

Between Cernuda's Paradise and Buñuel's Hell: Mexico through Spanish Exiles' Eyes

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Introduction

D. H. Lawrence, André Breton, Sergei Eisenstein, Jack Kerouac, Bernard Travençolo: Mexico has had its share of European and North-American groupies who, fascinated by the country and with a backpack full of preconceptions, travelled to the land of Moctezuma hoping to find what they lacked at home.¹ Ironically, though, few visitors will have been less interested in the country than the thousands of Spanish Civil War refugees who arrived there in the late 1930s and early '40s.² They did not go to Mexico because they wanted to—most of them simply did not have a choice, the alternative being persecution or death—and from the very beginning they had only one thing on their mind: getting back to Spain as soon as possible. That so many Spaniards were able to find refuge in Mexico was largely due to the personal efforts of President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40).

1 See Drewey Wayne Gunn, *Escritores norteamericanos y británicos en México* (México: SEP/FCE, 1985), and Carole Naggar and Fred Ritchin, *Mexico through Foreign Eyes 1850–1990* (New York: Norton, 1993).

2 It is unclear exactly how many Spanish Republican refugees went to Mexico. The numbers given by different scholars are generally vague. José Luis Abellán recently wrote: 'no hay estadísticas viables, pero los que hablan de 25.000 o 30.000 individuos se sitúan entre las cifras más probables' ('Deuda con México', *El País Digital*, 19 November 1997, No. 565, online, internet, 19 November 1997). The estimates mentioned by Patricia W. Fagen range from 20,000 to 40,000 (*Transterrados y ciudadanos. Los republicanos españoles en México* [México: FCE, 1975], 40n); Mauricio Fresco talks about 16,000 exiles (*La emigración española* [México: Editores Asociados, 1950], 53); Lois E. Smith cites Mexican statistics according to which, between 1939 and 1949, 22,075 Spaniards entered Mexico, the majority of whom can be presumed to have been exiles (*Mexico and the Spanish Republicans*, University of California Publications in Political Science IV.2 [Berkeley/Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1955], 305). According to Dolores Pla Brugat, a realistic estimate would be 20,000 ('Características del exilio en México en 1939', in *Una inmigración privilegiada. Comerciantes, empresarios y profesionales españoles en México en los siglos XIX y XX*, ed. Clara E. Lida [Madrid: Alianza, 1994], 218–31 [p. 220])

When it was clear that the Republic was going to lose the war, Cárdenas announced that Mexico would accept all the refugees for whose transport and accommodation the Republican authorities would carry the cost.³ Cárdenas' refugee policy was extraordinarily generous, but it met with strong domestic opposition from workers who feared for their jobs and, especially, from conservative groups who claimed that an invasion of Spanish 'reds' would bring great political unrest. The president, however, defended his decision by pointing out how Mexico would benefit from the Spaniards' expertise and preparation—acquired at hardly any cost—and expressing his faith in a quick and smooth integration process of an immigrant group so closely related to Mexico. In addition, both the Spanish and Mexican authorities assured that the Spaniards would respect article 33 of the Mexican constitution, which prohibits any foreigner from interfering in Mexican domestic politics.

The Spaniards' integration, however, was to prove more problematic than Cárdenas had foreseen. Until the outbreak of the Cold War in the late 1940s, it seemed likely that Franco could fall any day. Most Spaniards therefore continued to see their exile in temporary terms. It was said that many never unpacked their suitcases. So even though they lived and worked in Mexico, mentally they never stopped looking eastward. By far the largest part of the exiles' intellectual production was centred on Spain and its problems, written with a Spanish audience in mind, even though that audience was in practice unreachable. Only a small number developed a genuine interest in the host country, and even fewer went as far as writing about their new home.⁴

Apart from this simple lack of interest, however, there were other reasons why the exiles might have hesitated in recording their impressions of their new surroundings. It is one thing for an Englishman, a Frenchman

3 Fagen, *Transterrados y ciudadanos*, 35–36. Cárdenas' motives for receiving the Spaniards displaced by the civil war were in great part, but not solely, humanitarian. Since the Revolution (1910–20) Mexico had prided itself on being a haven for political refugees (Trotsky's example is famous). Aiding the Republican refugees also seemed to follow naturally from Mexico's previous support for the Republic, which in turn had been motivated by its anti-imperialist stance and its strong belief in national self-determination. President Cárdenas and his advisors, T. G. Powell explains, 'realized that Spain gave Mexico a chance to strengthen its own sagging international position. They wanted to persuade the Western powers that the Spanish war was another instance of outside aggression against weak countries that endangered world peace (fascism on the march); then the powers might commit themselves to saving the Republic and at the same time agree to oppose in principle any 'imperialistic' intervention by one country in another's affairs [...]. Despite Washington's assurances [to the contrary], the Mexicans continued to fear U.S. intervention' (T. G. Powell, *Mexico and the Spanish Civil War* [Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1981], 60). These motives outweighed the nationalistic anti-Spanish ideology that had prevailed ever since Mexico's independence.

4 José de la Colina, 'México: visión de los transterrados' (en su literatura)', in *El exilio español en México 1939–1982* (México: FCE, 1982), 411–31 (pp. 411–12).

or a Yankee to write about Mexico, but what about a Spanish intellectual in the 1940s, and a progressive intellectual at that? For the Spaniards, Mexico was both strangely familiar and ungraspably distant. The language, its customs, and the colonial architecture made it seem as if they were back home; but much else was decidedly foreign. This was especially true, of course, of the indigenous presence in Mexican society. To most of the Spaniards, indigenous culture was a mystery. And since they had been raised with, and never really doubted, the idea that imperial Spain had 'civilized' its colonies, they had a hard time accepting the prominence given to Mexico's indigenous heritage in the nationalistic discourse of the revolutionary regime. Nor did they fail to notice the curious contrast between this *indigenismo* of official government rhetoric and the scandalous poverty in which most of the indigenous population actually lived.

Still, the most difficult obstacle to overcome was no doubt the discrepancy between their own, largely unquestioned, vision of Spain's imperial past and its representation in the grand narrative of Mexico's national history. Even the most progressive Spaniards had never thought of Hernán Cortés as anything other than a national hero. The Mexicans, in turn, did not know any better: all Spaniards were bloodsuckers or *gachupines*, the villains of their history books. In short, the shared culture, language and history between guests and hosts, which Cárdenas had hoped would facilitate integration, was in some ways less of a catalyst than a hurdle for Mexican-Spanish relations.

The Spanish refugees themselves had embarked for Mexico with a curiously naïve image of their new home, about which they had no more than a couple of vague notions. As Francie Cate-Arries has shown in her analysis of a journal published during the two weeks at sea, the Spaniards construed Mexico as an 'ideal place', a 'political utopia' that amounted to nothing less than 'the perfect reflection of their own defeated Republic'.⁵ Once they had arrived, however, they soon discovered that in reality both Mexico and their position in it were rife with contradiction. Politically, to be sure, the Spaniards felt a strong affinity with the Mexican revolutionary party, whose goals and ideals—secularization, agrarian reform, social justice—were largely the same as those of the Spanish Republic. As said, though, the revolutionary politicians were *indigenistas* who found it hard to overcome their natural distrust of all Spaniards, regardless of their political orientation. Paradoxically, the Spaniards' real cultural affinity lay with the conservative, traditionally *hispanista* sectors of Mexican society, which during the Civil War had tended to be on Franco's side.

In addition, it is important to keep in mind that, starting in the 1940s, the politics of the Mexican regime underwent a series of important changes.

5 Francie Cate-Arries, 'Conquering Myths: The Construction of "Mexico" in the Spanish Republican Imaginary of Exile', *HR*, LXVIII (2000), 223–42 (p. 227).

Shortly after the end of the Spanish Civil War, Cárdenas was succeeded by Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940–46), who initiated a turn to the right, trading Cárdenas' 'Mexican socialism' for an emphasis on industrial capitalism.⁶ This tendency was continued by Miguel Alemán (1946–52), whose presidency was marked, furthermore, by increasing corruption, labour repression and, as the Cold War broke out, a fervent anti-Communist bent.⁷ Naturally, most of the exiled Spaniards must have disapproved of these developments. Even if they did, however, they were not free to express their opinion in public. Most of them were directly dependent on the Mexican government in terms of their legal status and employment. More importantly, they were guests, bound by the laws of gratitude and politeness: Cárdenas had saved their lives, and their debt to him extended to his successors. The Spaniards' freedom of expression was finally also restricted by the Mexican constitution—which, as said, declared any interference in domestic policy off limits—and the extreme sensitivity of Mexicans to any foreign criticism, especially from Spanish mouths and pens.

In what follows I wish to show how the contradictions of the Spaniards' position in Mexico manifest themselves in four Spanish representations of the host country—three books and a film—published between 1940 and 1952. The books are all by Andalusian poets: José Moreno Villa's *Cornucopia de México* (1940), Juan Rejano's *La esfinge mestiza* (1945) and Luis Cernuda's *Variaciones sobre tema mexicano* (1952). The film is Luis Buñuel's famous *Los olvidados* (1950), winner of the Best Director Prize at Cannes, which catapulted the Aragonese director back on the international stage. As we will see, these four works illustrate how their authors attempt to navigate the complex waters of political exile in a former colony,

6 In an essay from the 1970s, Antonio Sánchez Barbudo describes the situation as follows: 'Había ya pasado la larga revolución [...] [pero] cuáles habían sido los resultados, era para nosotros difícil precisar. [...] La consecuencia mayor de la revolución quizás había sido, por lo que se veía en la capital, y se decía, la entrada a la clase media de una gran parte de los mestizos. Aunque en los puestos más altos de la administración, la política o los negocios, los que dominaban eran casi siempre los más blancos [...]. El espíritu que diríase dominaba [...] era el de un conservatismo moderado, pero no podía saberse porque no había elecciones verdaderas. [...] El gobierno, con mano firme, mantenía al parecer el equilibrio entre las distintas fuerzas. Pero aunque la retórica fuese sobre todo "revolucionaria", los actos iban inclinando cada vez más la balanza hacia el lado conservador, de los grandes negocios. Había, visiblemente, un solo partido, [...] Los más influyentes en ese partido decidían quién había de ser el candidato a la presidencia, y éste salía elegido en las elecciones de un modo inexorable, [...] La cámara de diputados, donde no recuerdo hubiera nunca oposición ninguna, no contaba al parecer para nada o casi nada. No se trataba de una verdadera dictadura, sin embargo. No había terror, no había censura, y se podía decir sin gran peligro lo que se quisiera, con tal de que no se atacara al gobierno, especialmente el presidente' ('Introducción', in *Romance*, repr. [Glashütten im Taunus: Detlev Auvermann, 1974], pages unnumbered).

7 Barry Carr, *Marxism and Communism in Twentieth-century Mexico* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1992), 143–47.

expressing their amazement and admiration, as well as sense of their shock and surprise, as they live, work and travel in a country about which they knew next to nothing before arriving. As they record these impressions, they are forced to negotiate between their own liberal or progressive political convictions, the laws of gratitude, and their—not always conscious—vestiges of Euro- and Hispanocentrism. As Zelaya Kolker, Rehrmann and Daydí-Tolson have shown, the results of these negotiations are inevitably uneven and problematic.⁸

Here I wish to go one step further, arguing specifically that the contradictions running through these four texts are a direct consequence of two different factors: first, the political crisis of the Spanish left after Franco's victory in the Spanish Civil War and, second, the exiles' precarious situation in Mexico. As had been the case for most of the Spanish intelligentsia, for Moreno Villa, Rejano and Cernuda, the 1930s had been a time when being an intellectual was synonymous with political activism or, at least, a prominent public presence and a strong sense of social duty. The defeat of the Spanish Republic in April of 1939, soon followed by the Hitler-Stalin pact and the outbreak of World War II, spurred doubts about this kind of public role. It also delivered a strong blow to the 'cause' that had driven even the most timid of the intellectuals onto the political stage. Exile in Mexico, on the other hand, gave the intellectuals a degree of liberty impossible in a Spain ruled by Franco or a Europe succumbing to war. But at the same time their peculiar position in the host country also curtailed their freedom of action and expression. And it did so in important ways. As intellectuals, they could publicly write and talk about Spain; but, as we have seen, they were barred by law and considerations of courtesy from any real political participation in the society where they worked and lived. Defeat and exile together, then, forced a generation of eminently 'committed' intellectuals into a position of passive on-lookers—voyeurs, really—who, for all practical purposes, had to renounce or repress what many of them, during the preceding years, had come to see as the most important part of their condition as intellectuals, that is, their public role. The contradictions apparent in the exiles' representations of Mexico should be read, precisely, as symptoms of this repression, as I shall now go on to argue.

8 Marielene Zelaya Kolker, *Testimonios americanos de los escritores españoles transterrados de 1939* (Madrid: Ediciones Cultura Hispánica/ICI, 1985), 24–27; Norbert Rehrmann, *Lateinamerika aus spanischer Sicht: Exilliteratur und Panhispanismus zwischen Realität und Fiktion (1936–1975)* (Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert, 1996), 475–89; Santiago Daydí-Tolson, 'Reality and Desire of America in Luis Cernuda', in *Bridging the Atlantic: Toward a Reassessment of Iberian and Latin American Cultural Ties*, ed. Marina Pérez de Mendiola (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996), 155–67.

Three Andalusian Poets

Cornucopia de México, *La esfinge mestiza* and *Variaciones sobre tema mexicano* are unpretentious, benevolent, and somewhat naïve impressions of Mexico, less travel accounts than literary tourist guides. Poet, painter and archivist, José Moreno Villa (1887–1955), a progressive liberal associated with the Generation of 1927, had joined the other members of this group in putting himself at the service of the Republic. Once the war had started, he formed part of *Hora de España*, the journal of writers and poets committed to the Republican cause. Moreno Villa arrived in Mexico in 1938, at the age of fifty-one, as part of the first group of Spanish intellectuals to be housed in La Casa de España, founded with that purpose by Cárdenas. Juan Rejano (1903–76), an autodidact poet, life-long member of the Spanish Communist Party, and secretary of Publications in Málaga when Civil War broke out, quickly profiled himself as a key figure in the Spanish exile community. He was co-founder and director of two important journals—*Romance* (1940–41) and *Ultramar* (1947)—and long-time director of the cultural supplement to the Mexican government's official newspaper *El Nacional*. Luis Cernuda (1902–1963), finally, formed part, like Moreno Villa and Rejano, of the Republic's 'intellectual front', and the war years can be characterized as his 'revolutionary' period. In reality, however, Cernuda was too reclusive and reserved for collective political enterprises and, once in exile, he disassociated himself from both the exile community and politics in general.

Moreno Villa's *Cornucopia de México* is a collection of around fifty short, 750-word prose pieces, half of which are about Mexico City. *La esfinge mestiza* is an almost 300-page collection of essays chronicling the travels of Rejano through Mexico, from Córdoba to Yucatán, with a large section dedicated to the capital as well. Cernuda's *Variaciones sobre tema mexicano* is a collection of around thirty prose poems which record the poet's amazement, gratitude and sense of home as he rediscovers the joys of Hispanic culture after more than ten years of exile in the UK and the United States. Apart from these differences in format and size, however, the three texts are quite similar. The subject matter of all three books is mostly limited to the simple details of daily life: Mexican Spanish, the houses, the scenery, the city, the markets, indigenous culture, forms of courtesy and the national cult of death. The authors rarely venture beyond the surface of things, and it is clear that they do their best to avoid any kind of social or political commentary.⁹ Nevertheless, or maybe because of it, the politically conscious and correct reader of today will find much in these texts to criticize. It could be argued, for instance, that the authors'

9 Rehrmann shows that this is least true for Rejano (*Lateinamerika aus spanischer Sicht*, 475–81). José Moreno Villa, Zelaya Kolker writes, 'a pesar de su afecto por México parece como si no consiguiera calar hondo' (*Testimonios americanos*, 25).

enthusiasm for Mexico is largely based on what they recognize in it as Spanish and, more specifically, Andalusian. Mexico thus becomes, in a way, a screen onto which to project their own nostalgia, which in turn prevents them from considering Mexican culture on its own terms.¹⁰ Secondly, all three authors show signs of a naïve but blatant Hispanocentrism. Both Moreno Villa and Rejano, for instance, comment on the slow pace of Mexican Spanish, only to conclude that four centuries after the Conquest, the colonized apparently still have not managed to master the Conqueror's language completely. Moreno Villa flatly states that the Mexicans are obviously not capable of speaking Spanish 'con la fluencia y naturalidad de un ibérico'.¹¹

Even more problematic is the authors' representation of the indigenous population. Moreno Villa and Rejano read the silence, passivity and shyness they observe in the indigenous Mexicans as signs of repression; but they also tend to interpret these attributes as a form of backwardness. For Moreno Villa, the ubiquitous image of the squatting Indian is proof of the persisting Asian influence in Mexican culture. He associates the image with 'la quietud, [...] la pasividad, [el] ensimismamiento', traits which he directly opposes to the values of European civilization. Instead of the passive resignation of the *indio*, the European 'busca sin cesar la mejora de su situación'. For Moreno Villa the latter attitude is obviously superior, but sadly out of reach of the Mexican Indian, at least for now:

diría que aunque se levante el hombre acurrucado y se decida a trabajar, lo hará sin convencimiento [...] Hasta que el hombre no se entera de que el trabajo es alegría, hasta que no goza con su trabajo, con su creación, no está plenamente civilizado a la europea.¹²

Rejano, in turn, contrasts the merriment of indigenous children with the sadness he perceives in the adults. The loss of this happiness as the *indio* grows up is, for him, 'uno de los dramas más desolados de esta tierra'. For Rejano there is only one solution: 'no dejar que el niño crezca y se desarrolle sin haberlo incorporado a la civilización, sin haber despertado en él estímulos y ambiciones legítimos'.¹³

10 Rehrmann, *Lateinamerika aus spanischer Sicht*, 481–89; Daydí-Tolson, 'Reality and Desire of America', 166.

11 José Moreno Villa, *Cornucopia de México y Nueva cornucopia mexicana* (México: FCE, 1985), 71. Rejano remarks: 'El mexicano ha prescindido de muchas de las asperezas del viejo castellano [...] En resumen: ha amoldado el lenguaje a su psicología. Y esta labor, en el oscuro y soterrado paso de las generaciones, no debe haber sido una labor fácil, porque, cuando se le oye hablar en una lengua aborígen, se nota que su expresión es más holgada, como si recobrara en ella un camino que alguien ha llenado de obstáculos' (Juan Rejano, *La esfinge mestiza. Crónica menor de México*, 2nd ed. [Madrid: Cupsa, 1978], 247).

12 Moreno Villa, *Cornucopia*, 110.

13 Rejano, *La esfinge mestiza*, 260–61.

Paradoxically, Rejano combines this Enlightenment belief in civilization as progress with a reading of modern Mexico in a key of cultural pessimism. At several moments in his narrative he seems to stumble upon indications that Mexican culture is in decline, a phenomenon which he unwittingly associates with a certain loss of the 'primitive'.¹⁴ For Rejano this decline is especially noticeable in the increasing commercialization of Mexican society, the origin of which he traces to the cultural influence of the United States. Describing the crowd of believers that gather in celebration of the Día de Guadalupe, for instance, he is bothered by the sight of

el mundillo avariento, mercantil, que rodea esta feligresía harapienta y suplicante: los traficantes de ofrendas y reliquias, los charlatanes del pajarito que hace prodigios de adivinación [...] Un enjambre de mercachifles oportunistas que colaboran con su incesante trasiego a mantener esta densa atmósfera de magia y milagrería.¹⁵

Similarly, he is concerned about the desecration of the capital's colonial palaces: 'Donde habitó la historia', he comments on the Palacio de Iturbide, 'ahora la mercancía [...] Aquí una tienda de tejidos, allá otra de bisutería, más allá una sastrería o un bazar de calzado [...] Si despertara de su sueño eterno algún virrey, saldría haciéndose cruces, calle de Madero abajo.'¹⁶ A passage on the absence in Mexico of 'true', European-style cafes, which at first sight seems innocent enough, betrays nevertheless a curious reading of the Spaniards' arrival and impact on Mexico as a kind of restoration of Spanish values—a welcome and necessary counterweight to the pernicious influence of the United States. At one point in time, Rejano recounts, Mexican cafes used to be like those in Spain. But then

la influencia del Norte, tan cercano [...] torció su espíritu y acabó desfigurando su propio ser. Lo que los refugiados encontraron en México, ya no eran cafés. Por lo menos, cafés como ellos lo conciben. Por eso se dedicaron, desde el primer momento, a rehacerlos, que era tanto como rehacer su hogar.¹⁷

Rejano, then, a card-carrying Communist, seems to hesitate between a Eurocentric, Enlightenment vision of progress as civilization, and a Romantic, almost Spenglerian form of cultural pessimism. The latter leads

14 As an editorialist for *Romance*, Rejano wrote in 1940 that the peoples of Spanish America 'tienen la suerte [...] de que son aún PUEBLOS, es decir, comunidad de hombres en los que la vida mecánica y fácil no ha secado las más puras fuentes de la inspiración, del poder y la creación [...] Un pueblo tiene ante sí espléndido porvenir cuando aún conserva un alma pura [...] Estos pueblos [son] capaces de recordar a la humanidad, cuál es el verdadero papel del hombre en el mundo' ('Sobre la unidad espiritual de los pueblos de América', editorial, *Romance*, I, No. 4 [1940], 7).

15 *La esfinge mestiza*, 110.

16 *Ibid.*, 75.

17 *Ibid.*, 71–72

him to an exoticizing, populist idealization of both the Mexican 'primitives' and colonial times. As we will see in a moment when discussing Buñuel's *Los olvidados*, this hesitation between progressive optimism and a form of pessimistic, almost cynical fatalism—a tension, in other words, between action and resignation—is symptomatic of the exiles' ideological crisis.

This hesitation is much less obvious in Cernuda, who of all three poets is the one who seems most interested in the *indios*. Instead of denouncing their poverty and expressing the hope that Mexico's indigenous peoples might soon be 'incorporated' into civilization, Cernuda associates their destitution with a 'liveliness' and 'spirituality' that modern society has sadly lost. He reads the Mexicans' poverty as a conscious and dignified existential decision contrasting favourably with the base materialism of Anglo-Saxon culture:

Acaso el precio de estar vivo sea esa pobreza y duelo que veías en torno; acaso la vida exija, para estar viva, ese abandono ruin de miseria y tristeza [...]

¿Riqueza a costa del espíritu? ¿Espíritu a costa de la miseria? Ambos, espíritu y riqueza, parece imposible reunirlos. Mas no eres tú, ni acaso nadie, quien ahí pueda decidir. Piensa sólo, si lo que te importa es el espíritu, adónde debes inclinar tu simpatía [...] Oh gente mía, mía con toda su pobreza y su desolación, tan viva, tan entrañablemente viva.¹⁸

Zelaya Kolker rightly wonders if Cernuda's 'arrebatos de entusiasmo ante lo mexicano no reflejan también falta de compenetración': 'Mientras los indios le sigan pareciendo misteriosos y los giros del lenguaje mexicano le lleguen con nitidez clásica, quien así los percibe no podrá luchar, sumergirse y acabar de aprehender la realidad que le rodea, no podrá relacionarse con esa gente, ya en simpatía o en inquina, pero desde dentro.'¹⁹

And still, there is more to these texts than these relatively simple criticisms would seem to indicate. For one, all three writers combine their cultural and political naïveté with a remarkable degree of self-consciousness. José Moreno Villa closes his text with a 'diálogo conmigo mismo' in which he admits that his 'little book' is almost free of criticism of any kind.²⁰ But, he confesses, that uncritical attitude was the result of a conscious decision:

—Supongo que has dicho todo lo que te proponías. ¿No te guardas algo?

18 Luis Cernuda, 'Variaciones sobre tema mexicano', in *Poesía completa. Obra completa*, ed. Derek Harris and Luis Maristany, 3 vols (Madrid: Siruela, 1993), I, 623–58 (p. 629).

19 *Testimonios americanos*, 27.

20 Moreno Villa, *Cornucopia*, 61, 223–25.

—¿Cómo voy a decirte que no? [...] Como verás, en mi libro no haya censuras. [...]

—¿Pero no ves que un libro sin crítica puede ser demasiado blando? Si evitas el hueso puedes parecer un cobarde.

—No se trata de valentía ni de cobardía, sino de prudencia.²¹

Juan Rejano invokes a similar idea of prudence in his equally honest prologue to *La esfinge mestiza*. The author admits that his *crónica menor* leaves out many important things, but that these absences are not accidental: ‘Se omite, deliberadamente, cuanto atañe a los problemas y a los hombres que juegan dramáticamente en torno a ellos. Ni política, ni cuestiones sociales, ni conflictos económicos, ni disputa de razas.’²² His justification for these omissions is telling of the Spaniards’ precarious position in Mexico:

Después de pensarlo mucho, comprendí que el México de las grandes y apasionadas luchas estaba todavía demasiado fresco en mi retina para lograr reflejarlo sin temor a grandes yerros. ¡Y hay además en México tantas y tan complejas contradicciones! Por otra parte, mi condición de español acogido a la hospitalidad de este país me ponía en un trance comprometido. Si mi palabra caía en el elogio, hubiese sonado en algunos oídos a adulación. Si, por el contrario, daba en rigor, otros lo habrían tomado, acaso, a ingratitud. No, el refugiado político sigue siendo todavía un ciudadano de dos patrias: lo que en una se dejó perdido, en otra lo halló condicionado a diversos y respetables sentimientos.²³

Cernuda ends his *Variaciones* with a dialogic afterword similar to Moreno Villa’s. In one of his typical conversations with himself, Cernuda, too, shows himself to be quite conscious of his own ideological limits: ‘Este país’, he reflects, ‘creció de otro que fue duramente devastado. ¿Recuerdas quiénes lo devastaron?’ And he answers:

—[...] Mi gente.

—Entonces, lo que te acerca hacia él acaso no sea sino una forma sutil retrospectiva de orgullo nacional [...] ¿Qué virtud puede tener tu tierra, tan caída?

—La de haber puesto el espíritu antes que nada. [...]

—Bueno. Pero esta tierra ya no es una con la tuya, ni esta gente. ¿No sientes que para ellos sólo puedes ser un extraño? ¿Más que un extraño: uno de un país al que acaso todavía miran con disgusto?

—Todo eso es cierto. Pero, ¿importa? [...]

21 Moreno Villa, *Cornucopia*, 223.

22 Rejano, *La esfinge mestiza*, 21.

23 *Ibid.*

—¿No piensas que [tu] simpatía acaso sea disfraz de un
 mordimiento atávico, compensación inefectiva de deudas pasadas?
 —Quizá.²⁴

The authors' self-consciousness, then, covers the two most important aspects of their texts and situation. In the first place, they are quite aware of what their texts leave out. In a sense, as Bernard Sicot has argued, they confess to a degree of self-censorship, which they justify as a form of 'prudence' inevitably linked to their general condition of political exiles.²⁵ Secondly, and more specifically, they are very conscious of their delicate position, as representatives of a former colonizer, in a former colony. They wish to express their gratitude, affinity, and even love for Mexico; but at the same time they know that, given Spain's imperial past, that love will probably remain one-sided.²⁶

Clearly, the exiles' representation of Mexico is anything but gratuitous. The conflicts and contradictions of their situation, which the authors try to account for paratextually in prologues or epilogues, lead to a form of repression that cannot help but surface in the main body of their texts as well. In Cernuda's *Variaciones*, it blends in with, and reinforces, the sense of repressed (homosexual) desire that runs through all of his poetry.²⁷ '¿Crees', he rhetorically wonders in the epilogue, 'que [los mexicanos] van a comprender, y menos todavía aceptar, las razones de tu amor aun cuando vayan en su propio sentido?'²⁸ In Moreno Villa's *Cornucopia*, the repression

24 Cernuda, 'Variaciones', 657–58.

25 Bernard Sicot, 'Moreno Villa, Rejano, Giner de los Ríos et Cernuda: autocensure dans l'exil au Mexique', unpublished paper, read at 'Littérature et Censure dans les Pays de Langues Romanes', colloquium held at the Université de Rennes II, 13–14 March 1998.

26 The idea of the interior dialogue leads us to another curious aspect of these texts, one closely connected to the exilic condition. For whom were these three books written? As Francisco Ayala already argued in his 1949 essay 'Para quién escribimos nosotros', this is perhaps the most crucial dilemma of the exiled writer. Cut off from his 'natural' audience at home, the writer has to decide either to write for that audience in the knowledge that he will not reach it, or to write for a new audience in the host country—which implies, of course, a change of tone, topic and sometimes even language. Ayala argued that, ten years after the war, it was about time that the exiled Spaniards let go of the eternal topic of 'España: su ser y destino'. Instead, he urged his fellow writers to develop their thinking 'a partir de las concretas condiciones del medio ambiente en que ahora trabaja[n]' ('Para quién escribimos nosotros', *Cuadernos Americanos*, XLIII, No. 1 [1949], 36–58 [pp. 43–44]). One could say, of course, that this is precisely what Moreno Villa, Rejano and Cernuda did. When one reads closely, however, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that, even though their texts are about Mexico, they cannot have been written for Mexicans. Rejano, for instance, presents himself to his readers as a tourist guide, whose knowledge of and familiarity with Mexico far exceed those of his implicit readership.

27 Zelaya Kolker, *Testimonios americanos*, 27.

28 Cernuda, 'Variaciones', 658. The repression is also exemplified in the fact that the first edition of *Variaciones* leaves out one poem from the original manuscript. In this text, entitled 'Dúo', the love for the country is concretized in the poet's making love to a young Mexican 'en el umbral de la adolescencia' (Cernuda, *Poesía completa. Obra completa*, ed.

is manifested in the author's declared adoption of an un-Hispanic, 'English' attitude: 'mi propósito [...] fue el hacer un libro de viajes nada hispánico, es decir, sin acritudes ni violencia. Prefiero acercarme al tono del viajero inglés que observa y apunta limpiamente, sin mirar lo que hay detrás de las bambalinas.'²⁹

As we have seen, these conflicts and contradictions arise in the context of defeat and exile and at the intersection of politics and nationalism: they are the consequence both of a more general ideological crisis and of the specific relationship between Spaniards and Mexicans. It is worth stressing this point. As Cate-Arries has rightly argued, for the Spaniards Mexico became a means of redefining their own Spanishness;³⁰ but it also forced them to redefine what it meant to be an intellectual. If, during the Republic, there seemed to be a perfect identity between being Spanish, being Republican, and an active form of political commitment, the Spaniards' displacement to Mexico threw this triad out of joint. To be a Spaniard in Mexico meant, first, being condemned to a form of political paralysis and, second, being automatically suspect of imperialist tendencies. In Spain, the reactionary aspects of the Spaniards' 'natural' nationalism had gone unnoticed, blending in perfectly with the general consensus. No one blinked when a Republican intellectual such as Paulino Masip would lament, in a nationalistic war column written for *La Vanguardia*, 'el hundimiento de la Armada Invencible', or remember the pride he felt as a child when reading about 'las grandes glorias nacionales', as a strategy to delegitimize centuries of right-wing rule.³¹ Against the Mexican backdrop of *indigenista* anti-imperialism, however, this kind of national pride suddenly stood out starkly as an arrogant form of imperial nostalgia.³²

Harris and Maristany, I, 9, 643, 838). See also Sicot, 'Moreno Villa, Rejano', 6.

29 *Cornucopia*, 223. This repression is also manifested in Moreno Villa's rejection of all politics—'la política menuda no me interesa y la que llaman alta política me apesta por lo manoseada y falsa' (*ibid.*, 224)—and in the fact that, in the second edition of *Cornucopia*, a number of the more negative pieces and passages from the first edition were eliminated (Sicot, 'Moreno Villa, Rejano', 9).

30 Cate-Arries, 'Conquering Myths', 225.

31 Paulino Masip, 'No ganarán', *La Vanguardia* (Barcelona), 11 February 1937, p. 1; Paulino Masip, 'La recuperación española', *La Vanguardia* (Barcelona), 6 April 1937, p. 1.

32 It is again Sánchez Barbudo who, forty years afterwards, admits this with admirable honesty. Speaking of the group of young Spanish intellectuals who in 1940 founded the journal *Romance*, he writes that they had '[una] forma [...] franca y abierta, de sentirnos españoles y manifestarnos como tales [...] Nuestro españolismo, nada convencional, pero del que estábamos [...] muy seguros y orgullosos, era un oscuro sentimiento que queríamos imponer. [...] Aunque nada "imperial", claro es, era "arrogante"' ('Introduction'). For the presence of imperial nostalgia in Cernuda's exile poetry, see Sebastiaan Faber, "'El norte nos devora": la construcción de un espacio hispánico en el exilio anglosajón de Luis Cernuda', *Hispania* (USA), LXXXIII (2000), 733–44 (pp. 736–40).

To the Spaniards, of course, this was all very confusing, and nowhere is this clearer than in *La esfinge mestiza*. Juan Rejano, when describing his visit to the former residence of Hernán Cortés, does not fail to mention Diego Rivera's murals depicting the Conquest. Politically, Rivera is Rejano's Mexican mirror image: a member of the Communist Party who puts his art at the service of politics. In Rejano's description, however, the author's Spanish pride unwittingly overshadows this political solidarity, forcing him into an improbable and indirect disapproval of Rivera's art *because* of its political motivation. 'Las tales pinturas', he writes,

representan escenas de la conquista, según las ha interpretado el autor a su capricho, que por cierto no deja en un muy buen lugar a los españoles. No es cosa de entrar en discusión sobre la naturaleza de estas obras, entre otras razones porque creo que el móvil que les dio origen, participó más de lo político que de lo artístico.³³

At other places in the book, however, Rejano manifests his frustration with the impossibility of political action in the face of social injustice. In one of the sections dealing with life in Mexico City, he describes a nocturnal stroll through the cold streets of the capital, during which he keeps running into homeless children:

Uno, andando despacio, aguantando el frío de la noche, ve cómo en el escalón de una casa, dos niños casi desnudos—seis, siete años apenas, cada uno—intentan dormir sobre la piedra, sin abrigo alguno. Una pena profunda, una profunda congoja se agarra a nuestro pecho [...]

¿Cómo es posible que se pueda dar este tristísimo, desconsolador, espectáculo? Ya lo sé: no es sólo México el que lo sufre. Otras muchas ciudades del mundo tienen también niños abandonados en sus calles, soportando el frío y la miseria.³⁴

This in turn leads him to a somewhat melodramatic, but no less telling, lamentation about his situation, which he directly associates with a form of physical paralysis:

33 Rejano, *La esfinge mestiza*, 205. Rejano's vacillation between nationalism and politics is constant, especially where Spain's imperial past is concerned. Elsewhere in the book, he gives a very critical interpretation of the Spanish *conquistadores*: 'trajeron consigo los cortejos de las aves de rapiña: los aventureros ambiciosos, los alcabaleros, los venenosos golillas, la curia enredadora, los frailes fanáticos. [...] Llegó un momento en que la sangre del indio tenía el mismo valor que la de un animal. Llegó otro en que al animal y al indio se les marcaba con el mismo hierro' (*La esfinge mestiza*, 217; Rehrmann, *Lateinamerika aus spanischen Sicht*, 479). As editorialist for the journal *Romance*, he distanced the Republican exiles from imperial Spain, stating that the exiles 'odian tanto, y por las mismas razones que los americanos, a esa España negra y nefasta, cruel, contra la que han luchado de 1936 a 1939 como hace más de un siglo lucharon los americanos'; see 'Más emigrados españoles a América', editorial, *Romance*, I, No. 12 (1940), 7.

34 Rejano, *La esfinge mestiza*, 124–25.

Pero yo no trato de hacer demagogia. No trato de poner el grito en el cielo. [...] No voy a dirigirme a esos afortunados señores que, a la misma hora, en un salón de recreo, gastan lo que cualquiera de esos niños necesitaría para vivir feliz un año. ¿Para qué predicar en desierto, cuando las prédicas están desacreditadas y en el desierto no hay un solo oasis? Yo me dirijo a los que pueden mitigar, al menos en parte, este dolor. Si esos niños han abandonado sus hogares, ¿por qué no hacerles volver a ellos? Si son huérfanos, ¿por qué no depararles un asilo? [...] La congoja se hace [...] más viva, más punzante. [...] Y uno siente miedo, un miedo cobarde, y nota que la lengua se le paraliza, y no se atreve a gritar, sí, a gritar, a clamar contra el cielo y la tierra, contra los que duermen y los que están despiertos. [...] Y al fin uno se aleja, con un áspero gusto a dinamita y sangre en la boca, con un rencor profundo en el corazón ...³⁵

As we will see in what follows, it is the same tension between action and resignation—conflicting feelings of pity, indignation and powerlessness—which runs through Buñuel's *Los olvidados* (1950). But what in Rejano is not more than a peek into the social injustice of Mexican society in the 1940s, in the hands of Buñuel becomes a shocking ninety-minute display of human cruelty and despair.

Buñuel and *Los olvidados*

Indeed, at first sight there could be no greater contrast between the benevolent impressions of these three Andalusian poets and Buñuel's harsh portrayal of the Mexican poor. The movie, which records a couple of days in the lives of a group of juvenile delinquents in Mexico City, came as a great shock to the cultural *élite* of the country, some of whose members even called for the director's expulsion. Buñuel—who had moved to Mexico only four years earlier, when his suspected Communist sympathies made it impossible for him to work in the United States—recalls that the film 'suscitó en el acto violentas reacciones'.³⁶ It was initially shown for a mere four days, and only after being awarded the Prize for Best Director at the Cannes film festival in France, and receiving the backing of Octavio Paz, was the film reissued in Mexico.³⁷

In reality, however, *Los olvidados* is not that different from the three texts commented on above. True, the story is shocking and at times repulsive; but there is little or no indication that Buñuel intended specifically to criticize the situation in Mexico. On the contrary, he seems to have done his best to present the argument in a more universal framework. The first scenes of the film, for instance, do not show Mexico

³⁵ Rejano, *La esfinge mestiza*, 125.

³⁶ Luis Buñuel, *Mi último suspiro* (Barcelona: Plaza y Janés, 1996), 235.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 237.

City, but the skylines of New York, Paris and London. The images are accompanied by a narrator's voice:

Las grandes ciudades modernas, Nueva York, París, Londres, esconden tras sus magníficos edificios, hogares de miseria que albergan niños malnutridos, sin higiene, sin escuela, semillero de futuros delincuentes. La sociedad trata de corregir este mal pero el éxito de sus esfuerzos es muy limitado. Sólo en un futuro próximo podrán ser reivindicados los derechos del niño y del adolescente para que sean útiles a la sociedad. México, la gran ciudad moderna, no es la excepción a esta regla universal, por eso esta película, basada en hechos de la vida real, no es optimista y deja la solución del problema a las fuerzas progresistas de la sociedad.³⁸

It is worth recalling the unfortunate adventures of Pedro and *El Jaibo*, two delinquent teenagers in Mexico City. The film starts at the moment when Jaibo, who has just escaped from *la Correccional*, hooks back up with his old gang, to which Pedro also belongs. When Jaibo looks up Julián, whom he suspects of having squealed on him, and decides to 'teach him a lesson', he is overcome by wild rage and kills the boy. For Pedro, who witnesses the murder, this moment signals the beginning of a slow downfall. It is the first in a series of events which, with the help of Jaibo and fate—or bad luck—, will ultimately lead to his death. All his attempts to resist or redeem himself are in vain. He seeks the love of his young, single mother; but she rejects him because he was conceived during a rape which occurred when she was fourteen. He finds a job with a blacksmith, but when his friend Jaibo robs a knife, it is Pedro who is accused of the crime and fired. Even the benevolent Mexican state is unable to save him. When his mother takes him to the police, he is sent to a modern 'Escuela Granja', whose director is an example of progressive liberalism. Nevertheless, when this director puts Pedro to the test, asking him to run an errand and return all of the change to him, it is again Fate which stands between Pedro and his salvation. Pedro runs into Jaibo, who steals the money from him. This means Pedro cannot go back to the Granja and face the director; it also means he has lost his last opportunity of redemption. Not much later, Pedro and Jaibo get into a fight in which the latter kills his younger friend. Finally, however, the police track Jaibo down, chase him, and kill him with a shot in the back. The image of a dying Jaibo is superimposed with the scene of a rabid dog approaching the camera.

Interspersed in the main plot are a series of other elements worth mentioning. One of these is the story of 'Ojitos', an indigenous boy from the countryside. Abandoned by his father at a market, Ojitos ends up working for a blind musician, who makes a living performing songs from the time of

38 Luis Buñuel, *Los olvidados* (Mexico: Era, 1973), 18–19.

Porfirio Díaz. The blind man's nostalgia for those pre-revolutionary years of social 'order' is also apparent from his profoundly reactionary ideas—if it were up to him, he says, he would simply exterminate young good-for-nothings like Pedro and Jaibo. Another memorable character is Marta, the hard-working but still young and beautiful mother of Pedro, who lets herself be seduced by Jaibo. Then there is Pedro's surrealist dream, in which his suddenly loving mother offers him a big piece of bloody meat, which Jaibo, who unexpectedly appears from under the bed, pulls out of his hands. And then there is the girl named Meche, the sister of one of Pedro's friends, who develops a true liking for Ojitos but who is constantly forced to withstand the lascivious attacks from men of all ages. It is also Meche who, at the end of the film, helps her old father load Pedro's dead body on to a mule. In one of the most horrifying endings of Western movie history, they proceed to dump it on a trash heap.

Why did the Mexicans find this movie so shocking? Or rather, why did they interpret it as a direct offence to Mexico? The question is less obvious than it seems. To be sure, the story of Pedro and Jaibo has a clear tragic dimension, and Buñuel is ruthless in exposing the cruelty of both humanity and Fate. Still, it is almost impossible to say what exactly would be the film's *critical* charge. It would be false to say, for instance, that Buñuel directly criticizes the Mexican state. On the contrary, all the state's representatives, from the policemen to the director of the Escuela Granja, appear as well-meaning, intelligent and, above all, honest people. These, of course, are remarkable characteristics considering the time period in which the movie was shot and set—the presidency of Miguel Alemán (1946–52), during which government corruption became a serious problem in Mexican politics.³⁹ Nor can one say that Buñuel simply denounces the immorality of the poor whose lives he portrays. Even the most depraved among them, such as Jaibo and the blind man, never cease to be victims rather than criminals. Correspondingly, the audience always feels a degree of sympathy or compassion for them. As André Bazin wrote in 1951, one of the things that makes the film so remarkable is that 'no se refiere jamás a las categorías morales' and that, ultimately, the characters' culpability 'no es sino contingente'.⁴⁰

Wherein, then, lies the shock value of *Los olvidados*? Perhaps it lies partly in the fact that, when the film came out, it broke with two well-established discursive patterns. In the first place, *Los olvidados* diverges from the benevolent, self-censored impressions of Mexico that other Spanish exiles had been publishing, three of which we have analysed above. If Moreno Villa and Cernuda tried to turn a blind eye to the social problems of their host country, Buñuel, transgressive as always, breaks with the

39 See Stephen R. Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s: Modernity, Politics, and Corruption* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1999).

40 André Bazin, 'André Bazin', in Buñuel, *Los olvidados*, 12.

exile's etiquette, refusing to ignore what he sees all around him. As he declared in 1951 to *Cahiers du Cinéma*: 'He observado cosas que me han dejado atónito y he querido transponerlas a la pantalla.'⁴¹

But *Los olvidados* did not only ignore the foreigner's etiquette. As Víctor Fuentes points out, it also broke with '[la] visión ideologizada, triunfalista, del México de la revolución institucionalizada' that Mexican filmmakers had been constructing in the course of the 1940s.⁴² Compared to these cosmetic film versions of Mexico, Buñuel's crude form of realism—based on actual case histories—was paradoxically perceived by the audience as a falsification of Mexican reality. 'Entre los numerosos insultos que recibiría después del estreno', the director tells in his memoirs,

Ignacio Palacios escribió [...] que era inadmisibile que yo hubiera puesto tres camas de bronce en una de las barracas de madera. Pero era cierto. Yo había visto esas camas de bronce en una barraca de madera. Algunas parejas se privaban de todo para comprarlas después de casarse.⁴³

And yet, apart from the shock value of this double break with established discourse on Mexico, it is unclear what the critical, social or political intention of this film really is. Buñuel himself characterized it as a 'film de lucha social' but not an 'obra de tesis'.⁴⁴ In reality, the film is rife with contradictions. The universalizing framework of the narrator's introduction, which identifies the problem of the young urban poor as an issue that concerns the whole of the Western world, stands in contrast with the large quantity of specifically Mexican cultural elements that seem to indicate a much more local problematic. Secondly, if Buñuel wants to show how the criminal behaviour of these adolescents is caused by a lack of love and attention—or, as the narrator states, by malnutrition and a lack of education and hygiene—then why does he suggest that Jaibo's immoral conduct is also rooted in congenital flaws (there are allusions to his suffering from epilepsy) and, more important, in obscure psychological drives? And, finally, do not the tragic deaths of Pedro and Jaibo make the optimism of the narrator's introduction, with its assurance that 'en un futuro próximo podrán ser reivindicados los derechos del niño y del adolescente para que sean útiles a la sociedad', look incongruously naive?

Perhaps the best way to understand this film, therefore, is to view it as a battlefield between at least two contradictory discourses. First, there is the utopian, redemptive and progressive discourse of the narrator's

41 Buñuel, *Los olvidados*, 7.

42 Víctor Fuentes, 'Lo hispano-mexicano en el cine de Buñuel', in *Cincuenta años de exilio español en Puerto Rico y el Caribe 1939–1989: Memorias del Congreso Conmemorativo celebrado en San Juan de Puerto Rico* (A Coruña: Edición do Castro, 1991), 273–83 (p. 275).

43 Buñuel, *Mi último suspiro*, 234.

44 Buñuel, *Los olvidados*, 7.

introduction. The same optimistic worldview is embodied by the representatives of the Mexican state, especially the director of the Escuela Granja. According to this view, human beings are naturally good and moral, and all social problems are rooted in flaws that can be remedied. Ultimately, this standpoint is summarized in the phrase with which the director explains Pedro's violent behaviour at the Granja, where the boy, in a fit of rage, kills a number of chickens. 'Con el estómago lleno', the director states, 'todos somos mejores'.⁴⁵ To be sure, the director does not count out the deeper psychological motives of human behaviour, as is demonstrated by his 'explanation' of Pedro's violence: 'querías matarnos a nosotros. Pero como no te atrevías, lo pagaron las gallinas'.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, he strongly believes in the power of therapy and education. In other words, he has not yet lost faith in the power of reason; and in that sense he can be related to the utopian worldview shared by most of the leaders and supporters of Spain's Second Republic—a worldview which, as said, was thrown into crisis by the Republic's defeat, the Hitler-Stalin pact, the outbreak of World War II and the Republicans' exile.

As Cros and Dongan point out, however, the plot itself puts this utopian worldview into question.⁴⁷ With all of his good intentions, the director of the Escuela Granja is unable to save Pedro. Nor does the story give any glimpse of the 'near future' mentioned by the narrator in which these 'forgotten' boys are supposed to find redemption. Contrasting with the narrator's optimism, then, the film is run through by a much more pessimistic vein, which presents the social problem at hand in determinist and almost pathological terms. Octavio Paz is right when he emphasizes the film's tragic dimension:

El azar que rige la acción de los héroes se presenta como una necesidad absoluta y que, sin embargo, pudiera no haber ocurrido. (¿Por qué no llamarlo entonces con su verdadero nombre, como en la tragedia: destino?) La vieja fatalidad vuelve a funcionar, sólo que despojada de sus atributos sobrenaturales: ahora nos enfrentamos con una fatalidad social y psicológica.⁴⁸

One could take this reasoning one step further, and argue that *Los olvidados* is less indebted to the tradition of tragedy than to that of Zola's naturalism. Its characters' fate, after all, seems completely determined by the famous triad of *milieu*, *moment* and *race*—that is, their environment, historical moment and genetic make-up. Needless to say, this naturalistic bent of the film is no less problematic than the utopian one it belies. True

⁴⁵ Buñuel, *Los olvidados*, 105.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁴⁷ Edmond Cros and Christine Dongan, 'Formation discursive et déconstruction idéologique dans *Los olvidados*', *Co-Textes*, XII (1987), 121–32 (pp. 121–23, 131–32).

⁴⁸ Octavio Paz, 'Octavio Paz', in Buñuel, *Los olvidados*, 9.

to its nineteenth-century origins, naturalism has a notorious tendency to explain social problems—and the classes affected by them—in purely medical terms, reducing individual subjects to passive victims of fate. In addition, naturalism presupposes a radical distinction between the observer, whose clinical gaze is presumed to be scientific and therefore 'sane', and the observed. The latter are seen as nothing but will-less playthings of social, historic and genetic forces which lie out of their control.

This naturalist dimension leads us back to Spain's and Latin America's history of ideas. As, among others, Aronna has shown, the nineteenth-century tendency to explain social problems in medical terms notoriously influenced Peninsular and Latin-American intellectuals who, around the turn of the century, were faced with the challenge of accounting for the relative 'backwardness' of their nations in relation to the booming North. Many of them concluded that their nations must be, in some way, 'sick'.⁴⁹ Indeed, in the Hispanic world the phenomenon of the 'intellectual doctor' giving a 'diagnosis' of his own national community lasted well into the twentieth century, albeit in increasingly sophisticated forms. In Mexico, this tendency is represented by the philosopher, Samuel Ramos, whose *Perfil del hombre y la cultura en México* (1934) uses Alfred Adler's school of psychoanalysis to argue that the uncivilized behaviour of the Mexican lower classes—the so-called *pelados*—is rooted in a collective inferiority complex.

As is well known, Ramos' work was one of the main inspirations of Octavio Paz's *El laberinto de la soledad*. Both Paz and Ramos try to remedy what they perceive as a national identity crisis through a (psycho)analysis of Mexico's 'soul'. And both argue that this soul is most precisely manifested in the daily language and behaviour of the lower classes. This does not prevent them, however, from describing those classes as controlled by pathologically violent drives. Ramos, for instance, writes:

El 'pelado' pertenece a una fauna social de categoría ínfima y representa el deshecho humano de la gran ciudad. [...] Es un ser de naturaleza explosiva cuyo trato es peligroso, porque estalla al roce más leve. Sus explosiones son verbales, y tienen como tema la afirmación de sí mismo en un lenguaje grosero y agresivo. [...] Es un animal que se entrega a pantomimas de ferocidad para asustar a los demás [...] El 'pelado' busca la riña como un excitante para elevar el tono de su 'yo' deprimido.⁵⁰

In *El laberinto de la soledad*, to be sure, Paz distances himself from Ramos. In the end, however, as José E. Limón has shown, his intellectual attitude

49 See Michael Aronna, *'Pueblos enfermos': The Discourse of Illness in the Turn-of-the-Century Spanish and Latin American Essay* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1999).

50 Samuel Ramos, *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México* (México: UNAM, 1963), 72–74.

is not much different.⁵¹ The same can be said for the psychoanalytical language in which Paz formulates his ‘diagnosis’. He writes, for example, that the Mexican *pachucos* in the United States have an ‘actitud sádica’ related to ‘un deseo de autohumillación’; or that the Mexican people are ‘ensimismados’, tend to suffer from ‘estados deprimidos o frenéticos’, and that their reserved posture can break into ‘violencia inesperada’.⁵²

The first edition of *El laberinto de la soledad* appeared in 1950, the same year that Buñuel released *Los olvidados*. But even though there are important parallels between the two works, in the end they are radically different. What makes *Los olvidados* stand out is the fact that it is doubly self-critical. It first seems to share the naive revolutionary optimism of the Mexican state, which it almost immediately undercuts by suggesting a more pessimistic, determinist reading of the plot and the problems it is meant to expose. Next, however, the camera’s clinical, naturalism-inspired gaze into the netherworld of Mexico-City juvenile delinquency is in turn exposed and problematized. The film ends up revealing the ‘scientific’, detached observer for what he is: a simple voyeur. Voyeurism, one of Buñuel’s favourite motives, is in fact omnipresent in *Los olvidados*. Throughout the film, the camera both captures and embodies a long series of libidinous masculine glances hungry for exposed legs, feet and cleavage. In more general terms, the film offers the spectator something of a furtive peek into the hidden, marginal world of ‘the forgotten’. But Buñuel would not be Buñuel if he would let us peep unpunished. In one of the scenes at the Escuela Granja, Pedro looks up, stares directly into the camera and throws a rotten egg at it, which shatters against the lens. With this splendid gesture, the boy not only affirms that, in spite of his apparently fate-ruled life, he does have some agency left, albeit negative; but he also expresses his contempt for those of us who are watching him, with pity or terror, from our relatively comfortable, but powerless, position facing the screen. Pedro’s sudden awareness that he is being watched coincides with the spectator’s sudden awareness that he is watching; and in this moment of double insight, the moral victory is obviously Pedro’s. Like Cernuda’s *Variaciones*, Rejano’s *Esfinge* and Moreno Villa’s *Cornucopia*, then, the movie’s most redeeming feature—one that Paz’s *Laberinto* utterly lacks—is a radical, tongue-in-cheek self-consciousness. After three years of a militant intellectual agency, the Spanish Republicans in Mexico are reduced to a dubious role of intellectual voyeur—even Moreno Villa calls his *Cornucopia* a ‘librito mirón’. They are aware both of their impotence and of the fact that criticism and action on their part would not be appreciated or even permitted by their hosts.

51 José E. Limón, *American Encounters: Greater Mexico, the United States, and the Erotics of Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 82.

52 Octavio Paz, ‘El laberinto de la soledad. El Pachuco y otros extremos’, *Cuadernos Americanos*, VIII, No. 5 (1949), 17–30 (pp. 22–24).

In *Los olvidados* the tension between utopianism and fatalism, between hope for progress and pessimistic determinism, is maintained until the end. The film does not give any answers and does not leave the spectator any moral way out. The thing left is shock for shock's sake—perhaps the one single credo that the irreverent Buñuel, who never ceased to be a surrealist, lived by throughout his career.⁵³ In the context of the Spanish Republican representations of Mexico, however, this analysis of *Los olvidados* leads us to two conclusions. On the one hand, the unresolved tension between two conflicting discourses—exemplified even more by the existence of an alternative 'happy' ending that was filmed but never used⁵⁴—reflects the paradoxical situation of the Spanish Republican exiles in a capitalist, increasingly corrupt, and less and less revolutionary Mexico. If, in the narrator's introduction, Buñuel pays lip service to the official rhetoric of the host regime, it is partly because, as an exile, he cannot afford to criticize it directly. On the other hand, however, and in more general terms, the film's ideological ambivalence can be seen as a symptom of the crisis suffered by the Spanish Left after the defeat of the Republic, the disappointing aftermath of World War II—the exiled Spaniards expected that Franco would fall soon after Hitler did—and the outbreak of the Cold War. The latter, as earlier indicated, made it impossible for Buñuel to work in the United States; but without it Mexican cinema would not have been the same.

53 I would like to thank my colleague Luis José Bustamante for suggesting this idea to me.

54 See Francisco Gaytán, 'Los olvidados y un segundo final. La deuxième fin de "Los olvidados"', *Cinema d'Amérique Latine*, V (1997), 131–33.