

# Space, Politics, and the Crisis of Hegemony in Latin American Film

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The great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history: with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis and cycle [. . .]. The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space.

— (*Foucault 1986: 22*)

It no longer seems possible to provide a predominantly historical account of “Latin American” being or becoming, let alone of the national structures and identities that emerged from the ruins of the Spanish and Portuguese Empires. This is partly because the nation-state in Latin America—from the start a precarious and, more often than not, rapacious administrator of an identitarian community that was always “yet to come”—is everywhere losing control of the economic, cultural, and biopolitical arenas over which it claimed to hold sway. It is also partly a result of our contemporary eschatology—i.e. the “end” of modernity’s grand narratives of social transformation, whether these be (in Latin America) broadly statist, national-popular, or the last remnants of Marxist and Maoist insurgencies. Whereas for Hegel the end of history would come with the full realization of reason in the form of the state, overwhelming time through repetition and circularity, in the aftermath of the state it is now the never fully realized, outwardly expanding form of the market that abolishes all temporality, depth, and genealogy.

It has become something of a topos in contemporary studies of Latin American culture to label as “neoliberalism” the void that persists after the maligned end of history, and to reclaim a prior national culture as the last critical bulwark of identity, genealogy, and difference in the face of the crisis-ridden expansion of global capitalism. In Latin American film studies in particular, and partly in response to the spectacular transnationalization of “Mexican” cinema in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the analytical terrain seems broadly divided between, on the one hand, those who tend to affirm film’s continued role as a filter of historically determined national imaginaries, gaining its intelligibility largely from its critical relationship to national hegemonic processes and their periodic crises, and, on the other, those who prefer to emphasize the centrifugal forces that rupture the neat

circle of aesthetic reflection and critique, prioritizing transnational circuits of production and reception, and the global circulation of even the most staunchly national films.

Yet I believe we need to think beyond the cultural deadlocks produced by the crisis of the nation-state, the neoliberal end of ideology/history, entrenched national politico-cultural interests, and the celebration of “network struggle” and global digital cultures. In line with my epigraph, I want to explore how an engagement with the national, geopolitical, and urban production of space and place can help us to move beyond the impasses and cycles of the national-popular vs. the transnational-multicultural divide, or of “identity politics [vs.] radical multiculturalism” (Beverley 2011: 39), that besets film studies as much as broader Latin American cultural studies. The questions raised by this impasse go to the heart of film’s ambiguous status as both a mass-produced cultural product (especially in its golden age in Latin America) and as the inheritor of traditional functions of literature in the production of identitarian narratives, which is to say that they go to the heart of film’s status as “popular” culture.

Paradoxically, the greatest philosopher of space, Henri Lefebvre, affirms that “if space is produced, if there is a productive process, then we are dealing with *history*” (Lefebvre 1991: 46, original emphasis). He goes on to caution that this history of the production of space “is not to be confused either with the causal chain of ‘historical’ (i.e. dated) events, or with a sequence, whether teleological or not, of customs and laws, ideals and ideology, and socio-economic structures or institutions” (p. 46). It is instead to be understood as a series of contradictions and crises in the social relations of production, which give rise to, “produce,” different spatialities, different modes of relationship between people, and the spaces precipitated from the forces of abstraction. It is in this guise that, through the three films I shall be discussing here, I aim to outline a cinematic registering of the production of Latin American space, of the shifting social, economic, and political forms that are legible in the quintessentially spatial medium of film.

Although each film is taken from a different key moment in the development of Latin American cinema, and from three diverse geographical spaces, the choice is necessarily arbitrary, and they should not be taken as “representative” either of their genres nor of “national” cinemas, except in the broadest possible terms. Rather, these films are linked by how they address or force a crisis in the construction of (popular) identity and political representation through their engagement with the forces that produce what Lefebvre calls

“abstract space” (Lefebvre 1991: 49ff.). This can be understood as the form of spatiality produced by the requirements of commodity production, distribution, and consumption, and it can operate at every scale from the local to the global and the virtual. It is represented in these films through: the gigantic economic forces that were reshaping national spaces and identities at the beginning of the twentieth century in Colombia and Central America; the powerful processes that led to the transformation of Mexico from a rural to a predominantly urban society in the 1950s (processes in which popular cinema itself plays a crucial role); and the chaotic spatial forces at work in the Argentine megalopolis today, together with the challenge that this space and its inhabitants represent to the historical cycles of national-popular hegemony.

### How Wall Street created a nation

The cultural mobility of silent film—in terms of its themes, its actors, and its distribution—placed it from the outset in a complex and, as we shall see, tense relationship to national cultures and identities. Perhaps this is why Walter Benjamin, still in the 1930s, was able to laud film for its power to liberate us from our routine imprisonment in space-time:

Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. (Benjamin 1992: 236)

There is a powerful dialectic at work here that defines the spatial contradictions operating within the outwardly expansive domain of capitalist modernity: on the one hand, film has the technological power to delve into the everyday and to explode systematically the traditions, mythologies, and habits that structure it, disembedding such belief systems from their “organic” rootedness in everyday life, their *habitus*; on the other hand, film reinscribes the local into a higher set of ideological discourses and national and supranational narratives bounded by the ongoing production of hegemony *within* the nation-state and the geopolitical competition for hegemony *among* nation-states.

A little-known Colombian silent movie made in 1926 called *Garras de oro—Alborada de justicia* (*Clutches/Claws of Gold—The Dawn of Justice*) is a perfect illustration of the spatial tensions alluded to by Benjamin, but which are here intensified by the film’s location on the frontier between transnational flows of capital and their relationship to national sovereignty

and hegemony. There is a very good reason why the film is little known: it was effectively censored under pressure from U.S. consular officials after a year or so of screenings in different towns in Colombia, because of fears that it would stoke up anti-Yankee sentiments among the Colombian populace. The film did not resurface until the 1980s, after some of the footage had been lost or deteriorated beyond restoration. It was financed in the wake of the foreign investment boom of 1923 by a group of Cali-based businessmen (Suárez et al. 2009: 59), who were incensed by the takeover by the United States, under Theodor Roosevelt, of the former Colombian Province of Panama in 1903, so that the US could build, control, and profit from the Panama Canal. The film is directed by one “P.P. Jambrina,” a pseudonym of Alfonso Martínez Velasco.

As explained by Ovidio Díaz Espino in his book *How Wall Street Created a Nation* (Díaz Espino 2001), a Wall Street firm backed by wealthy American investors who were close to Roosevelt appears to have secretly bought a large stake of the worthless shares of the French company that had failed in the attempt to build the canal in the 1880s. The U.S. government then paid \$40 million supposedly to the liquidator of the French company for the rights to continue the works. However, the newspaper publisher Joseph Pulitzer, proprietor of the *New York World*, alleged that \$12 million of this sum had been paid instead to a dummy fronting company for J.P. Morgan, thus massively enriching Roosevelt’s associates. An enraged Roosevelt sued the *New York World* for libel. *Garras de oro* concerns this episode, with both Pulitzer (called James Moore in the film) and Roosevelt having sent agents to Colombia to gather evidence about the “transfer” of Panama to U.S. control. In the film, one of Pulitzer’s agents, an unreliable womanizer called Paterson, has fallen in love with the daughter of a Colombian consular official, Berta in “Rasca-Cielo” (New York). Paterson heads off to Colombia in a bid to prove to Berta that he is worthy of her, and to defend her nation by helping Pulitzer/Moore defend himself against Roosevelt’s libel suit.

Juana Suárez points out that “national romance” in *Garras de oro*—a readily available formula in early silent adaptations of popular nineteenth-century novels in Latin America—is quite problematic, citing Doris Sommer on the fantasy nature of such “wishfulfilling projection[s] of national consolidation and growth” (Sommer 1991: 6–7; Suárez et al. 2009: 77). The romance between Paterson and Berta “inaugurate[s] cinematically another type of accord: nations in political and diplomatic conflict no longer seek to consolidate the national but rather the international.” Indeed, the belated national romance here is both unstable and quite conflicted, a rhetorical fantasy of victory for Colombian national honor and purity of

motives in the face of U.S. neo-imperial ambitions. In the film, Moore's reporters are able to obtain key documents just in time to save the day for the U.S. free press and for Colombian justice and honor in the face of U.S. capitalist dissolution of its territory. Colombia in the guise of Berta, actually played by an Italian actress, tames the wayward US, in the guise of Paterson, thoroughly Colombianizing him and their offspring in a nationalistic fantasy sequence at the end of the film on the July 20 Independence Day, replete with the national anthem and a hand-tinted insert of the Colombian flag proudly flapping in the wind. Yet the intertitle immediately following this references the indemnity treaty between the US and Colombia of April 6, 1914 (erroneously recorded as 1916), in which Colombia accepted a mere \$25 million for the loss of Panama, and the film's final sequence is an explicitly allegorical cameo that has Uncle Sam in his typical top hat weighing the Isthmus of Panama in the scales of Justice, played by Berta in blindfold, against the backdrop of a large map of Colombia (Figure 1). The scale refuses to tip, despite the heavy bags containing the sum of \$25,000,000 weighing against the tiny cutout isthmus.



*Figure 1* Uncle Sam weighs Panama against bags of gold in *Garras de oro* (1926)

While the intended meaning of this overdetermined national allegory is clear, its effects are far less straightforward. For what has really won out in the film, and in reality, are not nation-states at all, nor international diplomacy, nor Colombian national honor, but the “clutches of gold” of the title: the power of Wall Street to instrumentalize nation-states in the geopolitical shaping of Latin American space for the purposes of commercial profit, to make

and unmake nations at will. Here, money quite literally produces space, carving out a new nation from an existing one for the purposes of building transportation infrastructure that will speed up the commercial trade of goods. Marx was the first to identify the tendency in capitalism to overcome spatial obstacles to the free flow of commodities through an increase in the speed of transportation, information flows, logistical organization, and turnover. By its very nature, capitalism “drives beyond every spatial barrier,” and the “extraordinary necessity” it has to overcome distance by increasing the velocity of production, transport, and communication leads to what he famously termed “the annihilation of space by time” (Marx 1993: 524). Later spatial theorists, and in particular the Marxist urban geographer David Harvey, call this process “time-space compression” (Harvey 1989: 260–307) and identify it as a fundamental force at work within both urbanization (which shortens the distance between production and consumption) and, later, globalization (which drives beyond the spatial barriers represented by the nation-state system and its fragmented national markets).

Beyond the national romance, it is this annihilation of space (distance, in this case) by the need for greater velocity of trade, and the consequent deterritorialization of the nation-state system by money, that is, effectively, the principal agent at work within this film. Although Latin American territory, from the moment of its “discovery” by European powers, has always been constructed through the vicissitudes of global trading systems, from slavery, to plantations and mining, the commercial shaping of Latin American space under colonial rule had been primarily concerned with resource extraction. The gigantic financial forces at work in the carving out of Panama for the purposes of carving an interoceanic canal across the isthmus are of a different order and do not serve resource extraction per se, but reflexively serve the expansion of capital itself. It is of no little significance that this film, although considered an orphan due to its long disappearance, lies at the very origins of Colombian cinema, which was born, as it were, coincidentally with the traumatic challenge posed by modern global finance to a national sovereignty that was barely 100 years old. For film itself is not, of course, exempt from these same spatial forces that the film documents. As early as the 1920s, the projection of national space through film, its relay through mass mediatization, and the transnational star system of silent film, began to render national space simulacral, even as the national itself was becoming a commodity to be bought and sold on international capital markets.

## Popular film and the production of urban space

With the advent of the “talkies,” the international market that operated in the distribution and star system of silent cinema was rapidly, if not uniformly, “renationalized,” as it was generally no longer possible for, say, an Italian actress to play a Colombian heroine, as in the case of *Garras de oro*. In Mexico, the advent of sound enabled the rise of a popular national film industry in the 1940s and 1950s, which nevertheless rivalled Hollywood in its popularity and reach within the Spanish-speaking world, even as it drew on, imitated, and then renationalized Hollywood genres and themes. Into the midst of this popular cinema that served the burgeoning urban population of the cities, arrived a foreigner, Luis Buñuel, in exile from Spain, in 1946. He quickly set about learning the codes and conventions of Mexico’s popular, often melodramatic genres, and began to produce films within the local idiom, but often also pushing the limits of that idiom. His most famous urban film is *Los olvidados* (*The Young and the Damned*, 1950), which in fact flatly defied the conventions for the idealized representation of poverty and the city in films such as *Nosotros los pobres* (*We the Poor*, 1948). The much less well-known follow-up to *Los olvidados*, in terms of its urban thematics and its working through of a number of the more challenging themes of the former film in a more popular idiom, is *El bruto* (*The Brute*) of 1953. In this film, Acevedo-Muñoz argues (Acevedo-Muñoz 2003: 126), Buñuel casts lead actor Pedro Armendáriz (who had personified the ideology of *machismo* in the films of Emilio Fernández) distinctly “against type” in the gullible, manipulated, and dim-witted figure of El Bruto, a slaughterhouse worker (called Pedro), who becomes a henchman for an ageing capitalist, Don Andrés, but ends up as a pawn in the hands of Don Andrés’ young “wife,” Paloma, a femme fatale played by Katy Jurado.

Buñuel’s urban films are set at the beginning of what would later become known as the “Mexican miracle,” a period of rapid economic expansion and urban growth that would last until the oil shocks of the 1970s. The unprecedented urban construction boom that he had recorded in *Los olvidados* (1950), and which is the cause of the immediate social conflict in *El bruto* (Don Andrés wants to redevelop the plot where his tenants live), points us towards a profound set of processes that were fundamentally reorganizing social and family relationships, and with them the conventional mappings of social power and libidinal investments. But beyond Buñuel’s reflexive use of the popular star system and generic formulae in *El bruto*, what is being framed is not so much the figure of the *macho*, as the role played by popular cinema itself, particularly the urban genre of the *cine de arrabal*—a key

interface between the urban populace and technological modernity—in this remapping of the libidinal economy of Mexican society. This is why my interest in the film lies not in the emasculation of its protagonist, but in the changing sexuality of *women* as an index of their pushing at the boundaries of their affective capture within the institution of the patriarchal family. The flows of affect, libido, and money that Buñuel extrapolates from popular melodrama have everything to do with the deterritorializations induced by urbanization, by national and international capital flows, and their imaginary entanglement in the vision machine of popular cinema.

*El bruto* begins with the staging of a typical urban land struggle between the aging property magnate, supported by the forces of law and order, and the rebellious occupants of a tenement he owns in the Portales district of Mexico City. The (then) working-class district was an area of major real-estate speculation and development in the 1950s, with the old ramshackle houses being torn down and replaced with apartment blocks at a feverish rate, so that by 1960 the population of the area had expanded hugely and had become largely middle class. This climate of land speculation and the breakup of semi-communal living conditions makes of the film a *spatial* expression of class conflict, which is mapped out in terms of the power of money to dissolve communities while unleashing new forms of libidinal economy. By opening the film with this scene of social struggle between the abstract representation of space as exchange value and the lived spaces of the community (to use Lefebvre's terms), Buñuel is directly staging the power of money to dissolve community and *become the real community* (Marx 1993: 225–226)—i.e. substitute itself for community as an abstract expression of the relations between people, including the very nucleus of social reproduction: the family.

The film sets up a whole series of inverted family relationships: the father-and-daughter “couple” of Don Carmelo and the teenage Meche; Don Andrés himself and his “wife” Paloma, young enough to be his daughter, who live with his doddering father whom they treat as if he were an irresponsible child; and El Bruto, who lives with a woman who has brought her whole family into their two-room living space, and who is both protected and exploited by his “boss” Don Andrés as his (illegitimate) son without overt recognition of the fact. Yet El Bruto ends up sleeping with Paloma, his putative stepmother, then making “home” in a hovel on a construction site with the teenage Meche, as a substitute for her father (whom he had unintentionally killed), and finally murdering his own father (Don Andrés) in some pre-political realization of the Oedipal drama.



Through this freak show of partial or pathologically Oedipalized family structures, Buñuel mercilessly subverts the travails of family romance encoded in popular urban melodramas such as those directed by Roberto Gavaldón and Julio Bracho. However, the film has a somewhat more complicitous relationship to the thoroughly urban *arrabal* films and the related *cabaretera*/prostitute genre. Buñuel here taps into the neorealist mode he had used so effectively in *Los olvidados*, in the representation of the daily struggle for food, work, and decent living conditions of the working-class *arrabal* inhabitants, and, bizarrely at first, fuses it with the “dangerous seductress” image already associated with actress Katy Jurado (e.g. as the fallen woman “who gets up late” in *Nosotros los pobres*). He pushes to a crisis point the contradictions at work in the axiomatic that governs the *arrabal* film’s compulsive cannibalization of prurient national melodrama, stylized and voyeuristic “neorealism,” and contemporary Hollywood crime/noir formats. If these genres are already partially decoded by the *arrabal* films, which is to say turned by the machine of cinema itself into deterritorializing flows of desire and affect exchangeable for the price of a cinema ticket, then Buñuel, in *El bruto*, violently confronts us with the dark, explosive forces unleashed in this process. These are condensed in the powerful extrapolation of the Catholic sublimation of sexuality and death at the heart of his representation of the Mexican femme fatale, in the gigantic urban machinery that absorbs the hundreds of thousands of post-revolutionary peasants converging on the burgeoning cities, and in the violent institution of a modern biopolitical order through the capture and taming of these “brutes.”

It is important to stress that Mexican film of this period does not “express” this axiomatic in some naïve representational sense; rather, Mexican film *is* the axiomatic in a very real sense, for it subjects all of the “customs” and habits, which the new urban migrants went to the cinema to “learn,” according to Monsiváis (Martín Barbero 1987: 180), to the logic of the *spectacle as commodity*, and hence to the axiom of quantitative equivalence and exchange. The popular cinema can be understood as a machinery, on the one hand commodifying affects for sale, and on the other slowly but surely precipitating an avalanche of new wants, customs, and habits, forming an incipient culture of popular consumption based upon image, spectacle, and fashion. It is perhaps nowhere more true than in Mexico of the 1950s, at least in Latin America, that cinema allies itself so intimately with capitalist modernization and the urbanization of capital in a society that had been hitherto predominantly rural, and became predominantly urban by 1960. Buñuel exposes the extent to which these powerful urban processes have a de-Oedipalizing effect that begins with the inversion of family structures

and family “romance,” and ends in the radical decoding of feminine identity and desire, allegorized perfectly in the shift it charts from women’s passivity and capture within domesticity to the assertion of active female desire.

Paloma’s radical assertion of her own desire and her manipulation of the dimwit Bruto to achieve her aims unleashes a powerful force within the film, which it hardly knows how to contain by its destructive close. Although Pedro ends up sleeping with his “stepmother” Paloma and killing his father, Paloma’s desire is precisely *that which exceeds her Oedipal capture* in the (Mexican) psychodrama of paternity. Indeed, Buñuel links Paloma’s *excessive* desire specifically and reflexively to the cinematic desiring-machine, as well as to the urban production of space in a sequence after El Bruto has been moved, for his own safety, to a hovel on another construction site owned by Don Andrés. Paloma has come to visit him clandestinely, telling Don Andrés that she was *going to the cinema* with a friend. On the soundtrack throughout Pedro and Paloma’s transgressive lovemaking, we hear the obtrusive sounds of construction machinery, so that we cannot avoid the impression that this erotic encounter, on a construction site, takes place at the center of some huge urban machine. That enormous deterritorializing machinery is the combined power of both the cinema-machine, with its dangerous decoding of affect, and the city-machine, in which the fluidity of capital circulation is transmogrified into desire, the one intertwined inseparably with the other.

### Beyond populist reason

I began with an allusion to the collapse of temporal significance that, for Hegel, would occur upon the full realization of reason in the form of the state. History would collapse into repetition and sameness, since its dialectical motor would have come to a standstill. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx famously corrected Hegel, quipping that history always repeats itself, but the first time as tragedy, and the second as farce. The historical repetition evinced in Argentine director Pablo Trapero’s 2012 film *Elefante blanco* (*White Elephant*) lies somewhere in the gap between Hegel and Marx, laying great emphasis on the feedback loops through which representation and history intersect and fold into each other. For it is not only the case in this film that history, specifically the history of populism in Argentina, appears to be stuck on repeat, but also that the representational mechanisms of history as well as of the film itself are somehow blocked through this very repetition. In line with my overall theme, this blockage is given an overwhelmingly spatial form, reflecting Trapero’s long-standing exploration of the urban as a condensation of economic, political, and libidinal investments

(*Mundo grúa/Crane World*, 1999; *Carancho*, 2010), and suggesting, perhaps, the reversibility of Marx's aforementioned dictum regarding "the annihilation of space by time": in the twenty-first century, it is perhaps time and history that are annihilated by space.

*Elefante blanco* is mostly set in Ciudad Oculta ("Hidden City") or Villa 15, a shantytown in the Villa Lugano district to the southwest of Buenos Aires, which has become iconic in part due to the huge abandoned hospital that lies at the heart of the slum, the so-called White Elephant. It concerns two priests, one of them Belgian, and a social worker who work in the *villa* and find themselves caught at the intersection of the competing demands of the local people and the ecclesiastical and state apparatuses. The priests operate within the legacy of the influential Movement of Priests for the Third World, and of its former charismatic leader, the priest Carlos Mugica, who was murdered in 1974 at the hands of the secret paramilitary organization known as the Triple A, the Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance. For the priests of the movement, missionary work in the *villas* (shantytowns) in 1960s and 1970s Buenos Aires was both a continuation and radicalization of a largely proscribed leftwing Peronism, and conjoined political and theological concepts of redemption, with Perón, Christ, and the coming Revolution acting as exchangeable placeholders in an affective structure of revolutionary messianism. Mugica is at the center of a struggle for ontotheological legitimation, which is to say that he becomes the symbolic point of confluence of a desire to grant the slippery and contingent terrain of politics something of the unanswerable power of the divine, encoded as "the people." The historical repetition shown in this film, which is set in 2011 but fruitlessly repeats a story from the 1970s, has the inevitable effect of framing the history of populism in Argentina, putting it in quotation marks and forcing us to confront its contradictions. While the tone is by no means farcical, in Marx's terms, the tragedy now emerges precisely from the *repetition* of a history that has not been transcended, where the mechanisms of the articulation and translation of popular demands within social and political institutions appear to be blocked. This ideological blockage constitutes in many ways the ground upon which the film's aesthetics are based, and which revolve around a crisis of *representation* in both the political and aesthetic senses of this word.

The film's intelligent script, written by Santiago Mitre (*El estudiante/The Student*, 2011), Martín Mauregui, and Alejandro Fadel, seems fully aware of these representational aporias. If the (Kantian) sublime traditionally determines the frontier between aesthetics and politics understood as a moral or ethical duty that arises from the gap between the representable and the unrepresentable, then the sublime is repeatedly signaled as a fundamental representational

frontier in this film. In the political sense, the failure of representation—of the state’s duty to translate the wants and needs of the inhabitants of the *villa* into forms of political agency—is displaced onto the terrain of ethics: the almost infinite moral debt and duty of the priests, their theological calling, towards the salvation of the multitude.

But the sublime has also come to stand as a figure of the crisis of representation in the aesthetic sense in postmodern society: this is the so-called postmodern sublime discussed by Jean-François Lyotard, which grows more intense with the globalization of information and communication systems. In the film, it is the chaotic urban backwaters of the megalopolis—the “unrepresentable” and “unmappable” space of the *villa*—which takes on, for the priests and for us as cinemagoers, the terrifying attributes of the sublime. In the first daylight sequence set in Ciudad Oculta, after a series of establishing shots surveying the *villa*, the principal protagonist of the film, Father Julián, orients the new Belgian priest, Nicolás, as the pair stand on a balcony of the second floor of the abandoned hospital at the center of the *villa*, surveying the urban space below. He tells Nicolás that there is no official census of the population of the *villa*, which they estimate from their own baptismal records to be around 30,000, and that it does not appear on any map (“ni figura en el mapa”). The *villa* is thus equated from the outset with the breakdown of the process of mapping that is given strong filmic emphasis elsewhere in the film’s imagery, both due to state abandonment and because its population, to use a Rancièrian formula, does not count, and therefore is not counted (Rancièr 1999: 6–18). An equivalence is established here between the unmeasurable space of the *villa*, its uncountable population, and the abandoned building, with the White Elephant standing as a synecdoche for the slum and its shunned population, and the slum, with its drug-fueled gang wars, standing as a synecdoche of what Manuel Castells calls the “new urban form” of the megalopolis, “globally connected and locally disconnected, physically and socially” (Castells 1996: 437).

Effectively, the central problem of the film will revolve around a question concerning the occupation of this urban space and the demand for land on the part of these citizens, systematically abandoned by all the institutions of the state, under every political regime. Julián informs Nicolás that the building project dates from the 1930s, and it links the socialism of Alfredo Lorenzo Palacios with the populism of General Perón, under whose government a serious attempt was made to finish the building, which would have been the largest hospital in Latin America had it been completed. During the dictatorships that followed on from Perón’s first two terms of office (1946–1955), the building was completely

abandoned, and part of it was occupied by homeless slum residents, new migrants to the city, and, more recently, by street children and drug addicts. The current owner of the building is, in an ironic twist of history, the Foundation of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo.

In some ways, then, the building, although having its origins in an earlier socialism, is linked to the first wave of Peronist populism. It is a place that gathers together a nameless *plebs*, one that is not yet a “people” and which challenges the hegemonic processes of all subsequent regimes. But the building obviously represents also the failure of these systems of representation, and this idea of failure extends to all the representational systems given in the film—whether architectural, religious, or political—which are intertwined with an ethics of salvation of the multitude. It should be clear that I do not claim that the film is criticizing the intentions of those who make such salvation their vocation. The failure in the film is represented as a tragedy, repeated as a form of repetition-compulsion in the Freudian sense. In the priests’ oft-declared devotion to Carlos Mugica and recitation of his words (“Lord, I want to die for them, help me to live for them, I want to be with them at the coming of the Light”), the film deliberately stages a confused mixture of pre-political, or perhaps post-political, affect, and the invocation of a transcendental ethics that attempts to capture affect under the sign of an absolute duty, in the absence of any political translation of the needs and demands of the inhabitants of the *villa*.

Yet the film clearly stages a shift from this ontotheological stance towards one of populist political praxis, gradually changing the essentialist sign of theological duty into the equivalential and differential signs of political logic, and exposing the conflicts that emerge in this shift. This is where the film plays out most obviously the formalist political analysis of Argentine political theorist Ernesto Laclau, as laid out in detail in his *On Populist Reason* (Laclau 2002). Laclau sees Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony as making sense only within a “vast historical mutation” (p. 126) from concepts of “manifest destiny” (p. 127), including Marxist teleology, towards a political process governed by the articulation of a series of democratic demands by an empty signifier. The basic mechanisms of this historical mutation of populism that Laclau, throughout his career, drew explicitly from Peronism, are easy to outline: a series of distinct and fragmented social demands must be “articulated” by some other element; however, that element can only act as articulator of many disparate demands if it is able to act as a placeholder for each and every one of them. In order to do this, it must itself become an empty placeholder, or an empty signifier, voided of positive content of its own. As Laclau puts it, “empty signifiers can play their role only if they signify

a chain of equivalences [. . .]. An ensemble of equivalential demands articulated by an empty signifier is what constitutes a ‘people’” (p. 171).

An almost too obvious exemplification of Laclau’s thought occurs in *Elefante blanco* during the celebration of the 37th anniversary of the “death and martyrdom” of Carlos Mugica. Julián, standing on an open-air stage with an iconic image of Mugica behind him on a backcloth, pronounces the following words to the assembled crowd:

“For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life as a ransom for the multitude.” [. . .] We are gathered today to remember a brother, a friend. And his memory unites us, unifies us. To oppose violence, to fight violence with love.



*Figure 2* Padre Julián (Ricardo Darín) evokes the “death and martyrdom” of Carlos Mugica in *Elefante blanco* (2012).

The iconography seems explicitly designed to recall that of populist political rallies in Argentina, with the image of Perón or Evita, and in more recent times that of Néstor Kirchner, substituted here with that of Mugica (Figure 2). In each case, the absent figure becomes the empty signifier which, in the words of Julián, “unites us, unifies us,” and stages the hegemonic political process that “saves” the multitude. Yet from an extra-diegetic perspective, the film curiously retranslates and displaces populism’s empty signifiers onto an image of Christian faith, and then onto a crisis of faith on the part of its practitioners, returning the ideological process of the construction of national-popular hegemony to a more basic mechanism, or at least an older one. It is precisely in the gap between the two systems, their incompatibility at the level of the diegesis, and the discomfort felt by the audience in seeing secular political processes translated back into questions of belief, and of regimes of belief in the broadest sense, that the film plays out its most fundamental critique.

Empty signifiers start to proliferate: not only Mugica and his “miracles,” both present and absent at the same time in many sequences, but also the priests who repeat more or less self-consciously his story and whose faith is itself challenged by mortality and death. But in the end, it is the fundamental spatial translation of all of these processes—the very building marooned at the heart of this marooned community, the White Elephant—which powerfully calls into question the political machinery of populist reason. If the empty signifier is the Lacanian *objet petit a*, as Laclau contends (Laclau 2002: 127), then the film confronts this structural emptiness or veil, which maintains the illusion of belief, with a radically different mode of vacuity. This White Elephant, this empty, useless but enormous object, is impossible to veil despite the fact that historically the military did everything they could to erase the Hidden City, hiding it behind screens so that it would not spoil the view of the city from the main roads nearby (Bontempo 2014). By placing the White Elephant, this synecdoche of the unmappable *villa* and spatial remainder of powerful political forces, at the end of its chain of empty signifiers, as an obstacle that resists every attempt of ideological reincorporation, we arrive finally at something like the nucleus or hard core of the real, not the support of fantasy in the metonymic chain of empty signifiers that is the *objet a*, but the void of an unsymbolizable residue that disturbs and blocks the regimes of belief generated by both Church and state.

## Conclusion

By the end of *Elefante blanco*, after the collapse of the priests’ mission and the shooting of Julián in some senseless, “farcical,” cops-and-robbers-style repetition of the assassination of Mugica (see Vezzetti 2013), the “reasoning engine” of the hegemonic processes underlying populist reason lies “huddled in dirt,” as John Wilmot, Second Earl of Rochester, put it in his poem “A Satyr against Reason and Mankind.” It is no accident that the film’s principal theme music is taken from a transcription for brass of a score by Michael Nyman entitled “A Satire against Reason,” originally released for the film *The Libertine* (2004) about the life of Wilmot. His famous satirical poem invokes the corruption of systems of governance, whose authors, “swollen with selfish vanity, devise / False freedoms, holy cheats, and formal lies / Over their fellow slaves to tyrannize” (Wilmot 2002: 102). The resounding, dissonant chords of Nyman’s theme accompany the opening journey down the Amazon from Iquitos in the aftermath of the jungle massacre. But they also accompany the final evocation of the “ideal,” consensual community in the Trappist monastery where Nicolás takes refuge after his traumatic foray into the *villa*. This must now appear as some ironic, final hypostatization of

the logic of the empty signifier, for the image of the idyllic pastoral community, of the fully reconciled society—far from the “madding crowd” of the slum—emerges precisely from the vacuity of the signifier that establishes the full, non-hierarchical equivalence of each member of the community.

From the “noisy silence” of early silent cinema to the ironic silence after the “end” of politics, the films I have examined in this chapter point us to a series of powerful forces that call into question the dominant narratives of hegemony and representation through which Latin American identities are so often thought. Film is a popular medium that has historically accompanied the rise of, and indeed helped to form and interpellate, the modern, national-popular subject. Yet as a medium, it cannot be understood fully without an awareness that it is itself imbricated in those convulsive, contradictory flows that reshape identities, places, and spaces. It is perhaps unsurprising that film is uniquely attuned to the forces that escape conventional political representation, but which powerfully act to dematerialize and rematerialize space to service the requirements of commodity production and consumption (the city, the country, the nation, the globe, and now, of course, cyberspace). For film is the most “spatial” of media, with its sets, locations, physical placing of its subjects in space, and its ability to produce virtual and imaginary spaces through which the cinemagoer “goes traveling.”

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