

Los olvidados: Luis Buñuel and the Crisis of Nationalism
in Mexican Cinema

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The release of *Los olvidados* in 1950 is one of the historical markers of what I call the "crisis of nationalism" in Mexican cinema. The film was widely received as the "return" of Buñuel by European critics after the period of unnoticeable activity between 1932, the year of *Las Hurdes*, and 1946, the year of Buñuel's incorporation into Mexican cinema and of the production of *Gran Casino*, which led to Buñuel's Mexican career of almost twenty years and almost twenty movies.

Nevertheless, it is known that at the time of the premiere of *Los olvidados* in Mexico City (November 9, 1950) the movie was mainly taken as an insult to Mexican sensibilities and to the Mexican nation. The stories of the detractors of *Los olvidados* are, of course, many and well documented.¹ As it was often to be the case with Buñuel's Mexican period, it took for *Los olvidados* to gather some prestige abroad before it was welcome in Mexico City. After its triumph at Cannes, where Buñuel won the best director award, *Los olvidados* had a successful season in a first run theater.

Buñuel's relationship with Mexican cinema went through several different stages, but it is significant that *Los olvidados* is recognized both by international critics and Mexican film historians as the turning point in the director's entire career. *Los olvidados* was also the first film in Buñuel's Mexican years in which the director specifically addressed issues related not only to Mexican society but more particularly to Mexican cinema itself. *Gran Casino* (1946) and *El gran Calavera* (1949) were projects in which Buñuel had little or no creative control, in the former case working strictly under generic conventions for producer Oscar Dancigers, (not to mention stars Jorge Negrete and Libertad Lamarque) and in the latter under star-producer Fernando Soler. The small but significant amount of liberty allowed Buñuel by Dancigers at the time of production of *Los olvidados* enabled the director to "return", formally and philosophically, to his surrealist years, and in particular to the violent visual and political style of *Las Hurdes*, Buñuel's 1932 parody of Grierson's social and Flaherty's ethnographic documentary aesthetics. Nevertheless, as much as *Los olvidados* can arguably (and probably rightly so) be associated to the style and themes of *Las Hurdes*, Buñuel also made a film that referred to, criticized, and exposed in a variety of discursive modes, the "fissures", the "cracks" and failures covering the aesthetic façade of classical Mexican cinema. The political statements made by Buñuel with *Los olvidados*, I believe,

directly address the director's expressed dislike for "official" folklore, and it states in no uncertain terms Buñuel's critique of Mexican cinema and of the image of Mexico associated with the visual style of revolutionary art.

Buñuel was, in fact, openly opposed to the style, look, values and rhetoric of Mexican cinema. Probably needless to say, as one of the few true surrealists, Buñuel did not acknowledge "national" symbols as anything other than a political manipulation and a bourgeois aberration.² In one of his best known stunts when working in Mexico, Buñuel challenged and reportedly "scandalized" Gabriel Figueroa, his cinematographer in *Los olvidados*, *Él* (1952), *Nazarín* (1959), *La Fièvre Monte à El Pao* (1959), *The Young One* (1960), *El ángel exterminador* (1962), and *Simón del desierto* (1965). As the story goes, Figueroa had set up a shot for *Nazarín* near the valley of the Popocatépetl:

It was during this shoot that I scandalized Gabriel Figueroa, who had prepared for me an aesthetically irreproachable framing, with the Popocatépetl in the background and the inevitable white clouds. I simply turned the camera to frame a banal scene that seemed to me more real, more proximate. I have never liked prefabricated cinematographic beauty, which very often makes one forget what the film wants to tell, and which personally, does not move me.³

With this attitude Buñuel was not only violating the "prefabricated" beauty of the cinematographic image of Mexico, but also one of the artists internationally recognized as being responsible for that image, Gabriel Figueroa, and one of its ubiquitous symbols, the volcano Popocatépetl and its valley. We may remember that the

valley of the Popocatépetl, as filmed by Gabriel Figueroa under the direction of Emilio Fernández had served as one of the most widely known cinematographic images of Mexico since *Flor Silvestre* (1943) and was alluded to and plagiarized in films from Eisentein's *¡Que Viva México!* (1933) to John Huston's *Under the Volcano* (1983). Hollywood directors have often since sought Figueroa to work in Mexican locations, from John Ford's *The Fugitive* (1947), to John Huston's *The Night of the Iguana* (1963) and *Under the Volcano*, to Don Siegel's *Two Mules for Sister Sara* (1969).⁴

Buñuel's declared ideological independence from the "inevitable" images of Mexico, exemplified by the gesture against Figueroa's representation, whether the tale is real or apocryphal, comes up as an eloquent and symbolic anecdote in his Mexican career. By calling Figueroa's composition "inevitable" Buñuel also recognized that those images belonged to a representational system, perhaps an "imaginary" of Mexican film, that was recognizable and predictable and of which he did not want his film[s] to participate. Nevertheless, by the times of *Nazarín* Buñuel had already violated many of the codes and themes in classical Mexican cinema in his landmark surrealist drama *Los olvidados*. As it is often the case with contra-canonical or revisionist art, it took for *Los olvidados* to gather attention and honors abroad, in the European film festivals, for Mexican critics and audiences to come around and reconsider admiring it.⁵

Interestingly and in a most telling fashion, it was originally the critics at *Cahiers du Cinéma*, and particularly André Bazin, who shifted critical attention towards Buñuel in 1950, after the release of *Los olvidados*, in opposition to the better-known visual code associated with the work of Emilio Fernández and Gabriel Figueroa. Bazin, arguably the most influential film critic of the period and one of the co-founders of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, expressed in the occasion of the French release of *Subida al cielo*, and in no uncertain terms, the changes in the focus of attention from classical Mexican cinema to movies made in Mexico by Luis Buñuel:

Juries seem to mistake cinema for photography. There was admittedly something more than beautiful photography in *María Candelaria* and even in *La Perla* (1945). But it is easy to see, year in and year out, that physical formalism and nationalist rhetoric have replaced realism and authentic poetry. With the exotic surprises gone, and [Gabriel] Figueroa's cinematographic feats reduced to fragments of technical bravura, Mexican cinema found itself crossed-off the critics' map. [...] It is entirely thanks to Luis Buñuel that we are talking about Mexican films again.⁶

While it is known that Bazin's rhetorical style is often imprinted of an apocalyptic quality, and judgmental claims permeate his essays, as one of the founders of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, his positions often influenced the balance of criticism. Even Luis Buñuel, as apathetic as he was to the critics (and in particular to *Cahiers du Cinéma* later in the 1960s) sometimes listened and paid attention to Bazin's views about his films.⁷

What is most telling about Bazin's criticism of Buñuel's Mexican films, is that as interested as Bazin was

in technical, formal, and visual matters more than in issues of content, he chose to take up Buñuel in lieu of Fernández-Figueroa because neither Bazin nor *Cahiers du Cinéma* were interested any longer in "the nationalist rhetoric" of Mexican cinema. While *Cahiers* often praised the artistic and technical beauty of the Fernández-Figueroa movies exported to the European film festivals, and especially to Cannes (with some of the usual philosophical musings on depth of focus), Bazin was no longer impressed with that "physical formalism" which he detected as stalled, decadent, and in a creative descent at this point. Classical Mexican cinema was no longer evolving, thought Bazin, and Buñuel came in to dictate the new directions of Mexican cinema. Buñuel became the center of critical attention and at the international level, it was his movies that began getting the awards thenceforth denied to the predictable "nationalist rhetoric" of Emilio Fernández, Gabriel Figueroa, and their heirs.⁸ Furthermore, Luis Buñuel was soon to become the key connecting figure between the style and themes of the classical period of Mexican cinema, and the post-classical generation of Mexican film directors that emerged in the 1960s.⁹

The assumption that Classical Mexican cinema can be thought of as being "codified", or being part of some sort of "nationalist" rhetorical system is consistent with recent theoretical developments, particularly in the work of

anthropologist Néstor García Canclini. In his book *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* García Canclini discusses the nationalist-state project of Mexican culture by analyzing the organization of the National Museum of Anthropology, illustrating the relationships between art and hegemony. Although García Canclini refers to museums in particular and the operations of anthropology and sociology in the institutionalization of culture in Mexico, when it comes to his conclusions about the uses of art in the processes of codification and signification, he puts the emphasis on the 'visual' character of popular culture in Mexico, which is necessarily applicable to the cinema:

[...] Among Latin American countries, Mexico, because of the nationalist orientation of its post revolutionary policy, should be the one that has been more concerned with expanding visual culture, preserving its patrimony, and integrating it into a system of museums and archeological and historical centers. In the first half of the twentieth century, the documentation and diffusion of the patrimony was done through temporary and traveling exhibits, cultural missions, and muralism.¹⁰

The systematic "expansion" of visual culture and its "integration into a system" of public cultural diffusion as exemplified by museums and other forms of cultural flow in García Canclini's analysis can be readily applied to the cinema, especially the classical cinema of Mexico that was "flowing" through film festivals in Europe ("diffused" through "temporary exhibits"), just until the release of *Los olvidados*. Buñuel's films, as demonstrated by André Bazin's prophetic review in *L'Observateur* of August 1952 quoted above, directly substitutes Mexican classical cinema both at

the film festivals and in the critical circuits. In other words, there is a clear moment of "transition", a "crisis" in what constituted Mexican classical cinema that *Los olvidados* exemplifies and represents. After 1950, in the eyes of festival juries and critics, Mexican cinema became Buñuel.

Los olvidados is, at face value, an urban drama, and like Vittorio De Sica's *Sciuscia* (1946) and *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), which Buñuel admired, it conforms to a picaresque structure.¹¹ Like its structural models *Lazarillo de Tormes* and Francisco de Quevedo's *Historia de la vida del buscón*, *Los olvidados* follows a principal character, the young boy Pedro, through a series of adventures and a succession of formative figures, none of which ever helps Pedro accomplish anything, but only mistreat him, lie to him, take advantage of him, or in their misdirected attempt to help, as in the episode of the farm-school director, lead him to his death. Through these hard knocks, however, Pedro "learns" what seems to be a life-lesson on self preservation, which tragically fails when Pedro last meets with Jaibo, his evil nemesis. *Los olvidados*, like the Spanish picaresque novel, is also recognized as a social critique, as an indictment of its contemporary urban society through its depiction of over-crowded slum shanties, domestic abuse, incest, child abuse, the arbitrary nature of both crime and punishment, poverty, and the ineptness of public social services. The

original detractors of *Los olvidados*, however, were missing the key point of Buñuel's criticism.

Distracted as they were in defending the "honor" of Mexico's institutions, ("God, Nation, and Home" as the key values of the Revolution after the 1930s), which emerged deeply wounded in the international festivals by Buñuel's film, attention shifted away from the other target of the film's criticism: classical Mexican cinema. In spite of its social "thesis" façade, Buñuel and co-screenwriter Luis Alcoriza opened the film with a disclaiming voice-over narration asserting that it was based on real-life events (the origins of which are unclear), settling the tone and mood of the movie as one of skepticism and criticism, often taken, mistakenly, for "documentary." The narration states that "[the] film is based on real-life facts, is not optimistic, and leaves the solution to the problem to the progressive forces of society." One of the few personalities of Mexican arts, culture, or politics who congratulated Buñuel on the film immediately upon its (unsuccessful) initial run in Mexico City was the politically active muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros.¹² But most other personalities, celebrities, and critics were originally negative on their criticism, based on the belief that *Los olvidados* portrayed a viciously negative, false, and "dirty" image of Mexico. Even the film's producer, Óscar Dancigers, was afraid the film was too dangerous, that

there was "too much filth" in it, not enough recognized talent, and too much of a risk for his production company.

In his extensive interview about the film with José de la Colina and Tomás Pérez Turrent (see note number 1) Buñuel tells of the research that went into the preparation for *Los olvidados*. Buñuel, Luis Alcoriza, and production designer Edward Fitzgerald spent six months doing field research inside the Mexico City slums where the action of the movie was to take place, and attempted to be particularly realist in their physical depiction of the environments: the interior of shacks and shanties, the existence of animals, the number of people in each house, etc., are said to be all faithful to what Buñuel, Alcoriza, and Fitzgerald encountered. Buñuel and his team were concerned with being true to the "reality" that they found. "Reality" in this case, however, constituted a rejection of the dominant image of Mexico in classical cinema, and of the tradition of revolutionary representation from which it evolved.¹³

Los olvidados is populated by a cast of characters that represents the poorest of any society in situations that bring out only the worst in them: violence, murder, decrepit, filthy settings, over-crowding, lying, cheating, stealing, sickness, sexual abuse, domestic abuse, incest, abandonment, hopelessness. There are no noble Indian souls here. No "essence" of Mexican beauty à la Dolores del Río in *María Candelaria* and María Félix in *Maclovía*. There is only the provocation of having the only redeemable character

in *Los olvidados*, the naïve country boy, 'El Ojitos', be the only one that wears a poncho and a sombrero, true markers of the folkloric Mexico for which Buñuel felt "profound horror."¹⁴ There are no national landmarks in the background (no Rivera murals in the National Palace as in Fernández's *Río Escondido*), no gentle revolutionary generals nor faithful soldaderas (as in Fernández's *Enamorada*): there is only a mean blind man who misses with nostalgia the times of Don Porfirio. There is no Popocatepetl shot against the background of the "inevitable" white clouds; only the hills of a garbage dump where the last victim, Pedro, is disposed of; the skeleton of a high-rise building under construction, and the city smog which effectively substitute the Popo and the "inevitable" white clouds. These images help to frame the narrative turning points of Julián and Jaibo's deaths. And there are certainly no "traditional" family values, no "God, Nation, and Home" in the fashion of the family melodramas of Juan Bustillo Oro, Fernando de Fuentes, and Julio Bracho that forwarded Revolutionary morals.

Seen from this perspective, *Los olvidados* arguably rejected both the set of values put forward by some of the most important and popular genres of classical Mexican cinema, and the stylistic conventions of the best examples of classical cinema in Mexico from the 1930s to the 1950s, which reached its peak in 1943. While *Los olvidados* was not the only movie set in the poor neighborhoods of Mexican cities (there are of course Alejandro Galindo's *Campeón sin*

corona, 1945 ;*Esquina, bajan!*, 1948 and *Espaldas mojadas*, 1953, among others) Buñuel's film did go several steps further in its depressing pessimism and its sheer filthiness.¹⁵ In that way *Los olvidados* does directly address and questions an official idea of Mexican culture, an official imaginary of Mexican cinema that was part of the post revolutionary cultural project (the "cultural nation") that included museums, murals, publications, and at the international level, the cinema.¹⁶

Furthermore, *Los olvidados* can also be seen as a film that addresses the defining problem of the systematic but slow transition to modernity after the revolution. The transition and negotiation of Mexican society into modernity, particularly under the developmentalist policies of the administration of president Miguel Alemán (1946-1952) was a deep concern of classical Mexican cinema that is especially related to the canon-building 1940s films of Emilio Fernández. In his book *Cine y realidad social en México* Alejandro Rozado argues that the work of Emilio Fernández represented a sort of romantic, innocent resistance to Mexico's process of modernization.¹⁷ In Fernández's imaginary the paradox of modernization can not be negotiated. His films, according to Rozado, fail to harmonize the romanticism of tradition with the pressing, unstoppable needs of modernization, thus failing, I may add, to conform with the "hybrid" social and cultural agenda of the revolution. The process that started in the 1930s under

president Cárdenas and his administration's efforts to nationalize industries (1934-1940), and that was timidly followed by Manuel Ávila-Camacho (1940-1946), became a full-blown modernizing and "westernizing" campaign under Alemán, and a great influence in Mexican cinema. From the urban pressures of *alemanismo* emerged both the *cabaretera* film and the masterpieces of "cine de arrabal", Alejandro Galindo's *¡Esquina, bajan!* and, of course, Buñuel's *Los olvidados*.

Interestingly, Emilio Fernández's anti-modernist position does not take the shape of any sort of anti-technological or anti-industrialist critique, but it becomes a moral statement: it is the old Mexico's moral codes and values that are really opposed to the decaying morals of the new, modernizing Mexico. In *Cine y realidad social en México* Rozado thus explains Fernández's dilemma:

Of the entire panorama of Mexican film production in the 1940s, the work of Emilio Fernández stands out for the tragic resonance adopted in the filmic spirit by the conflict of modernization that [Mexico] has lived since the republican era. Fernández originates in melodramatic representation, whose tradition is extraordinarily vigorous in Hispanic America, and submerges in a space where the conflict of values generates a learning experience. From the beatified attitude that constitutes melodrama, which takes the side of "good" versus "evil" values, the visual tragedy of *Indio* Fernández develops in a reiterated reconsideration of the struggle between the traditional values of the "Mexican community" and the values of progress...¹⁸

Los olvidados presents Mexico at the critical threshold of modernization in a less melodramatic fashion than the contemporary films of Alejandro Galindo, which were also structured in the guise of moral predicaments, but in more realistic fashion than the films of Emilio Fernández.¹⁹ If, however, the image of classical Mexican cinema was one

of a moral resistance to modernization, as Rozado argues, then the image of Mexico's submission to modernization, which Buñuel dramatizes as that of hopelessness and a completely amoral existence in *Los olvidados*, would be the epitome of what was "anti-classical" in Mexican cinema.²⁰ If there is anything that dramatically represents what is "Mexico" in *Los olvidados* is precisely moral and social decay as a sign of modernization. *Los olvidados*, unlike the imaginary world of Fernández's Mexico, poses the problem of modernization in the shape of a moral dyad, instead of a moral dilemma (which is more like the way Galindo's films present modernization): *Los olvidados* resists the temptation of taking "sides", of judging in moral terms what Mexico is and what Mexico is not.

In this sense *Los olvidados* is, quite literally, an "amoral" tale: like *Las Hurdes* it is rather emotionally detached from its subjects. In classical Mexican cinema, being "amoral" could also be a way to be situated in the margins of the nation (no "God, Nation, Home"²¹), while at the same time participating of the "national" cultural debate of which classical cinema represented the "traditionalist" position. Buñuel's *Los olvidados* inevitably placed the director in the middle of this debate, and also situates itself as a symptom of the crisis of the "nationalist rhetoric" of Mexican cinema. In any case, Buñuel's and Alcoriza's script, and Buñuel's aesthetic and thematic treatment of this "amoral" story, does attempt to

negotiate the position of urban Mexico in the dyad of tradition and modernity. *Los olvidados* thus, as opposed to the classic "Indianist" films of Emilio Fernández or the urban melodramas (cine de arrabal) of Alejandro Galindo, comes closer to representing a draft, a sketch, of Mexico City in the face of modernization.

Therefore, *Los olvidados* can be taken as truly representative of this moment of crisis that is also a juncture of definition; if the negotiation of Mexico's "hybrid" cultural configuration in the revolutionary period is a marker of its national identification, as Néstor García Canclini will argue, then *Los olvidados* can be seen as the quintessential "Mexican" movie of the late classical period.²² The only thing that resembles in any way the analysis of Mexican society proposed by *Los olvidados* could be the "cabaretera" subgenre of Mexican melodrama in the late 1940s and 1950s: movies like Julio Bracho's *Distinto Amanecer* (1943), and Alberto Gout's *Aventurera* (1950) and *Sensualidad* (1951). *Los olvidados* evidently struck a cord in the classical cinema establishment, very much like the "cabaretera" films, and it thus became the center of some controversy: it was attacked by the Mexican film industry (for being a "vicious" misrepresentation of Mexico), and embraced by the Mexican cultural and intellectual elite as well as by the international critics.

Néstor García Canclini's analysis, (without referring directly to classical cinema) addresses the issue of "modernization" and its relationship to the defining post revolutionary period in Mexico (1930-1950) demonstrating both the ill-fitting ideological position of classical cinema's resistance to "modernization" and the dramatic and thematic alliance of *Los olvidados* with "modernity" and the "new" nationalism of the 1950s. García Canclini explains how Mexico's cultural establishment in coordination with the state, attempted to condense, to consolidate traditional "handicrafts" and modern art (exemplified most dramatically by the assignments given to Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco, of course) in an effort to negotiate the paradox of modernization by incorporating modern and traditional tendencies under the signature of "the nation":

Mexican cultural history of the 1930s through the 1950s demonstrates the fragility of that utopia and the attrition it was suffering as a result of intraartistic (sic) and socio-political conditions. The visual arts field, hegemonized by dogmatic realism, the dominance of content, and the subordination of arts to politics, loses its former vitality and produces few innovations. In addition, it was difficult to promote the social action of art when the revolutionary impulse was being "institutionalized..."²³

Not surprisingly, although written in different contexts, for different purposes, and nearly forty years apart, García Canclini's analysis of the failed "utopia" of the visual arts project in Mexico around 1950 is not unlike that of André Bazin, who did not know the first thing about Mexico, but who did know about the cinema, and saw through the failure of Emilio Fernández's "physical formalism and

nationalist rhetoric [as they] replace[d] realism and authentic poetry."²⁴

As we know, the different reactions to *Los olvidados* in critical circuits were justified in diverse ways by both the detractors and supporters of the film. In the special number of the foremost Mexican film journal, *Nuevo Cine*, dedicated to Luis Buñuel in November 1961, Octavio Paz, José de la Colina, Carlos Monsiváis and a virtual "Who's Who" of Mexican film and cultural criticism had nothing but praise for *Los olvidados*.²⁵ The problem with some of the criticism in *Nuevo Cine* however, is the resistance to look at *Los olvidados* as Mexican cinema or as a film that addresses issues of Mexican cinema and the Mexican nation. José de la Colina, for example, praised Buñuel's oeuvre in its own context, that is ignoring the themes, the subtleties, and the aesthetic decisions that make *Los olvidados* a "Mexican" movie. Furthermore, De la Colina was apparently unaware of the existence of Buñuel's *El gran Calavera* (1949). He called *Los olvidados* Buñuel's "second film made in Mexico." "The first [was] *Gran Casino*, writes De la Colina, "an absolutely negligible commercial product." After the dismissive treatment of *Gran Casino*, De la Colina proceeded to compare *Los olvidados* to *Las Hurdes*, without ever having seen the latter film. This was typical of contemporary Mexican criticism, for whom Buñuel's commercial (i.e. "Mexican") movies were exceptions to his brand of authorship, and for the most part "negligible" as far as

criticism was concerned, especially in the *Cahiers*-inspired publication *Nuevo Cine*.²⁶

I want to argue, however, that if there is something especially telling about *Los olvidados*, as well as about Buñuel's "forgotten films", or "negligible" movies of the 1950s (*Susana*, 1950; *Una mujer sin amor*, 1951; *El bruto*, 1952; *El río y la muerte*, 1954) is that *Los olvidados* is not just about Mexico, but it is also about Mexican cinema, and it can help us understand the context of its production as much as it can help us understand Buñuel's authorial arch.

Los olvidados to an extent represents the crisis of "revolutionary rhetoric" in Mexican cinema at the juncture of the decline of the "golden age" and it also serves as a revisionist approach to the superficiality and weaknesses of Mexican revolutionary mythology, best exemplified by the work of "the fourth muralist" Emilio Fernández.

Mexico's struggle with modernization, as Néstor García Canclini argues, serves as the background against which to understand the inherent "Mexicanness" of *Los olvidados*. Perhaps not too coincidentally, the release of *Los olvidados* is framed by two more direct questionings of Mexican society and culture with revisionist, provocative, and controversial looks at the portrait of Mexico exemplified by revolutionary history, rhetoric and aesthetic systems. I am referring to the publication of Daniel Cosío Villegas' influential essay "La Crisis de México" ("The Crisis of Mexico", first published in *Cuadernos Americanos* in March of 1947) and of

course, to the publication in 1950 of Octavio Paz's *El laberinto de la soledad*. Cosío Villegas' essay was a historical and philosophical landmark on the "failure" of Mexico's state institutions to implement effectively the revolutionary program of the 1917 constitution. Paz's controversial cultural essay can serve, like *Los olvidados*, as a marker of the crisis in Mexican culture in general in this times of accelerated urban development and the decay of "traditional" moral and revolutionary values. Bot publications characterized the social and historic context of the best "cabaretera" movies, associated with president Miguel Alemán's "sexenio."²⁷

At this point I am in no position to do a critical analysis of the chronological and formative coincidences between these landmarks of Mexican revisionist-cultural production at the turn of the decade of the 1950s. I must however call attention to the most obvious chronological coincidence, since *Los olvidados* and *El laberinto de la soledad* both address some issues related to "the crisis" of Mexico (as Cosío Villegas had predicted) almost as a "psychosis" of Mexican society. Both were also at the time considered controversial and were the target of criticism by cultural and intellectual circles. Time and criticism may have been kinder to *Los olvidados* than to *El laberinto de la soledad* (its psychoanalytic theoretical framework has provoked varied opinions, not always positive). But while Cosío Villegas' essay is more concerned with the "failure"

of the Revolution as a political institution (Mexico is, after all, the country of the "Institutional Revolution") and Buñuel's film has apparently no expressed pretensions of analyzing Mexican culture, Mexican cinema, Mexican art, or the Mexican nation, they both serve as an example of the need to revise some representations of Mexico that are directly addressed, more deeply deconstructed, schematized, historicized, scrutinized, and set up for questioning in Paz's book.

Los olvidados is really concerned, as I have argued above, with provoking a questioning of the cinematic Mexico, -like Buñuel's gesture of reframing Figueroa's camera set-up in *Nazarín* suggests- than with understanding the *abstract* psychoanalytical construction of Mexican national identity. The film is on the contrary attempting to show the *physical* reality (notwithstanding its surreal elements) that may, in this modern and "modernizing" urban setting, in the very real slums of Mexico City, incarnate some of the issues brought up in Paz's book, as well as showing the "cracks" and "fissures" and "weaknesses" of Emilio Fernández's and classical cinema's anti-modernist utopia.²⁸

Buñuel's incorporation into the Mexican cinema industry does not necessarily imply his "conversion" into the system of symbols and representations that classical cinema immortalized and that is best exemplified by *María Candelaria* and *Flor Silvestre* (both 1943). Nevertheless, in the case of *Los olvidados*, Luis Buñuel's resistance to the

themes and visual conventions of classical cinema becomes a sign of the film's correspondence with the transitional juncture of modernization, and its integration into what was specific to Mexican culture in the revisionist historiography of the post-revolution, according to the periodization of García Canclini in *Hybrid Cultures*. Buñuel's arrival in Mexico in the "late golden age", coincides with the juncture of the decline of the romantic aestheticism of Emilio Fernández and the rise of the psychoanalytic pessimism of Octavio Paz. But that juncture, that "crisis of nationalism" of the turn of the decade of the 1950s helps to contextualize and validate the director's inquiry into the idea of Mexico invented, codified, hierarchized, and divulged by the revolution in the plastic arts (as in the work of the muralists), in literature and philosophy (as in José Vasconcelos' *La raza cósmica* and Alfonso Reyes' *Última Tule*) and, of course, in national cinema.

Notes

¹See De La Colina and Pérez Turrent, *Conversations avec Luis Buñuel*, pp. 68-78. Buñuel recounts how even the film's producer, Oscar Dancingers, and members of the crew were worried about the amount of "filth" in the film and that it was "blackening" the image of Mexico. See also, *Mon Dernier Soupir*, Paris: Robert Laffont, 1982, pp. 246-249.

²In *Mon Dernier Soupir* Buñuel tells Jean Claude Carrière about his "profound horror" of "official folklore", exemplified by Mexican *sombreros*: "*J'ai une profonde horreur des chapeaux mexicains. Je veux dire par là que je déteste le folklore officiel et organisé.*" (pp. 283-4 My translation; emphasis in the original).

³Buñuel, Op. cit. (p. 266) My own translation of the original French: "C'est aussi pendant ce tournage que j'ai scandalisé Gabriel Figueroa, lequel m'avait préparé un cadre esthétiquement irréprochable, avec le Popocatepelt (sic) dans le fond et les inévitables nuages blancs. Je retournai simplement la caméra pour cadrer un paysage banal qui me semblait plus vrai, plus proche. Je n'ai jamais aimé la beauté cinématographique préfabriquée, qui fait très souvent oublier ce que le film veut raconter et qui personnellement ne me touche pas." Needles to say, Figueroa remembers the anecdote differently, and on the set of *Los olvidados* in *Conversaciones con Gabriel Figueroa* (Alberto Isaac, Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico: Universidad de Guadalajara, 1993)

⁴Figueroa was blacklisted in the times of HUAC and denied visas to work in the USA. See Alberto Isaac, *Conversaciones con Gabriel Figueroa*, pp. 41-47.

⁵See Francisco Sánchez *Crónica antiolema del cine mexicano*, Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana. 1989.

⁶André Bazin in *L'Observateur* of August 1952. Quoted from André Bazin, *The Cinema of Cruelty*. New York: Seaver Books, 1982. pp. 59-60.

⁷For all about Bazin, see Dudley Andrew, *André Bazin*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990. In his last note on the friendship of Buñuel and Bazin, Andrew notes: "Buñuel, notorious for his cynicism and anger, found in Bazin a kind of depth and honesty of vision which set him aside from all other critics. Even before they had met, Buñuel had "found in Bazin's essays truths about my films I had never thought of." Later Buñuel would describe his projects to Bazin before final scripting..." (pp. 213-214.) In *Mon Dernier Soupir* Buñuel states: "*Je déteste le pédantisme et le jargon. Il m'est arrivé de rire aux larmes en lisant certains articles des Cahiers du Cinéma*" (p. 274) (*I hate pedantism and jargon. Sometimes I weep with laughter in reading certain articles in the Cahiers du Cinéma*" -My translation; emphasis in the original).

⁸In 1958 for example, the film *La Cucaracha* a "Revolutionary epic" by Ismael Rodríguez, starring a literal "who's who" of Mexican classical cinema (Dolores del Río, María Félix, and Emilio Fernández) and, needless to say, photographed by Gabriel Figueroa, was prepackaged and sent as the shoo-in "official" Mexican entry to the Cannes film festival, passed over Buñuel's *Nazarín*, which is at best, like *Los olvidados*, an anti-classical Mexican film. Due in part to the interest of John Huston in the film, *Nazarín* was presented at Cannes (but not as a Mexican film) where it was given the first "International Critics Prize" in 1959. *La Cucaracha*, the official Mexican entry, was conspicuously ignored by the jurors.

⁹See Charles Ramírez Berg, *Cinema of Solitude*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992. In the final chapter of my dissertation on Luis Buñuel in Mexico, of which this paper is a short version, the influence of Buñuel in the following generation of directors, among them Alberto Isaac (*En este pueblo no hay ladrones*, 1964; *Tívoli*, 1974) and Jaime Humberto Hermosillo (*María de mi corazón*, 1982)

¹⁰Néstor García Canlini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1995, p. 117.

¹¹See Carlos Blanco Aguinaga, Julio Rodríguez Puértolas and Iris M. Zavala's *Historia social de la literatura española*, vol. 1. Madrid: Editorial Castalia, 1984, pp. 264-273; 384-399. As much as Buñuel admired De Sica, he was admittedly far more interested in the Spanish picaresque novel, and he was an admirer of *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554) and Francisco de Quevedo's *Historia de la vida del buscón* (1626). Buñuel's admiration for the Spanish picaresque novel was probably a narrative and structural influence in *Los olvidados*. When it came to the influence of Italian neorealism, Buñuel stated that it was, at best negligible. In any case, *Las Hurdes* is much more evidently a strong influence in *Los olvidados* and said film, produced in Spain in 1932, predates neorealism at least 11 years.

¹²It is, however, José Clemente Orozco's murals which are known to have been more influential in Gabriel Figueroa's work. Of "the three muralists" David Alfaro Siqueiros, was known to be openly opposed to government policies, and was imprisoned during the presidency of Adolfo López Mateos (1958-1964).

¹³In the full version of this essay a summary of the history of representation and its origins in Revolutionary art (as in the Mexican muralist tradition) and ideology (as in the educational program of the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* follows here. See, Francisco Sánchez, *Crónica antiolemne del cine mexicano*, Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 1989. See also Ilene V. O'Malley *The Myth of the Revolution*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1986, and Mary Kay Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997.

¹⁴See note number 2.

¹⁵Recall producer Dancigers' concerns with "too much filth": see note number 1.

¹⁶On the idea of "the cultural nation" in Mexico's revolutionary arts and education, see Mary Kay Vaughan, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-46.

¹⁷Alejandro Rozado, *Cine y realidad social en México: una lectura de la obra de Emilio Fernández*. Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara, 1991.

¹⁸Rozado, *Op cit.* p. 60-61. My own translation of the original Spanish.

¹⁹See Galindo's *Campeón sin corona* (1945), *¡Esquina, bajan!* (1948) and *Espaldas Mojadas* (1953-55)

²⁰It may be a propos to point out that the films of Galindo that present their protagonists in a "modernization" dilemma (*Campeón sin corona*, and *Espaldas mojadas*) give "tradition" the form of "Mexico" in opposition to the dangers of "modernization" coming primarily from the United States. In then films of Galindo, thus, the moral predicament takes a manichean-nationalistic shape.

²¹See Carl J. Mora's *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1896-1988*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989. p 57.

²²García Canclini, *Op. cit.* pp. 52-53

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴Bazin, *Op. cit.*

²⁵*Nuevo Cine*: Mexico City. Special double issue on Buñuel. Number 4-5, November 1961 includes some of the best criticism on Buñuel, although generally neglecting the "Mexican" films. Of special interest are articles by José de la Colina ("La agonía del amor romántico", pp. 13-21), Salvador Elizondo ("Luis Buñuel, un visionario", pp. 2-7), Francisco Pina ("El viejo y eterno realismo español", pp. 26-28) and Octavio Paz ("El poeta Buñuel", pp. 46-47).

²⁶Emilio García Riera told me in July of 1996 in Guadalajara that *Nuevo Cine* was somewhat "auteurist" and that the journal was heavily influenced by *Cahiers du Cinéma*. García Riera, like director Matilde Landeta, with whom I spoke in Mexico City in June 1996, agree that of Buñuel's entire Mexican career, the only worthy products were *Los olvidados*, *Nazarín* (1958), and *Él* (1952).

²⁷The full version of this chapter includes a discussion of Cosío Villegas' essay as it contextualizes the "crisis" as one of the seminal analyses that foresees the imminent debacle of Mexican classical cinema as a revolutionary cultural institution in this period. Also, the formative and historical relationships between *Los olvidados* and *El laberinto de la soledad* (surrealism, ethnography, etc.) are closely analyzed. See Daniel Cosío-Villegas, "La crisis de México" in *Cuadernos Americanos*, año vi, vol xxxii, marzo-abril 1947, pp. 29-51. See also Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad*, Madrid: Cátedra, 1993.

²⁸Remember the ubiquitous skeleton of a high-rise building under construction, that fool-proof sign of modernization, that dominates the background of the scenes depicting the deaths of Julián and Jaibo, as well as Jaibo's gang's attack on the blind man, don Carmelo. In a way, it is the building under construction and the city smog in its background that substitute the Popocatepetl and the "inevitable" white clouds in *Los olvidados*, as I have stated above.