire typically focuses on a particular individual or group of individuals considered eccentric to the social norm, entropic satire focuses not on a corrigible part but the incorrigible whole" (143).

O'Neill links his concept of entropic humour to the idea of black humour (*l'humour noir*), a term coined in the early 1940s by one of the founders of the Surrealist movement, André Breton. Black humour is generally characterized by an irreverent stance towards tragic events, with an important social, iconoclastic, and satirical dimension. Due to his admiration for the work of the Mexican engraver José Guadalupe Posada and the skeletal figurines inspired by the latter's satirical creations, Breton suggests that "Mexico, … with its splendid funeral toys, stands as the chosen land of black humour" (23). Indeed, he links the satirical content of these

images to his own concept of black humour. This connection between surrealist black humour and black humour as part of what Claudio Lomntiz describes as "Mexican death totemism" (28) is one of the principal reasons why it is necessary to investigate Buñuel's "peculiar" use of black humour in a Mexican context.

While there are clear similarities between O'Neill's concept of entropic humour and surrealist black humour, the term entropic does add substantially to our understanding of how these films engaged with their Mexican context, particularly with respect to cinematic naturalism and degradation. According to Deleuze, "Buñuel's relationship to surrealism was almost as ambiguous as Stroheim's to Expressionism: he makes use of it, but for quite different ends which are those of an omnipotent naturalism" (134). Along with its rejection of social norms, O'Neill suggests that entropic humour is "*metahumour* … self-reflective humour about humour itself…" (50). In Buñuel's films, there is often a self-reflexive questioning of the laughter elicited, particularly in the Mexican context, where notions such as "la burla [de la muerte]" (Paz 63) and "la muerte fácil" (Bartra 78-79) are the cultural constructs being satirized. Self-reflexivity is also manifest at a narrative level in Buñuel's Mexican films. O'Neill's concept of entropic parody, "a comedy of narration" (261), describes the disintegration of narrative coherence for comic effect. With reference to Buñuel's use of what she terms the "style gag" (playing with narrative conventions) in his Mexican cinema, Russell suggests that what some critics have identified as "flashes of persistent 'surrealism' … also signal Buñuel's pushing up against, and playing with, the constraints of the classical style" (52).

In the broad spectrum of cultural approaches to humour in Mexico, I focus on two principal strands: "normative" black humour, which I argue operates "in connivance" with national ideology; and entropic black humour, which I will show goes against the grain and questions this ideology. The principal aim of the analysis is to determine whether the "vices" depicted in a satirical manner are resolved within the cultural framework of the dominant hegemonic ideology, as is the case with normative humour; or whether they are left open for interpretation, as in the case of entropic humour.

While both films examine constructed attitudes towards death and machismo in Mexico, they do so through different genres. *El río y la muerte* (1954) tackles these issues through the genre of serious melodrama, a "social thesis" film, undermined throughout by episodes of satirical humour.[4] In contrast, *Ensayo de un crimen* (1955) is a black comedy where satirical humour is intrinsically linked to the film's innovative narrative structure. This difference in approach signals a stylistic departure from Buñuel's early Mexican films, generally made under greater studio control – apart from a

few notable exceptions such as *Los olvidados* (1950) – towards the distinctive blending of satirical humour and experimental narration that would characterize his later Mexican works. Peter William Evans suggests that "the connections between the commercial and auteurist films [Buñuel's] are not as starkly incompatible as might initially seem to be the case" (38).

EL RÍO Y LA MUERTE

Based on the novel *Muro blanco sobre roca negra* (1952) by Miguel Álvarez Acosta, *El río y la muerte* depicts a one-hundred-year-old feud between two rival families who are enmeshed in a vicious cycle of tit-for-tat killings. The protagonist, a doctor undergoing treatment for polio, is forced to return to his home village to defend his family's honour. Even though Buñuel fundamentally disagreed with the novel's moral and ideological slant (to the effect that education would eliminate violent behaviour), he was contractually obliged by CLASA films to direct the film version.[5] However, a closer look reveals that while the film effectively transmits the "social message" on one level, it simultaneously subverts and satirizes that message, particularly by employing incongruous cuts, dissonance between the image and the soundtrack, and subversive changes of tone throughout. There is a sense that the violent world of Santa Viviana is spiraling towards decay and destruction. According to Deleuze: "In Buñuel, the phenomenon of degradation does not assume less autonomy [than Stroheim] – perhaps even more – since it is degradation which extends explicitly to the human species" (131).

The film opens with a travelling shot of a foreboding gloomy river accompanied by ominous orchestral non-diegetic music. The visual and aural cues, in addition to the title, suggest the unfolding of a dark tragedy. However, the next shot turns out to be a slow leisurely pan over a lively bustling village marketplace accompanied by a calm, informative, and rather affectionate male voice-over; the musical score at this stage also changes to mirror his pastoral tone. The voice-over narrator suavely intones that Santa Viviana is a Mexican village like countless others, and then adds a quaint anecdote about why the cemetery is curiously located on the other side of the river: it emerges that a flood some years ago destroyed the old village and that consequently it was moved to the other side of the river. The cemetery remained on the original side because the inhabitants did not want to disturb the dead. Ironically, as the narrative progresses, we begin to appreciate the fact that it is the dead who continue to disturb the living.

Through a humorous disjunction between the information conveyed by the cinematic narrator and the voice-over narrator, the following scene undermines the initial pastoral tone established in the opening. Over a

tranquil shot of a woman walking along a quiet side street with her young child, the voice-over narrator states that the casual observer might be deceived into thinking that this is a peaceful village. In his next statement, the tone changes abruptly: "Sin embargo, la vida del pueblo está presidida por la *muerte*" (*Río* 00:02:28). On the word "muerte" the camera cuts to an extreme close-up of a sugar *calavera* wearing a crown. Simultaneously, a rather jaunty piece of festive music starts up, which is later revealed to be diegetic. The sudden juxtaposition of the celebratory music with the image of the skeleton has the effect of destabilizing the tone of the narrative, as it alternates rapidly from threatening to festive. The contrast between the images also makes the voice-over narrator's dramatic tone more comical, as we might expect to see a more terrifying image than that of a sugar skeleton. Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz maintains that "[t]his juxtaposition of images and sounds in the first two minutes of the movie downplays the 'social thesis' of *El río y la muerte* …" (108).

The camera now cuts to a medium close-up of a wire figurine of the skeleton held in an anonymous hand. The man who has been inspecting the figurine then replaces it and the camera pulls back further to reveal male and female skeletal dancers flanked by a little band of skeletons with musical instruments. They are positioned on a table with bottles of alcohol to the left and right, with some real musicians standing behind them. This humorous *mise-en-abîme* technique mirrors the actual musicians and dancers at the fiesta, mischievously portraying them as though they were "puppets" acting out an orchestrated performance of a festival inspired by what Lomnitz terms "Mexico's death totemism" (57). Along with the parodic reference to Diego Rivera's mural *El patio de las fiestas* (1923-24), these skeletal caricatures of death also resonate with the mock-serious tone of the voice-over narrator's statement. The man then picks up a female figurine and begins to dance comically with it. As the camera tracks back further, the scene is revealed to be a joyous and festive celebration of El Día de los Muertos. Acevedo-Muñoz outlines the parodic aspect of this scene with respect to previous artistic representations of the festival: "The scene is clearly reminiscent of Eisenstein's *¡Que Viva México!* (1979) [short features from which were released in 1934] in which a traditional Day of the Dead fiesta is presented as a cliché of Mexican culture" (107).

To fully understand the subversive depiction of El Día de los Muertos in *El río y la muerte*, I will now briefly outline some of the origins of this festival and show how it has affected cultural attitudes towards death, black humour, and national identity in Mexico. Of the myriad discourses surrounding this cultural phenomenon, stemming from the state and popular culture, Lomnitz identifies two main strands:

> The first strand [in the 1950s] sees the phenomenon as the natural precipitation of two death-obsessed cultures (Spanish and Mesoamerican) coming together on violent grounds … ; the second strand [in the 1980s] sees post-Revolutionary death obsession as an aspect of a national mythology rather than a true reflection of popular character. (402)

Octavio Paz's highly influential study of Mexican national identity, *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950), suggests that a playful attitude towards death is a fundamental part of Mexican national character, drawing a clear distinction between attitudes towards death in North America and Europe, and those in Mexico:

> Para el habitante de Nueva York, París, o Londres, la muerte es la palabra que jamás se pronuncia porque quema los labios. El mexicano, en cambio, la frecuenta, la burla, la acaricia, duerme con ella, la festeja, es uno de sus juguetes favoritos y su amor más permanente. (63)

One of the pioneers in the second strand of argumentation in the 1980s, Roger Bartra, maintains that ideas such as "el desprecio a la muerte" or "el amor a la muerte" form part of a mythology only present in Mexican national cultural production, and in essays on "lo mexicano" [*mexicanidad*]. He argues that the central notion, which he terms "La muerte fácil" (Bartra 78-79), is a cultural construct, tacitly reinforced by state-sponsored national cultural production, in particular the works of José Guadalupe Posada, Diego Rivera, and those influenced by them. With respect to the festival itself, Ruth Hellier-Tinoco traces the development of El Día de los Muertos to a visit by state officials in the 1920s to the island of Janitzio which "marked the beginning of the process of transformation of the ceremony on the island … from intimate, private ritual … into a public spectacle, national and touristic icon, and patrimony of the nation" (72).

Lomnitz suggests that death imagery derived from Posada's engravings became embedded in nationalist discourses partly through representation in influential murals, such as Rivera's *El patio de las fiestas* (1923-24) in the building of the Ministry of Education (401). In the part of the mural entitled *El Día de los Muertos — Fiesta en la ciudad*, a band of skeletons, with Emiliano Zapata at the centre, perform for a crowded marketplace. This imagery, replete with a hero of the Revolution in the guise of a skeletal figure representing death, clearly contains elements of black humour, as outlined in Breton's assertion that Mexico is the "chosen land of black humour" (23). Nevertheless, in the context of the 1950s, Lomnitz argues that these images tended to have more in common with the ideology of the post-

Revolutionary Mexican state than any subversive content or political critique:

> After the Revolution, that imagery [Posada's] migrated, in the hands of Rivera and others, to another field, that of national projects. For Rivera and others, the intermingling and cohabitation of the dead … was the most potent image. The dead, in this version, collectively gave birth, through revolution, to a modern nation. These associations would in turn facilitate the emblematic usage of Posada imagery as a marker of national identity. (440)

As a result, by the mid-1950s, the particular type of black humour associated with El Día de los Muertos in Mexico, via the images of José Guadalupe Posada, can be seen as aligning itself more with the nationalist ideology of the state and also with the conservative ideology of the Church. In representations of El Día de los Muertos in Mexican national cinema, Jorge Ayala Blanco suggests that "… sólo hay cráneos de azúcar y culto florido a los muertos. Comedido, respetuoso y servicial, el cine mexicano, cómico o serio, ignora sistemáticamente la existencia del humor negro" (270). I read the phrase "culto florido a los muertos" as a reference to normative black humour in Mexico.

The subversive depiction of El Día de los Muertos in *El río y la muerte* contains elements of entropic humour and situational irony, given that it is juxtaposed with the murder of one of the guests and the beginning of a vicious family feud. I suggest that the entropic dimension of the satirical humour in this scene, which, as we have seen earlier, itself contains elements of black humour, operates, at one remove, to the normative black humour associated with this festival, as derived from the images of José Guadalupe Posada. With its self-reflexive questioning of normative black humour, Buñuel's film thus problematizes the social conditions which give rise to this constructed festive relationship with death, "el tuteo con la muerte" (Monsiváis, "Mira" 16), playing with what is considered "normally" and "abnormally" comic, or tragic for that matter, in contemporary Mexican society. Through its ironic representation of El Día de los Muertos, I contend that it is precisely notions such as "la burla [de la muerte]" (Paz 63) and "la muerte fácil" (Bartra 78-79) that are satirized in this scene, an instance of macabre situational irony, where a man is murdered at a festive celebration of death. Víctor Fuentes suggests that the depiction of El Día de los Muertos in the film achieves a "desdramatización humorística del drama de 'la muerte fácil' mexicana" (*La mirada* 101). We can consider the satirical humour to have an entropic rather than a normative dimension given that the scene portrays a world about to descend into chaos, where the normative values (the *machista* honour code) of that same world are the

cause of its spiral towards destruction.[6] In line with this, O'Neill suggests that "[e]ntropic satire has to do with what Durkheim called social anomie: a 'lawless' (*anomos*) state of society where normative, rule-oriented, authoritative, prescribed standards of conduct and belief have irreparably broken down" (143). Buñuel's naturalistic depiction of the festival can also be interpreted through Deleuze's idea of the "originary world," a spatial concept developed along with the latter's theory of naturalism in cinema, evoking a primordial place where the characters' impulses and acts "are prior to all differentiation between the human and the animal … a world of a very special kind of violence" (Deleuze 128). In the film, murderous impulses are shown to derive from the *machista* honour code, tacitly enshrined in the cardinal values of the state. Indeed, Charles Ramírez Berg sees machismo as "a reciprocal ideological agreement between the individual male and the Mexican state, empowering each" (23). The humour is not elicited by a cruel, detached enjoyment of the tragic fate of the Anguiano patriarch, but rather by a "metahumorous" appreciation of the ironic social conditions, specifically the *machista* honour code, linked to nationalist death tropes, that cause this tragedy to unfold. On an ideological level, the scene presents these stereotypical cultural constructs as products of hegemonic domination by nationalist discourses, given that, as we have seen earlier, the festival El Día de los Muertos was, by the early 1950s, tacitly approved by both the state and the Church. According to Acevedo-Muñoz, the film's depiction of hegemonic masculinity satirizes "the absurd nature of violence imposed by national tradition" (108).

Having outlined the origins of the family feud, the camera then cuts to present day Mexico City where the last male descendent of the Anguiano family, Gerardo, is receiving treatment in an iron lung for the after-effects of polio. By presenting the leading male character in a physically weakened state, this scene subtly undermines previous monolithic depictions of masculinity in Mexican national cinema, such as the *charro*, where male characters were often not permitted to show weakness of any kind.[7] Gerardo is a qualified doctor and places medical science above traditional values such as male courage. Matthew Gutmann suggests that "[b]eginning especially in the 1940s, the male accent [on the virtue of courage] itself came to prominence as a national (ist) symbol. … Mexico came to mean machismo and machismo to mean Mexico" (224). As a consequence of this moral stance, and despite his serious illness, it seems that he has been rejected by his mother for his refusal to return to the village and defend the family's honour. However, his serious demeanor and utterances are at variance with his rather incongruous position in the iron lung, where only his head is visible. Acevedo-Muñoz suggests that "the effect is comical, as the

character's [Gerardo's] grave affectation seems ridiculously undermined by his immobile head sticking out of the machine" (110).

While the scene in the clinic examines serious social issues, it also satirically undermines stereotypical attitudes towards violence and death. At one point, Gerardo's nurse Elsa observes that Chinelas is wearing a pistol on his belt. He explains to her that he wears it to remind him of his mother, who: "me obligaba siempre a cargarla" (*Río* 00:06:09). He adds that his mother also recommended, "para andar seguro" (00:06:13), that he carry an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe along with the weapon.[8] The association of the pistol with the image of the Virgin in this scene, along with the fact that this "advice" comes from the almost sacred figure of the Mexican mother, leaves us in no doubt that Buñuel is making a satirical allusion to nationalist tropes surrounding death, violence, and machismo.[9]

The scene in the clinic also depicts the first confrontation between Gerardo and Rómulo Menchaca, a character from the village who is initially portrayed as the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity. His trip to Mexico City, to see if rumours about Gerardo's ill health are true, is effectively to establish whether or not he can restore his family's honour by challenging him to a duel. When Gerardo describes the world of Santa Viviana in which his mother lives as "salvaje," where violence stems from "tradición e incultura," Rómulo censures him for daring to criticize his own mother and subsequently strikes him across the face (*Río* 00:12:57). In Buñuel's naturalist films, Deleuze notes the presence of "a constant predator-prey relationship," where "[t]he invalid is the prey par excellence …" (132). Rómulo is immediately overcome with shame for striking a defenseless man and violating his own *machista* code: "lo que acabo de hacer no es de hombres" (00:13:38). This code seems to stem directly from his dead relatives, evident in his next statement: "no quiero que mis muertos se avergüencen de mí" (00:13:42). When relating to Elsa the motives behind Rómulo's visit, Gerardo states: "quería que me pusiera bien para matarme o que yo lo matase a él" (00:15:31). The absurdity of such *machista* discourse, that is, wishing someone well in order to kill them or be killed by them is clearly satirized in this statement. Given that the self-referential black humour derives principally from the naturalist setting, that is, from Rómulo's impulsive actions and utterances, and not from *within* the mythology of death tropes such as "la burla [de la muerte]" (Paz 63) and "la muerte fácil" (Bartra 78-9), we can consider it entropic rather than normative. Acevedo-Muñoz suggests that "the hero's expressed objection to his manly duty in *El río y la muerte* makes him, on the one hand, an instrument Buñuel uses to reflect on the absurdity of violence in Mexico, and on the other hand, a parody of the virile-man tradition in Mexican cinema" (110). The feminizing moment when both men embrace at the end of the film

also undermines this strict *machista* honour code governed by vengeance. Evans observes that "Buñuel's melodramas end happily, but in ways vitiated with irony" (43).

Attitudes towards violence, religion and the carrying of weapons are also satirically skewered in the scene with the card game featuring the local priest Don Julián and the community leader Don Nemesio. Having just spoken with his godson Polo, the latter is worried about an escalation of the feud between the two families, suggesting to the others around the table that "[n]o hay nada más hermoso que la paz" (*Río* 00:25:32). The priest's response is rather ambiguous and seems to suggest that it is God's will that the violence happens in the village: "Él [Dios] sabe lo que hace" (00:25:37). Chinelas is angered by this assertion and argues that the priest, as a community leader, should condemn violence. Don Julián refutes this comment and says that he condemns violence from the pulpit; however, he qualifies the remark by adding that he cannot ask his congregation not to carry weapons: "[N]o puedo recomendar que se dejen matar sin defenderse" (00:25:49). Don Nemesio bemoans that fact that "todo el mundo va armado" (00:26:02) and then declares that he is sure that the priest and himself are the only two people in the village who are not armed. At this point, Don Julián produces a pistol from underneath the table and states: "Yo sí la llevo" (00:26:10).[10] We can consider the self-reflexive black humour elicited in this moment as entropic rather than normative given that it punctures the serious tone of the preceding discussion and attacks the very foundations of the dominant ideology. It is not celebrating or laughing within nationalist death tropes. The priest, as a community leader, is shown to be part of the value system that perpetuates the same absurd cycle of violence.[11] Notwithstanding the previous bitter conflict with the Mexican state, the Church had, by the mid-1930s, firmly re-established itself as a powerful hegemonic influence within the patriarchal hierarchy of the post-Revolutionary nation-state. The three pillars of God, Nation, and Home were at the heart of nationalist rhetoric, and certain features of early post-Revolutionary cultural production in subsequent decades.[12] In Buñuel's naturalist films, Deleuze notes that "it is not only the poor and rich who participate in the same work of degradation, but so do the good and holy men" (134). I read Don Nemesio's response, "Vaya Padre, que me ha hecho reír sin ganas," (*Río* 00:26:13) as a type of mirthless self-reflexive laughter, a key component of entropic humour. O'Neill suggests that "the dianoetic [mirthless] laugh is meta-laughter, a comedy of discourse, a breaking out of or through the intellectual frame that leads to the absurd" (135). Don Nemesio's mirthless laughter "reír *sin ganas*" (emphasis added) is derived from an ironic appreciation of the absurdity of the idea of a village priest carrying a gun.

Later in the film, when the priest approaches the army checkpoint set up to disarm the village, he throws up his arms and theatrically insists that they search him, stating: "Yo soy el primero que respeta la ley" (00:31:51). A senior officer approaches and waves him through. Ironically, he makes no mention of his concealed pistol on this occasion. Again, we can consider the humour to have an entropic rather than normative dimension given that it sharply critiques the dominant ideology and does not attempt to correct any perceived deviant behaviour from within the ethical framework of that ideology. As O'Neill puts it: "The normative satirist defuses a disturbing question by providing a reassuring answer; the entropic satirist limits himself to posing the question in as exacerbated a form as possible and then leaving it provocatively and disturbingly open" (143).

At Don Nemesio's wake, the main narrative, which depicts a temporary truce between Felipe and Polo, both united in grief, is interrupted by a bizarre conversation between some of the attendees regarding the current atmosphere of respect at wakes. One of them recounts how when he was just a boy, a man called Pablo Codina rode his horse into Anselmo Lepe's wake, decapitated the corpse, tied the head up in the reins, and then took it with him to a *cantina*. Another guest then interjects that the dead man's relatives subsequently went to the *cantina* and skinned Pablo Codina. There is a clear reference to the grotesque with the images of the severed head and subsequent skinning of the instigator of the first attack. These descriptions aside, however, it becomes clear that the matter-of-fact way in which the guests tell this story is the key target of this entropic satire, since it highlights the constructed nature of notions such as "La indiferencia del mexicano ante la muerte" (Paz 63) or "el tuteo con la muerte" (Monsiváis, "Mira" 16), the exaggerated idea that death is to be mocked and responded to in a nonchalant manner. On the discursive plane, it also represents an incongruous break in the continuity of the main narrative, an unnecessary digression, underscoring the self-reflexive component characteristic of entropic parody. According to O'Neill,

> [w]e sense parody … as soon as the element of self-reflexivity becomes ostentatious, as soon as the telling of the tale becomes ostentatiously more important than the tale told, as soon as the narrator steps forward and steals the limelight usually – or at any rate, usually in realist texts – reserved for the characters. (260)

The self-awareness of the cinematic text in this scene complements the entropic unravelling of national narratives at a thematic level.

ENSAYO DE UN CRIMEN

Stereotypical attitudes relating to machismo and death in Mexico also undergo a scathing satirical treatment in Buñuel's *Ensayo de un crimen* (1955). The film was "inspired by" the 1944 novel of the same name by Rodolfo Usigli. It follows the misadventures of a would-be serial killer who never manages to kill any of his intended victims.[13] Víctor Fuentes maintains that Buñuel dramatizes "… con su peculiar humor negro, una de las ideas cardinales de su concepción del mundo, la inocencia de la imaginación [para] rendir homenaje a Sade, que 'sólo cometía crímenes en la imaginación'" (*Los mundos* 95). In the opening scene, we learn that the antihero Archibaldo's murderous intentions towards beautiful women stem from a curious incident in his childhood, which takes place around the turbulent time of the Mexican Revolution, idealized depictions of which were a particular source of discourses of hegemonic masculinity, violence, and cavalier attitudes towards death. In the film, the naturalist impulse-image (such as nourishment or sexual desire) is central to the black comic treatment of attempted murder. According to Deleuze, "the impulse-image, has in fact two signs: symptoms and idols or fetishes. Symptoms are the presence of impulses in the derived world, and idols and fetishes, the representation of the fragments [the object of the impulse]" (129). In Buñuel's narrative, this naturalist originary world (the story world of the film), derived from Mexico City, becomes the primordial location for Archibaldo's murderous impulses stemming from a fetishistic obsession with death.

His penchant for dressing up in his mother's clothes is discovered by his governess who scolds him for this transgression of "gender-normative" behaviour. However, his cross-dressing does not necessarily indicate a transgender issue or homosexual impulses; it may simply indicate an exploration of social taboos, a frequent interest of Buñuel's. Nevertheless, by having the leading male character perform these actions, which might be considered "deviant" from the strict heterosexual masculinity characteristic of earlier depictions in national cultural productions, the scene undermines the prescriptive codes of normative masculinity in contemporary Mexico.[15] Archibaldo's highly groomed urbane appearance, teetotalling habits, pottery-making, and genteel mannerisms also destabilize these rigid paradigms of masculinity.[16]

As a child during the time of the Mexican Revolution, Archibaldo is extremely possessive of his mother and resents her going out to the theatre with his seemingly absent father. As a way of placating him, she gives him a music box and instructs the governess to tell him the "story of the king" (*Ensayo* 00:04:36) with a knowing wink. The latter duly makes up the story on the spot, telling Archibaldo that the box once belonged to a king whose

wife was suspected of treason. Tricked into believing the false accusations of his prime minister and making use of the box's "magical" properties, the king turned the key, causing it to chime, and simultaneously thought of the queen who was struck dead on the spot. The young protagonist is enthralled by the story and decides to see if it is really true. While the melody is chiming, he deliberately thinks of the governess, who is coincidentally and fatally wounded in the throat by a stray bullet from a revolutionary skirmish in the street outside. Archibaldo is shown to be both erotically thrilled and repulsed by the combination of her lifeless body, the blood on her neck, and her shapely stockinged legs which are partially exposed as she falls to the floor. The scene establishes a psychological link between her death and the chiming of the music box, to which he also attributes supernatural forces. Due to the gendered nature of the governess's story about the box and its murderous power over women, it is possible that he unconsciously associates the entire episode with male power, death, and sexual possession, thereby creating his subsequent impulse for murder. As Deleuze puts it: "the law or destiny of the impulse is to take possession through guile, but violently, of everything it *can* in a given milieu …" (133).

I interpret the ironic circumstances of the governess's death as a satirical undermining of the mythology surrounding notions such as "La burla [de la muerte]" (Paz 63) and "la muerte fácil" (Bartra 78-79) in Mexico. Archibaldo's fetishistic obsession with death is presented as a children's story gone wrong and serves as a wry metahumorous commentary on constructed cultural narratives surrounding death and machismo in Mexican culture. Geoffrey Kantaris suggests that "[t]he sequence is rendered comic by the manner of its retelling and by its status as (literally) a dress-rehearsal" (313-14). The scene also satirizes the sense of "entitlement" in these *machista* codes to dominate the female through violence. The self-reflexive black humour can be considered entropic rather than normative given that the target of the satire is the very fabric of the post-Revolutionary state itself (via the clear reference to the Mexican Revolution), a tacit critique of some of the core cultural constructions of death and masculinity promoted by the new nation after the Revolution. Drawing on the lines from the *corrido* "La Valentina," Carlos Monsiváis underlines the connection between death, machismo, and the Mexican nation as follows: "el machismo es un acto de obediencia social. 'Si me han de matar mañana, que me maten de una vez' no es una frase de engallamiento sino una apreciación realista" (*Amor* 31). Unlike normative satire, the vices that are exposed are not resolved within the framework of the dominant ideology. As O'Neill puts it: "[e]ntropic satire is merely descriptive, observational, revelatory, apocalyptic, voyeuristic" (143). The incident underlines the *random* and subjective nature of Archibaldo's

association between sexual attraction and violent death. In his subconscious, the mythical story of the all-powerful music box invented *arbitrarily* by the governess, which supports hegemonic masculine discourses in its portrayal of female betrayal and deceit, is intertwined, by the *chance* intervention of a revolutionary bullet, with the erotic image of her dead body. As a plot device, this has the effect of cementing his association between female deceit, male power, sex, and death. On an ideological level, the scene highlights that many cultural values are essentially arbitrary constructions, mythical narratives engendered by a chance combination of human invention and ironic coincidence. In line with this, Julián Daniel Gutiérrez-Albilla highlights the film's commentary on the degradation of national cultural narratives:

> The film's celebration of chance as a revolutionary principle can be linked to the potential of chance to disrupt and undermine the bourgeois notion of history as progress, thereby opening to doubt the validity of modern cultural assumptions about the strength of modern culture itself. (130)

As an adult, triggered initially by the sound of the very same box at the antique dealer's shop, and later by the sight of blood when he cuts himself shaving, Archibaldo tries to recreate this first brief moment of sexual frisson by murdering beautiful women, but it remains tantalizingly, and comically, out of his reach. Deleuze suggests that impulse-images "are inseparable from the perverse modes of behaviour which they produce and animate" (132). Archibaldo's homicidal urges seem to stem from an obsession with the exercise of dominant male power over the female as he confesses to Sister Trinidad at his hospital bedside: "el placer de sentirme poderoso" (*Ensayo* 00:07:22). These desires can be related to his position within the discourse of hegemonic masculinity, where dominant men seek to exercise power over females and other subordinate males.

Archibaldo's neurosis, stemming from random and indiscriminate violence, sees him ritualistically "performing" scripts of reified discourses of hegemonic masculinity, mythical narratives of maleness, with their associated attitudes towards violence and death, which have distorted the diverse ideological landscape of modern Mexico. In direct contrast to the panoramic images of battle, glory, and heroism of previous representations of the Revolution, Víctor Fuentes argues that *Ensayo de un crimen* satirically reduces these epic images to the momentary creation of a childhood neurosis:

> Las escenas de la Revolución, tan usadas en el cine mexicano para cantar la gloria nacional, adquieren en esta película un giro típicamente buñueliano, convirtiéndose

en un simple marco para que una bala perdida atraviese la garganta de la institutriz de Archibaldo. (*Los mundos* 96)

Seen in this light, one might presume that the Mexican Revolution serves as a mere plot device in the film. And yet it has a much more important role, as we shall now see. Archibaldo is unmistakably a member of the aristocratic class that lost much of its wealth, social status, and property as a direct consequence of the Mexican Revolution. Indeed, the first images we see in the film come from a history book depicting the violence and devastation of this period. These are also the images that accompany the confession of his homicidal urges to Sr. Trinidad. Acevedo-Muñoz suggests that "the traumatic experiences of the Revolution are at the root of Archi's problems … a type of male leading character who is somewhat emasculated by the turn of events against his family and social class in the years since the Mexican Revolution" (140).

Víctor Fuentes maintains that Buñuel's film, and the novel on which it was based, are both highly critical of the historical course taken and the values adopted by the dominant classes, particularly constructed attitudes towards patriotism, machismo, and death, in the post-Revolutionary period:

La novela se desarrollaba en Ciudad de México, y en ella se puede ver, lo mismo que en la película de Buñuel, una cierta alegoría de "la vida alegre y confiada" de la burguesía mexicana, que, al timón de la revolución institucionalizada, iba a desembocar en la actual capital del crimen y la corrupción. (*Los mundos* 95)

Buñuel's satirical critique of cultural attitudes towards death and machismo in the film is continued through further reference to the theme of transvestism which we examined earlier. This is exemplified in the scene where Archibaldo is sitting in a bar waiting for his customary glass of milk. He notices Lavinia's face through the flames at the top of a cocktail glass that she is holding and will subsequently confess to her the significant impression that this brief superimposed image had on him: "Me atrajo desde que la vi rodeada de llamas como una pequeña bruja condenada a la hoguera, mi pequeña Juana de Arco" (*Ensayo* 01:00:26). The partial image of Lavinia's face seen through the flames links religious transgression, sacrificial death, and heightened sexual desire. According to Deleuze: "The object of the impulse is always the 'partial object', or the fetish; a haunch of meat, a raw morsel, a scrap, a woman's brief, a shoe" (132).

Although Lavinia is not portrayed as a transvestite, her assertiveness certainly could be perceived as a threat to hegemonic masculinity. As Evans suggests: "[Lavinia's] expropriation of male power corresponds to the crime of which Joan was accused" (108). The latter's transvestism was seen as

visual proof of her gender transgression. The implicit reference to Joan of Arc's transvestism echoes the young Archibaldo's cross-dressing episode, and further illustrates the film's playful questioning of social and "gender normative" behaviour. Gutiérrez-Albilla outlines this narrative feature in the following terms:

> This challenge to the 'naturalness' of gender roles and displacement of essentialist versions of identities allows for a much more fluid process of cross-gender fantastic identification with and among the characters and audiences. (121)

Moreover, the use of Joan of Arc's name as a term of endearment for Lavinia "mi pequeña Juana de Arco," (01:00:26) can be seen as another instance of entropic humour, given that it satirically undermines nationalist tropes such as "el tuteo con la muerte" (Monsiváis 16) and "la muerte fácil" (Bartra 78-9). From within a naturalist setting, the film links Archibaldo's impulsive pursuit of Lavinia to the persecution, torture, and execution of Joan of Arc, suggesting that elemental impulses on the part of the male to subjugate, possess, and murder the female derive from established cultural narratives.

To a certain extent, we might consider Archibaldo a victim of unfortunate circumstance, unconsciously driven by a childhood neurosis, and yet, at times, he displays a morbid concern with the aesthetic nature of his imaginary "crimes". For instance, when he witnesses Carlota's infidelity with Alejandro on the night before the wedding, his initial response is to kill her immediately. However, he reasons coldly that this impulsive act will end up as "un vulgar homicidio," (*Ensayo* 01:15:08) a lurid affair perpetrated by a jilted lover seeking revenge. Instead, he fantasizes about shooting her in the bridal suite on their wedding night, something he believes will elevate his crime from the ordinary. In a perverse fantasy re-enactment of the scene in her home chapel, he forces her to kneel and recite the Salve Regina. After the passage that refers to Eve, one of the principal archetypes of female betrayal, "A ti clamamos, los desterrados hijos de Eva," (01:16:57), he callously shoots her dead. Evans suggests that "Carlota's submission to Archibaldo's demands represents her forced awareness of her identification with Eve and with all sinners, especially females. She is shot dead while lying on the nuptial bed, in Archibaldo's eyes the symbolic site of all women's betrayals" (105). In this scene, the film clearly employs self-reflexive entropic humour and establishes a satirical link between Archibaldo's aesthetic preoccupation with murder and his hobby as an "authentic" Mexican artist. Moreover, as an example of entropic parody, his self-reflexive "staging" and "direction" of his fantasy of Carlota's death draws a wry meta-cinematic parallel with Buñuel as the director. When the self-reflexivity of the narrative becomes overt, we sense that the way the story

is told becomes more important than the events that are related and therefore it becomes a parody of the act of narration. Russell describes the "style gag" in Buñuel's cinema as "a momentary interruption of the viewer's immersion in the story world and an awareness of the hand [Buñuel's] behind the screen" (51).

The shock value of Carlota's eventual murder by Alejandro is increased by the incongruous insertion of a preceding conversation between a priest, a functionary, and a military officer who extol the theatrical virtues of a Catholic wedding as opposed to the "prosaic" nature of a civil ceremony: "la pompa de la Iglesia católica" (*Ensayo* 01:19:10). The functionary also remarks on the deep emotion he feels while watching military parades. In their discourse, the Church and the nation are seen as one, and Carlota's sudden shooting has the effect of satirically deflating the theatrical grandeur of both institutions. This self-reflexive narrative device, characteristic of entropic parody, recalls the incongruous insertion of the bizarre conversation between the attendees at Don Nemesio's wake in *El río y la muerte*. The critique of the dominant ideology is built into the structure of the film, thus establishing a parallel between the constructed nature of the text and the constructed nature of cultural narratives relating to death, such as "la muerte fácil" (Bartra 78-79), which have been reified within that dominant ideology. Buñuel's film thus posits an ethical dilemma: namely, whether it is appropriate to laugh at such an irreverent and emotionally detached representation of criminal motive. By portraying the fantasized lengths to which Archibaldo will go in order to assert his perceived dominance over women, the film satirizes the rigid codes of hegemonic masculinity and the death tropes at the centre of constructed discourses of cultural nationalism in Mexico. According to O'Neill, "[n]ormative satire is judicial, regulative, prescriptive: the narrator implicitly reaches into the world of his characters in an effort to reorientate that potentially disordered world or explicitly instructs the narrate as to how to do so" (143). However, in *Ensayo de un crimen*, there is no sense that the cinematic narrator is guiding us towards any particular resolution of Archibaldo's aberrant behaviour within the framework of the dominant ideology. Instead, the entropic black humour operates outside this normative framework in order to target these culturally constructed death tropes in Mexico.

During Lavinia's visit to his home, Archibaldo tries to attack her from behind but is prevented from doing so when the doorbell rings. Situational irony again deprives him of his opportunity to kill. It emerges that she has asked some North American tourists to visit his house, which she suggests is emblematic of an authentic Mexican artist, albeit one who is "original" and "doesn't follow rules" (*Ensayo* 01:06:51). With this statement, she seems to recognize him as a kindred spirit who does not respect established social

codes. Her utterance also establishes a satirical link to post-Revolutionary discourses of Mexican cultural nationalism and particularly the pivotal role of pre-Hispanic art.[17] Marvin D'Lugo reads the spatial disruption by the American tourists as a challenge to the utopian idea of a monolithic unified community in Mexican national cinema and suggests that "their [the tourists] very presence challenges the cinematic illusion of Mexican space itself through the eruption of the foreign language" (85).

Archibaldo is visibly frustrated by the tourists unwelcome presence and becomes incandescent with rage when Lavinia tells him that she will not be able to see him again and provocatively suggests: "Puede usted consolarse con mi hermanita" [a mannequin in her likeness] (01:08:05), before leaving with her inquisitive charges. In his fury, he rushes inside and drags the mannequin towards his workshop to enact a slapstick theatrical purging of his homicidal tendencies.[18] He watches in ecstatic glee as this substitute for Lavinia is consumed by the furnace; shot from the point of view of the dummy, his maniacal and delirious face is superimposed on the image of the flickering flames, mirroring his first glimpse of her face in the bar. In an example of self-reflexive entropic humour, the scene takes the slapstick distancing device a step further, by having the protagonist burn a mannequin of his tormentor and object of his affection/obsession. The images of the burning mannequin hint at the grotesque and yet are considerably more anodyne than the physical horror of blood that characterizes the other real and imaginary deaths in the film. With respect to the elemental urges depicted in naturalist cinema, Deleuze suggests that "the impulse selects its fragment in a given milieu and yet does not select it, it takes indiscriminately from what the milieu offers it, even if it means going on further" (133). On this occasion, Archibaldo is forced to "go on further" and satisfy his murderous impulse with the dummy instead of the real Lavinia. According to Camilo Hernández Castellanos, "La relación erótica que se establece entre Archibaldo y Lavinia no se da entre dos cuerpos, sino entre victimario y víctima, entre simulación de asesinato y simulación de cadáver" (125). Ironically, Archibaldo's only "true" crime is the comical "murder" of an inanimate mannequin – to be distinguished from the fantasy murders – perpetrated within a fictional narrative, which in turn is comprised of a retrospective first-person confession to a judge. This complex narrative structure constitutes a self-reflexive *mise-en-abîme* technique, characteristic of entropic parody, which O'Neill terms "a comedy of narration" (261). Consequently, it draws attention to the construction of the film text itself. The meta-cinematic self-awareness of the text is outlined by Evans as follows:

> These identifications between protagonist, victim, and audience once again highlight the text's patterns of self-consciousness. Furthermore, the confessional structure … is, as in other films, not only motivated by a desire to focus on a character driven by guilt to be shriven to a figure of authority … but also to expose, in this precursor of postmodernist aesthetics, the text's artificiality. (110-11)

Piqued by Lavinia's departure, this destructive act seems to purge him of his homicidal instincts, although there is nothing in the ending of the film to suggest that he has been completely cured. The sudden trite "happy ending" seems ironic and out of place with the other events in the narrative. Instead of the sinister electric organ score, originating from the melody of the "cursed" music box, an optimistic orchestral score, characteristic of melodrama, swells up to bring the film to a close. Given the multiple levels of narration, that is, the retrospective narration to Sister Trinidad, then to the judge, intercalated with fantasy flash-forwards – Archibaldo's fantasy of killing Patricia and Carlota – we are constantly unsure of the primary level of narration, that is, whether the events presented are really taking place or whether they are part of a dream or fantasy. Consequently, I interpret the ending as yet another subjective fantasy, an oneiric representation of Archibaldo's desire to be "normal," and therefore an entropic parody of the narrative conventions of romantic melodrama, which was a staple of Mexican national cinema in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.[19] In line with this, Víctor Fuentes reads the ending of the film as "la última subversión de Buñuel del cine en que se vio obligado a trabajar" (*Los mundos* 98).

We have seen how the entropic dimension of Buñuel's "peculiar" black humour operates in these two naturalist films and how they tacitly undermine stereotypical cultural constructions surrounding death and machismo in Mexico. The self-reflexive dimension also allows the films to overcome the conceptual and analytical impasse relating to surrealist black humour and normative black humour in Mexico. The analysis has shown Buñuel's satirical humour to be inextricably linked to his naturalist worldview, where degradation, entropy, and destruction are central features of the milieu. At a narrative level, his innovative use of humour displays the self-reflexive characteristics of post-structuralist texts and postmodernism, philosophical movements suffused by "entropic modes of thought" (O'Neill 24). Unlike normative satire, the "vices" depicted in both films are not resolved within the ideological framework of the dominant ideology. Rather, any possible solution is left to the judgment of the audience. *El río y la muerte* engages with El Día de los Muertos directly, satirically linking impulses towards violence to nationalist death tropes. At a structural level, the film employs many of the generic features of the melodrama, which it then subverts through episodes of satirical humour. In

contrast, *Ensayo de un crimen* employs satirical humour as a central structural feature. The film suggests that certain notions regarding death and machismo in post-Revolutionary Mexican cultural production are essentially arbitrary constructions, fictional narratives intercalated with random historical coincidence. The distinctive approach to satirical humour in *El río y la muerte* can be seen as an embryonic version of the intertwining of satirical humour and experimental narration in *Ensayo de un crimen*, stylistic features that would characterize Buñuel's later Mexican films, and is further evidence of the myriad parallels that can be drawn between his commercial and auteurist works. The subversion of formal and tonal dynamics brought about by self-reflexive narration and the blending of tragic and comic elements in these films, all characteristics of entropic humour, call into question the place of artistic production as a means of exerting nationalist cultural hegemony in Mexico.

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NOTES

1 The following studies highlight the central importance of black humour in Buñuel's films: Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film*; Peter William Evans, *Subjectivity and Desire*; Víctor Fuentes, *Los mundos de Buñuel*; and Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz, *Buñuel and Mexico*; in films such as *El río y la muerte* (1954), *Ensayo de un crimen* (1955), *Nazarín* (1959), and *El ángel exterminador* (1962).

2 See Juan F. Egea, *Dark Laughter* 24-25.

3 Regarding the false consciousness generated by laughing in connivance with ideological constructs, Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer argue that "[i]n the culture industry, jovial denial takes the place of the pain found in ecstasy and in asceticism … they must laugh and be content with laughter" (141). In their schema, then, comedy can be used as a veil by state discourses to entertain the masses and obscure the true nature of its ideological systems. According to Claudio Lomnitz, normative black humour in Mexico serves to reify death tropes within the national narrative (421).

4 Carl J. Mora argues that the ideological framework of the Golden Age Mexican melodrama adhered to the traditional values of "God, Nation, and Home" (57).

5 See Luis Buñuel, *Mi último suspiro* 261-64.

6 This *machista* "code" is outlined in the following analysis of Mexican machismo by Octavio Paz: "El 'Macho' es el Gran Chingón. Una palabra resume la agresividad, impasibilidad, invulnerabilidad, uso descarnado de la violencia, y

demás atributos del 'macho' poder" (89). See also: Samuel Ramos; Carlos Monsiváis, *Amor perdido;* Charles Ramírez Berg; and Matthew Gutmann.

7 Olga Nájera-Ramírez sees the *charro* as both "a master symbol of Mexican culture" and "a cultural construction of maleness" (1-2).

8 Lomnitz suggests that "Mexico's first national totem was the Virgin of Guadalupe" (41); Roger Bartra makes reference to "esa peculiar combinación de machismo exacerbado y de fanático amor a la madre en la figura de la Virgen de Guadalupe" (171); see also Paz 72-97.

9 Amit Thakkar notes that in Mexico "feminine concepts of the 'patria' as the 'motherland' … were useful for the invocation of spiritual loyalty in a country where devotion to the mother had become institutionalised" (*Fiction* 53).

10 The ironic image of the village priest with a pistol is a clear reference to the Cristero War (1926-28). In 1926, the left-leaning government of Plutarco Elías Calles (1924-28), in line with the constitution of 1917, attempted to mitigate the power of the Church by eradicating the teaching of religion in schools. The ensuing bloodshed, which drove a wedge between Church and state, would leave an indelible mark on the history of Mexico. See Thakkar, "Irony and the Priest in Fragment 14 of Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*" and Acevedo-Muñoz.

11 Guy H. Wood and Javier Herrera Navarro read Buñuel and Dalí's use of firearms in *Un chien andalou* (1929) as a parody of the Western genre. They suggest that the "displaced 'pistolero' [Batcheff] may be the prototype that best clarifies *Un chien andalou*'s parodic process …" (Wood and Herrera Navarro 105). In *El río y la muerte* Buñuel's earlier parody of the Western in *Un chien andalou* is given a further subversive twist through the character of the gun-toting parish priest.

12 See Mora 57.

13 In the novel, the protagonist manages to kill his own wife by mistake. In Buñuel's film, Archibaldo's crimes are only committed in his imagination (Víctor Fuentes, *Los mundos* 94-95).

14 See Paz; Bartra; Monsiváis; "Mira muerte"; and Lomnitz.

15 See Ramos; Paz; Monsiváis, *Amor perdido*; Ramírez Berg; and Gutmann.

16 R.W. Connell suggests that "[g]ayness, in patriarchal ideology, is the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity" (78).

17 See Acevedo-Muñoz 15-31.

18 In slapstick comedy, Andrew Stott suggests that "[h]owever often the body was assaulted it was largely indestructible, rendering concern or sympathy for a character's pain irrelevant. In this sense, slapstick may be said to represent a socially acceptable expression of masochism, as the viewer takes no sadistic pleasure in the pain induced, or, perhaps, a liberation from the compulsion to empathize" (93).

19 See Mora 57; and Monsiváis, *Historia mínima* 318-21.

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