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SUBVERSIVE NARRATIVE AND *MEXICANIDAD* IN
THE WORKS OF LUIS BUÑUEL AND JUAN RULFO

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Supervisor: Professor Bill Richardson

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Introduction: Mexico and *Mexicanidad*

‘Luchamos con entidades imaginarias, vestigios del pasado o fantasmas engendrados por nosotros mismos. Esos fantasmas y vestigios son reales, al menos para nosotros mismos. Su realidad es de un orden sutil y atroz, porque es una realidad fantasmagórica’ (Paz 2002: 80).

Through a comparative analysis of selected key Mexican works by Luis Buñuel and Juan Rulfo, dating from the period 1950 to 1962, the central aim of this thesis is to determine how these two artists’ use of subversive narrative techniques addresses, and in many ways undermines, unitary post-Revolutionary ideas of *mexicanidad*. In other words, this study examines the impact of Mexican cultural nationalism on the artistic practices of a writer, on the one hand, and a filmmaker, on the other. In both cases, it becomes clear that state-sponsored cultural nationalism in early- to mid-twentieth century Mexico politicises the artist’s outlook and aesthetics. Such politicisation is manifest in the expression of major thematic concerns that coincide across the selected corpus of narrative fiction and film (especially religion, gender and popular culture which are all treated in chapter-length detail) as well as in the use of subversive narrative techniques which are often medium-specific but which, I maintain, serve the common end of artistic protest by means of deconstructing the myth and ideology of national unity and unitary national identity that underpins Mexican cultural nationalism in the period and which continually and forcefully informs political discourse in all its various articulations by the state during the first decades of the post-Revolutionary period. The term *mexicanidad* can be seen as an intricate web of discourses encompassing the social, political, and psychological aspects of national identity in Mexico, with further layers of complexity added by influential intellectual theories¹, state rhetoric, and national cultural representations. Biron (2012: 18) describes *mexicanidad* as ‘an amorphous

¹ Psychoanalytical studies on the nature of *mexicanidad* by Ramos (2014, 1st pub. 1934) and Paz (2002, 1st pub. 1950) often imagined the very concept they attempted to define.

simultaneity of complex historical, social, and psychological relations'. This constantly changing idea of the nation can be located somewhere between the hegemonic wielding of state power, and the 'natural' crystallization of 'national-popular' sentiment². Of key importance is the issue of how being Mexican is imagined³ and codified through a variety of cultural forms, such as literature, film, and visual art. After the Mexican Revolution (1910-20), aspects of cultural texts were often appropriated by state discourses in order to consolidate a collective sense of national identity⁴. Lomnitz-Adler (1992: 251) suggests that the Mexican state 'prefers to invent that which it represents out of bits and pieces of images that are well known to all of us. This act of power stands in the way of the benefits of modernity (democracy) while it leaves people vulnerable to its economic implications'. The state also had a direct influence on the creative process as evidenced by the studio system in Mexican national cinema.

While it is evident that cultural texts can create and maintain nationalist mythologies⁵, it can also be argued that they are simultaneously capable of commenting on and subverting existing mythological structures. It follows that an artistic text must present a semblance of a mythical structure in order to critically engage with it. The investigation of the interstices between these many different conceptions of the nation and its identity reveals a web of hybrid discourses, whose internal contradictions can be revealing. Bhabha (2003: 3) maintains that '[t]hese approaches are valuable in drawing attention to those easily obscured, but highly significant, recesses of the national culture from which alternative constituencies of peoples and oppositional analytic capacities may emerge'. Indeed, one can argue that the subversive narrative techniques in Buñuel's and Rulfo's works underline the instability of monolithic national visual and linguistic semiotic systems. In the texts under consideration here, certain mythical expressions of *mexicanidad* are *posited* precisely in order to be *deconstructed*. However, it should also be noted that while their works are critical of certain unitary representations of *mexicanidad*, they also participate to a certain extent in the writing of what could be termed the 'national narrative'.

² See Bartra's (1987) distinction between hegemonic state ideology and popular culture.

³ Anderson (1991) maintains that the modern nation is a cultural construct, 'imagined' into existence through cultural production.

⁴ See the analysis of cultural nationalism in the following works: Bartra (1987), Bhabha (2003), Acevedo-Muñoz (2003), García Canclini (2005), Monsiváis (2013).

⁵ In *Mythologies* (1972), Barthes investigates the degree to which nationalist discourses are 'naturalised' in cultural production.

Many of the bizarre and enigmatic story worlds they created abound with images of decline and dissolution, metaphorically highlighting a breakdown in traditional social structures and perceptions of reality. Structurally, much of the subversive impact of their works is achieved precisely through experimental narrative techniques, such as fragmentation, incongruous juxtaposition, and self-reflexive narration, resulting in a distinctive blend of realist and modernist aesthetics, which challenged the predominance of the socio-realist mode in earlier post-Revolutionary national cultural production, such as the novels dealing with the Revolution, also known as ‘La Narrativa de la Revolución’, and in ‘Golden Age’ Mexican national cinema. Dark entropic humour is frequently employed as a counter-hegemonic discourse which challenges the ideological orthodoxy of the state. The term ‘entropic humour’ can be used to describe a particular kind of existential humour, commonly found in modernist and post-modernist fiction, and which deals with the dissolution of social norms. Given its iconoclastic and nihilistic nature, entropic humour is closely related to the surrealist concept of black humour (Breton, 2009). It has five main modes of articulation which O’Neill (1990: 156) outlines as follows: ‘the satiric, the ironic, the grotesque, the absurd, and the parodic’. Aspects of all these modes are found throughout the works of Buñuel and Rulfo. Despite the fact that both artists worked in Mexico and were contemporaries, there is relatively little material comparing Buñuel’s films with Rulfo’s literary works, and, to date, a comprehensive analysis of representations of *mexicanidad* in their works has not been carried out, in particular their use of subversive narrative techniques.

Fuentes (2004) has examined the links between Buñuel’s films and the Latin American New Novel, citing the collaboration between the director and several prominent politically-engaged Mexican writers such as Mauricio Magdaleno, Juan de la Cabada, José Revueltas and Emilio Carballido. He maintains that *Los olvidados* (1950) went on to influence Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo* (1955) and many of the writers who were part of the Latin American literary ‘Boom’. In addition, he suggests that Buñuel’s *El ángel exterminador* (1962) was one of the first cinematic expressions of magical realism, and may well have been influenced by Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo*. In order to fully explore their counter-hegemonic narrative techniques, we will now outline the composition of some of the discourses of cultural nationalism which were prevalent at the time.

Ever since the Revolution, as the new nation made the transition from tradition to modernity, that is, from a semi-feudal society dominated by the oligarchy to a modern bourgeois, nation-state, successive governments tried, with varying degrees of success, to implement social and

political reform. The Partido Revolucionario Nacional (PNR), founded by Plutarco Elías Calles, had as its principal aim the realisation of the core aspirations of the Revolution: land reform and nationalization of industry⁶. However, despite some moderate gains during his government (1924-28), power gradually began to fall back into the hands of the nationalist bourgeoisie. Lorente-Murphy (1988: 24) notes that ‘la burguesía [...] hizo suya la Revolución y [...] le devuelve al país un porfirismo renovado’. The president’s tenure was also marked by the Cristero War (1926-28), a bitter and bloody conflict between Church and state which was remarkably resolved by the early 1930s⁷.

During this period, *mexicanidad*, along with the social values that this term was thought to encapsulate, and with a considerable degree of Church and state influence, had been steadily undergoing a process of re-imagination and homogenization. According to Acevedo-Muñoz (2003: 21-2) ‘[o]ne of the great achievements of the government’s cultural project in the 1930s was combining a sense of creole patriarchy with Indian arts and crafts and Catholic morals’. The re-naming of the ruling party as the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional), during the successful 1940 electoral campaign of Ávila Camacho (1940-46), was arguably an attempt to demonstrate that the ideals of the Revolution had finally been implemented and that it now assumed a reified status as both an *institution* and a national icon.

These nationalist discourses often advanced an idealized, teleological, and utopian vision of the country. Jameson (2005) explicitly links state ideology and notions of utopia: ‘Whole social movements have tried to realize a Utopian vision, communities have been founded and revolutions waged in its name’. In Mexico, a Utopian vision of the future of the country is evident in such foundational texts as *La raza cósmica* (1925) by José Vasconcelos⁸, a work which describes the combination of indigenous and European bloodlines in Mexico as the creation of a more highly evolved ‘fifth race’⁹. Indeed the ideology underpinning the Revolution was closely linked with the figure of the *mestizo*. Lomnitz-Adler (1992: 281) suggests that the Revolution’s ‘reappraisal of Indian cultures and its identification of “the

⁶ See Lorente-Murphy (1988) for an outline of the political and cultural context of the post-Revolutionary period in Mexico.

⁷ See Chapter 2, section 2.2, for a more detailed discussion of the Cristero War.

⁸ Vasconcelos served as the first Secretary of Public Education under Álvaro Obregón (1920-4). His fervent nationalism is also evident in *Ulises criollo* (1936). See Franco (1994: 195) for a detailed discussion of this text.

⁹ *La raza cósmica* can be seen as a project of assimilation rather than integration. Thakkar (2012: 45) summarises the situation as follows: ‘Indians were expected to conform to the cosmic race: they would be redeemed once they had acquired the qualities of the *mestizo*, these qualities being a combination of the physical robustness of the Indian and what Vasconcelos called ‘la mente clara del blanco’.

Mexican” with “the mestizo” allowed for the reconstruction of a hierarchical ideology under the aegis of a protectionist state’.

The continual ‘performance’ of national identity is central to such unifying strategies. Consequently, the staging of social and religious rituals occupies a central space in the Mexican national imaginary¹⁰, and these rites of inclusion, often to the exclusion of those who do not conform, arguably foster a collective sense of belonging to the nation, with politicians and priests as the principal actors. The tendency of these ‘traditional’ rituals to equate reality with cultural representations of reality is underlined by García Canclini (2005: 110) as follows:

What is defined as patrimony and identity claims to be the faithful reflection of the national essence. Hence its principal dramatic performance is the mass commemoration: civic and religious celebrations, patriotic anniversaries, and, in dictatorial societies, especially restorations.

One can argue that these social rituals tend to enforce strict patterns of normative behaviour, such as adherence to social and religious mores, traditional paradigms of masculinity and femininity, along with a promotion of narratives of heroic patriotism. National symbols are also an integral part of this process. In the case of post-Revolutionary Mexico, death was elevated to a totemic status in the national imaginary.

These rituals are linked to the concept of hegemony, a complex ideological process through which the dominant social group influences the values of the rest of the population. Gramsci (1971: 12) defines hegemony as follows:

The ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed in social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.

When applied to national linguistic and cultural systems, hegemony can be seen as the restriction, or elision, of certain marginal discourses and forms of expression rather than the direct imposition of a particular ideology (Jackson Lears, 1985).

Throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, visual images and literary texts played a key role in the construction of the new nation as a cultural artefact. Representations of *mexicanidad* in

¹⁰ See Anderson (1991) with respect to the role of religion in the modern nation state.

La Narrativa de la Revolución, Mexican national cinema, the Muralist movement, and indeed studies on the nature of *mexicanidad* itself, would prove highly influential. While these works addressed and critiqued key social and political issues, one can argue that aspects of these cultural texts were incorporated into the discourses of cultural nationalism which tended to promote a monolithic idea of the nation and its shared values, while exerting a powerful hegemonic influence on citizens. Doremus (2001: 3) maintains that Mexican literature and film were ‘complementary within the framework of nationalism’.

Anderson (1991) identifies the realist novel and the newspaper as key cultural forms which help to generate a sense of belonging to the single community of the nation. By harnessing their inherent capacity to entertain and instruct, many texts, such as Domingo Sarmiento’s *Facundo* (1962, 1st pub. 1845) were appropriated by Latin American states during the process of nation-building. Dove (2004: 11) outlines the ideological relationship with the state as follows: ‘[L]iterature participates in the consolidation of the modern nation-state by acting as a pedagogical device, helping to secure consensus for the economic, political and military projects associated with nation-building’. In particular, the tragic mode was the favoured form of aesthetic literary expression given its historical association with the development of democracy, and for its capacity to instruct citizens by example. In Mexico, foundational works such as *Clemencia* (1869), *La navidad en las montañas* (1870), and *El Zarco* (1901) by Ignacio Manuel Altamirano had considerable influence on the formation of post-Independence Mexican national identity¹¹.

In the post-Revolutionary period, the novels of the Narrativa de la Revolución explored the darker, morally ambiguous, and generally more pessimistic side of the conflict, highlighting corruption and the lack of a central ideology on the part of the revolutionaries. These works embraced a socio-realist and journalistic style so as to achieve greater verisimilitude (Shaw, 2002). Despite these technical advances, however, many of these texts were restricted by excessively linear narratives and intrusive ‘moral commentary’ which tended to interrupt the flow of the action (Monsiváis, 2013). With respect to style, many of these narratives were suffused with *costumbrismo*, paying elegiac tribute to the heroes of the Revolution, leaders like Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa. On an ideological level, one can argue that the essential characteristics of post-Revolutionary *mexicanidad* depicted in these texts, filtered through hegemonic state ideology, were beginning to undergo a process of reification. With

¹¹ See Franco’s (1994) overview of foundational literature in Mexico.

reference to early twentieth century Latin American literature, Franco (1994: 193) notes the emergence of ‘the belief that literature was an agent of national integration and that through it, divergent areas and peoples could be brought into the stream of national culture’.

Mariano Azuela’s works evince many of the ideological contradictions at the heart of the Revolution. Juxtaposed with depictions of cruelty, pillage, the crumbling of idealism, and absence of morality, his narratives also extol virtues such as bravery, generosity, and nobility of spirit. A central moral impasse for the reader in his texts is the uneasy awareness of the fact that the revolutionaries used the same level of violence as was inflicted on them by the government and the *hacendados*. The novels are also characterized by *machismo* and a sense that the Revolution was undermined by cowardice, betrayal, and the ‘tragic’ destiny of the Mexican people¹². In *Los de abajo* (1915), the need to forge a new post-Revolutionary Mexican nation, through self-sacrifice, is summed up by the character of Luis Cervantes:

¿Será justo abandonar a la patria en estos momentos solemnes en que va a necesitar de toda la abnegación de sus hijos humildes para que la salven, para que no la dejen caer de nuevo en manos de sus eternos detentadores y verdugos, los caciques? ... ¡No hay que olvidarse de lo más sagrado que existe en el mundo para el hombre: la familia y la patria! (Azuela 2001: 116)

Through patronage, the Mexican state attempted to ‘align’ the views of literary critics with its own conception of what constituted ‘national identity’ and ‘national literature’, as Monsiváis (2013: 65) outlines:

En 1924 y 1925, Julio Jiménez Rueda reclama la existencia de una “literatura viril”. Francisco Monterde le responde exaltando *Los de abajo*. De nuevo, la urgencia de la política de unidad. Se puede auspiciar lo “duro y dramático” si esto contribuye a forjar la “conciencia nacional”.

The novel is innovative in its use of segmentation, with each episode corresponding to a particular stage in the Revolution. However, this narrative technique is not overtly emphasised on the plane of discourse, and the gaps in the text frequently serve to show the normal passage of time from one day to the next. Clark D’Lugo (1997: 22) notes that ‘there are no jarring temporal jumps or disorienting contiguity’.

¹² While *Los de abajo* has often been seen as contributing to masculinist narrative discourses in Mexico, due to its depiction of violence and representation of male characters, Harris (2010) has shown that it is possible to read the novel against the grain to reveal a subtle disruption of normative hegemonic masculinity. One could argue that the discourses of cultural nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s often appropriated aspects of cultural texts which seemed to align themselves with state ideology, eliding or suppressing other more subversive readings.

El águila y la serpiente (1995, 1st pub. 1928) by Martín Luis Guzmán is an autobiographical account of the author's experiences during the Revolution. The great revolutionary leader Pancho Villa is portrayed as a complex character, idealized and critiqued in equal measure. Notwithstanding its pessimistic portrayal of the conflict, Gyurko (1996: 253) suggests that the novel, with its reference to the image on the Mexican flag, can be seen as a quest for 'the spiritual essence of the Mexican national identity'.

The Revolution is represented from a female perspective in *Cartucho* (1959, 1st pub. 1931) by Nellie Campobello. The story was influenced by some of the author's personal experiences of the conflict and is narrated in the first person. However, despite its innovative treatment of male and female characters, one can argue that the text tends to align itself with the post-Revolutionary nation building project. According to Doremus (2001: 45), the novel's depiction of the Revolution is indicative of 'her [Campobello's] allegiance to cultural nationalism'.

The innovative *Al filo del agua* (1947) by Agustín Yáñez can be considered as an intermediate step between the more conventional socio-realist narratives of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, and the more radical experimental modernist narratives of the 1950s. The text is comprised of a fragmented discourse which is contained within a traditional chapter division. While it draws the reader's attention to the process of narration, our response to the text is often guided by the omniscient narrator. Despite the innovative use of textual fragmentation, there are no radical time jumps and the events depicted follow a linear chronology from 1909 to 1910 (Clark D'Lugo, 1997). The novel critiques aspects of religious fanaticism and rural poverty which characterised the *Porfiriato*, and the gathering storm of the Revolution is depicted as a liberating force from social and religious repression. With reference to the ending of the novel, Harris (2000: 9) suggests that 'it was clearly designed to steer readers of the 1940s towards a critical but ultimately positive assessment of the uprising's social impact in rural Mexico'. This interpretation, to a certain extent, would tend to align the novel with discourses of post-Revolutionary cultural nationalism¹³, since the text revisits the underlying reasons for the uprising, rather than focusing on the ideological bankruptcy of the actual armed conflict.

¹³ The critical perception of Yáñez's novels has often been influenced by his political activism with the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Many critics suggest that his artistic integrity may have been compromised through political affiliation (Franco, 1988). However, (Harris, 2000) has underlined the validity of the socio-critical aspects of his works.

Films produced during the Golden Age of Mexican cinema (1936–59) performed a greater ideological function when compared to contemporary literary works, given that the state, through the studio system, had considerably more artistic control. In the post-Revolutionary period, and particularly during the Second World War, Mexico had become the leading Latin American producer of films. In 1942, Ávila Camacho founded the *Banco Cinematográfico* to help support domestic film production. This backing, however, came at a price: in the first place, the organization was reluctant to finance any film that lacked commercial appeal; there was also an ideological aspect to this relationship¹⁴, where the state took advantage of artistic output in order to influence its citizens. Polizzotti (2006: 23) outlines this collusion between state and film studios as follows: ‘Since the Revolution, the Mexican state had used popular culture as the primary tool of ideological education. Films were expected to promote certain national values, such as the nobility of the native Indian culture or the sanctity of the family’. The apotheosis of Mexican national cinema on the international stage took shape in the epic cinematic narratives of Emilio Fernández, in films such as *Flor silvestre* (1943) and *Río escondido* (1947), featuring the sweeping panoramic photography of Gabriel Figueroa. During this period, several important and popular genres emerged. The more influential of these were: the *comedia ranchera*, the revolutionary/historical epic, the family melodrama, the *cabaretera*, and the classic comedy.

The *comedia ranchera* was generally a love story set in a rural, pastoral idyll; its story world was often populated by naïve *campesinos*, benevolent patriarchal figures, über-masculine *charros*, and beautiful, virtuous women. There was a strong tendency to idealize the preindustrial era and the treatment of the material could be comic or dramatic, frequently a combination of both. *Allá en el rancho grande* (1936) directed by Fernando de Fuentes is a notable example.

The revolutionary/historical epic, also known as the revolutionary melodrama, commonly depicted a part of the Mexican Revolution. The main focus of this sweeping drama was to accentuate the role of the hero in the formation of the modern Mexican nation. Acevedo-Muñoz (2003: 6) describes the majestic pictorial aspect of this genre as follows: ‘In its epic scale, desert landscapes, and spectacular battle sequences it condenses stylistic traits of Mexican Muralism and socialist realism’. These features are evident in the classic films *Flor*

¹⁴ Core national values were codified, reified, and protected by a series of cinema laws passed by Congress. Acevedo-Muñoz (2003: 18) maintains that ‘films had to respect the Mexican nation, Mexican authorities, and Mexican law’.

silvestre (1943) and *Enamorada* (1948) by Emilio Fernández. To make the Revolution more commercially viable at the box office, these films often depicted the glorious side of battle, generally avoiding gritty socio-realist techniques, and emphasizing the core values of the nation, especially the necessary sacrifices which were required to bring about its foundation, as Monsiváis (2013: 66) suggests: ‘Entre iluminaciones comerciales de la vocación sangrienta de la raza, brota el escamoteo de la realidad y todo se reduce a demasiadas cananas y a la cumplida indiferencia ante la muerte’. From these idealized representations, the Revolution passed from historical reality to official folklore. It must be noted that not all films from this period tended to glorify the Revolution. The ideological shortcomings of the armed conflict were initially explored by Fernando de Fuentes in the following three films: *El compadre Mendoza* (1933), *El prisionero trece* (1933), and *¡Vámonos con Pancho Villa!* (1935). As Noble (2005: 56) puts it, ‘all three films provide a bold critique of the Revolution’s fratricidal factionalism’.

Another popular genre was the family melodrama. With respect to the morals of the nation, the main purpose was often to reassert traditional patriarchal values and emphasise the unity, sanctity and security of the Church, family, and state. The family home was often presented as a metaphor for the state, where patriarchy was equated to stability and prosperity. Mora (1989: 57) argues that the ideological framework of the Golden Age Mexican melodrama revolved around the traditional trinity of ‘God, Nation, and Home’. The Mexican mother was also a central part of this continuum, closely linked to the nurturing capacity of the land in state discourses. Thakkar (2012: 53) suggests that ‘feminine concepts of the ‘patria’ as the ‘motherland’ [...] were useful for the invocation of spiritual loyalty in a country where devotion to the mother had become institutionalised’. Examples of films which exhibit some of these characteristics include: *La mujer del puerto* (1933) by Arcady Boytler, *No basta ser madre* (1937) by Ramón Peón, *Cuando los hijos se van* (1941) directed by Juan Bustillo Oro, the musical melodrama *Nosotros los pobres* (1947) by Ismael Rodríguez, and *Una familia de tantas* (1948) by Alejandro Galindo. To attract their audience, these films often employed the seductive appeal of mild titillation, in the form of adultery, lewdness, or other similar moral transgressions. The *cabaretera* films can be considered as a sub-genre of the family melodrama which dealt with the problems of modernity and the new liminal spaces that were opening up in urban environments: bars, cabarets, bordellos and dance halls. These spaces were emerging out of rampant urban expansion and thematically these films explored the

difficulty of maintaining traditional morals in a modern environment. Examples include: *Distinto amanecer* (1943) by Julio Bracho and Alberto Gout's *Aventurera* (1949).

The classic comedy was the last of these main genres, featuring working-class characters like Cantinflas and Tin-Tán, who exemplified the two main kinds of comic character found in classical Mexican cinema: the *pelado*¹⁵ and the *pachuco*¹⁶. For instance, Cantinflas (Mario Moreno) had his first starring role in the film *¡Así es mi tierra!* (1937) set in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution and directed by Arcady Boytler. Germán Valdés (Tin-Tán) appeared in countless comedies including *El hijo desobediente* (1945) directed by Humberto Gómez Landero. Aspects of these films advocated bearing hardship with a sense of humour as long as it did not impinge on the status quo, thus implicitly reinforcing the social hierarchy of Mexican society. By representing the comic misadventures of these characters, these films depicted the working class as being integrated with the discourse of the nation. However, there was a misleading aspect to this relationship, as Acevedo-Muñoz (2003: 6) observes: 'The function of classic social comedy in Mexican films was to give the working classes the illusion of being represented in the nation's cinematic imaginary'.

At its core, the Mexican Muralist movement was an attempt to bring art, history, and culture within the reach of the working classes, many of whom could neither read nor write. The pedagogic ambition of these vast and influential works, according to Diego Rivera (quoted in Monsiváis 2013: 96) was '[e]scribir en enormes murales públicos la historia de la gente iletrada que no puede leerla en libros'. Stylistically, the Muralist movement was heavily influenced by religious art from the colonial era, combined with thematic elements stemming from classical antiquity. This is evident in Rivera's first work, aptly titled, *La Creación*, completed between 1922 and 1923 in the Bolívar Amphitheatre in Mexico City. The initial reception of this mural, along with works by Siqueiros and Orozco, was mixed, with some conservative elements within contemporary Mexican society questioning their nature as art, that is, popular works which were not located in Churches, museums, or private homes, to being lauded as paradigms of Mexican art on the international stage. Their socialist ideology (Ramírez-Rodríguez, 2013) also perturbed conservative sectors of the population, with communist symbols such as the hammer and sickle appearing regularly in the works of Rivera. The movement explored a diverse array of social and political themes, highlighting

¹⁵ Ramos (2014, 1st pub. 1934) refers to the *pelado* as a Mexican working class male.

¹⁶ Paz (2002: 16) outlines the hybridity of the figure of the *pachuco* (Young Mexican male immigrants in North America) as follows: 'no quiere [el pachuco] volver a su origen mexicano; tampoco [...] desea fundirse a la vida norteamericana.

injustice, celebrating the heroic struggle of the working classes, and advancing scathing critiques of the ruling classes.

The Revolution was a central theme and the symbolic exaltation of its heroes was crucial to the nation-building process which was already underway even before the armed conflict ended. Due to the single unifying perspective of the artistic space, that is, a two-dimensional flat wall, the murals often invited the viewer to forge conceptual links between the diverse historical figures which were represented therein. One can argue that there was a certain tendency in some of these works, especially in those by Rivera, to see the Revolution as a 'year zero', a new point of departure for the Mexican nation, a phoenix which arose majestically from the ashes of the uprising, eliminating class difference, and weaving the heterogeneous strands of pre-Revolutionary history into a single tapestry which emphasised the birth and teleological destiny of the new nation. Monsiváis (2013: 96-97) notes the unifying tendency of the movement: 'Así, el muralismo traslada a la vista del público o la sociedad, las ideas de Nación y Humanidad'. This particular aspect can be seen in Rivera's triptych of murals entitled *Epopéya del pueblo mexicano* (1929-1935) in the stairwell of the Palacio Nacional de México. In this monumental work, the struggle of the Aztecs against the Spanish is depicted alongside the heroes of the Revolution (Zapata, Villa, and Madero) thus condensing and unifying the diverse strands of Mexican history in the same artistic space. Ramírez-Rodríguez (2013: 340) suggests that this work, commissioned by José Vasconcelos, was principally 'dedicada a legitimizar al Estado nacional revolucionario'.

The Muralist movement was to have a profound influence on Mexican national cinema, with Eisenstein's *¡Que viva México!* (1934) displaying many of the stylistic features of Rivera's early murals (Acevedo-Muñoz, 2003). The intermedial fusion of these two forms of cultural production is particularly evident in *Río Escondido* (1947) directed by Emilio Fernández. The film addresses aspects of the Mexican state's rural schools program of the 1930s, thus connecting educational policy and nationalism. It underlines the importance of the heroes of the Revolution, as well as illustrating the hybrid fusion of Hispanic and pre-Colombian culture in the ideological construction of the new modern Mexican nation. When the protagonist-teacher, played by María Félix, enters the National Palace to receive her mission instructions from President Alemán the camera pans over the south wall of Rivera's *Epopéya del pueblo mexicano*. The ideological import of the incorporation of this iconic mural within the film is summarised by Acevedo-Muñoz (2003: 24) as follows:

In that single shot, Emilio Fernández and cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa seem to be articulating three theses: that there is a historical-cultural bias to the Revolution; that public education policy is important in helping that project adhere together; and, finally, that the national cultural establishment, of which Diego Rivera was a foolproof symbol, played a substantial role in ensuring the success of that project.

The works of José Clemente Orozco, from Guadalajara, Jalisco, stand in direct contrast to the utopian imaginings which were characteristic of Rivera's murals, and thus eschew the tendency towards a unification of national ideals. Orozco's critical and pessimistic portrayal of the Revolution, reminiscent of 'La Narrativa de la Revolución', often features the aesthetic of the grotesque. For instance, the figure of Prometheus forms the central focus of *El hombre en llamas* (1938-39), a work which depicts the horrors of war. His work mercilessly satirized the clergy, the military, and the bourgeois, while reflecting his anarchist leanings.

Ever since the Conquest, intellectual essays and discussions dealing with questions of Mexican national identity seem to have been preoccupied with the melancholic side of the 'national temperament'. Furthermore, they exhibit a marked focus on the male gender, to a large extent excluding the female perspective. Ramos (2014: 61) characterized the prototypical Mexican male as ill tempered and violent: 'casi siempre está de mal humor y es a menudo iracundo y violento'. His protégé, Uranga (1990: 35) also theorized 'national character' in a predominantly negative manner, emphasizing tendencies towards depression and even dishonesty: 'Es el mexicano criatura melancólica [...] es un ser de infundio, con todos los matices de disimulo, encubrimiento, mentira [...]'. These theoretical 'constructs' left little room for the earthy, humorous side of Mexican character. The continual focus on the negative may have been due to the disappointment engendered by the failure of many of the ideals and aspirations of the Revolution, as Munguía Zatarain (2012: 24) suggests:

El desencanto que vivían los intelectuales [Ramos, Uranga, Paz] en la época en la que escribían estos tratados no les dejaba mucho espacio para el optimismo, ni mucho menos para el humor.

Nevertheless, despite their predominantly negative outlook, many of these influential essays were an earnest attempt to diagnose, through the application of psychoanalytical¹⁷ methods, and redeem perceived negative aspects of *mexicanidad*.

El laberinto de la soledad (1950) by Octavio Paz maintains this melancholic outlook on national character with its rather poetic and solemn tone. For instance, Paz (2002: 57) interprets spontaneous expressions of laughter and happiness during *festivales* and *fiestas* as masks to conceal internal sorrow coupled with profound feelings of inadequacy: ‘La noche de fiesta es también noche de duelo’. This somewhat lugubrious interpretation would seem to downplay the existence of genuine outbursts of happiness in Mexican society. With respect to Paz’s questioning of the ironic contrast between what he perceives as an all-pervasive sense of national ‘sadness’ and the proliferation of ‘fiestas alegres’, Munguía Zatarain (2012: 25) asserts that ‘la propia lógica de su pensamiento lo lleva a la negación de tal alegría porque desde la raíz de sus reflexiones reconoce la sonrisa como máscara defensiva, ocultadora’.

Studies on the nature of *mexicanidad*, such as those by Ramos (2014, 1st pub. 1934) and Paz (2002, 1st pub. 1950) also helped to shape the very construct that they purported to analyse, generating paradigms of *mexicanidad* from their own personal viewpoints. A crucial aspect of Bartra’s (1987: 17) examination of these psychoanalytical studies of national identity is his assertion that *mexicanidad* or ‘*lo mexicano*’ only has a literary and mythological existence: ‘existe principalmente en los libros y discursos que lo describen o exaltan, y allí es posible encontrar las huellas de su origen: una voluntad de poder nacionalista ligada a la unificación e institucionalización del Estado capitalista moderno’. While the hegemonic influence of cultural nationalism undoubtedly informs many aspects of *mexicanidad*, it should be emphasised that there is also a wider societal influence of popular culture (Lomnitz, 2008) on the construction of Mexican identity which has to be taken into account.

From the beginning of the 1950s, new counter-hegemonic currents in Mexican cultural production, particularly evident in the works of Buñuel and Rulfo, began to address, and in many ways question, conventional socio-realist representations of *mexicanidad* in earlier post-Revolutionary narrative forms through the deployment of experimental narrative techniques allied with dark humour. As a response to the changing cultural and historical

¹⁷ Monsiváis (2013: 250) suggests that there was what he terms a ‘Nacionalización de Freud’ in early twentieth century Mexico. Rather than focussing on the individual, prominent intellectuals, such as Ramos (2014) and Paz (2002), made reference to a ‘national neurosis’.

zeitgeist, these artistic innovations reflected a broader interrogation of utopian post-revolutionary nationalist ideology aligned with calls for a revised appraisal of the political and cultural achievements of the Revolution.

The move away from traditional social and historical realism towards modernist narrative techniques by many of the writers of the Latin American Boom was felt by many critics to constitute manifest dissociation from political engagement. A similar case could be made for experimental cinematic narratives, which distanced themselves from the explicit social comment characteristic of the Neo-realist movement. Nevertheless, it can be argued that these works were searching for new ways to engage with social reality. These self-reflexive texts highlighted their fictional nature precisely to draw attention to the fact that all national narratives are constructed, as Franco (2002: 8) asserts in the case of Latin American literature:

I attribute it [the use of experimental narration] to the difference between reductionist public rhetoric and the complexity of fiction in which writers explored the foundering not only of national autonomy but also the autonomy of the text. The political and the literary institution of the nation-state mirrored each other.

Furthermore, the move away from realism highlighted a lack of faith in traditional social structures; this is particularly relevant if one takes into account, as we have seen earlier, some of the ideological aspects of the realist mode and how it traditionally bolstered the status quo.

With respect to the relationship between avant-garde literary representation¹⁸ and its critique of nationalist discourses, Franco (2002: 7) suggests that many examples of experimental mid-twentieth century Latin American literature postulated an antithesis to the real state by depicting radically alternative realities: ‘In the writing of García Márquez, Juan Rulfo, and Roa Bastos we come upon different versions of this ‘antistate’ in confrontation with the despotic and patriarchal state imagined as territory and male body’. In this context, two artists who experimented with narrative form in highly original ways during the period in question were Luis Buñuel and Juan Rulfo. Each of these employed innovative techniques in cinema and literature, respectively, in mid-twentieth century Mexico, with varying effects but in

¹⁸ With reference to avant-garde painting, García Canclini (2005: 60) also identifies socio-realist styles with state ideology: ‘In Mexico, the cultural action of the modernizing bourgeoisie and of the vanguard artists did not arise in opposition to the traditional oligarchy, which was marginalized by the Revolution at the beginning of the century, but rather by contradicting the nationalist *realism* of the Mexican school backed by the post-Revolutionary state’.

ways that show interesting parallels to each other. It can be argued that their satirical critique of discourses of cultural nationalism reevaluated the relationship between the artist and the state in mid-twentieth century Mexican cultural history. Rather than simply seeking the common factors present in their works, the study aims to determine the extent to which their fictional worlds illuminate each other and the mid-twentieth century Mexican context.

Luis Buñuel

From 1939 to 1943, in exile from Franco's Spain, Buñuel worked in the Museum of Modern Art in New York as an editor of anti-Nazi propaganda. However, his subversive past soon caught up with him, and in 1946 he found himself by chance unemployed in Mexico City. It is here where he would eventually make his home, becoming a citizen in 1949. His works are characterized by a blend of subversive narrative techniques incorporating dark humour¹⁹. Thematically, his films consistently attack the hallowed institutions of the Church and state, the values of the bourgeoisie, essentially what could be termed the foundations of society. On a structural level, his narratives often disrupt the conventional logic of film narration.

Buñuel was acerbically critical of the traditional narrative conventions in the cinema, particularly those which aligned themselves with the ideology and censorship of the Church and state. In a speech given at UNAM in 1958, with respect to these conventional, generic approaches to filmmaking he suggested that:

[t]hey would rather have the screen reflect subjects that could be sequels to our everyday life, repeat for the thousandth time the same drama, or make us forget the daily drudgery of work. And all of this sanctioned, naturally, by conventional morality, government censorship, and religion, ruled by good taste and seasoned by bland humor and all the other prosaic imperatives of reality (Buñuel 2002: 138).

He strongly advocated the socio-critical role of art in society by blending socio-realism with the surreal and the fantastic. This hybrid approach ran counter to the Italian Neorealist movement which was in vogue at the time. This particular style relied completely on a documentary-like socio-realist approach in its productions, using non-professional actors and actual locations. In relation to this total reliance on socio-realism, Buñuel (2002: 140) argued

¹⁹ The following studies make reference to the central importance of humour in Buñuel's films: Stam (1989), Evans (1995), Kinder (1999), Fuentes (2000) and Egea (2013).

that '[n]eorealist reality is incomplete, conventional, and above all rational; poetry, mystery, everything that completes and enlarges tangible reality is entirely missing from its works'. By incorporating elements of socio-realism, allied with a penetrating exploration of the subconscious, it can be argued that Buñuel's narratives also avoid the complete escapism which is characteristic of certain works which rely completely on fantasy.

Buñuel was highly innovative when it came to subverting and parodying the traditional narrative forms of 'Golden Age' Mexican cinema. In relation to the director's Mexican works, Lillo (2015: 60) argues that '[a] contracorriente de la "nación imaginada" (Anderson, 1991) y sus estereotipos, que el cine mexicano contribuye a consolidar, las películas mexicanas de Buñuel se presentan como espacios textuales donde quedan expuestas las contradicciones, paradojas y aporías del discurso hegemónico'. The satirical and subversive manner in which he utilized the genres of commercial Mexican cinema—the melodrama, the comedy and the film-novel— can be compared to the 'alienation effect' employed in Brechtian theatre, as Fuentes (2000: 74) suggests:

La ironía y el humor, la antífrasis, la subversión de elementos y hasta las deficiencias de técnica y actuación contribuyen en su cine mexicano a realzar el efecto de distanciamiento o defamiliarización, encaminado, como preconizara el dramaturgo germano [Brecht], a hacernos ver, pensar y sentir el carácter contingente y motivado de las relaciones sociales establecidas'.

However, these alienating effects are not employed by Buñuel in the strict Marxist didactic sense characteristic of the Brechtian *Lehrstücke* (Learning plays). Contrary to Aristotle's (1976) optimistic assertion that we live in the 'best of possible worlds'—in a deployment of what O'Neill (1990) refers to as entropic satire— these works suggest that, as Buñuel (quoted in Fuentes 2000: 74) once remarked: 'No vivimos en el mejor de los mundos posibles'. The solution to the issues raised and satirized by the text is left to the judgement of the audience.

His first job with producer Óscar Dancigers was to direct *Gran Casino* (1946). Even though the film was judged to be a commercial and critical failure, Buñuel was already honing his film-making craft while drawing satirical attention to the trite conventions of the Mexican national film industry, particularly the genre of romantic melodrama. Just before each song performed by Jorge Negrete, the musicians conspicuously and ironically walk on to the film set to greet the leading man, thus self-reflexively playing with the conventional distinction between diegetic and extra-diegetic sound. The following films from his Mexican period are

particularly emblematic of this iconoclastic attitude: *Los olvidados* (1950), *El río y la muerte* (1954), *Ensayo de un crimen* (1955), *Nazarín* (1958), and *El ángel exterminador* (1962). These films deal with ritual, religion, gender, and patriotism, often undermining these reified values through experimental narration and humour. Representing around half of Buñuel's Mexican *oeuvre*, the films were selected according to three criteria: firstly, since the thesis deals with *mexicanidad*, it was essential that they all be set in Mexico; secondly, specific films were chosen where there was documented evidence (Fuentes, 2000) that the director had greater artistic control of the filmmaking process and was not overly constrained by the dictates of the studio system; finally, individual films were selected for their capacity to mutually illuminate the distinctive spatio-temporal narrative structures which characterise the works of Juan Rulfo, and where critics had identified a degree of mutual influence (Fuentes, 2004). We will return to these important films and offer a detailed analysis of them in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 below.

Juan Rulfo

Rulfo's experimental works are often seen as a precursor to the Latin American literary Boom. Shaw (2002: 109) outlines the technical characteristics of this movement as 'a tendency to abandon linear plot structure, and chronological arrangement [...]; the decline of the omniscient third-person narrator; the frequent incorporation of humour, satire, and parody; and a more prominent use of symbolic elements'. In contrast to traditional socio-realism, Rulfo's works, particularly *Pedro Páramo* (1955), and, to a lesser extent, some of the stories in *El llano en llamas* (1953), undermine linear narrative and break up conventional ideas of time and space. His bleak existential narratives are also home to a particular blend of dark humour²⁰ and experimental narration. They abound with images of decline and dissolution, suggesting the inevitable decay that occurs with rural isolation and the inexorable passage of time. In *Pedro Páramo*, Cosgrove (1991: 80) notes that '[a]cts of dissolubility and the erosion of form seem endemic'. In a socio-political sense, Rulfo's narratives explore the impact the Revolution had on rural Mexican society, especially the *campesinos*. *El llano en llamas* and *Pedro Páramo* satirize entrenched customs and religious rituals, traditional gender roles, and empty patriotic rhetoric, often portraying how the *campesinos* were manipulated by

²⁰ The key role of humour in Rulfo's works has been highlighted by the following critics, among others: González Boixo (1980), Garrido (2004), Olivier (2005), Munguía Zatarain (2012) and Perus (2012).

the dominant classes, both during the Revolution, and in the post-Revolutionary period. In conversation with Joseph Sommers in 1974, Rulfo (2003: 520) outlined how *Pedro Páramo* approaches conventional social values: ‘Simplemente se niegan algunos valores que tradicionalmente se han considerado válidos. En la novela [*Pedro Páramo*] están satirizados’.

Rulfo utilized a diverse array of experimental narrative techniques to break with traditional modes of artistic representation in Mexico. In contrast to the third-person omniscient narrator, which was characteristic of many previous socio-realist literary representations, such as that of the *costumbristas* and some of the canonical texts representative of La Narrativa de la Revolución, he placed a greater emphasis on first-person narrative viewpoints, thus emphasising the subjectivity of individual perception. Bhushan Choubey (2011: 73) outlines this feature as follows: ‘El narrador en su obra es casi siempre uno de los personajes con las capacidades limitadas, es decir, no se ve una visión omnisciente de los hechos, sino su percepción de lo que sucede debido a sus limitaciones’.

Rulfo’s distinctive use of narrative fragmentation, where the discourse plane is anachronous to the ‘natural’ chronological order of the story, highlights the manner in which the past is often apprehended, that is, in a series of spatially and temporally fragmented anecdotes. In so doing, the text underlines the heterogeneous nature of memory and history, elicits metafictional humour, and questions the unified and teleological nature of post-Revolutionary nationalist discourses. With respect to the latter, it can be argued that the concept of the ‘nation’, far from being a monolithic entity, is better described as a patchwork of competing mythologies and discourses. In relation to the social ramifications of narrative fragmentation in Mexican literature, Clark D’Lugo (1997: 10) suggests that ‘[a] second essential interpretation of fragmentation is that of a discourse that serves to destabilize the patriarchy, both in literary and more abstract, social terms’.

Many of Rulfo’s experimental narrative techniques can be related to the actualization of cinematic texts, particularly the concept of montage. For instance, in *Pedro Páramo*, the narrative is assembled using a series of textual fragments which resembles the sequential editing of a cinematic narrative. Negrín (2005: 356) notes the intermedial aspects of Rulfo’s works:

Reitero que apuntes como fragmentación, dislocación de las secuencias temporales, yuxtaposición, montaje, repetidos una y otra vez en los análisis de textos de Rulfo se asocian con procedimientos cinematográficos, aunque no se emplee el término.

Like Buñuel's experimental montage, Rulfo's ironic narratives are highly self-reflexive and often draw attention to the process of their own construction, that is, to their nature as literature. In *Pedro Páramo*, the fragmentation of the text implicitly draws our attention to issues of narration. This meditation on the nature of narration and the construction of the literary text itself stimulates the reader to examine the construction of his/her social reality, in addition to the social reality depicted in the text. These moments of 'baring the device', involving the formation of links between the world of *story* and that of *discourse*, show, in effect, how this 'reality', or 'story world', is mediated through specific discourses, as Perus (2005: 94) suggests:

Constituiría como una suerte de doble fondo, o de *mise en abîme*, por cuanto los planos de la historia narrada, el relato (la forma de narración) y la figuración de la instancia enunciativa y narrativa presentan una serie de "desajustes", que pudieran estar destinados a propiciar en el lector formas de reflexión que fueran "más allá" de los "contenidos" y la "forma" del relato.

We will return to these various aspects of Rulfo's work in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, making specific references to the key texts, *El llano en llamas* and *Pedro Páramo*. The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows.

The first chapter, 'Subversive Narrative Techniques', sets out the overarching theoretical framework which will guide and inform the analysis of the primary texts in subsequent chapters. I begin with an outline of some of the key features of socio-realist and modernist texts, with a particular emphasis on self-reflexive narration. I also explore textual fragmentation and Brecht's (1974) concept of 'alienation' as applied to literature and cinema. Given that the works expose social rituals as a form of 'theatre', I next examine the subversive use of representational space. Foucault's (1986) ideas on spatiality, specifically 'heterotopias of deviance', are of central importance, especially in relation to structures of power and the post-Revolutionary state. By transforming normative social space, Buñuel's and Rulfo's works break down conventional visual and linguistic semiotic systems. The inversion of social mores in these spaces leads to an examination of stereotypical gender roles. In particular, I discuss Massey's (1994) 'gendered spaces', and Butler's (1990) ideas on drag performance. Finally, I turn to the use of humour as a subversive discourse. Beginning with Brechtian theories of comedy and tragedy, I then move on to Bakhtin's (1984, 1968) concepts of the carnivalesque and the grotesque. These ideas on humour are then integrated

with techniques of self-reflexive narration, paying particular attention to O'Neill's (1990) concept of entropic humour, a mode closely linked to surrealist black humour (Breton, 2009).

Chapter 2, entitled 'Spatiality, Ritual, and Religion in Buñuel and Rulfo', focuses on the nature and construction of the mysterious story worlds created by Buñuel and Rulfo. I explore the importance of spatiality and social ritual, with a particular focus on religion. By applying Foucault's (1986) concept of heterotopias of deviance, along with O'Neill's (1990) theory of entropic parody, to the underworld of Comala in Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1955) and the music room in Buñuel's *El ángel exterminador* (1962) respectively, I analyse the disruptive representation of conventional social space, and determine how this technique destabilizes the semiology of traditional representations of social and religious rituals. I also make reference to the public 'performance' of ritual and religion, in Buñuel's *Nazarín* (1958) and Rulfo's 'Talpa' (1953) given that these works often satirically portray social customs and religious ceremonies as a form of 'theatre'. The final part of the chapter deals with the works' treatment of self-abasement, and the public 'performance' of grief and suffering.

Chapter 3 'Un-mapping Traditional Gender Roles in Buñuel and Rulfo' is focused on questions of gender, and in particular how subversive narrative techniques denaturalize conventional 'gender-appropriate' behaviour in the works. The chapter opens with a consideration of earlier post-Revolutionary depictions of masculinities and femininities in Mexico. Building on the examination of space and social performance in Chapter 2, Butler's (1990) theory of gender performance forms a central part of the analysis. This is supplemented by Connell's (1995) ideas on masculinities, along with the concept of the Virgin/*Malinche* paradigm. The focus consequently shifts from the surrounding story worlds in Chapter 2 to the social reality of the characters, with parodic links being explicitly established with previous representations of masculinity and femininity in earlier examples of post-Revolutionary Mexican cultural production. The first section deals with the counter-hegemonic depiction of gender performance in Buñuel's *Ensayo de un crimen* (1955) and Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, before moving on to consider their distinctive approach towards female characterisation. The chapter concludes with a detailed analysis of the parodic treatment of the 'sacred' figure of the Mexican mother in *Los olvidados* (1950) and *Pedro Páramo*.

In Chapter 4, 'Death and the Mexican Nation in Buñuel and Rulfo' I turn to the issue of death, given that it has arguably become elevated to a symbol of *mexicanidad* in the post-

Revolutionary national imaginary. Mortality and decline are central preoccupations in Buñuel's and Rulfo's works and yet these themes are often placed in an ironic light. I will concentrate specifically on the destabilizing treatment of the mythology of 'indifference towards death'²¹, a construct which is tied in with the nationalist 'virtues' of patriotism and heroism. I begin by outlining some of the key discourses which have contributed to this particularly Mexican understanding of death, drawing on the ideas of Paz (2002), Bartra (1987), and Lomnitz (2008). I then analyse the subversive representation of pre-Hispanic conceptions of death in Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, along with the carnivalesque portrayal of the deaths of Miguel Páramo and Susana San Juan. The ironic depiction of the Mexican national festival the Days of the Dead in Buñuel's *El río y la muerte* (1954) is then analysed. During the Revolution, pre-Hispanic conceptions of death were often integrated with nationalist discourses of heroism and patriotic self-sacrifice in the national imaginary. In relation to these national narratives, I explore the portrayal of death and class conflict in Rulfo's '¡Diles que no me maten!' (1953) and *Pedro Páramo*; and in Buñuel's *El ángel exterminador* and *Los olvidados*.

The conclusion draws all these chapters together and highlights the shared formal and thematic aspects of Buñuel's and Rulfo's experimental narratives. In relation to their mid-twentieth century context, I suggest that they can be seen as part of a genre of darkly humorous Mexican cultural production. I also offer new lines of enquiry which might be pursued in further studies, such as an investigation of the resonances between their works and other forms of Mexican cultural production, and an examination of the links between Buñuel's films and Rulfo's photographs and screenplays.

²¹ See Bartra's analysis of *la muerte fácil* (1987).

Chapter 1: Subversive Narrative Techniques

‘Mexico, [...] with its splendid funeral toys, stands as the chosen land of black humour’ (Breton 2009: 23)

In this chapter, I set out the overarching theoretical framework which will underpin the analysis of the primary texts in subsequent chapters. The principal concepts and categories of analysis are all succinctly explained before they are applied in the ensuing textual analyses. What must be said immediately, however, is that once these concepts and categories are mobilised for interpretive purposes they do obtain different degrees of importance and relevance. A central concept of the study is Foucault’s (1986) ‘heterotopias of deviance’ which I choose to use rather than dystopia because I seek to position Buñuel’s and Rulfo’s textual worlds in a series of ideologically oppositional contrasts to the utopian worlds articulated in the state’s discourses of cultural nationalism, especially the discourse of progress broadly or national economic development more specifically. A second key concept is ‘entropic humour’ (O’Neill, 1990) which I use to discuss some of the ways in which Buñuel and Rulfo draw attention to patterns of social fragmentation in Mexico, thus contesting the myth of national unity on the textual basis of combining structural fragmentation with a disturbingly dark sense of humour suffused with the presence of the abject (Kristeva, 1982).

Since Buñuel and Rulfo employ a distinctive combination of realist and modernist techniques in their works, I begin with a brief outline of the key features of these modes. This leads to a consideration of self-reflexive narration, in particular Brecht’s (1974) ideas on ‘alienation’ as applied to literature and cinema. These frame-breaking techniques are designed to expose the rhetoric and ‘performance’ beneath everyday utterances and indeed hegemonic state discourses. The staging of social ritual as a form of theatre leads us to consider the nature of the narrative *space* in which identity is performed. As Lefebvre (1991) and Foucault (1977)

have shown, spatiality is intimately tied in with structures of power, in particular the institutions of the state. What follows then is a discussion of how conventional treatment of space in narrative can be disrupted, with a particular emphasis on Foucault's (1986) heterotopias of deviance. Given the key role of normative gender roles in the Mexican national imaginary, Massey's (1994) ideas on gendered spaces and Butler's (1990) theory of gender as 'performance' are also relevant to the study. Finally, I turn to the issue of humour as a subversive discourse, beginning with Bakhtin's (1984) concept of the carnivalesque. I then move on to consider the key aspects of black (Breton, 2009) and entropic (O'Neill, 1990) humour, modes which feature prominently in the works under consideration and which are also connected to techniques of self-reflexive narration.

1.1 Narrative Structures

The comparative perspective adopted by this study is closely related to what Stam (1989: 56), while discussing the potential application of Bakhtin's (1986) theories to the cinema, refers to as 'a trans-linguistic approach' which allows us to:

Re-appreciate the links of film to other "series" or semiotic systems, to reaffirm the affinities of film studies to other disciplines, and to re-envision the relation between film history and the larger historical trajectory of narrative and discursive forms.

With reference to the relationship between different semioses, Bakhtin (1986: 106) argues that '[a]ny sign system, regardless how small the collective that produces its conventions may be, can always be deciphered, that is, translated into other sign systems'. Rather than focussing on the idea of the autonomous work of art, I situate Buñuel's and Rulfo's works as artefacts within a web of interrelated cultural texts. Regarding Bakhtin's (1984) concept of heteroglossia (the constantly shifting layers of language and discourse), Stam (1989: 51) suggests that '[l]iterature, and by extension cinema, does not so much refer to or call up the world as it represents the world's languages and discourses'.

All narratives are comprised of two distinct planes, one referring to the story world 'what is expressed', and the other to the means of transmission of that information 'how it is expressed'. Chatman (1978: 19) outlines this structure as follows:

Each narrative has two parts: a story (*histoire*), the content or chain of events (actions, happenings), plus what may be called the existents (characters, items of setting); and a discourse (*discours*), that is, the expression, the means by which the content is communicated.

Discourse can be divided into two further sub-categories: the manifestation of the narrative, which relates to its medium; and the transmission, which encapsulates the relationship of ‘story time’ to ‘discourse time’, and the authority, or source, of the story. Narratives may be transmitted through a variety of different media, for instance, verbal, cinematic, or musical texts. According to Chatman (1978: 20), the fact that the same story can be conveyed through different media demonstrates that ‘narratives are indeed structures independent of any medium’. However, it is important to note that the medium still has a significant influence on the transmission of a narrative.

The series of events that make up any given story are generally referred to as the ‘plot’ of the narrative. Aristotle (1987) employed the term *mythos*, or the ‘arrangement of incidents’. The incidents in a story are transmitted to the audience via the discourse and the order of the events is also determined by the discourse. With respect to transmission and order in narratives, Chatman (1978: 43) suggests that ‘plot, story-as-discoursed, exists at a more general level than any particular objectification, any given movie, novel or whatever. Its order of presentation need not be the same as that of the natural logic of the story’. Essentially, the plot foregrounds certain events and characters in the narrative while lessening the importance of others; some incidents are interpreted in the text; others are left for the audience to infer. Regarding the relationship between story and plot, O. B. Hardison (1968: 123) states that ‘[e]ach arrangement produces a different plot, and a great many plots can be made from the same story’.

1.1.1 Socio-realism

Traditional realist narratives are not just structurally linear but also explicitly or implicitly causative. The audience instinctively seeks to connect even the most random and divergent events in a narrative. Where structure and causation are absent, the reader/viewer will usually employ inference to fill in the gaps. In traditional socio-realist texts, there is a teleological drive to the narrative, a chronological order, a sense that the problems depicted are examined and resolved in a rational manner (O’Neill, 1990). Frequently, these quintessentially

bourgeois, rationalist works naïvely claim to highlight perceived problems with normative reference to the ‘common sense’ good of all society. For instance, in the realist novel, the fictional world is faithfully rendered as a mirror image of the tangible reality of the everyday world. O’Neill (1990: 60) suggests that the general perception of the role of the realist writer involved ‘the faithful representation of a common-sense reality where the ground was solid under foot and romantic doubts and questionings as to ‘ultimate’ stability or the lack of it were by and large firmly quashed [...]’. Barthes (1986: 148) describes the mimetic enterprise of realism as rather constituting ‘a reality effect’. With respect to film, the documentary mode also makes certain claims to be a faithful depiction of reality. This mode is also utilized in the fusion of documentary with drama which was characteristic of the Neorealist movement (Polizzotti, 2006).

1.1.2 Modernism

In contrast, the modernist text denies the resolution of realist works and focuses instead on a detailed exploration of the circumstances surrounding the actions that are presented in the narrative. Chatman (1978: 48) states this in the following terms: ‘Revelatory [modernist] plots tend to be strongly character-orientated, concerned with the infinite detailing of existents, as events are reduced to a relatively minor, illustrative role’. In modernist works, rhetorical devices such as parody and satire are often employed to deconstruct the metanarratives of reason and progress intrinsic to Enlightenment philosophy, values which arguably underpin the ideological apparatus of the modern nation state. Drawing on darker subjective forces, modernism attempted to undermine bourgeois realism by the use of a ‘mythical’ rather than a ‘realistic’ method (O’Neill, 1990). Parody thus assumes central importance, as evidenced by the depiction of Leopold Bloom, in Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), as an urban, modern analogue of Homer’s wandering hero. Experimental narrative techniques such as fragmentation interrupted the linear causality of plot, while simultaneously drawing attention to the constructed nature of narrative itself.

The Surrealist movement was at the vanguard of Modernism. The former was heavily influenced by the ‘anti-art’ message of the Dada movement, as well as by the writings of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. Key figures included: André Breton, Marcel Duchamp, Rafael Alberti, Salvador Dalí, and Luis Buñuel. By privileging the irrational over the rational, the movement felt that the artist would be free to express the hidden motivations of the

unconscious mind thus challenging the dictates of artistic convention and the morality associated with the dominant hegemonic social order. Linear narratives were frequently subverted using fragmentation or collage, a form of ‘associative play’ which interfered with the logical development of the narrative through the insertion of circular or lateral associations (Adamowicz, 2010). These techniques challenged the conventions of the socio-realist mode of narration and encouraged more metaphorical readings of the texts. Buñuel’s *Un chien andalou* (1929), made in collaboration with Salvador Dalí, is considered a masterpiece of surrealist cinema, principally due to its unconventional approach to narration. Artists associated with the Surrealist movement also employed black humour (Breton, 2009) to question normative ideas of morality.

Both Rulfo and Buñuel employ a distinctive combination of realist, modernist techniques in their narratives creating *tension* in the narrative between the planes of story and discourse and thus destabilizing the rationalist pretensions of the bourgeois world view. The teleological drive of the narrative is posited on the level of story and then later diffused through the proliferation and arrangement of the discourse. Much of this narrative tension is the source of their characteristic dark humour, which, in essence, can be read as a metafictional parody of conventional narrative forms. This aspect of narrative structure is particularly relevant in the case of Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo*, where the order of the presentation of the narrative goes against the ‘natural’ chronology of the story²². This form of fractured narration is also used in Buñuel’s *Ensayo de un crimen* (1955). He also uses anachronous repetition in some of his other films, for instance, *El ángel exterminador* (1962), to undermine the viewer’s traditional narrative expectations. These narrative techniques draw attention to the constructed nature of the narrative. I will now examine how self-reflexive narration underlines the constructed nature of socio-political reality.

1.2 Self-Reflexive Narration

In addition to dialectical materialism, Marxist philosophy also explored the connection between art and ideology. However, many of the leading theorists disagreed on the best way to represent and criticise social issues. Lukács (1971) felt that artistic works must analyse the

²² An extreme example of this concept can be also found in Julio Cortázar’s ‘anti-novel’ *Rayuela* (1963), where the reader is encouraged to assemble narrative fragments in whatever order he or she chooses, thus actualizing a multitude of possible plots.

hidden dynamics operating in all levels of society, and that the best way to achieve this was through social realism. He was particularly critical of the Modernist movement because he felt that it placed too much emphasis on subjective experience and formal experimentation. In his opinion, it therefore lacked an objective perspective on reality. On the other side of the divide, the Frankfurt School of Marxist aesthetics completely rejected realism. One of its leading figures, Theodor Adorno (1997), felt that art should set itself apart from reality in order to criticise it more effectively; criticism of ideology was to be reflected in the narrative structure. Frequently, a modernist text, redolent with ambiguity, will challenge the reader to make an intensified hermeneutic effort to resolve the apparent contradictions. Eco (1979: 263) notes that the [modernist] text ‘incites me towards the discovery of an unexpected flexibility in the language with which I am dealing’. An aesthetic experience is produced when ‘the shock received by the breaking of certain rules forces the hearer to reconsider the entire organization of the content’. This ‘shock’ can be linked to the formalist concept of ‘defamiliarization’, put forward by Shklovsky (1990, 1st pub. 1925). Bertolt Brecht (1974) employed aspects of Shklovsky’s theory when developing the classic concept of the ‘alienation effect’, *Verfremdungseffekt* (V-effect), in socialist theatre. We will now outline some key aspects of Brecht’s V-effect with a particular emphasis on its relevance to subversive narrative structure in the works of Rulfo and Buñuel.

Brecht’s theatrical practice may be seen as being located between the two extremes represented by the ideas of Lukács and Adorno. Like Rulfo and Buñuel, he *combined* realist and modernist techniques in order to simultaneously render a socio-realist representation of the world and also undermine the audience’s suspension of disbelief in order to stimulate a more active and critical response to the artistic text. For instance, he was acerbically critical of the hypnotic effects of music, especially the harmonious sound of classically trained musicians and lush orchestrations which he felt washed over the spectator, thus dulling the critical faculties:

A single glance at the audiences who attend concerts is enough to show how impossible it is to make any political or philosophical use of music that produces such effects. We see entire rows of human beings transported into a peculiar state of intoxication, wholly passive, self-absorbed, and according to all appearances, doped. (1974: 89)

Buñuel (2012: 87) makes a related point with respect to the hypnotic power of cinema and in particular the ability of the medium to undermine the critical faculties:

Creo que el cine ejerce cierto poder hipnótico en el espectador. No hay más que mirar a la gente cuando sale a la calle, después de ver una película: callados, cabizbajos, ausentes. El público de teatro, de toros o de deporte, muestra mucha más energía y animación. La hipnosis cinematográfica, ligera e imperceptible, se debe sin duda, en primer lugar, a la oscuridad de la sala, pero también al cambio de planos y de luz y a los movimientos de la cámara, que *debilitan el sentido crítico del espectador* y ejercen sobre él una especie de fascinación y hasta de violación. (My emphasis)

Against the passive acceptance of the narrative, Buñuel's experimental films challenge and make considerable interpretative demands on the viewer. Rulfo's texts also require an *active* reader to make the necessary connections between the narrative fragments. With respect to *Pedro Páramo*, Rulfo (1992: 875) maintains that 'es un libro de cooperación. Si el lector no coopera, no le entiende; él tiene que añadirle lo que le falta'.

On a formal level, Brecht felt that artistic representations should be *fragmented* not unified, requiring the reader/spectator to form a more analytical view of the events portrayed in the narrative. Examples of this 'alienating' narrative technique can be found in the fractured structure of Rulfo's 'Luvina', '¡Diles que no me maten!', and of course *Pedro Páramo*. Buñuel's unconventional use of montage and repetition is evident in *Los olvidados* and *El ángel exterminador*. Benjamin (1973: 2) outlines that, in Brechtian theatre, the audience and the performer are united, there is no 'magic circle' which delimits the extent of the stage. Brecht wanted to focus the audience's attention on the 'constructed' nature of social reality. With respect to socio-revelatory aspects of Brecht's Epic theatre, Eagleton (1986: 168) suggests the following:

It is because political society does not recognize itself as *production* that it must be *represented* as such, which (since the concept of production itself overturns classical notions of representation) is bound to result in a self-contradictory aesthetic.

Brecht's V-effect exploits this contradiction by positing and subverting simultaneously. Both Rulfo and Buñuel challenged naturalistic, socio-realist, and classical, forms of Mexican cultural production with their experimental techniques, thus drawing attention to the constructed nature of the fictional narrative and the abstract social structures and discourses which are presented therein. Benjamin (1973: 4) contrasts the Brechtian principle of 'distancing' the spectator with the focus on 'suspension of disbelief' more commonly associated with classical drama:

Epic theatre, by contrast, [to naturalistic Aristotelian drama] incessantly derives a lively and productive consciousness from the fact that it is theatre. This consciousness enables it to treat elements of reality as though it were setting up an experiment, with the 'conditions' at the end of the experiment, not at the beginning. Thus they are not brought close to the spectator but distanced from him.

Effectively, the V-effect in theatre allows the audience to relate the events depicted on stage to the social 'mythologies' which permeate their lives, as Eagleton (1986: 169) asserts: 'Its task [theatrical discourse] is to reveal the repressed rhetoricity of non-theatrical utterances'. It can be argued that cinematic and literary narratives are also capable of producing similar effects in the viewer/reader.

Brecht's V-effect, to a certain extent, anticipated and encapsulated many later movements in literary and cultural theory including Structuralism and Post-structuralism. For instance, Brecht's deconstruction of the mythology surrounding ideas of heroism and nationalism is further theorized, via a semiotic analysis, by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* (1972). This is of particular relevance for the present study given Rulfo's and Buñuel's critique and re-appraisal of nationalist discourses surrounding ideas of *mexicanidad*.

According to Barthes (1972: 11), mythical expression comprises a second-order semiotic system which can be deciphered by the creation of the 'artificial mythologies' characteristic of literature, and in particular, fictional satire. In his initial definition of what constitutes myth, he asserts that his goal is to 'track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there' (109). He goes on to define myth as 'a type of speech'. This 'type of speech' is not 'defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message'. A connection could be established between this concept and the narratological definition of *story* and *discourse* (Chatman, 1978), story encompassing 'what is said' and discourse referring to 'how it is said'. Mythical expression is not confined to any particular medium; it can refer to literature, photography, and cinema to name but a few modes of artistic expression.

Barthes (1972: 109) suggests that the only defence against the influence of myth is to, 'mythify it in its turn', creating, in the process, an 'artificial myth'. Both Rulfo and Buñuel reproduce nationalist discourses in their narratives, which, to a certain extent, breathes new life into these myths. However, the subversive slant of the texts simultaneously undermines this discourse, thus exposing the constructed nature of social rituals and indeed of unitary

concepts of *mexicanidad*. The unconventional use of space in their narratives is a central concern, in particular the ways in which their works disrupt normative social spaces. I will now outline some of the spatial theories which will be employed in the analysis of the primary texts.

1.3 Spatiality

Symbolic expression and cultural production are both intrinsically bound up with questions of spatiality, whether we are dealing with literature, cinema, music, or the plastic arts. Richardson (2015: 2) suggests that ‘no account of our capacity to express ourselves symbolically can avoid addressing the multiple ways in which spatiality informs our relationships with others’. Furthermore, there is an ideological aspect to the creation of a map, such as the establishment of national or local boundaries and the naming of places such as cities and villages. According to Tuan (1977: 161-62), a certain space becomes a ‘place’ when it becomes the subject of a story or narrative. One can argue that this text can be framed as a ‘national’ narrative, through the discourse of the state, or as a marginal story, known only to the local inhabitants. The relationship between space and the institutions of the state can be understood as a dialectic between abstract and social space, which Lefebvre (1991: 85) outlines as follows:

It [space] is at once a precondition and a result of social superstructures. The state and each of its constituent institutions call for spaces —but spaces which they can then organize according to their specific requirements; so there is no sense in which space can be treated solely as an a priori condition of these institutions and the state which presides over them.

Drawing on some of the propositions in Bentham’s *Panopticon* (1791), Foucault (1977: 205) outlines the importance of space in the exercise of power in social and institutional organizations:

It [the panopticon] is a type of location of bodies in space, of distribution of individuals in relation to one another, of hierarchical organization, of disposition of centres and channels of power, of definition of the instruments and modes of intervention of power, which can be implemented in hospitals, workshops, schools, prisons.

With respect to the public spaces used for the ‘theatrical staging’ of the patrimony in Mexico²³, García Canclini (2005: 110) suggests that ‘[h]istoric sites and squares, palaces and churches, serve as the stage for representing the national destiny, traced from the beginning of time’. The museum is also a crucial site for the storage of artefacts which are considered, according to state discourses, as constituting the national essence. The ways in which space is represented and the performance of identity in artistic cultural production can reinforce or undermine these conventional ideas of public space.

All fictional narratives involve the creation of a particular story world, the generation of a series of spatial coordinates like that of a cartographer’s map. The imaginary space of the fictional world has certain links to the real world, or ‘geo-space’ (Piatti 2008: 22-23), outside the text, but, even in socio-realist texts such as the documentary, can only be considered as a partial reflection of this outside world. This fictional ‘world’ is also governed by temporal considerations. Bakhtin (1981: 84) outlines the interaction of space and time in the artistic chronotope²⁴ as follows:

Spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.

The combination of temporal and spatial coordinates in a fictional work, corresponding to historical time and geographical space, also encourages the reader/viewer to form connections between the fictional world and the world outside the text.

To a certain extent, the type of world imagined into existence in the fictional narrative determines its genre. This can be seen as a kind of ‘contract’ between the artist and the reader/audience, with each genre having a set of formal conventions or at least a certain ‘horizon of expectations’ (Jauss, 1982). For instance, in realist works, the reader/viewer expects certain conventions, such as verisimilitude, to be upheld. There is an implicit claim that this world is somehow a ‘true’ reflection of the real world. For instance, in Classical Mexican cinema²⁵, the *ranchera* always takes place in a rural setting, the *arrabalera* in an urban slum setting. Frow (2006: 10) suggests that genre theory is ‘about the ways in which

²³ See Chapter 2, section 2.1., for a detailed outline of spatiality in a Mexican context.

²⁴ Although the concept was developed with respect to literature, it can also be extended to the medium of film. Stam (1989: 41) suggests that the idea of the chronotope ‘allows us to historicize the question of space and time in the cinema’.

²⁵ See the Introduction for an account of the popular genres in Mexican classical/national cinema.

different structures of meaning and truth are produced in and by the various kinds of writing, talking, painting, filming, and acting by which the universe of discourse is structured'. Consequently, distinct genres can be identified by their particular use of space and time²⁶.

One can argue that the creation of new chronotopes, or the subversion of established generic chronotopes, has the effect of shattering the totality (Lukács, 1971) of previous socio-realist representations. In the experimental works of Buñuel and Rulfo, many of the established conventions and genres of Mexican artistic production are subverted through experimental narrative structures. The imagined spaces of the fantastic mode often merge seamlessly with the socio-realist aspects of their works, generating an uncanny intercalation of mimesis and fantasy. This is particularly the case with the ghostly underworld of *Pedro Páramo*²⁷ and the mysterious enclosure of the guests in *El ángel exterminador*. Rather than complete detachment from reality, one can argue that the creation of these 'otherworldly' artistic works encourages us to form conceptual links between the imaginary space depicted and the geo-space of the real world. This process allows us to reflect on the constructed nature of our perceptions of the real world and also to create new spaces in which to imagine alternatives to the status quo (Marcuse, 1966). With respect to the connections that the audience can establish between fantasy works of art and the real world, Miéville (2002: 45-46) suggests that fantasy allows for a fresh perspective on the geo-space of the real:

In a fantastic cultural work, the artist pretends that things known to be impossible are not only possible but real, which creates mental space redefining—or pretending to redefine—the impossible. This is sleight of mind, altering the categories of the not-real. Bearing in mind Marx's point that the real and the not-real are constantly cross-referenced in the productive activity by which humans interact with the world, changing the not-real allows one to think differently about the real, its possibilities and its actualities.

Arguably, the manner in which space is perceived in the text changes the type of behaviour expected of the individuals enclosed by that particular space. The process is facilitated by the inherent plasticity of both the written word and the cinematic image, specifically the capacity

²⁶ As a model of classification, genre can be linked to the mode of narration employed. According to Bordwell (1997: 150), '[a] narrational mode is a historically distinct set of norms of narrational construction and comprehension'.

²⁷ In relation to *Pedro Páramo* and the collection of Rulfo's photographs in *Inframundo* (1983), Raventós-Pons (2006: 79) suggests that 'lo fantástico irrumpe en un mundo "verosímilmente real" para embarcar al lector en un viaje al "inframundo"; un viaje donde desaparecen los límites entre la vida y la muerte, entre la realidad y la irrealidad'.

of these artistic media to evoke a three-dimensional fictional space²⁸, and to play with the social norms which adhere to patterns of prescribed behaviour in the subversive depiction of that particular location. The creation of this artistic world is described by Blanchot (1982: 41) as follows: 'he [the poet] creates an object made of language just as the painter, rather than using colours to reproduce what is, seeks the point at which his colours produce being'. By drawing attention to the plasticity of the images and words used to construct a fictional world, the artist thus highlights the self-reflexive nature of all artistic media.

1.3.1 Heterotopias of Deviance

In order to clarify the curious relationship between these two spatial categories, that is, the physical and the perceptual, in 'Of Other Spaces' Foucault (1986) employs the analogy of a person looking at their own reflection in a mirror. The reflected image appears to extend behind the surface of the mirror but does not exist in reality. Consequently, it can be described as a utopia, an illusory reflection of reality. However, the mirror also exists as part of the material world, so the place where the person stands is at once completely *real* and *unreal*, in other words, a heterotopia, a space with multiple layers of meaning, since the perception of the actual spatial location of the person's body is based on a reflection which originates from a virtual point 'behind' the mirror. The enigmatic story worlds of *El ángel exterminador* and *Pedro Páramo* evince this particular fusion of abstract and concrete perception, a delusion of domestic entrapment in the former, and a parodic rendering of purgatory in the latter.

A heterotopia can also be described as a single space which juxtaposes a variety of seemingly incompatible spaces and locations, for instance, the representational space of the theatre²⁹, where diverse milieu and spatial orientations are actualised. In spaces set apart and isolated from mainstream society, such as prisons, rubbish dumps, slums, and cemeteries, which Foucault (1986) refers to as 'heterotopias of deviance', normative behaviour is framed in a completely different manner.

The location in question undergoes a transformation which effectively suspends the 'rules' of normative behaviour. As a site of resistance to dominant discourses, it can be compared to the

²⁸ Narrative space is depicted literally in cinema, while verbal texts elicit the construction of an abstract space in the mind of the reader. (Chatman, 1978)

²⁹ See section 1.2 on Brecht's concept of theatrical space.

suspension and subversion of conventional morality through humour, which often occurs during festivals and carnivals³⁰, as theorised by Bakhtin (1984). This brief anarchic transformation of normative social space, in a sense, can be considered as a ‘reclaiming’ of public space by detaching it from normative hegemonic regulation.

Nevertheless, heterotopias do not always constitute sites of resistance; they may also represent spaces which are subject to the limitless exercise of hegemonic institutional power, as in the case of a prison. In *Pedro Páramo*, the *cacique*, with tacit ideological support from Padre Rentería, exercises complete domination over Comala and the surrounding lands. Seen in this light, they may be better defined as spaces where unconventional patterns of classification and organization are in place. Hetherington (1997: 40) suggests that ‘[h]eterotopia [s] are spaces in which an alternative social ordering is performed [...] that stands in contrast to the taken-for-granted mundane idea of social order that exists within society’.

The concept of the heterotopia can be linked to the incongruous juxtaposition of bizarre objects in unlikely places, which was a noted characteristic of Surrealist art and humour. These enigmatic locations effectively break up the conventional syntax of semiotic systems. Along with the clear visual examples found in the paintings of René Magritte, for instance, *The Listening Room* (1952), which depicts a gigantic green apple in a bare room, one could include the writings of George Bataille; the oneiric references to memory and eclectic jumble of memorabilia occupying the attic space in Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* (1994); and indeed the works of Jorge Luis Borges, especially evident in his description of the bizarre categories listed in the ‘Chinese Encyclopaedia’, which Foucault discusses in the opening section of *The Order of Things* (1994).

With respect to the destabilizing effect heterotopic space has on language, that is, in its capacity to evoke a common site where incongruous objects can be placed next to each other, and the humour that this sometimes occasions (Borges’s Chinese encyclopaedia) Foucault (1994: xviii) suggests that:

[H]eterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy ‘syntax’ in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct

³⁰ See section 1.4.2 on Bakhtin’s Carnival Humour.

sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to ‘hold together’.

Heterotopias of deviation often delimit and enclose that which has been literally and symbolically rejected from conventional society, as we have seen above in the case of rubbish dumps, prisons, slums, and cemeteries. This expulsion from the mainstream society can be linked to the concept of abjection³¹, a term closely associated with refuse and death.

1.3.2 Space and Gender Performance

Spaces and places often exude symbolic meanings intrinsically tied in with conventional gender roles, with some culturally determined ‘rules’ regulating access to these locations being tacitly enforced, while others are explicitly maintained through force or coercion. For instance, certain public spaces, such as the workplace, have often been considered to be the sole preserve of the male, to the exclusion of women, while other intimate domestic spaces tended to be associated with the female. Massey (1994: 185-86) describes the situation as follows:

Spaces and places, and our senses of them [...] are gendered through and through. Moreover, they are gendered in a myriad different ways, which vary between cultures and over time. And this gendering of space and place both *reflects and has effects* back on the ways in which gender is constructed and understood in the societies in which we live.

As we have seen above, heterotopias are connected to the representational space of the theatre, given its capacity to evoke diverse locations. It can also be argued that the space of the stage is transformed by the performance of the actors in that space. A parody of traditional gender roles in the theatre can be seen as an activity that transforms normative social space and deconstructs traditional gender paradigms. Buñuel’s and Rulfo’s fictional story worlds can therefore be seen as heterotopias which connect to and transform other social spaces that exist outside of the work of art. The *similarities* rather than the *differences* between male and female bodies are thus foregrounded. This breakdown in gender distinction can be linked to the practice of comic transvestism, which highlights the idea of gender as performance (Butler, 1990).

³¹ See section 1.4.4., for Kristeva’s (1982) definition of the abject.

Transvestism and drag have long been associated with comic performance, reaching back as far as the ancient Greeks, forming a staple of Elizabethan theatre, and in particular, in its modern incarnation, stemming from music hall acts in the mid-nineteenth century. The fact that these acts were often advertised as ‘female impersonators’, meant that the performer’s biological gender was made obvious from the outset, and was an intrinsic part of the act. On the surface, a drag performance satirizes idealized representations of femininity, through a comic deflation of women’s attitudes towards, for instance, sex, fashion, and their perceived role in society. Stott (2005: 71) suggests that ‘the intention [in drag performance] is to parody types of femininity through a knowing masculine prism that acknowledges the nature of the travesty at all times’. There is a clear distinction between the outward physical appearance, comprised of clothes, make-up, and coiffure, that is projected to the audience, and the actual biological sex of the performer, the humour often being elicited by the ludic interaction between these two distinctions. While drag is unquestionably a parody of some extreme elements of female behaviour, targeting self-delusion, exaggerated glamour, or grotesque and extravagant sexual conduct, it could be argued that a deeper engagement with the art form facilitates an interrogation of wider attitudes towards traditional gender roles in society, undermining the social construction of gender identity and breaking down the prescriptive ‘rules’ that supposedly link and govern biological gender and ‘gender appropriate’ behaviour in any given social milieu. In essence, by ‘showing the seams’ of the performance, that is, making it obvious that the actor playing the female character is male, a technique characteristic of Brechtian (1974) alienation in theatre, these comedic acts reveal the constructed nature of gender. With respect to traditional gender roles in Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque, Stam (1989: 163) notes the following:

Against a patriarchal ideology of innate difference, Bakhtin implicitly exalts the blurring and shifting of gender distinctions, a release from the boundaries of socially imposed sex roles. Bakhtin lauds the androgynous body of carnival representation.

Butler (1999) has examined the implications of transvestism and drag for the study of gender identity, highlighting that they may be both subversive and also reflective of cultural hegemony, depending on the context and reception. She maintains that gender is ‘iterated’ through continual ‘performance’, based on societal mores, and reflects an attitude which is not necessarily connected to the biological sex of the individual. Furthermore, she argues that there are three categories which comprise this continuum: ‘anatomical gender, gender identity (the gender with which the person identifies), and the gender that is being performed’ (175).

By drawing attention to the idea of gender as ‘performance’, that is, a series of actions which create gender³², drag humorously highlights the idea of gender as a social construction, as Butler (1999: 175) outlines:

In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency. Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary. (Original emphasis)

The idea of a stable essentialist idea of gender, a priori, can be considered as a parody of the notion of gender normality and originality itself. Butler (1999: 176) argues that:

[t]he loss of the sense of “the normal,” however, can be its own occasion for laughter, especially when “the normal,” “the original” is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one, an ideal that no one *can* embody. In this sense, laughter emerges in the realization that all along the original was derived. (Original emphasis)

Both Buñuel and Rulfo challenge normative gender roles through the creation of liminal sites where gender performance is abstracted from conventional socio-realist settings. The conflict between *place* and *self*, between identity and performance, is a central feature of comedic works, where characters are often depicted as being ‘fish out of water’. We will now turn our attention to the use of humour as a subversive narrative strategy.

1.4 Humour in Subversive Narrative

With respect to traditional social norms, humour can be seen as a subversive discourse which takes issue with all forms of authority and ideological orthodoxy. It frequently makes reference to what has been forbidden, silenced, or elided from mainstream discourse and sometimes may offer an alternative perspective in its place. Fishburn (2001: 10) outlines its deconstructive nature as follows:

³² According to Connell (1995: 71) gender ‘is social practice that constantly refers to bodies and what bodies do, it is not social practice reduced to the body’.

It [humour] is an artful means of unmasking what is repressed or prohibited in any contemporary society, for when something is ridiculed, not only is its authority undermined but an alternative, aberrant version is being tacitly insinuated.

Traditional conservative values are often inverted and ridiculed, through a depiction of transgression and transformation, a destabilization of identity, and a breakdown in established social structures.

While outlining his concept of ‘nomadic’ or marginal discourses, as opposed to the centralizing tendencies of state bureaucracy, Deleuze (1999: 142) identifies Nietzsche’s writings with the ‘dawn of counterculture’, drawing particular attention to the German philosopher’s use of humour and irony, which he terms ‘schizophrenic laughter or revolutionary joy’ (147). Along with examples of other subversive texts, such as Kafka’s dark comedy *The Trial* (1925), and many works in Beckett’s *oeuvre*, Deleuze suggests that their use of humorous aphorisms, along with the depiction of terrifying, grotesque, and disturbing events, can be read as a subversive discourse which contests the codification of normative values represented by the institutions of the law and the state. As he states: ‘One cannot help but laugh when the codes are confounded’ (147). In the subsequent chapters, we will see how Buñuel’s and Rulfo’s subversive works have a similar effect on the monolithic discourses of the Mexican state and related national cultural production.

1.4.1 Brecht and Humour

Brecht (1974) felt that the comic had immediate political potential to raise the consciousness of the audience through art. However, he felt that comedy was not an attribute of some immutable human condition. On the contrary, its laughter is focused on that which is ‘not natural’. Wright (1989: 49-50) suggests that ‘[f]or Brecht, comedy “quotes” what has never been “natural”. It is laughter at the “not natural” which provides the leverage to escape the ideological determinations of society’. Brecht’s view of comedy is firmly rooted in society, rather than the individual, and he utilized both comic and tragic elements in his works. O’Neill (1990: 121) notes that ‘[i]n Brecht’s exploitation of Shklovsky’s notion [*ostranenie*] for political ends, incidentally, it is interesting to note that the defamiliarizing effect achieved by the *Verfremdungseffekt* is very frequently obtained through the use of humour’.

In contrast, traditional [Aristotelian] drama tended to maintain comedy and tragedy in separate spheres. Wright (1989: 50) cites from Byron's *Don Juan*, (Canto III: 1819-20) to illustrate this particular worldview: 'All tragedies are finished by death, / All comedies are ended by a marriage'. One can argue that this assumption constructs a discourse which has as its object the naturalization of a certain social order which the audience passively accepts as teleological. This is the exact *weltanschauung* (worldview) that Brecht sets out to rigorously question and destabilize. Rather than employing normative satire³³, which tends to reinforce the stability and justness of the established social system, Brecht's use of comedy represents an assault on any reified system of values. With respect to the undermining of conventional values in Epic theatre, Wright (1989: 50) argues that '[t]he target of [Brechtian] comedy is the historical irrelevance and inauthentic modes of living of a society stuck with an outworn set of beliefs long after history has moved on'. With reference to the present study, both Buñuel's and Rulfo's texts engage with outworn ideas of *mexicanidad*. In so doing, they underline the hybrid and heterogeneous nature of Mexican identity.

In Brecht's narratives the comic and the tragic are not separate concepts which are finally united in the denouement, say, in the genre of tragi-comedy; rather, they are intercalated in an ambiguous manner, by the use of the V-effect, which, as Wright (1989: 51) suggests 'constantly disturbs the spectator's gaze, points to life as a dialectic, a continual battle of gazes to be fought out beyond the bounds of the theatre'. Brecht encouraged the spectator to view tragic events depicted on stage through the lens of comedy, to acknowledge the inherent capability of transforming their perception of these events.

Of particular relevance to the critique of Mexican nationalist discourses in Buñuel's and Rulfo's works, Wright (1989: 54) cites an example from Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* (1928) where 'the royal messenger as *deus ex machina* completes the mythic presentation of capitalism in order to estrange the ideology of myths, revealing in a comic effect the way myths serve to safeguard a society's or nation's image of itself'. Rulfo's and Buñuel's texts employ similar subversive techniques to question Mexico's self-image, as codified in previous traditional representations³⁴. In Brecht's *Mother Courage* (1941), 'mythical' nationalist virtues such as 'courage' and 'patriotism' are deconstructed, and shown to precipitate the tragic events depicted in the play. The laughter of the audience, however, is

³³ Normative satire (O'Neill, 1990) involves ridiculing human vices and follies with the purpose of correcting the perceived aberrant behaviour represented in the narrative. These texts, whether implicitly or explicitly, strive to improve society and the individuals which perpetrate these deviant actions.

³⁴ See the outline of post-Revolutionary Mexican cultural production in the Introduction.

suppressed by the V-effect which problematizes conventional ideas of humour. With reference to the metafictional aspects of humour in Brechtian theatre, Wright (1989: 54) suggests that:

Brecht's comedy estranges the sign from the thing, or as he would put it, the representation (*die Abbildungen*) from that which is being represented (*das Abgebildete*)

In the works of Rulfo and Buñuel, comedy is not utilized to trivialize the tragic events represented, or to diminish the shadowy and sombre aesthetic of the bleak atmosphere which suffuses many of their texts. Rather, the V-effect achieved by comedy functions to highlight the rhetorical nature of social mythologies in which their characters are immersed. Regarding the response of the audience to a Soviet performance of *Hamlet* (they felt it was a farce), Eagleton (1986: 163) agrees with Christopher Norris' suggestion that the critic William Empson would have approved of such a reaction:

Tragedy for Empson is an heroic mode associated with aristocratic absolutism and ascetic self-renunciation, deeply at odds with his own ironic humanism; and in this humanistic suspicion of tragedy he is again very close to Brecht. Like Brecht, the alternative form he offers is not some crass comic triumphalism but, 'a down-to-earth quality of healthy skepticism which [...] permits their users to build up a trust in human nature on a shared knowledge of its needs and attendant weaknesses.

As we have seen in the Introduction, the tragic mode (Dove, 2004) is also closely associated with foundational texts, where tragic events often occur when conventional norms are transgressed. The inversion of normative values characteristic of subversive humour leads us to a consideration of the carnivalesque.

1.4.2 Carnival Humour

With respect to literature, Bakhtin (1984) argues that the incongruous combination of tragedy and comedy in the same narrative, the evocation of grotesquerie, and the interweaving of the sacred and sublime with the sacrilegious and the all-too-human, lend the narrative a sense of cosmos, of wholeness. This is a characteristic of the genre of the serio-comic *spoudogeloion*, which revels in a carnival sense of the world, an attitude of joyful relativity, as O'Neill (1990: 57) outlines:

The serious genres are *monologic*, or *homophonic*, as Bakhtin phrases it: they presuppose an integrated and stable universe of discourse. The *spoudogeloia*, by contrast, are *dialogic*, or *polyphonic*: they deny the possibility, or at any rate the experience, of such integration [...] The serious forms attempt to comprehend human endeavour; the serio-comic forms are based on human inability to know and contain our fate.

In this respect, both Buñuel's and Rulfo's texts can be said to fall into the latter category given the lack of a clear moral and tonal centre, that is, either serious or comic, coupled with the disquieting presence of humorous existential angst in their fictional worlds. Mankind's ceaseless search for knowledge is thus textualised in their works. Indeed, Bakhtin (1984: 110) suggests that 'Truth is born between people collectively searching for the truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction'.

During the medieval period there were two main competing forms of cultural expression: one which related to the ruling classes, that is, 'official culture', an ascetic set of moral strictures which suppressed the carnality of the body and forbade any form of profanity; and the second which was concerned with the incessant bustle of the marketplace, the exuberant and transgressive vox populi (Stott, 2005). The earthy humour associated with this heterogeneous site often mocked the serious pretensions and repressive censure of 'official' culture. For Bakhtin (1984), carnival laughter gave a voice to the working classes and contested the ascetic and religious mores of the ruling classes. Humour thus becomes a site of popular resistance offering an alternative discourse which destabilizes social norms.

Be that as it may, with reference to the fleeting nature of social inversion characteristic of carnival humour, one can argue that this brief 'sanctioned' anarchy may also be tacitly governed by the dominant hegemonic order through censorship³⁵. One could argue that this was most certainly the case with Mexican national cinema, and to a lesser extent with less regulated cultural production, examples from which we will discuss in subsequent chapters. For instance, Saturnalian comedy, a mode derived from the festive merrymaking which was dedicated to the Roman god Saturn, according to Barber (1963), often avoided overt political or satirical content. It was rather a celebration of community togetherness while casting derision on that which was considered 'unnatural'. To this end, 'outsiders', who failed to integrate with the dominant social order, were punished, and 'sanctioned' folk practices were

³⁵ From around 486 BC, through the rituals associated with the god Dionysus in ancient Greece, comedy became an 'official' dramatic form and played an important role in fostering a sense of collective national identity, where citizens were actively involved in the political debates raised by these representations (Stott, 2005).

thus naturalized. In Chapter 4, this particular facet of ‘state-sanctioned’ humour is explored in conjunction with the Days of the Dead celebration in Mexico.

Ultimately, fleeting transgression may be absorbed back into the system and traditional social order reaffirmed, arguably a feature of certain types of normative satire (O’Neill, 1990). How each individual cultural text deals with dominant discourses can only be assessed through close reading, the principal aim of the analysis being to determine whether comic transgression is *resolved* within the cultural framework of the dominant hegemonic ideology or whether it is left *open* for interpretation. This idea can be compared to Barthes’ (1974) distinction between *lisible* ‘readerly’ and *scriptible* ‘writerly’ texts, the former tending towards a defined meaning, and the latter towards an open interpretation. The interaction between carnival humour and the traditional status quo can be seen as a continual dialectic, that is, the former highlights the contradictions and omissions inherent in the latter. Arguably, state censorship prompted artists to use ever more subtle and sophisticated narrative techniques to avoid restriction and possible reprisal.

The carnival inversion associated with certain festivals may thus be seen either as a spontaneous outburst or as an event tacitly regulated by the state. Drawing on the work of the anthropologist Victor Turner, Bristol (1985) distinguishes between ‘liminal’ and ‘liminoid’ festivals: the former refers to activities contained within a traditional hegemonic framework, for example, the Days of the Dead in Mexico³⁶, a residual national cultural event which has gradually become disconnected from its former subversive function. The latter are more subversive and lack the ‘legitimacy’ conferred on state-sanctioned festivals, for instance, riots and impromptu theatrical performances. The liberation of the body from conservative discourses can also be linked to Bakhtin’s (1968) concept of the grotesque, a mode of humour present throughout the works of Buñuel and Rulfo.

1.4.3 The Grotesque

The grotesque is often closely linked to portrayals of the body and the inevitable processes of decay, death, and rebirth which are an intrinsic part of material existence. Bakhtin outlines his concept of the grotesque body in *Rabelais and His World* (1968). Rather than seeing the

³⁶ See Chapter 4, section 4.2., for a detailed analysis of the representation of the Days of the Dead in the works of Buñuel and Rulfo.

body as a closed system, sealed off from the world, the continual interaction between the body and external reality is explored through a grotesque celebration of the natural processes of interchange, such as eating and excretion. According to Bakhtin, the depiction of excreted substances which are frequently rendered as ‘un-representable’ by orthodox discourses, is exaggerated for comic effect in the works of Rabelais, for instance, in the labour contractions of Gargamelle which are portrayed as being equivalent to bowel movements. The Church and religious hypocrisy were particular satirical targets in his works, and Bakhtin exploited this iconoclastic aspect, via an interpretative allegory, to tacitly undermine Stalinist orthodoxy, a morally conservative discourse which ironically resembled the religious doctrines it purported to disavow (Stam, 1989).

In grotesque representations, the polished visual aesthetic, characteristic of static classical paradigms of beauty, the hegemony of the sense of sight, is thus undermined by bodies that equally embrace *all* the senses, are undergoing perpetual entropic change, and transcend the prefabricated categories imposed by conventional representations. Stott (2005) links grotesque humour to the concept of the abject.

1.4.4 Abjection

Along with the physical disgust that it elicits, Kristeva (1982: 4) suggests that the abject is primarily caused by ‘what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite’. The satirical use of abjection, characteristic of grotesque humour, which elicits both horror and laughter³⁷, frequently draws attention to our own mortality, undermining utopian narratives of teleological progress. It can be seen as what Lacan (2006) refers to as an ‘irruption of the Real’, that is, the momentary and traumatic awareness of the harsh unmediated reality of the pre-linguistic world. For instance, while death may be discussed within the normative discourses of the symbolic order, that is, the ideological conventions of society and the language of the law, the subject is frequently avoided altogether, or elided through

³⁷ According to Kristeva (1982: 8), ‘laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection’.

euphemism. However, in the presence of the abject, which confronts us with the ‘unrepresentable’, death becomes more immediate and threatening³⁸.

To deal with the unspeakable horror of the abject, rituals of purification are often performed. For instance, within the discourses of the Catholic Church, and indeed some pre-Hispanic ceremonies, funeral rites are employed so as to ‘sanctify’ the body in preparation for the journey to the afterlife, an aspect of the works which we will examine in Chapters 2 and 4. One can argue that the use of grotesque humour in the works of Buñuel and Rulfo disrupts the sense of reassurance offered by normative discourses associated with religion and ritual in Mexico, and instead satirically highlights how these discourses imprison, disenfranchise, and exclude their adherents. The combination of horror with comedy leads us to a consideration of black humour, to which we will now turn.

1.4.5 Black Humour

Originally theorized in the 1940s by one of the founders of the Surrealist movement, André Breton, in his *Anthology of Black Humour* (2009, 1st pub. 1941), this mode of humour is generally characterized by an irreverent stance towards tragic events, with an important social and satirical dimension. According to Breton (2009: 25), *humour noir* is ‘the mortal enemy of sentimentality’. One could argue that this mode of humour delves deep into the hidden forces operating beneath the veneer of social conventions and rituals. As Haynes (2006: 26) contends, with reference to Breton’s *Anthology*:

[B]lack humour thus becomes the articulation of a kind of ‘social unconscious’, at its kernel the detection and amplification, through aesthetic form and language, of displaced but agonistic social and historical contradictions.

Furthermore, black humour transcends the merely comic and has at its heart a glacial irony, characteristic of much of Swift’s oeuvre, which juxtaposes two contradictory ideologies in the same semantic utterance. In ‘A Modest Proposal’ (1729), for instance, the horrific and detached opinions of the urbane narrator –that impoverished children should be eaten– are satirically undermined by the parodic thrust of the text itself, that is, the socio-critical ideology regarding the treatment of the poor in Ireland, which is tacitly advanced by the

³⁸ Slavoj Žižek, while analysing the figure of the monster in Ridley Scott’s *Alien* (1979), in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), following on from Lacan, links this sense of horror to the ‘pre-symbolic Real’.

implied author. V.N. Vološinov (1976: 113) argues that the mode can be seen as an ‘encounter in one voice of two incarnate value judgements and their interference with one another’.

The reader/viewer is initially horrified and repulsed by the cruelty and suffering depicted in the novel or film, the presence of the tragic mode wringing pathos from our immediate emotional engagement. However, through incongruous juxtaposition and ‘alienating’ depictions of tragedy, one is then paradoxically incited towards humour. Finally, this comedic release comes with a bitter aftertaste as a sense of remorse in taking ‘pleasure’ from misfortune, derived from the clash of agonistic ideologies, slowly seeps into our consciousness. Arguably, this final impact is where the social thrust of this mode becomes evident. Haynes (2006: 27) suggests that ‘alongside the immediate, comedic impact of the works in the *Anthology* [Breton’s] there lies also a countervailing, aesthetic seriousness that interferes with and comments upon the very conditions of that laughter’. The ‘hollow’ nature of this kind of laughter is evoked in Beckett’s *Watt* (1959: 48) where the character Arsène describes what he terms as the ‘mirthless’ laugh:

[...] the mirthless laugh is the dianoetic laugh, down the snout—Haw!—so. It is the laugh of laughs, the *risus purus*, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs—silence please—at that which is unhappy.

In Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo*, this mirthless, existential laughter is perhaps echoed in the phrase: ‘Unas risas muy viejas, como cansadas de reír’ (*PP*: 101).

The precise ideological criticism advanced by black humour can be problematic given its frequently misanthropic nature. For all its scathing critique of bourgeois, liberal value systems, to a certain extent, it ultimately derives a rather dubious ‘pleasure’ from the alienating depiction of tragedy and social violence, the viewing of tragic events with an emotional distance. Yet, this ‘gratification’ is only a preliminary part of the process. Through de-centering the ‘orthodox’ object of laughter, black humour elicits the kind of mirth that makes the person who laughs uncomfortable, and therefore questions what is ‘normally’ and ‘abnormally’ comic in a given social milieu. The ideological alignment of the text with respect to the reader/viewer is of crucial importance, an interaction which poses the following question: ‘whether each work interpellates its reader as textual aggressor, victim, or as ‘agonised witness’ (Haynes, 27).

In the Hispanic literary tradition, the genre of *esperpento* most closely resembles the tonal and structural characteristics of black humour as outlined by Breton (2009). Dating back as far as the aesthetic of the grotesque in the paintings of Francisco de Goya, and containing elements of the Spanish picaresque, the term has been particularly associated with the works of Ramón María del Valle Inclán (1866 – 1936). Prominent themes in his narratives include a tragi-comic treatment of death and the reduction of human beings to objects. His satirical play *Luces de Bohemia* (1973, 1st pub. 1924) blends realist and non-realist modes of narration and is considered an emblematic work in this genre. While elaborating on the absurd and comical aspects of Valle-Inclán's works, Egea (2013: 24) suggests that 'it is a relational aesthetics wherein the key concept is deformation'. A distorted view of reality in these texts, or what might alternatively be read as the representation of a 'distorted reality', is often conveyed through the use of bitter irony.

Many of the types of critical humour discussed so far can be seen as evolving towards what O'Neill (1990) terms 'entropic' humour, a fusion of self-reflexive narrative techniques with subversive comic discourses.

1.4.6 Entropic Humour

The Second Law of Thermodynamics states that all matter moves towards molecular chaos in the absence of external energy sources³⁹. Entropy describes this process of disintegration. When applied to the arts, entropy can be considered as a metaphor for decline and dissolution. O' Neill (1990: 8) considers entropy to be 'a metaphor for the crumbling of ordered systems, the breakdown of traditional perceptions of reality, and the erosion of certainty'. When the theory of entropy is applied to the field of information theory, it can be seen as a measure of disruption of information, what information theorists refer to as 'noise': 'Noise is the distortion factor in any communication system –the electrical interference, for example, that causes static on the radio or snow on the television screen, eroding the information content of the signal' (8). Both Rulfo and Buñuel explore the difficulty of communication in their narratives, and link this problem to the breakdown of traditional social structures. Figuratively, these images of deliquescence can be related to the loss of

³⁹ The *OED* defines entropy as follows: 'A thermodynamic quantity representing the unavailability of a system's thermal energy for conversion into mechanical work, often interpreted as the degree of disorder or randomness in the system'.

certainty, a spinning moral compass, and the profound interrogation of notions of *mexicanidad* that permeated the cultural and historical zeitgeist of mid-twentieth century Mexico. As we have seen earlier, the concept of entropy can also be related to humour and self-reflexive narration. It is comprised of three main categories: entropic satire, irony, and parody.

In contrast to traditional, normative satire, entropic satire is missing the central authority which regulates the social milieu being depicted. One of its salient characteristics is a lack of belief in the ability of moral and social mores to adequately deal with the ‘vices’ that are exposed in the narrative. Rather, it tends to focus on the deictic gesture of identifying the wrong to be corrected, and then leaving the adequate correction of this vice to the judgement of the reader. O’Neill (1990: 143) suggests that ‘[e]ntropic satire has to do with what Durkheim called social anomie: a ‘lawless’ (*anomos*) state of society where normative, rule-oriented, authoritative, prescribed standards of conduct and belief have irreparably broken down’. As such, it deals only with the responses of the characters to the story world which they inhabit. The godlike figure of the author, or director, of this fictional world remains immutable and impassive to the vicissitudes and suffering of the characters.

Consequently, it can be argued that entropic satire deals primarily with the thematic nature of the story world represented in the narrative. In a predominantly realist manner, it explores the humorous ways in which the characters respond to the bleak and seemingly meaningless nature of their milieu. The story world generally remains unaffected and somewhat detached from their vicissitudes, as O’Neill (1990: 201) asserts: ‘It is typical of these worlds of entropic satire that they remain unchanged, totally impassive to any impact, ameliorative or otherwise, on the part of the characters who play out their parts in them’.

In entropic irony, the relationship between existent and story world is of an entirely different nature and is concerned primarily with the interaction between the characters and the discourse plane which transmits the narrative. Instead of battling with the realist socio-political forces of the story world, the characters themselves tend to be consumed by existential angst, and try in vain to ascertain central meaning from their world. For instance, Juan Preciado, accompanied by the reader, through his first-person narrative perspective, tries to interpret what is happening to him in Comala. The narrative raises as many questions as it

answers and thus requires a metaphoric rather than a metonymic reading⁴⁰. As such, it has more in common with modernist texts than with traditional realist works, and makes considerable interpretative demands on the reader/viewer. It is essentially a hermeneutic form of humour which exploits the unstable nature of meaning. O'Neill (1990: 201-202) suggests that it consists of the textual interaction 'between the character, that is, as a narrated entity and the narrative instance that shapes that character's being'.

In entropic parody, the characters assume a less central role and the focus shifts to the spatiality and construction of the fictional world itself, or, as O'Neill (1990: 261) summarises the situation: 'Entropic satire is a comedy of anomie; entropic irony is a comedy of epistemology; entropic parody is a comedy of narration'. Characters are moved around like chess pieces and the main focus is on the textual structure of the surrounding narrative, that is, the *space* in which they are situated. For instance, in Buñuel's *El ángel exterminador*, it is difficult to identify a central character, someone that the camera (the cinematic narrator) selects and continually follows as being particularly important to the story. In the absence of a protagonist, we could see the central 'character' as the music room where the delusional guests are trapped. In a similar vein, Rulfo (1973) also referred to Comala as the central character in *Pedro Páramo*. The multiplicity of voices and viewpoints in the novel also undermines the traditional realist idea of a central narrative thread. When self-reflexivity becomes overt, the reader senses that the way the story is told becomes more important than the events which are related, and therefore it becomes a parody of the act of narration. Juan Preciado's darkly humorous account of his own death in fragment 35 of the novel can thus be seen as undermining the act of narration itself. It could be read as a manifestation of the 'Death of the Author', as wryly observed in the essay of that title by Roland Barthes (1977).

The satirical intent of both Rulfo's and Buñuel's narratives can be seen as that of the 'entropic', rather than normative, variety since there is little suggestion of a correct 'ethical' path to be followed by the reader or viewer. Indeed, law and social order in their story worlds are often portrayed as having irrevocably broken down. If one considers, for instance, the

⁴⁰ Centripetal irony can be said to function within the story world represented in the fictional text and which can communicate its message to a reader/viewer who is not overly familiar with the actual historical and cultural context to which it refers. Arguably, it is a non-culture specific and universal form of irony, as Thakkar (2012: 25) suggests: 'Centripetal irony is not postmodern: it is the bare mechanics of dramatic, verbal, situational, and cosmic irony'. Centrifugal irony, however, bears more of a resemblance to postmodern irony and requires prior knowledge of the historical and cultural context, since the ironic referent reaches out from the story world, in the manner of Bakhtin's chronotope, to the real milieu which is being metaphorically represented in the text, and necessarily requires the reader/viewer to make that connection.

predatory street gang in *Los olvidados*, the despotic *cacique* Pedro Páramo who invents his own laws, the atavistic behaviour of the guests in *El ángel exterminador*, or the marauding revolutionaries in *El llano en llamas*. The appropriate 'ethical' response to the narrative is left up to the judgement of the reader/viewer.

We have examined the distinction between realist and modernist texts and literary aesthetics, with a particular emphasis on both techniques of fragmentation and self-reflexive narration and their connection with the representation of the dissolution of the Mexican social order. The importance of spatiality and the subversion of generic chronotopes have also been underlined. Both of these structural aspects of narration are intrinsically linked to the counter-hegemonic use of dark, entropic humour. In the following chapters, we will apply these theories to the portrayal of aspects of *mexicanidad* in Buñuel's and Rulfo's works, demonstrating how these subversive techniques are present in both cinematic and literary forms.

Chapter 2: Spatiality, Ritual, and Religion in Buñuel and Rulfo

In this chapter, I examine spatiality and the performance of social rituals, with a particular emphasis on the subversive treatment of religion. I contend that the innovative use of space in Buñuel's and Rulfo's narratives contributes to a darkly humorous unearthing of many of the ideological contradictions and subterranean power structures inherent in social and religious rituals, beliefs, practices, and cultural texts which form a central part of the Mexican national imaginary⁴¹. Key texts to be analysed include: *El llano en llamas* (1953) and *Pedro Páramo* (1955) by Juan Rulfo; and the films *Los olvidados* (1950), *Nazarín* (1958), and *El ángel exterminador* (1962) by Luis Buñuel. Their works frequently expose the links between social practices and dominant discourses of cultural nationalism, complex ideological frameworks which, as we have seen earlier, were often reflected in, and also constructed through, earlier forms of post-Revolutionary national cultural production. The utopian characteristics of these earlier representations, aspects of which tended to generate idealized conceptions of *mexicanidad*, are tacitly undermined by the creation of surreal heterotopic story worlds which break up the perceived 'naturalness' and integrity of these conventional semiotic systems, and thus underline the hybrid nature of *mexicanidad*.

Given that ritual and religion are closely associated with specific spaces, for instance, the sacred space of the church and the cemetery, or the complex social rituals performed at the bourgeois dinner party, I begin with an outline of some of the links between ritual, social space, and national space. I next outline the central importance of the institution of the Catholic Church in Mexico, concentrating on how its pervasive ideology suffuses many aspects of the national imaginary. I then turn to the analysis of the texts themselves, specifically examining how subversive narrative techniques incorporating dark humour bring about a transformation of the perception of normative social space with respect to the characters and the reader/viewer. Since this strategy foregrounds the plane of narration, it can

⁴¹ See the discussion on cultural nationalism in the Introduction (pp. 2-14).

be compared to O'Neill's (1990) concept of entropic parody⁴² alluded to earlier. Our focus then shifts to the level of the story world and the satirical treatment of the characters themselves, in particular the central religious characters padre Rentería and padre Nazario. We will consider the ways in which the works portray traditional religious and social rituals as theatre and performance, another self-reflexive⁴³ strategy which is employed with subversive satirical intent. I also address the issue of self-abasement and the grotesque⁴⁴, a distinctly dark and disturbing brand of humour in the works which, through a satirical use of abjection, engages with some of the more extreme penitential ideologies propounded by Church discourses.

2.1 Ritual and National Space

As we have seen in the Introduction, discourses of cultural nationalism in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s tended to reify abstract notions of *mexicanidad*. These projections of the nation can be read as the staging of a spectacle, rather than as a direct unmediated reflection of social relations. The selection of certain traditional values and symbols, to the exclusion of others, means that they gradually become synonymous with 'legitimate' expressions of national identity. Indeed, cultural tradition, according to Williams (1998: 56), can be seen as 'a continual selection and re-selection of ancestors'. The traditionalism operating at the heart of the patrimony is comprised of two main components, which García Canclini (2005: 132) outlines as follows: 'the occupation of a territory and the formation of collections'. Occupying a territory consists of placing the people and natural resources in this area in question under sovereignty. After this first stage, the whole enterprise is continually legitimized and authenticated through the formation of national cultural collections. National heroes are immortalized in stone or bronze and placed strategically in public spaces, and sacred foundational objects are enshrined in museums⁴⁵.

⁴² See Chapter 1, section 1.4.6. The focus of this metafictional type of humour generally shifts away from the characters and more towards the discourse plane, thus underlining the constructed nature of the fictional world itself (O'Neill, 1990).

⁴³ See Chapter 1, section 1.2. The notion of social ritual as 'theatre' recalls Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt*, a technique which exposes social and political practice as performance.

⁴⁴ See Bakhtin (1984) Chapter 1, section 1.4.3. The grotesque can be seen as a satirical appropriation of what Kristeva (1982) terms as 'the abject', in other words, that which is often 'un-representable' or symbolically expelled from conventional discourses.

⁴⁵ See Chapter 1, section 1.3., in relation to spatiality and the nation.

With respect to the concepts of origin and essence, as applied to the ideological formation of the modern nation state, García Canclini (2005: 133) states that:

[T]he territory of the square or the museum becomes ceremonial by virtue of containing the symbols of identity, objects and souvenirs of the best heroes and battles, something that no longer exists but is preserved because it alludes to origins and essence. It is there that the model of identity—the *authentic* vision—is conserved. (Original emphasis)

National museums have an additional temporal feature and can be seen as heterotopias which, following the archival project of modernity⁴⁶, constitute national spaces dedicated to the continual accumulation of history, that is, the collection of cultural artefacts from different eras in the single space of the museum. A space which unites distinct timelines, a ‘heterochrony’, is a place where conventional chronological time is suspended. As Foucault (1986: 26) puts it, ‘[h]eterotopias are most often linked to slices in time—which is to say that they open onto what might be termed [...] heterochronies’. While these collections arguably promote equal public access to the cultural patrimony, they also tacitly reinforce the hegemonic ideology of the state, often serving as testimony to patterns of domination rather than inclusion (Bartra, 1987). The artefacts in these locations, removed from their original temporal and spatial context, are often organized and hierarchized according to a national narrative or imaginary, in contrast with the disruptive and incongruous juxtaposition of objects in, for instance, surrealist art. With respect to the Tamayo Museum and the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico, García Canclini (2005: 134) suggests that:

[t]he museums analysed here ritualize the patrimony by organizing the deeds with reference to a transcendental order [...] the cultural deeds of each ethnic group yield to the national discourse [...] the material exhibited is reordered in terms of an alien conceptual system.

According to Foucault (1986: 23), all definitions of contemporary space are imbued with the presence of the sacred and the profane, reflected in the opposition between ‘private space and public space, between family space and social space, between cultural space and useful space, between the space of leisure and that of work’. Any violation of these traditional categories is therefore seen as an affront to the prevailing social order. In order to maintain this national tradition, daily rituals are therefore essential to the staging and performance of identity,

⁴⁶ With respect to the history of the Archive in Latin America, and its role in nation-building, González Echevarría (1998: 31) states that ‘[p]ower, secrecy, and law stand at the origin of the Archive; it was, in its most concrete form, the structure that actually housed the dispensers of the law, its readers, the magistrates; it was the building that encrypted the power to command’. He also draws attention to the role of cultural production in this process, particularly literature: ‘Like the Archive, the novel hoards knowledge’ (34).

practices which often tend to exclude those who do not partake. With respect to the role of ritual in establishing and maintaining traditional social order, García Canclini (2005: 134) maintains that:

[t]he history of all societies shows rites to be devices for neutralizing heterogeneity and reproducing order and social differences in an authoritarian manner. The rite is distinguished from other practices in that it is not discussed, it cannot be changed or carried out halfway. It is carried out and then one ratifies his or her belonging to an order, or it is transgressed and one remains excluded, outside of the community and of communion.

As we have seen in Chapter 1, heterotopias of deviation can be read as both spaces of hegemonic domination, for instance, in the case of a prison, and also of transgression, as evidenced in transient carnival fairgrounds and festivals (Bakhtin, 1984; Foucault, 1986), and, of course, the humorous juxtaposition of objects found in surrealist art. Buñuel's and Rulfo's heterotopic story worlds are ultimately transgressive in nature. Given the importance of religious rituals in the national imaginary, we will now turn our attention to the role of the Catholic Church in Mexico.

2.2 The Catholic Church in Mexico

The privileged place occupied by the Catholic Church within nationalist discourses in Mexico seems unquestionable, especially if one considers the national devotion shown towards the Virgin of Guadalupe. However, this relationship has not been without its difficulties, the Cristero War (1926-28) being one such notable example. In 1926, the left-leaning government of Plutarco Elías Calles (1924-28), in line with the constitution of 1917, attempted to mitigate the power of the Church by eradicating the teaching of religion in schools. The ensuing bloodshed, which drove a wedge between Church and state, would leave an indelible mark on the history of Mexico, particularly in the state of Jalisco, where Rulfo was born.

While President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40) believed firmly in a secular state, he also needed to learn the harsh lessons from the Cristero War and thus take popular support for the Catholic faith into consideration. This realisation was to lead to a gradual re-integration of Church and state. The process was continued by his successor Ávila Camacho (1940-46), who, during the 1940 electoral campaign, announced publically that he believed in God

(Harris, 2000). Consequently, by the mid-1930s, and despite the previous bitter conflict with the Mexican state, the Church had firmly re-established itself as a powerful hegemonic influence within the patriarchal hierarchy of the post-Revolutionary nation-state, and can thus be intrinsically linked to the ‘national imaginary’ of God, Nation, and Home⁴⁷, which was at the heart of nationalist rhetoric, and certain features of early post-Revolutionary cultural production in subsequent decades. By 1947, in order to ensure the continuing influx of foreign aid, from the US and other allies, the Mexican state had severed many of the ties to its left-wing, atheist origins thus embracing ‘a more ‘Christian-Democratic’ ideology’ (Acevedo-Muñoz 2003: 60). Besides, despite some of their ideological differences, one could argue that Church and state shared a common objective of hegemonic control, as Thakkar (2006: 207) suggests:

The state’s programme of redemption was for the purpose of economic modernisation while the aim of the Church was Christian salvation. However, such differences between Church and post-independence state discourse disguised the common aim of patriarchal dominion.

Ever since the conquest, the Catholic Church in Mexico integrated many aspects of pre-Hispanic cultural practices and mythology into its own rituals and ideologies. In a literal and spatial sense, many of the first churches were built on the ruins of sacred pre-Hispanic structures, for instance, in the case of the Great Pyramid of Cholula (Tlachihualteptl) in Puebla. Symbolically, this suggests a ‘hierarchy of superstition’⁴⁸, with the Church physically and figuratively occupying a higher level, supplanting the social and ritual function of the former indigenous beliefs. The church in Cholula now houses the ‘Virgin of the Remedies’, a figure who replaced Chiconauhquiuhitl (Goddess of the Nine Rains). Nevertheless, the 8th of September, the date of the latter’s veneration, was maintained (McCafferty, 1996). On a national level, this syncretic process is particularly apparent in visual representations of the Virgin of Guadalupe, an image featuring the darker skin tone of the *mestizo*, and an iconic symbol of the Mexican nation. It is also evident in the national festival the Days of the Dead,

⁴⁷ See the Introduction for an outline of nationalist discourses in Mexico.

⁴⁸ With reference to postcolonial theories dealing with concepts of the centre and the periphery, as outlined by Said in *Orientalism* (1978), this can be considered as a Eurocentric bias which tends to relegate pre-Hispanic mythology to an ‘inferior’ position compared to the orthodox teachings of the Catholic Church. The texts often highlight the irony of one superstitious practice (the Catholic Church) criticising the superstitious practice of another (pre-Hispanic beliefs).

where the Catholic festival All Souls' Day is interwoven with aspects of the pre-Hispanic conception of death⁴⁹.

The complicit role of the faithful congregation in the propagation and exaggeration of these national religious discourses is also a consideration, as Buñuel's and Rulfo's works do not portray devout believers as merely helpless victims of official Church discourses. Rather, these discourses are shown to be constructed in a continual dialectic between the institutions which initiate them and the creative and often idiosyncratic interpretations of the individuals who internalize their semiotic structures, believe in them, and therefore tacitly legitimize their hegemonic authority. We will see examples of this in section 2.4 Religious Ritual as Performance. I now turn to the analysis of ritual and religion in the texts in question, beginning with the subversive disruption of normative social space.

2.3 Disruption of Normative Social Space

In Buñuel's *El ángel exterminador* (1962), the social and religious rituals of the Mexican bourgeoisie are mercilessly satirized. The title of the film is suggestive of the supernatural, and is a clear allusion to the Bible⁵⁰. The opening credits reinforce this perception by showing an image of a dark Gothic cathedral accompanied by religious choral music. The religious theme is echoed by the image of the ironic name of the street on which the house is located, la Calle de la Providencia. Fuentes (2000: 107) notes the film's wry inversion of this Christian concept, describing the portrayal as 'la providencia como fatalidad'. The title can also be read as a parodic rendering of the monument, *El Ángel de la Independencia*, in Mexico City, inaugurated by Porfirio Díaz in 1910, and which commemorates Mexico's War of Independence (1810). Religion and ideas of nation converge and are thus parodically referenced in the same image.

The entrapment of the guests can be seen as an allegory of how the Mexican bourgeoisie have effectively sealed themselves off from the rest of society, enclosing themselves in large imposing mansions surrounded by high railings. This demarcation between the Nobles' stately residence and the rest of the outside world is firmly established in the opening

⁴⁹ See Chapter 4, section 4.2, for a detailed discussion of the Days of the Dead (p.128).

⁵⁰ An image from the painting, *The Flagellation of Saint Jerome* (1657) by Juan de Valdés Leal, unusually depicting an angel flogging Saint Jerome with a six-thronged whip before the throne of God, was used on the film's promotional poster. The scene was based on a dream that the Saint had where he was being punished by God for devoting too much time to the reading of classical literature, thus neglecting his study of the Bible.

sequence. Indeed, for the majority of the film, the external world, in a sense, ceases to exist, with the exception of the scenes with the curious crowd gathering outside the stricken house. With their elegant homes, the bourgeoisie arguably set out to create what could be described as a 'utopian space' of refinement and pleasure: evenings at the opera followed by dinner, a recital, and polite conversation; in other words, all the trappings of wealth, civilization, and modernity. Ritual performance of these activities is the way in which their identity is continuously reaffirmed, and yet they are simultaneously constrained by these repetitive practices, as Kinder (1999: 65) suggests: 'Buñuel regards the upper middle class as a caste that has no choice but to repeat its rituals; it cannot survive without them, but it is imprisoned within them'. Through its deployment of dark ironic humour, the film explores the drastic consequences of this self-imposed isolation.

The guests' inability to leave the room appears to start out as an excessive bourgeois desire to preserve propriety and not be the first to leave. The film can thus be read as a comical exaggeration of the stifling social experience of being at a boring party, where everybody would like to leave but lacks either the will or the courage to do so. Later, this rather absurd 'politeness' morphs into an irrational superstition which is given legitimacy by the whole group, a wry analogy which resonates with most forms of organized religion. The film thus links knowledge and space, that is, the abstract nature of thought and how it impinges on our material existence. In relation to the ties between the individual and social space, Richardson (2015: 7) notes that 'the key factor is not the size of the space one is in but rather the attitude one assumes to whatever space one is in, and that attitude is a function of our individual imaginative powers'. In this case, the guests seem to be spatially imprisoned by their own imaginations. The extreme circumstances engendered by this mass delusion transform the utility of this particular social space from a restful oasis of calm in which to enjoy a piano sonata into a communal, and indeed squalid living quarters –with toilet facilities in the cupboards– cut off from the rest of society. The film's combination of slum naturalism with the mystical religious arguably shares some of the generic features of menippean satire⁵¹.

The thin facade of civilization quickly crumbles away to reveal an ugly interior, conveyed in the narrative through satirical episodes of grotesque realism: live sheep are eventually slaughtered and roasted using the fragments of a broken cello. The instrument also appears in

⁵¹ In relation to menippean satire and carnival humour, see Chapter 1, section 1.4.2. (Bakhtin, 1984). The film's many resonances with the medieval world are also noted by Fuentes (2000: 107), in particular its apocalyptic tone: 'Al alegorizar medio en broma el milenarismo apocalíptico, Buñuel entronca con las profecías de la destrucción de su querida Edad Media'.

the guests' 'collective' dream sequence, where it is being sawn in half, superimposed on the images and sounds of a thunderstorm. These surreal images are connected formally rather than diegetically, leading to a poetic structure which interferes with the linear progression of the narrative. The splinters of an instrument which is arguably representative of refinement and 'high' culture, through association with the bourgeois cultural value attributed to classical music, and particularly the classical music canon, are thus ironically transformed into firewood, briefly transporting the guests back to the Stone Age. Drawing on some of the narrative characteristics of slapstick comedy (Stott, 2005), the carnivalesque (Bakhtin, 1986), and the Theatre of the Absurd (Esslin, 1960⁵²), Stam (1989:106) outlines the central theme of social inversion in the film as follows:

Buñuel radicalizes these burlesque and avant-garde topoi by linking them to the carnivalesque theme of social inversion and the 'world upside down'. The 'Exterminating Angel' in this sense executes a kind of millennial mission of social justice, an apocalyptic laying low of the noble and the powerful.

In a spatial sense, the room can be seen as analogous to a ship adrift, lacking any direction or guidance, cut off from dry land, and at the mercy of the wind and tide, a situation echoing the fate of the survivors in *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-1819), by the French Romantic painter Théodore Géricault. This work depicts the tragedy and the resultant collapse in conventional morality and ethics which accompanied the shipwreck of the naval vessel *Méduse*, in 1816, where some survivors reportedly resorted to cannibalism in order to survive. According to Buñuel (2012), the original title for the film was to be *Los naufragos de la calle Providencia*, a fact which resonates with the idea of the room as a ship or raft. The utopian temple of *haute* bourgeois culture thus becomes a heterotopia of deviation⁵³, a place of 'otherness', both physical and psychological, where the hegemonic norms of appropriate behaviour in society break down. Foucault (1986: 27) sees the ship as the perfect example of a heterotopia:

The boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea [...] The ship is

⁵² Esslin (1960: 5) underlines the importance of Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt* in 'The Theatre of the Absurd'. As he puts it, '[e]motional identification with the characters is replaced by a puzzled critical attention. For while the happenings on the stage are absurd, they yet remain recognizable as somehow related to real life and *its* absurdity, so that eventually the spectators are brought face to face with the irrational side of their existence'.

⁵³ According to Foucault (1986: 25), 'heterotopias of crisis are disappearing today and are being replaced by [...] heterotopias of deviation: those in which individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed'. He suggests that prisons and cemeteries are prime examples of these liminal spaces.

the heterotopia *par excellence*. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.

In Buñuel's film, however, the 'ship' goes nowhere, exploration and adventure are truncated, and so it becomes a stagnated heterotopia, a nation in crisis, closed off from the world, consuming itself from within, and degrading in an entropic process. Arguably, the film can be read as a dark parody of previous traditional and Romantic representations of tragedy and disaster, especially Mexican melodrama⁵⁴, given that the absurd scenario unfolds in the supposedly secure and innocuous surroundings of the family home, precipitated by an excess of manners and decorum, and far from the perceived chaos and danger of the natural world. The signs of entropic decay begin in a very subtle and almost imperceptible manner.

Even before the realization that they are inexplicably trapped, the characters' conversations seem to exhibit symptoms of linguistic degradation. The first signs of impending disaster and social decay become evident when the 'appropriate' ritual conversations and actions common to all such social gatherings appear to break down. These episodes indicate that the social space depicted, governed by hegemonic patterns of behaviour, and heavily influenced by group dynamics (Lewin, 1973), is undergoing an enigmatic transformation. The characters seem to be temporarily unaware or confused as to the correct thing to say or do when faced with common social encounters, a fact made all the more ironic given that they are members of the *haute* bourgeoisie, a class which arguably prides itself on social decorum, normative regulation of behaviour, and therefore knowing precisely how to behave 'correctly' in all social situations. On this night, however, it appears that their subconscious thoughts and urges are coming to the surface, unregulated by rational social convention. The language is still elaborate and sophisticated, appropriate to their social class, yet it is incongruously out of sequence with the social milieu.

Frequently, the 'appropriate' type of speech in any given situation is governed by the spatial location of the discursive practice, for instance, the more 'intimate', informal, conversational genres at home, and the more 'guarded' polite and formal genres in the workplace (Bakhtin, 1986). By playing with the spatial location of specific speech genres, the film parodies certain types of speech associated with specific social contexts. These genres are described by Stam (1989: 65) as 'normatively structured clusters of formal, contextual, and thematic features having to do with ways of speaking in particular situations'. Arguably, the social norms that

⁵⁴ See the Introduction, on the importance of melodrama in Mexican national cinema.

regulate the performance of these utterances are often set in place by the dominant hegemonic order; however, they can also be representative of a counterculture, such as the case of slang. They can be applied equally to oral, written, or indeed to visual media, where gesture, accent, and intonation add further layers of meaning to the utterance, for instance, in the case of irony and sarcasm. When this decorum is undermined by speech acts which are incongruous to the social context, humour is often elicited.

The usually formal ‘doctor-patient’ relationship is subverted, both in word and in action. When the doctor tells Leonora that her treatment is progressing well, she asks him to dance with her and then suddenly kisses him passionately, blurting out to the bemused doctor that it was a desire that she always wanted to satisfy. Afterwards, the doctor confides in another guest that she only has three months to live: ‘dentro de tres meses quedará completamente calva’. The latter obviously misunderstands the idiomatic use of the phrase and responds literally with: ‘tiene un buen cráneo’. Beatriz and Eduardo dance with each other and enact a parody of the ‘seduction ritual’ speech genre. In this case, the usual polite circumnavigation of the topic of seduction is avoided, as both characters skip the customary euphemisms and get straight to the point. Their dialogue humorously resembles a series of one-word bureaucratic questions: ‘¿Nombre? Eduardo. ¿Edad? 30. ¿Profesión? Arquitecto. ¿Soltero? Hasta el sábado como tú’. This scene seems to suggest that underneath the poetry and rhetoric of love, romantic relationships are underpinned by a pragmatic and rather clinical socio-economic and erotic substratum. Stam (1989: 67) links linguistic degradation to the collapse of social etiquette in *El ángel exterminador* as follows: ‘Buñuel seems to be offering linguistic-discursive evidence of grave ruptures in the fabric of a pathologically polite society’.

The film is also peppered with deliberate repetitions which draw attention to its constructed nature. Repetition occurs on three levels: on the plane of action, that of discourse, and also on a thematic level. These techniques are examples of ‘associative play’ which impede or displace the diegetic development of the narrative by inserting circular or lateral associations. On a thematic level, the motif of repetition in the film echoes the social rituals which permeate the cosy, comfortable and ordered world of the bourgeoisie, as Edwards (2005: 96) suggests: ‘If repetition [...] is part and parcel of the everyday lives of ordinary human beings, Buñuel transforms it, when practiced by the bourgeois, into pure ritual [...]’. For instance, on the plane of story, Edmundo makes a toast which is warmly received by his guests. Inexplicably, after a few moments, he rises again to make the same toast and, to his own

apparent bewilderment, is ignored on this occasion. This repetition can be seen as forgetfulness on the part of the character; however, it can also be seen as a deliberate repetition of the scene on the plane of discourse, perhaps a 're-take' ordered by the director, like when the guests are shown, by the cinematic narrator, entering the hallway twice, from two slightly different angles, further underlining the repetitive nature of their shallow social lives. This metafictional comment draws attention to the discourse plane of the film narrative, where the director, as a rather whimsical godlike figure, plays games with his characters in an example of entropic parody, the comedy of narration.

As the narrative unfolds, the spatial and psychological confinement, lack of food, water, and proper toilet facilities, begins to aggravate the situation to such an extent that it quickly spirals out of control. Consequently, the bourgeois dinner party, a symbol of civilization, sophistication, and modernity, degenerates into an orgy of human savagery. Faced with a situation beyond their understanding, the terrified guests try to break the 'spell' by resorting to myth, superstition, and assorted fetish objects: religion, chicken's claws, the Kabbalah, and a 'washable rubber Virgin'. Ana tells Blanca and Silvia that before going to the opera she heard a voice in her head telling her to bring the 'keys', and makes a tenuous connection to the Kabbalah. She takes some chicken legs out of her handbag and begins to intone mysterious prayers under her breath; later, she solemnly throws a handful of white feathers in the air. As freemasons, Alberto and Cristián spell out the unpronounceable word: 'Hihhoh'. However, try as they might, the situation remains unchanged, and the level of frustration ratchets up a further notch.

At the precise moment when all is about to descend into total chaos and Edmundo has gone for a gun to commit ritual suicide⁵⁵, Leticia has a sudden revelation. She realises that they are all in similar spatial positions around the piano as they were just before they were trapped. Convinced that this is no mere coincidence, she suggests a ritualistic re-enactment of the piano recital, perhaps in order to appease the mysterious power or deity which she believes is holding them in the room.

Music, combined with spatial arrangement, appears to be the talismanic key to their entrapment and indeed to their apparent release, given that the mass delusion of enclosure

⁵⁵ See Chapter 4, section 4.3., which deals in detail with the nationalist mythology of *La muerte fácil* (Bartra, 1987). With reference to Bataille's ideas on human sacrifice, Hetherington (1997: 44) notes that 'he [Bataille] exhibited a fascination for ecstatic, heterogeneous or liminal experiences of an erotic and violent nature, in which subjectivity was dissolved in the sacred, the divine social, ultimately found [...] in acts of human sacrifice'.

begins soon after the recital. Indeed, the structural form of the piano sonata, *Sonata No. 6*, by Pietro Domenico Paradisi, played by Blanca, itself suggests circular repetition: introduction, exposition, development, and *recapitulation*, the last part of which is an altered repeat of the exposition⁵⁶. The sonata may also contain a coda which introduces further musical ideas of varying length, but which always resolves to the original key. The form of the sonata thus structurally mirrors the film narrative, and yet subverts the classical form where the recapitulation section is prolonged in an *aporia*, a ‘broken record’ which metaphorically illustrates the film’s jaundiced view of the stagnated nature of bourgeois culture.

However, it is evident that some of the characters (Russell, Eduardo, and Beatriz) have since died, so Leticia’s observation cannot be true⁵⁷. Nevertheless, despite this textual inaccuracy, through a shared belief in this ritual repetition, they are ‘magically’ able to leave the room. The viewer is also implicated in this communal display of superstitious faith, through unconscious association with the semiotic structures and conventions of socio-realist classical Mexican film narrative, that is, a sense that all narratives must be somehow be resolved, seeking the same improbable answers as the guests, and willing them to be true. Arguably, these traditional narrative structures are also characteristic of classical Hollywood film with its over-reliance on linear narratives and tendency to neatly resolve thematic problems at the end. Bordwell (1996: 6, 18) makes the following reference to the linearity and predictability of this particular style of filmmaking:

In the Hollywood style, the systems [logic, space, and time] do not play equal roles: space and time are almost invariably made vehicles for narrative causality [...] the ending becomes the culmination of the spectator’s absorption, as all the causal gaps get filled.

As many scholars have shown, classical Hollywood film was itself a blueprint for classical Mexican cinema (Acevedo-Muñoz, 2003; Revueltas, 1981). Regarding *Los olvidados* and its break with cinematic tradition in 1950s Mexico, Gutiérrez-Albilla (2008: 21) suggests that ‘[c]lassical Mexican cinema had become politically alienating because of its association with melodrama and its imitation of the Hollywood paradigm’. In contrast, Buñuel’s approach can be considered as the antithesis to the ‘continuity method’ favoured by Hollywood and Mexican national cinema, given the constant subversion of narrative causality through a

⁵⁶ See Ockelford (2005) on the musical structure of the piano sonata.

⁵⁷ See Kinder’s (1999: 10-11) excellent analysis of this scene.

fusion of black humour with the cinematic ‘gag’⁵⁸. Fuentes (2000: 79) summarizes this subversive approach as follows:

Su carácter [the visual gag] de elipsis visual y su capacidad para manifestarse con plena independencia de la lógica causal tradicional, subvirtiéndola o parodiándola, encaja a la perfección con el carácter libre y anticonvencional que Buñuel logra infiltrar en el relato narrativo convencional.

With reference to narrative theory, this ‘re-staging’ of the earlier recital can be described as a repetitive homodiegetic anachrony⁵⁹, since it evidently influences the progression of the story, that is, by cancelling the effect of the narrative *aporia*. Consequently, one can argue that there is a strong metacinematic aspect to this repetition. On the plane of discourse, and as an example of entropic parody, it suggests that the actors are going to attempt another ‘take’ of the scene, despite the ‘continuity’ errors due to the deaths of three of the guests. The focus seems to centre on placing them like chess pieces in the set/board/music room, with no one character being of any special importance. This frame-breaking manoeuvre can also be compared to Brecht’s V-effect, since it interrupts the illusion of reality generated by the film narrative⁶⁰. Regarding the metafictional aspect of narrative in the theatre, Eagleton (1986: 169) suggests that ‘[t]he function of the theatre is to show that “all the world’s a stage”’. On this particular occasion, once the music ends, and to the great relief of the trapped guests, the ‘spell’ appears to be broken. Ritual seems to be the key to their release, but it is also the cause of their entrapment. In relation to the ritual function of repetition illustrated in this particular scene, Fuentes (2000: 108) suggests the following:

La repetición, tan frecuente a lo largo de la película, adquiere ahora un papel mágico (de ahí lo de realismo mágico), talismánico: anula el tiempo y el espacio del encierro –dentro de la concepción mítica del eterno retorno.

⁵⁸ As a young man, Buñuel was particularly interested in the American silent film comics such as Harold Lloyd, Buster Keaton, and Charles Chaplin, seeing parallels in their works with his own growing interest in the Surrealist movement. Indeed, while principally inspired by the ideas of Marx and Freud, that is, the liberation of the body and mind from reason and repression, practical jokes were often employed by the surrealists in order to scandalize the conservative elements of Catholic society (Polizzotti, 2006).

⁵⁹ With respect to the temporal disjunctions in any given narrative, Chatman (1978: 65) suggests that ‘[i]nternal anachronies in turn can be subdivided into those that do not interfere with the interrupted story (“heterodiegetic”) and those that do (“homodiegetic”). In the latter case we can distinguish between completive [filling in lacunae] and repetitive [the narrative going back over its own tracks]’.

⁶⁰ With reference to the comic and metafictional aspects of Buñuel’s films, Russell (2009: 45) maintains that ‘a gag in film is a momentary interruption of the viewer’s immersion in the story world and an awareness of the hand behind the screen’.

The film's ridicule of an irrational delusion where redemption is attained through ritual indicates a strong satirical critique of superstitious belief and religious faith. This idea is further explored when the guests go to the church to give thanks to God for their liberation. After the service, in a second narrative *aporia* which the film refuses to resolve, the assembled congregation now seem to be inexplicably imprisoned all over again. They seem to be doomed to interminably repeat the same absurd cycle. With respect to the deployment of surrealist humour and the connection to experimental narration in *El ángel exterminador*, Kinder (1999: 10) asserts that:

[t]his is the first of several Buñuel films in which humor depends on a serious engagement with narrative theory. Buñuel plays with the subversive potential of repetition and its paradoxical ability to avoid narrative closure while appearing to fulfil it.

Buñuel's satirical and enigmatic narrative thus deconstructs the habitual social rituals of the Mexican bourgeoisie, revealing the performative nature of these reified social practices. Regarding the foregrounding of the actors' performance in Epic theatre, Eagleton (1986: 168) argues that 'Brechtian theatre deconstructs social processes into rhetoric, which is to say reveals them as social practices'.

The heterotopia of deviation created through psychological delusion in *El ángel exterminador* can be compared to the destitute wasteland of the Mexico City slums depicted twelve years earlier in *Los olvidados* (1950). Both of these films explore the polarisation of Mexican society, from abject poverty, to obscene wealth and privilege. The viewer is presented with urban spaces which have been set apart, isolated from the rest of the city, where primary resources such as food and water are scarce and consequently conventional morality begins to deteriorate. With respect to the destructive and constructive forces of modernity, Tuñon (2003: 69) suggests that 'la ciudad moderna es un espacio que al habitarse olvida, que al urbanizarse deshumaniza y que al edificarse destruye'. Primarily in the socio-realist mode, albeit with notable surrealist exceptions, *Los olvidados* portrays the daily life and death struggles in the marginal zones of the city, economically deprived areas thronged with migrants as a result of the drive towards a modern industrial economy, initiated by the policies of Miguel Alemán's *sexenio* (1946-52). The film undermines the prevailing government discourse of the time which sustained that Mexico was making a smooth transition from tradition to modernity. In the opening sequence, Mexico City is shown as a bustling metropolis, a symbol of modernity and progress, compared to London and Paris by

the voiceover narrator, although the flat emotionally detached delivery suggests a certain ironic distance, recalling the tone of Buñuel's Surrealist documentary *Las Hurdes* (1933), a film which, in addition to highlighting social inequality in a marginalised geographical area of rural Spain, parodies the tone of previous ethnographic documentaries. Furthermore, the voice-over narrator in *Los olvidados* suggests that the relentless drive towards modernity has produced this appalling social inequality, yet goes on to contradict what he has just said by stating that the solution lies with 'las fuerzas progresistas de la sociedad'. This ironic assertion ties in with his detached tone and is further evidence of the film's parody of the state's discourse of concerned liberalism which tended to gloss over the need for substantive social reform. With respect to this initial ideological contradiction, Gutiérrez-Albilla (2008: 29) suggests that 'we could read the film as an ironic commentary of the image of social cohesion, progress and reform that Mexican official discourses propagated'. This state rhetoric manifestly failed to address the structural socio-economic causes of delinquency and marginality.

Consequently, in Buñuel's *oeuvre*, the trajectory of these representations of spatial isolation and parasitic social predation invites an intertextual reading. For instance, the bathetic treatment of disaster and tragedy in the plush surroundings of *El ángel exterminador* gathers ironic significance if we examine it in the light of the considerably more socio-realist depictions of poverty in *Las Hurdes* and *Los olvidados*. One of the imprisoned guests bitterly bemoans the fact that they seem to have been 'forgotten' by the outside world. With respect to the film's satirical attack on the rich and powerful, and particularly the intertextual resonances with other works depicting social deprivation, Stam (1989: 106) maintains that '[T]he *Exterminating Angel* should be paired with another of Buñuel's films, *Los olvidados*, in the sense that the logic of the former film is to reduce its upper-class protagonists to the miserable condition of the slum-dwellers of the latter'. Independent of social class, people's actions are shown to be ultimately governed by the circumstances into which they are placed.

What is consistent throughout these films is the complete lack of a sentimental 'romantic' treatment of social deprivation. *Los olvidados* represents a clear move away from the *costumbrista* aesthetics and iconography characteristic of classical Mexican cinema⁶¹,

⁶¹ An example of this particular genre is the urban musical melodrama *Nosotros los pobres* (1948) directed by Ismael Rodríguez. See the Introduction for an outline of Classical Mexican film genres. Regarding the portrayal of poverty and national identity in Classical Mexican cinema, Obscura Gutiérrez (2015: 46) maintains that 'en el filme [cine de arrabal] predomina una idealización y naturalización de los espacios de miseria, al mostrarlos como un espectáculo lúdico musical donde prevalecen el amor y la solidaridad'.

especially the *cine de arrabal*, towards the new experimental left-oriented forms of Latin American cinema, which would later evolve further to become Third Cinema. The film appropriates the conventions of the documentary mode, along with elements of Italian Neorealism⁶², in order to highlight social injustice, and yet simultaneously undermines these conventions, via Surrealist self-reflexive narrative strategies, in order to draw attention to the inherent limitations of artistic representations of socio-economic reality. Rather than reality, these narratives give us instead a ‘reality effect’, as Barthes (1986: 148) theorises with respect to mimetic realism.

The abject⁶³ elements of society (Kristeva, 1982), that is, the detritus and waste, are normally placed apart from the rest of society. Consequently, those characters that are isolated and excluded, specifically Pedro, El Jaibo, and the rest of the gang, can be seen as symbolically abject. In the final sequence of the film, which has ironic biblical overtones via the expressionistic lighting and the image of the donkey carrying Pedro’s body, this metaphor is concretized by the secretive dumping of his lifeless body on the rubbish heap. With respect to the subversive and arresting power of the abject, Kristeva (1982: 3) suggests that ‘[a]s in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live’ (Original emphasis). Abjection, absurdity, dark humour, and heterotopias of deviation are also prominent features in Rulfo’s work. We will now examine the disruption of normative social space in Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo*.

The fragmented nature of Rulfo’s novel draws attention to itself as narrative, disrupting the conventional teleology of a traditional realist text. From the beginning, the reader is immersed in a playful self-reflexive narrative over which he/she has little control, and where entropic humour is often elicited by exploiting the shifting, and often duplicitous, relationship between narrating and reading. Arguably, both characters and reader are manipulated by the text’s puzzling structure. The identity of the narrative voice is problematized continually, and in some sections it is impossible to tell the identity and location of the person who is speaking. For instance, in fragment 28 we are presented with a passage of text which appears to be abstracted from any spatio-temporal context: ‘Ruidos. Voces. Rumores...’ (PP: 106).

The ghostly village of Comala, as a mysterious, ephemeral, and transient place which first disorients Juan Preciado, is mirrored on a textual level with the unsettling of the reader by the

⁶² This genre pioneered the use of actual locations, non-professional actors, and gritty non-iconic cinematography. (Acevedo-Muñoz, 2003; Polizzotti, 2006)

⁶³ See Chapter 1, section 1.4.4.

enigmatic and fragmented structure of the novel itself. The narrator-protagonist's account of his own doomed quest for self-knowledge, an example of entropic irony⁶⁴, can thus be seen as analogous to the position of the reader who is also 'lost' in the fragmented structure of the novel. In the latter case, we can speak of entropic parody, a metafictional comedy of narration. Consequently, both reader and character enter a world which resists logical linear interpretation. As we accompany Juan Preciado on his journey to Comala, one could argue that both character and reader are in a similar position to Benjamin's *flâneur* (1999), a wanderer who imposes personal narratives on -or to put it another way- allegorizes the space which he/she encounters. The narrator's subjective interpretation of space is particularly evident in fragment one of the novel: 'Hasta que ahora pronto comencé a llenarme de sueños, a darle vuelo a las ilusiones. Y de este modo *se me fue formando un mundo alrededor* de la esperanza que era aquel señor llamado Pedro Páramo' (my emphasis) (PP: 65). This subjective disruption of conventional social space is in direct contrast to the spaces of power, the panoptic gaze⁶⁵, represented by the tyrannical regime of Pedro Páramo, the former 'architect' of the boundaries and systems of social power in Comala. Since the figure of the *cacique* is emblematic within the discourses of the post-Revolutionary Mexican state, Rulfo's novel can thus be seen as tacitly countering national narratives which tended to celebrate the exploits of these local land chieftains. With reference to Baudelaire's lyric poetry and its counter-hegemonic representation of the neatly planned streets of Paris, Benjamin (1999: 10) suggests that '[t]his poetry is no hymn to the homeland; rather, the gaze of the allegorist, as it falls on the city, is the gaze of the alienated man'.

In a spatial sense, the narrative conjures up a heterotopia of deviation, an obsidian parody of the Catholic idea of purgatory. Like the guests in *El ángel exterminador*, the ghostly denizens of Comala are trapped in an enigmatic space which can be described as physical, perceptual, and psychological in equal measure: a fusion of the concrete spatial reality of a village cemetery with a type of abstract netherworld that appears to be constructed in part from an overwhelming sense of guilt derived from an assimilation of the repressive discourses of the Catholic faith. Their utterances can often be read as parodic renderings of the Catholic rituals of confession and penance. In relation to the complex treatment of the Catholic religion in Rulfo's works, González Boixo (1980: 76) maintains that:

⁶⁴ See Chapter 1, section 1.4.6., for a discussion of this term, a comedy of interpretation.

⁶⁵ The term is used by Foucault (1977) to analyse spaces of power in society. See Chapter 1, section 1.3., for a more detailed discussion.

[E]s muy difícil separar el sentimiento que de la religión tiene el hombre en cuanto necesidad natural de buscar una trascendencia en la que apoyarse, y la religión en su aspecto material, concreto e institucionalizado, tal como la ha recibido por tradición cultural. En este segundo sentido, Rulfo señala el carácter supersticioso y primitivo de esa religión, al mismo tiempo que su ineficacia.

The cemetery is described by Foucault (1986) as a prime example of a heterotopia of deviance. It is certainly a space of ‘otherness’, outside the normative world, and yet it is intimately connected to the community of the living, since most families bury their relatives there. The entire diversity and hierarchy of society is thus represented in one single space. With respect to religion, burial is also closely linked with the consecrated space of the church, with some tombs located within its walls. While the grave forms a link with a person’s loved ones, it also represents an ‘abject’ (Kristeva, 1982) part of society that we would prefer not to think about, the disquieting presence of mortal remains which remind us of our common fate.

Before the secularism which came with the Enlightenment, the focus was on the eternal life of the soul, with the body occupying a position of lesser importance. However, along with the decline in religious belief came an elevation of the treatment of a person’s remains, since these effectively represented the only traces of that person’s life. Each individual now had the right to a personal space in the cemetery, a box for their own ‘personal decomposition’. This paradoxical renewal of focus on the physical nature of the dead body, which ironically came about through a rise in atheist beliefs, can be compared to aspects of the Days of the Dead⁶⁶ in Mexico, where the veneration of the physical remains of a person is placed on equal footing with that of the immortal soul. This attitude can also be traced to pre-Hispanic burial practices which, as we have seen earlier, became syncretically intertwined with Catholic discourses in the post-Revolutionary Mexican national imaginary.

In fragment 36, the reader discovers that both Dorotea and Juan Preciado are spatially united in the same grave, as they are in the narrative, the level of story space echoing that of discourse space⁶⁷. Indeed, the space where their dialogue takes place is difficult for the reader to imagine: is it actually occurring in the earth itself or in some form of afterlife, purgatory, or perhaps a combination of both? The space can be described as ‘allotopic’, that is, in no particular place, and yet it still exists as part of the ‘real’ story world of the novel, which

⁶⁶ See Chapter 4, section 4.2., for a detailed analysis of this national festival.

⁶⁷ The de-gendered nature of this ‘paradoxical space’ is explored fully in Chapter 3, section 3.3. (Massey, 1996)

would suggest the idea of a heterotopia, like Foucault's analogy of the mirror⁶⁸, an indeterminate location somewhere between physical and perceptual space. The fusion of earth and spirit in this passage gives rise to a unique form of situational irony: the ontologically absurd idea that two dead bodies can converse in the grave. The text thus ridicules the Catholic belief-system which allows for this bathetic post-mortem dialogue, transpiring in a Dantean 'non-place'⁶⁹, where 'impure' souls are condemned to live until their sins are forgiven. This passage also highlights some of the key differences between verbal and cinematic story-space, as Chatman (1978: 106) outlines:

[...] verbal narratives can be completely non-scenic, "nowhere in particular", transpiring in a realm of *ideas* rather than *place*. The movies have difficulty evoking this kind of non-place. Even a pure black or gray or white backdrop will suggest night, or a fogged-in area, or heaven, or an over-illuminated room, but rarely "nowhere".

This narrative technique is used to great effect in *Pedro Páramo*, disorienting the reader through a lack of concrete spatial references. These 'living-dead' characters thus exist in the physical space of the 'real' world, that is, in their individual coffins, or communal graves, in the case of Juan Preciado and Dorotea, and also in the psychic realm, where their souls roam the world of the living in order to persuade people to pray for them.

In fragment 38, Dorotea makes an ironic reference to the tripartite structure which, according to the teachings of the Catholic Church, separates the body, mind, and soul⁷⁰, while wearily renouncing the eternal salvation promised by its evangelical discourses:

El Cielo para mí, Juan Preciado, está aquí donde estoy ahora.

—¿Y tu alma? ¿Dónde crees que haya ido?

—Debe andar vagando por la tierra como tantas otras; buscando vivos que recen por ella. Tal vez me odie por el mal trato que le di; pero eso ya no me preocupa. (*PP*: 124)

Her calm recollection of the rather humorous 'argument' with her soul, which she surmises left her body due to its sinfulness, seems to be a sign that she has purged herself of religious

⁶⁸ See Chapter 1, section 1.3., on heterotopias of deviance.

⁶⁹ Augé (1995: 111-2) links the term 'non-place' with Foucault's idea of heterotopia, suggesting that 'the non-place is the opposite of utopia: it exists and it does not contain any organic society'.

⁷⁰ This structure is mentioned in 'St. Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians': 'May he [the God] of peace himself also sanctify you in all things so that your whole spirit and soul and body [...]. This passage is cited in Phelan (2011: 13) as part of an analysis of the contentious nature (which Rulfo's text parodically references) of scholastic interpretations of this distinction.

guilt: 'ya no me preocupa'. It also leaves a tiny drop of blood on her hands, suggesting that it was somehow physically attached to her heart: 'Sentí cuando cayó en mis manos el hilito de sangre con que estaba amarrada a mi corazón' (*PP*: 125). Although it is an emotive and poetic image, Dorotea's jaded references to the 'plight' of her wandering soul, undermine its ostensibly tragic import. By positing an absurd attachment between the concrete and the abstract, a type of fleshy bond between her heart and soul, the novel thus parodically undermines the religious distinctions between the body, the soul, and the mind/spirit.

In addition to its poignancy, this passage also illustrates the dialectic interaction between deconstructive and constructive irony. Hutcheon (1992: 30-1) highlights an important distinction between these two terms: the former is described as a critical stance which undermines social and ideological constructions, and which 'is always concerned with internally oppositional positions. Here *marginality* becomes the model for internal subversion of that which presumes to be central'; building on these 'ruins', constructive irony celebrates this disjunction in meaning, focussing on *liminality*, or as she puts it, '[i]rony opens up new spaces, literally between opposing meanings, where new things can happen'. Along with signifying the moment of Dorotea's own death, the detachment of her soul from her body can be read as a symbolic break, experienced in her rational mind, with the penitential discourses of the Catholic Church.

Through its macabre caricature of the nature of mind, body, and soul, the text thus deconstructs the ideological framework underpinning these repressive discourses. From the de-gendered⁷¹ space of the grave, and as a character emblematic of marginality, Dorotea's dark, weary, and resigned humour therefore constructs a liminal site of resistance to the dominant hegemonic discourses which have governed her life, and riddled her with guilt. The utopian idea of Heaven is finally seen as merely an illusion which is reconciled with her position in the heterotopic space of the grave. With respect to Dorotea's rejection of the discourses of Catholic salvation, Hernández-Rodríguez (2001: 626) suggests that '[d]e todos los habitantes de Comala sólo en Dorotea se vislumbra cierta conciencia de finitud y renuncia a cualquier tipo de trascendencia'. While spatiality is the main focus of this chapter, the novel frequently exploits the conjunction of space and time for subversive effect.

⁷¹ See Chapter 3, section 3.3., for a detailed analysis of de-gendered space in *Pedro Páramo*.

As we have seen earlier, the Bakhtinian chronotope⁷² illustrates the inseparable nature of time and space within the narrative structure of a fictional work, and also establishes a relationship between the text and the outside world. In *Pedro Páramo*, the multiple timelines in the novel are situated within the single heterotopic story space of the village cemetery, a place with a strange, disorientating sense of time. When a person dies and is buried, chronological time for that particular individual can be said to cease; instead, time seems to stretch out in a kind of ‘eternity’, where the body decays in an entropic process⁷³. In Catholic discourses, this eternity is represented by the afterlife, where the soul travels to Heaven, hell, or, in the case of Comala, remains trapped in the strange netherworld known as purgatory. As bodies are continually being added to the cemetery, time can thus be said to accumulate in a central archive⁷⁴ or macabre ‘museum’ of the past. Consequently, the concept of heterochrony, as discussed earlier, can also be extended to the cemetery, given that the accumulation of bodies can be seen as an ‘archive’ of the past history of the community. Foucault (1986: 26) states this in the following terms: ‘the cemetery is indeed a highly heterotopic place since, for the individual, the cemetery begins with this strange heterochrony, the loss of life, and with this quasi-eternity in which her [sic] permanent lot is dissolution and disappearance’. However, rather than the glorification of the patrimony in the heterotopic space of the national museum, one can argue that the depiction of these isolated individuals highlights how many rural villages and communities have been elided by history.

In *Pedro Páramo*, the incongruous juxtaposition of timelines occurs both within the fictional story-space of the novel, and also on the level of discourse-space, that is, in the arrangement of the individual fragments in the text itself. Through entropic parody, the novel frequently exploits this feature for darkly humorous effect, where characters buried in different eras can humorously eavesdrop and interact with each other⁷⁵. The text highlights the eerie and amusing aspects of the indeterminate passage of time after death, such as the previously-cited ‘risas ya muy viejas, como cansadas de reír’ (*PP*: 101). In fragment 42, Juan Preciado and Dorotea overhear Susana San Juan speaking in a nearby grave, even though they died in different eras, that is, within the story world of the novel, and therefore belong to different timelines:

⁷² See Chapter 1, section 1.3., on spatiality and narrative.

⁷³ See Chapter 1, section 1.4.6., on entropic humour.

⁷⁴ See the discussion of the public spaces and the national archive in Echeverría (1998) and García Canclini (2005).

⁷⁵ A similar darkly comic treatment of conversations between the dead can be found in Máirtín Ó Cadhain’s *Cré na Cille* (1949), the title of which roughly translates as ‘Graveyard Clay’.

—Oí a alguien que hablaba. Una voz de mujer. Creí que eras tú.

—Voz de mujer? Creíste que era yo? Ha de ser la que habla sola. La de la sepultura grande. Doña Susanita. Está aquí enterrada a nuestro lado. Le ha de haber llegado la humedad y estará removiéndose entre el sueño (PP: 135).

Death, therefore, seems to erase distinctions of time as either past or present, creating what could be described as an ‘eternal present’. The fragmented structure of the novel achieves this same effect in the reader as the various voices, episodes, and memories, past and present, coalesce through their spatial juxtaposition on the discourse plane. It should be noted that Susana is also textually located in the preceding fragment, from where she enunciates her monologue; she is also in a larger tomb which illustrates her elevated social role within the *cacique’s* system of power relations. Grotesque humour is also present when Dorotea attributes Susana’s restlessness to the rather quotidian influence of dampness reaching as far as her coffin, a statement which undermines the previous reference to Susana’s higher social status in the ‘sepultura grande’. Their irreverent bathetic dialogue can thus be seen as a dark parody of the hagiographic national narratives constructed between ‘sacred’ objects in national museums.

Furthermore, the unorthodox use of verb tenses and time adverbials in certain sections creates the same sense of temporal confusion, foregrounding, in an entropic parody, the way in which the story is narrated. In fragment two, deictic confusion is propagated in the text by the use of the time adverbial ‘ahora’ in a section which is primarily in the past tense: ‘Hasta que *ahora* pronto comencé a llenarme de sueños’ (PP, 65). Juan Preciado also employs the present tense in the middle of a passage in the past tense: ‘Yo *imaginaba* ver aquello a través de los recuerdos de mi madre; [...] Ahora *vengo* en su lugar. *Traigo* los ojos con que ella miró estas cosas, porque me dio sus ojos para ver’ (PP, 66). With respect to the use of verb tenses and time adverbials in the novel, Perus (2012: 220) asserts that:

[E]stás insólitas marcas de enunciación no estaban destinadas a señalar la presencia de un interlocutor ante el cual el narrador, deprovisto de nombre propio, fuera a devanar su narración; señalaban traslapses entre espacios y tiempos diferentes [...]

Like Buñuel’s unfortunate guests, the ghosts of Comala seem to be condemned to live through a series of temporal repetitions, trapped in a single heterotopic space, either by discourses of social conformity and guilt, or as the helpless victims of the *cacique’s* violence, and continuously agonising over the traumatic events in their lives. One can argue that their

painful memories are fragmented and spatialised in the novel and are thus situated outside the flow of conventional time. Drawing on the ideas of Bachelard (1994), particularly with respect to the inner spaces of the mind and imagination, Tally (2013: 116) suggests that ‘the experience of time is actually frozen in discrete moments in our memory, photographic or spatial arrangements, such that space assumes a greater importance than temporality that is no longer understood as a fluvial metaphor’. For instance, the restless spirit of Toribio Aldrete clamours in vain for justice, entombed within the walls of Eduviges’ house. In fragment 17, Juan Preciado hears a tortured cry while he is trying to sleep: ‘Dormí a pausas. En una de esas pausas fue cuando oí el grito. Era un grito arrastrado como el alarido de algún borracho: “¡Ay vida, no me mereces!”’ (*PP*: 93). Toribio’s tortured spirit makes an ironic reference to the cruel nature of life itself, or rather addresses his complaint to a personification of life, seemingly remonstrating with an impassive universe that it doesn’t deserve a man like him: ‘no me mereces’. The reference to life is doubly ironic since he is already dead, and yet it illustrates his strong will and sense of self-worth. The sound seems to come from the very walls themselves: ‘Me enderecé de prisa porque casi lo oí aquí, untado a las paredes de mi cuarto’ (*PP*: 93). Juan Preciado’s faculties of perception are becoming confused, the description of the sound evincing the presence of poetic synaesthesia, which may indeed indicate psychological delusion, such as the symptoms of schizophrenia. In this case the audio waves take on the malleable physical qualities of butter, ‘untado a las paredes’. His disorientation mirrors the confusion felt by the reader on the plane of discourse.

The silence that follows the cry is described as follows: ‘No, no era posible calcular la hondura del silencio que produjo aquel grito. Como si la tierra se hubiera vaciado de su aire. Ningún sonido; ni de resuello, ni el del latir del corazón; como si se detuviera el mismo ruido de la conciencia’ (*PP*: 93). Much of the otherworldly atmosphere in the novel is generated by absences: shadows instead of light, and silence in place of sound. In cinematic as well as literary terms, this sculpting of visual/textual form by removing sound and light gives the narrative a very stark and expressionistic quality.

After a brief pause, Juan Preciado hears the cry again: ‘¡Déjenme aunque sea el derecho de pataleo que tienen los ahorcados!’ (*PP*: 93). The reference to the condemned man being allowed a few last words is suffused with grim irony, since the idiomatic expression also refers to the way a person’s legs twitch when they are hanged. We finally hear an explanation of the source of the sound from Damiana Cisneros: ‘Tal vez sea algún eco que está aquí encerrado. En este cuarto ahorcaron a Toribio Aldrete hace mucho tiempo. Luego condenaron

la puerta, hasta que él se secase; para que su cuerpo no encontrara reposo' (*PP*: 94). Like the situation of the guests in *El ángel exterminador*, this particular fragment of the past seems to repeat itself like a looped film clip. On a structural level, it mirrors the self-contained textual fragments in the novel. Each fragment exists independently of a determined linear chronology and can be said to have its own internal time. In conversation with Fernando Benítez, Rulfo (1983: 6) himself stated:

Debo decirte que mi primera novela estaba escrita en secuencias, pero advertí que la vida no es una secuencia. Pueden pasar los años sin que nada ocurra y de pronto se desencadena una multitud de hechos. A cualquier hombre no le suceden cosas de manera constante y yo pretendí contar una historia con hechos muy espaciados, rompiendo el tiempo y el espacio.

While examining the role of the female characters in the novel, Fuentes (1983: 11) comments on the way the past is apprehended in the text: 'Son ellas quienes introducen a Juan Preciado en el pasado de Pedro Páramo: un pasado contiguo, adyacente, como el imaginado por Coleridge: no atrás sino al lado, detrás de esa puerta, al abrir esa ventana'. When a fragment of the past is deprived of its specific temporality, as evinced in the experimental structure of *Pedro Páramo*, it becomes eternal, somehow outside conventional chronological time, in other words, a 'living' memory. The idea of memories behind different doors or windows in the same house, or space, existing alongside each other, as Fuentes suggests, is connected to the idea of the spatiality of memory (Bachelard, 1994), that is, a collective repository of distinct memories. In the case of Comala, these are epitomised by the multiple voices in the village cemetery. A more concrete example would be the storage of memorabilia in an attic space, or in a museum: artefacts from different timelines existing in the same heterotopic space. The disruption of social space in the narratives sets the stage for a deconstruction of ritual performance by the characters who occupy these surreal spaces. We will now turn our attention to the question of religious ritual as 'performance', focussing also on the texts' satirical treatment of self-abasement.

2.4 Religious Ritual as Performance

Catholic rituals are frequently the target for the implicit satire of established religious traditions and social organization in *Pedro Páramo*. In particular, the narrative closely examines the theatricality and performance of religious ceremonies, and explores the

underlying monetary nature of the ‘production’ which governs these public events. These rituals are often restricted to particular places of significance, where institutional power is invoked and exercised through the utterance of a sanctioned discourse by an official associated with the social ceremony in question⁷⁶; for instance, a priest’s performance of mass in a church. However, one could argue that the pronouncement of official discourse has a transformative effect on other more intimate social spaces, as evinced in a priest’s administration of last rites in a person’s home.

Social performance, spatiality, and religion all come to the fore in fragment 13 of the novel, which deals with Miguel Páramo’s funeral, and features the bribe offered to padre Rentería by Pedro Páramo, so that his son may be accepted into Heaven. At the start of the fragment, the reader is presented with an utterance which may be direct speech, character’s thought, or a thought report, by a silent extradiegetic narrator. The speech is conveyed in guillemets («...») and is in the present tense, although the identity of the enunciating subject remains unknown until the start of the third paragraph:

«Hay aire y sol, hay nubes. Allá arriba un cielo azul y detrás de él tal vez haya canciones; tal vez mejores voces... Hay esperanza, en suma. Hay esperanza para nosotros, contra nuestro pesar» (PP: 86)

This section of the text can be read as an affectionate yearning for an ethereal domain, far from the trials and tribulations of the material world. The only spatial references are the sky and the clouds emphasising the distance of this realm from the earth. The use of the present tense heightens the immediacy of the utterance in the mind of the reader, in a sense *showing* rather than *telling* what happened. Nevertheless, the existence of this otherworldly paradise is placed in question by the use of ‘tal vez’; only the sky, air, and clouds are described as having a concrete existence, with the use of ‘hay’. The speaker has, therefore, some doubts about the reality of this ‘world’ beyond the blue sky. The tone is relaxed, peaceful, and perhaps even evocative of poetic discourse. However, this tranquil meditation is suddenly shattered by the abrupt juxtaposition of the speaker’s next utterance: «Pero no para ti, Miguel Páramo, que has muerto sin perdón y no alcanzarás ninguna gracia» (PP: 86). It can be argued that this incongruous outburst by the speaker, where the character Miguel Páramo is to be apparently denied absolution for his sins, achieves a humorous undermining of the dreamlike tone of the start of the narrative fragment. Through the consciousness of padre Rentería, the narrator

⁷⁶ See Richardson, *Borges and Space* (2012); and Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (1991)

evokes a poetic, tranquil mood, by means of direct speech/internal monologue/soliloquy, and then punctures this narrative idyll with a venomous outburst from within the consciousness of the character of the priest, thus bringing the ethereal tone established earlier crashing down to earth. As the identity of the speaker is now known, the reader realises that the unfortunate cleric has been undergoing a crisis of faith.

At the beginning of the following paragraph, the reader is made aware that this first-person direct speech (character's thought) has been mediated through the consciousness of the third-person anonymous narrator of the novel, who then intervenes to identify the previous speaker as the character padre Rentería: 'El padre Rentería dio vuelta al cuerpo y entregó la misa al pasado' (*PP*: 86). The narrative is now spatially located in the church at Miguel Páramo's funeral and the juxtaposition of narrative spaces also jars with the reader's sensibilities: first ethereal and then earthly. At the level of narrative *discourse*, the implied author of the text assigns the order of the presentation of the events to the third-person narrator. It can be argued that the presentation of the information in this particular sequence, omitting and then later inserting key information, creates a serio-comic incongruity in the order, and tone, of the events in the narrative. The presence of humour does not, however, negate the dramatic, serious nature and tone of the priest's spiritual crisis; it simply adds a further layer of meaning and possible interpretation to the narrative⁷⁷. Regarding Rentería's ironic use of the strictures of the Catholic Church for his own personal ends, Thakkar (2012: 109-110) maintains that '[w]hatever the motive, irony is intended by Rulfo in the priest's initial words of hope and it is based on an illusory sense of control over Miguel's destiny governed by the legal concepts of sin and absolution'.

Once the serious tone has been undermined, the events that follow in the narrative fragment also lend themselves to serio-comic interpretations. For instance, the subsequent description of padre Rentería's hasty exit from the altar is imbued with a sense of exaggerated theatricality: 'Se dio prisa por terminar pronto y salió sin dar la bendición final a aquella gente que llenaba la iglesia' (*PP*: 86). He turns his back on Miguel's body and then storms off, omitting in the process the all-important benediction. When the assembled congregation plead for his blessing his response is dramatic and testy in equal measure: '—¡No! —dijo moviendo negativamente la cabeza—. No lo haré. Fue un mal hombre y no entrará al Reino de los Cielos. Dios me tomará a mal que interceda por él' (*PP*: 86).

⁷⁷ See Brecht's ideas on comedy and tragedy in Chapter 1, section 1.4.1.

The rather detached third-person narrator presents this dramatic scene with a sliver of subtle irony, depicting the priest's crisis of conscience, while at the same time poking fun at his exaggerated and self-important gesticulations. In his anger, padre Rentería emphatically states that Miguel will never enter the kingdom of heaven, as if the priest had the omnipotent power to decide the latter's spiritual fate. His statement makes clear reference to the spatiality of the metaphysical world, as constructed by Catholic discourses, the idea that a *threshold* must be crossed in order for the soul to be saved. It is worth noting that another characteristic of a heterotopia is the regulation of access, that is, the existence of a portal, like in Buñuel's *El ángel exterminador*, which may be opened or closed⁷⁸. Foucault (1986: 26) links this rite of passage to the performance of religious ritual:

Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable [...] To get in one must have certain permission and make certain gestures. Moreover, there are heterotopias that are entirely consecrated to these activities of purification —purification that is partly religious and partly hygienic.

In the case of Miguel Páramo's body, Padre Rentería refuses to administer these rites and purifications⁷⁹, and illustrates his own spiritual bankruptcy by accepting the money from Pedro Páramo. With respect to the attitude and tone of the third-person narrator in *Pedro Páramo*, Perus (2012: 234) suggests that:

[É]ste no busca tan sólo despejar la nublazón colectiva: la revierte al hacerse eco, él mismo, de los diversos registros y tonos de la risa popular, vitalmente propensa a mofarse de todas las vanidades y las pretensiones sociales y a trasponer lo 'serio' y 'trágico' de la muerte en un plano terrenal y cósmico.

The hypocrisy and greed inherent in the relationship between the *cacique* and the institution of the Church is clearly satirized in the same fragment when Pedro Páramo asks padre Rentería to absolve his son Miguel and gives him a fistful of gold coins, under the guise of a 'donation', in order to obtain a favourable decision regarding the latter's position in the afterlife: '—Reciba eso como una limosna para su iglesia' (*PP*: 87). It is also worth noting that Pedro Páramo gives him the money when the church is empty, so that the bribery is kept secret from the rest of the congregation. On the plane of story, this scene illustrates the

⁷⁸ With respect to the novel's treatment of death, Harris (2005: 151) notes that 'thresholds, open doorways [...] symbolise the situation of the people of Comala', that is, the passage from life to death.

⁷⁹ According to Kristeva (1982), since the corpse is the epitome of the abject, it must be purified according to religious ritual before entry to the afterlife can be granted. See Chapter 1, section 1.4.3. Abjection and grotesque humour are also discussed in Chapter 3, section 3.3., with respect to gender performance.

complicit hypocrisy shown by both Pedro Páramo and padre Rentería. In the murky nebulous world of Catholic morality, it appears that forgiveness and salvation have a fluctuating price. Having accepted the spiritual bribe, padre Rentería's subsequent monologue/conversation with God is peppered with subtle irony:

—Son tuyas [las monedas] —dijo. Él puede comprar la salvación. Tú sabes si éste es el precio. En cuanto a mí, Señor, me pongo ante tus plantas para pedirte lo justo o lo injusto, que todo nos es dado pedir [...] Por mí, condénalo, Señor. Y cerró el sagrario'. (PP: 87)

On the surface, the tone of the passage is solemn and brooding as the priest battles with the moral dictates of his faith and the visceral human emotions of hatred churning within his body. There is also a satirical tone underlying this section, where the intimate —evidenced by the use of tú— 'conversation/monologue' with God is conducted rather like a business transaction. Padre Rentería doesn't refuse the money on principle and he leaves God to decide whether or not the amount 'donated' by Pedro Páramo is sufficient, implying that there are some kinds of spiritual market forces in operation: 'Tú sabes si éste es el precio'. Finally, he appears to give God some advice, obviously motivated by his understandable bitterness towards Miguel: 'Por mí, condénalo, Señor'. The narrator then intervenes to describe how the priest concludes his 'conversation' with God by abruptly closing the tabernacle, 'Y cerró el sagrario', an act which is mischievously suggestive of hanging up the receiver after a telephone conversation. It appears that he doesn't want to hear God's answer. Pedro Páramo's sly appropriation of Church and state power is commented on by Thakkar (2012: 114) as follows: 'we see how the *cacique* is the ultimate winner for he uses the techniques of both Church (spiritual legitimacy) and state (material legitimacy) to establish control over law and order in his realm'.

Religious faith is shown to be defunct, and salvation can apparently be purchased with a few gold coins. With respect to the economic practices of the Catholic Church during his formative years in Jalisco, Mexico, Rulfo (1992: 878) stated that '[a]l Obispado, a las cuotas que se cobraban por confirmar niños —ya por mero y bautizábamos también, pero no le dieron permiso— y todo eso me parecía una farsa ¿no?'. The novel exposes the deliquescence of Comala's moral and social system but does not suggest how it should be repaired. Personal moral conflict set against religious ritual portrayed as theatrical performance is also a central feature of Buñuel's *Nazarín* (1958), in particular exploring the ways in which fanatical believers confer legitimacy and authority on the conflicted priest.

Adapted from the Spanish novel by Benito Pérez Galdós, *Nazarín* follows the vicissitudes of an ascetic priest who is determined to live his austere life exactly according to the teachings of Jesus. However, far from bringing social harmony to his humble surroundings, his unorthodox stance causes personal ruin, generates social unrest, and brings him into frequent conflict with the Law and the strictures of the Catholic Church. Set in Mexico of 1900, the text functions as a penetrating study of the practicalities of Christian morality and as a scathing satire of excessive adherence to dogmatic faith.

The excessive self-abasement of the figure of Padre Nazario can be read as a darkly ironic satire of the priest-as-martyr image which dates back to the nineteenth-century Mexican independence movement spearheaded by Morelos and Hidalgo⁸⁰. From the opening scenes, Buñuel's film exaggerates padre Nazario's humility and self-mortification⁸¹ both of which are stretched comically to the point of absurdity. When he is explaining to Don Pablo how he has been recently robbed of his clothes and money, a neighbour calls in to borrow a pot; without hesitation, the priest tells her to go straight to the kitchen and take whichever one she needs. She later emerges with a pot and some firewood, a rather opportunistic action to which he calmly and graciously assents. Before a bemused Don Pablo leaves, he deposits a few coins on the table. Padre Nazario's next altruistic action is to give most of this money to a blind beggar. Having been grossly insulted by the prostitute Andara, he selflessly shelters her when she is accused of murder. After a few days hiding together in his room, they are comically bickering like an old married couple; on one occasion, when he arrives home late, he is berated by Andara: '¿Por qué llega tan tarde que me ha tenido con unas angustias de muerte? [...] ¡Hombre había de ser!'. Nevertheless, she eventually 'repays' his kindness by setting fire to the *mesón* in order to create a diversion and escape from the authorities. To add insult to injury, he now has to go on the run for harbouring a fugitive, consorting with a prostitute, and is also blamed for starting the fire. He exchanges his priest's robes for peasant's clothes and sets off to wander the countryside, surviving by begging for alms. In the *corraliza* scene, he gives his last few morsels of food to a small child; later, moved by the gruesome sight of a beggar's blistered feet, he surrenders his own boots; to top it all off, while he is sleeping, another 'companion', whom he later describes as having 'el venerable

⁸⁰ See Thakkar's (2012) study of state and religious discourses in post-Revolutionary Mexico.

⁸¹ A similar form of dark humour which stems from an exaggeration of misfortune can be found in Myles na gCopaleen's satire (Flann O'Brien) *An Béal Bocht* (1941), where the unfortunate protagonist, one Bonaparte O'Coonassa, is ironically described as living in 'most excellent poverty', parodic lines which can be traced back to *The Imitation of Christ* (1441) by the canon regular Thomas à Kempis, a work which incidentally contains a chapter entitled: 'Self-abasement in the Sight of God'.

aspecto de un padre de la Iglesia' steals his satchel and blanket. The events portrayed in the film seem to confirm the validity of the ironic maxim: 'no good deed goes unpunished', a quote which has been attributed both to Oscar Wilde and Clare Boothe Luce. Fuentes (2000: 145) notes the subversive influence of Sade in this particular aspect of the film: 'al Nazarín buñueliano todas sus acciones le salen mal, son un ejemplo del *dictum* sadiano «criminal en la virtud»'.

While Padre Nazario wanders the countryside in a destitute state, his formerly resolute faith is gradually eroded by a series of misadventures until he has a chance encounter with Beatriz, who wants him to bless her dying niece. When he arrives at the house, the child's mother (Josefa) is overcome with emotion: 'Dios nos lo trae a esta su casa, padre. Ya sé que es usted un santo'. Padre Nazario is visibly annoyed at being called a saint and responds curtly: 'No digan tonterías'. Undaunted, Josefa declares that he is their only hope. The priest's curious reply is perhaps partly indicative of his dwindling faith: 'Sólo la ciencia y Dios sobre ella pueden remediar algo'. He fuses scientific and religious discourses, giving precedence in his utterance to science. The film thus underlines his pragmatic, multi-faceted nature, by eschewing manicheistic representations, and contesting the state's one-dimensional portrayal of the rural Mexican priest⁸².

Josefa then explains to him how she foresaw the onset of her daughter's fever through a series of supernatural occurrences; many of these observations are of a pre-Hispanic nature and evince the religious syncretism at the heart of the Catholic faith in Mexico: 'El día que cayó enferma me malicié yo la desgracia porque toda la noche cantó el tecolote [from the *náhuatl* word for 'owl', a bird of ill-omen connected to the pre-Hispanic gods of the underworld] y cuando salí aullaron tres perros uno detrás de otro...'. Her explanation is brusquely interrupted by Padre Nazario, who once more places science above superstition: '¿La ha visto un médico?', an attitude which reaffirms his practical nature. In addition, through dramatic irony, the text clearly satirizes the priest's dismissal of Josefa's superstition; given that the Catholic faith, of which he is a representative, also contains elements of superstitious belief, he seems to be blithely unaware of the irony of his criticism. His patriarchal censure of her belief-system creates what could be described as a 'hierarchy' of

⁸² Throughout the colonial period, right up until the Revolution and the subsequent Cristero War, and, indeed, into the first decade of the modern post-Revolutionary Mexican nation, state discourses often depicted the priest as a devious, conniving, and manipulative figure, in league with the local *cacique*, and concerned only with social status and monetary gain. The latter image is particularly characteristic of the socialist rhetoric of the Cárdenas era (Thakkar, 2012).

superstition: supernatural beliefs of a pre-Hispanic origin are seemingly valued less than the 'orthodox' ideas of the Catholic faith. Indeed, another layer of irony can be added to this observation: Padre Nazario has been labelled a heretic by the official Church, due to the fact that he has decided to reinterpret the Catholic faith in his own idiosyncratic manner.

The scene quickly descends into a darkly comical farce: Josefa throws herself at his feet beseeching him for a miracle; this outburst seems to spur on her neighbours who all fall victim to a hysterical and fanatical religious trance, clamouring loudly for a miracle, and invoking the Virgin of Guadalupe, among other religious icons. The priest contemplates this scene with a bemused expression but eventually performs the blessing in a suitably sombre tone. Early next morning, as he is leaving the village, he is told by a breathless Beatriz that the girl has recovered. The women attribute this to a miracle performed by the priest. This 'miracle' has now seemingly sealed his reputation as a 'saint'. In this scene, the film thus explores how adherents to a particular faith or superstition can be more fanatical than those who minister this faith, and how their blind devotion confers legitimacy on the doctrine in which they unconditionally believe.

A similar situation arises when Padre Nazario comes across a plague-ridden village. Nevertheless, in this instance, he seems to be possessed of a new vitality, a new belief in his power as a priest, as if this is a place where he can finally fulfil his spiritual vocation. One could also argue that his renewed faith stems in part from a burgeoning belief in his newly-acquired 'sainthood', so fervently proclaimed by both Andara and Beatriz. Fuentes (1993: 132) notes the priest's growing confidence in himself: 'se afirma más en su condición de santidad'. While tending the sick, he encounters a dying woman and begins to perform the last rites: 'Piensa que esta vida sólo es camino: soporta tus sufrimientos y prepara tu alma al gozo que te espera de verte en la presencia de Dios'. In contrast to his attitude towards Josefa's daughter, he makes no mention of medical science on this occasion. However, the stricken woman rejects his spiritual solace preferring the physical comfort of her husband/partner: 'Yo sólo quiero ver a Juan ... quiero verlo'. Aspects of the scene can be compared to the confessional scene between padre Rentería and Susana San Juan, explored in depth in Chapter 3, and is also reminiscent of Sade's *Dialogue between a Priest and a Dying Man* (1782), first published in 1926, where an atheist libertine refuses to accept the last rites.

Padre Nazario then attempts to focus her attention on the afterlife: 'Olvida ya las pasiones de este mundo, hija. El Señor te da tiempo para hacer examen de conciencia...piensa en el cielo

que te espera'. Nevertheless, she is unmoved by this plea and reiterates her desire for her partner. Rather peevishly, Don Nazario then invokes his elevated status within the official patriarchal hierarchy of the Church, as a veiled threat: 'Como *sacerdote* te digo que puedes salvarte con sólo que te arrepientas de tus faltas'. His efforts are in vain as the woman insists on seeing Juan. When the latter finally arrives she tells him to send padre Nazario and his 'disciples' packing. Given the priest's previous criticism of Josefa's superstitious beliefs, the dramatic irony in the text satirizes his sudden pious impulse to perform the last rites, and his use of the official Church doctrine when it suits his purpose. Furthermore, he appears to believe in himself just because his flock decide to confer legitimacy on him.

The film also parodically references the conversation between Jesus and the two thieves who have been crucified with him; one asks for his forgiveness, while the other remains impenitent. When he is in jail, Padre Nazario continues to preach Christian values and, in the spirit of the Biblical story, tries to convert one of the 'criminals'. However, the latter responds instead with a resigned, weary humour: 'y su vida para qué sirve, usted para el lado bueno y yo para el lado malo, ninguno de los dos servimos de nada'. This comment seems to deal the final psychological blow to the priest's quixotic ambition to follow the teachings of Jesus to the letter. As Fuentes (1993: 135) suggests: 'El santo queda convertido en un parásito y confundido con un criminal'.

The two prominent religious characters in the works in question, Padre Rentería and Padre Nazario, are complex, morally ambiguous characters, falling outside traditional narratives and depictions of the Mexican Catholic priest⁸³. Both can be seen as revolutionaries, due to their defiance of the institutions of the Church and state. Despite his crisis of faith, Rentería will eventually join the Cristero Revolt (1926-28), while Nazario's actions betray a desire to reform the Church from within by following the teachings of Jesus to the letter. And yet, in defiance of their rebellious natures, they both display complicity with the institution of the Church, through a 'performance' of hegemonic patriarchal power, when it suits their purpose.

Rulfo's 'Talpa' (1953) also addresses the themes of ritual performance, exaggerated faith, and self-abasement, illustrating the destructive effects of these practices on the protagonists. Eschewing conventional narrative chronology, it opens with the depiction of a scene at the end of the story between Natalia and her mother. The rest of the events leading up to this

⁸³ In many Mexican Catholic narratives, the priest was often portrayed as a martyr, selflessly putting the good of the people before his own safety; this iconic 'mask' often concealed the shortcomings of the institutional Church (Thakkar, 2012).

moment are related by the first-person narrator in a completive homodiegetic analepsis⁸⁴, the innovative structure leading to some surprising revelations for the reader throughout the narrative: the fact that Tanilo is the narrator's brother; and that the latter has been having an affair with Tanilo's wife.

The commercial aspects of ritual pilgrimage and public performance of religious rites are also featured in the text. Throughout the narrative, Tanilo's unwavering belief in the curative power of the statue of the Virgin is contrasted sharply with the narrator's more worldly and jaundiced view. The latter's references to the shrine in the text are full of ironic intent: 'La Virgencita le daría remedio para aliviarse de aquellas cosas que nunca se secaban' (LL: 77). The use of the diminutive 'virgencita' certainly seems to be used with ironic rather than affectionate intent, perhaps underlining his opinion that Tanilo's belief is childish and naive, and thus calling into question the healing power of the religious shrine. It is also possible that he is imitating Tanilo's speech patterns, his particular choice of words; in this case, it may be that Tanilo uses 'virgencita' with affection. Nonetheless, when the word is repeated by the narrator, it still assumes a hint of irony, given that the entire paragraph deals with the narrator's cynicism regarding the holy shrine. The sardonic tone continues in the next phrase, where he makes a mocking reference to her supposed power to erase suffering: 'Ella sabía hacer eso: lavar las cosas, ponerlo todo nuevo de nueva cuenta como un campo recién llovido' (LL: 77). The reference to 'making everything new' is satirically undermined by using the adjective 'nuevo/a' twice. Throughout this section of the text, Tanilo's strong faith is continually contrasted with the narrator's scepticism, and he makes this clear with the following statement: 'Ya allí, frente a Ella, se acabarían sus males; nada le dolería ni le volvería a doler más. *Eso pensaba él*' (My emphasis) (LL: 77).

With reference to the inordinate time it has taken them to complete the journey to the shrine, the narrator gives the following reason: 'Todo se debió a que Tanilo se puso a hacer penitencia' (LL: 82). Having seen some of the other pilgrims wearing pieces of nopal cactus around their necks as scapulars, Tanilo chooses to do the same; in addition, he decides to tie his feet together 'para que sus pasos se hicieran más desesperados' (LL: 83). Apparently taking inspiration from accounts relating to the passion of Christ, he also wants to wear a crown of thorns so as to punish himself even further for his perceived guilt; a little later he adds a blindfold. Finally, he begins to walk on his knees, with his hands crossed behind his

⁸⁴ See Chatman, *Story and Discourse* (1978)

back. Having already described, in horrific detail, Tanilo's physical suffering up to this point, the further reference to self-inflicted pain and penance in the text diffuses the boundaries between the tragic, the grotesque, the absurd, and the blackly comic. Tanilo's debilitating illness seems to recede into the background and it is now his blind faith that is the principal cause of his suffering. Through a satirical use of abjection, the narrator makes it seem as though it were a perverse 'competition' between the pilgrims to achieve total mortification and self-abasement.

The text thus targets the cultural emphasis placed on being *seen* to suffer, highlighting the performative, ritual, visual, and social aspects of grief and the religious discourses which govern much of its expression. When the narrator describes Natalia's outpouring of grief at the end of the story, he explicitly criticises her delayed reaction to Tanilo's death, and emphasises the complicit nature of their culpability:

Vino a llorar hasta aquí, arrimada a su madre; sólo para acongojarla y que supiera que sufría, acongojándonos de paso a todos, porque yo también sentí ese llanto de ella dentro de mí como si estuviera exprimiendo el trapo de nuestros pecados. (LL: 76-77)

In addition to transferring some of his personal guilt to Natalia, the narrator is also critical of the social conventions surrounding death and bereavement: the need for a public ritual 'performance' of grief; the way that someone's anguish can be used to upset other people; and that the most important thing is to be *seen* to grieve: 'que [la madre] *supiera* que [ella] sufría' (My emphasis). Nonetheless, the narrator fails to mention the numbness and shock that might be delaying Natalia's reaction: she may have been bottling up her emotions in order to successfully complete the arduous journey back from Talpa; it is also possible that she can only really open up emotionally to her mother, someone to whom she feels closest. The narrator's bitterness towards her may also be explained by the fact that she has now rejected him as a lover.

As they are nearing the sacred shrine, the narrator emphasizes their sense of urgency: 'queriendo llegar los primeros hasta la Virgen, antes que se le acabaran los milagros' (LL: 81). In addition to expressing their fervent desire to reach Talpa, the narrator makes an ironic reference to the quantity of miracles dispensed by the Virgin. The use of the phrase 'before she ran out of miracles' implicitly suggests a commercial aspect to ritual pilgrimage and religious belief. The phrase is reminiscent of a sale of cheap merchandise which is about to run out. With reference to the treatment of religious faith in 'Talpa', Rulfo (1992: 878) states:

‘La cuestión religiosa la fui entendiendo demasiado tarde y vi que era teatro, puro teatro, y más o menos quise hacer cierta ironía en la cuestión esta de los milagros que hacen las Vírgenes y los Santos’.

The power of religious discourse to dehumanize the excessively devout believer is illustrated in the narrator’s description of his brother’s abject physical state when they reach Talpa: ‘llegó a Talpa aquella cosa que era mi hermano Tanilo Santos; aquella cosa tan llena de cataplasmas y de hilos oscuros de sangre que dejaba en el aire, al pasar, un olor agrio como de animal muerto’ (LL: 83). At this point, Tanilo has been completely stripped of his humanity and dignity by the horrific combination of his illness and his exaggerated faith, and is referred to by his brother as an object, ‘aquella cosa’ and by using animalistic similes: ‘como de animal muerto’. Rulfo (2003: 520) makes frequent reference to the negative effects of fanatical faith in Mexico:

Yo fui criado en un ambiente de fe, pero sé que la fe allí ha sido trastocada a tal grado que aparentemente se niega que estos hombres crean, que tengan fe en algo. Pero en realidad precisamente porque tienen fe en algo, por eso han llegado a ese estado.

In the case of ‘Talpa’, one could argue that the text interpellates⁸⁵ the reader as an ‘agonised witness’ to the cruelty endured by Tanilo –the clash between the latter’s naïve world-view and the often brutal realities of life. It must be noted that the violence is self-inflicted, although the narrator is also implicated, given that he persuades Tanilo to undergo the pilgrimage, in order to achieve his own selfish ends. The black humour present in the narrative thus has as its primary target the penitential discourses espoused by the institution of the Catholic Church which, the text implies, may be largely responsible for Tanilo’s grotesque ritual behaviour. In relation to the text’s subversive approach to Catholic hegemony, Schmidt (1998: 231) maintains that ‘tanto la presentación del cuerpo grotesco como la de la danza en la plaza pública en Talpa tienen la función de desmitificar el poder de la Iglesia católica, es decir, el cuento representa una carnavalización del discurso religioso dominante’. A secondary target of the story would be Tanilo himself, his excessive faith, his need for a public display of mortification, and the consequent tragedy and self-abasement that this brings about. With respect to the mode’s approach to class division, Haynes (2006: 28)

⁸⁵ Althusser (1969: 231) sees ideology as ‘a system (with its own logic and rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts, depending on the case) endowed with a historical existence and role within a given society’. He goes on to define interpellation (1971: 173) in the following terms: ‘*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*, by the functioning of the category of the subject’. (Original emphasis)

maintains that ‘while black humour is of course frequently tendentious, its ‘target’[...] is the nature of social conflict as such, rather than any underprivileged group’.

When they finally enter the church ‘enfrentito de aquella figurita dorada que era la Virgen de Talpa’ (*LL*: 83-84), the narrator’s choice of words echoes the ironic references to the Virgin that he has already made at the start of the story. For instance, the diminutive ‘figurita dorada’ to describe the statue underlines the small size and rather underwhelming image of the Virgin, while the use of the spatial deictic ‘aquella’ highlights the distance, both physical and spiritual, between the statue and the pilgrims. The narrator’s account of Tanilo’s failure to notice that one of his tears has extinguished the candle which they have placed in his hands is a clear metaphor for how he has been blinded by his faith: ‘Pero no se dio cuenta de esto; la luminaria de tantas velas prendidas que allí había le cortó esa cosa con la que uno se sabe dar cuenta de lo que pasa junto a uno’ (*LL*: 84). In addition to the religious connotation, the last part of the phrase obviously makes an oblique reference to Tanilo’s failure to notice the affair between his brother and his wife. The narrator generates considerable atmosphere by describing the scene at the shrine, building up the emotional tension, and reaching a climax where Tanilo desperately invokes the healing power of the Virgin, clamouring out loud that his prayers be heard. However, the following description of his sudden death: ‘Pero no le valió. Se murió de todos modos’ (*LL*: 84), is related in a brusque, laconic, matter-of-fact manner, which deflates the previous narrative tone and finishes this passage on a muted discordant note.

The following paragraph begins with quotation marks and the reader is not informed who is speaking: ‘...Desde nuestros corazones sale para Ella una súplica igual, envuelta en el dolor. Muchas lamentaciones revueltas con esperanza. No se ensordece su ternura ni ante los lamentos ni las lágrimas, pues Ella sufre con nosotros...’ (*LL*: 84). The narrator then intervenes to identify the speaker as the priest. The ironic juxtaposition of the latter’s effusive adoration of the Virgin with the former’s impassive description of Tanilo’s death indicates the narrator’s scepticism and bitterness towards the curative properties of the shrine: ‘Eso decía el señor cura desde allá arriba del púlpito’ (*LL*: 84). The use of ‘allá arriba’ again underlines the narrator’s perception of the spatial and social gulf between the priest and the pilgrims, the impression that he is not part of their earthly reality. Indeed, the revelation of the identity of the speaker has a hint of dark humour about it, its incongruity playing against the reader’s expectations. The narrator then describes his sadness at the loss of his brother, overcome by the sound of the dancers, drums, and bells outside: ‘Y entonces fue cuando me

dio a mí tristeza. Ver tantas cosas vivas; ver a la Virgen allí, mero enfrente de nosotros dándonos su sonrisa, y ver por el otro lado a Tanilo, como si fuera un estorbo' (LL: 84-85). The poignant description is composed of equal parts of irony, sadness, guilt, and bitterness. The narrator focuses on the Virgin's impassive smile in the midst of Tanilo's earthly suffering, echoing the hallucinatory and grotesque transformation of the representation of the scene of the *Ecce Homo* into the macabre figure of the laughing Christ seen by Andara in padre Nazario's room.

To sum up, we have seen how Buñuel's and Rulfo's experimental texts transform and often disrupt normative social space by creating bizarre and enigmatic story worlds which can be read as heterotopias of deviation. These liminal spaces are particularly evident in *El ángel exterminador* and *Pedro Páramo*. The resultant dark self-reflexive humour, characteristic of entropic parody, satirizes excessive religious belief and repetitive social ritual, unmasking the subterranean power relations which underpin these pervasive ideologies and social practices in Mexico. The works also employ self-reflexive humour on the plane of story in order to highlight the essentially performative and theatrical aspects of these rituals, playing with the idea of 'orthodox' belief, and making ironic references to the hierarchy of superstition which appears to exist between the institution of the Catholic Church and pre-Hispanic beliefs. Along with the implicit critique of the complicity of the hallowed institutions of the Mexican state and the Catholic Church, that is, their common aim of patriarchal hegemonic domination, the narratives highlight the role of over-zealous citizens in the conferral of legitimacy on these institutions. The latter effect is best exemplified in the absurd and grotesque self-abasement, through a satirical appropriation of abjection, of padre Nazario and Tanilo; it is also evident in the religious fervour displayed by Josefa, and the 'beatification' of padre Nazario by Beatriz and Andara. Arguably, these characters are entrapped precisely as a consequence of their fanatical faith. Furthermore, the texts' portrayal of the two priests is considerably more nuanced than the idealized image characteristic of Church narratives and the 'demonised' grasping cleric disseminated by state discourses. Indeed, both priests can be considered as revolutionaries: one taking up arms against the state, the other rebelling from within the ranks. Ironically, neither of them seems capable of trusting entirely in God to solve their problems, resorting instead to science and brute force in a pragmatic world, and arbitrarily wielding institutional power when it is to their advantage. Having identified the ways in which religion and ritual marginalize and imprison characters, one could argue that the ironic, satirical stance taken in the texts opens up new liminal spaces from where to

mount resistance to hegemonic discourses and enunciate and assert new heterogeneous forms of being Mexican.

Chapter 3: Un-mapping Normative Gender Identities in Buñuel and Rulfo

Como si fueran mujeres las que cantaran

(*Pedro Páramo*)

This chapter investigates the ways in which subversive narrative techniques denaturalize traditional normative ‘gender appropriate’ behaviour patterns. In particular, it will examine how the works engage with discourses of cultural nationalism and certain stereotypical representations of male and female characters found in earlier post-Revolutionary cultural production⁸⁶, such as the novels dealing with the Revolution and Mexican ‘national’ cinema. These questions will be considered in relation to the following texts: Buñuel’s *Los olvidados* (1950) and *Ensayo de un crimen* (1955); and Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo* (1955).

As unitary notions of *mexicanidad*⁸⁷ underwent a process of reification in post-Revolutionary Mexico, idealized and conventional portrayals of gender became intertwined with the national imaginary. In cultural texts which espoused this rather utopian⁸⁸ vision of Mexico, male protagonists were often depicted as aggressive, philandering, free-spirited, and recklessly brave, while their female counterparts were frequently portrayed as either caring, compliant, and virtuous, or as seductive and dangerous⁸⁹. In contrast to such binary depictions, I contend that the works of Buñuel and Rulfo evince a subversive and counter-hegemonic treatment of traditional gender relations. The representation of men and masculinities, allied with the portrayal of women and femininities, reveals a considerably more nuanced approach characterised by a distinctive blend of dark humour and self-reflexive narration.

⁸⁶ See the Introduction for a detailed discussion of earlier post-Revolutionary Mexican cultural production.

⁸⁷ See the outline of *mexicanidad* in the Introduction: Bartra (1987); Acevedo-Muñoz (2003); Paz (2002).

⁸⁸ See Jameson’s (2005) discussion of utopian nationalist discourses in the Introduction.

⁸⁹ Monsiváis (2012) and Ramírez Berg (1992) have analysed the depiction of masculinities and femininities in post-Revolutionary cultural production.

The chapter begins by outlining some of the key features of normative gender representation in earlier post-Revolutionary Mexican cultural production. It then proceeds to examine the distinction between biological gender, gender identity, and gender performance⁹⁰ in Buñuel's *Ensayo de un crimen*, demonstrating how the film's subversive treatment of the theme raises questions about the socially constructed nature of gender and indeed other national cultural discourses. The humorous dialogue between Juan Preciado and Dorotea in *Pedro Páramo* will then be analysed, looking at how the novel's use of dark grotesque humour problematizes the links between the three aforementioned gender categories. To elucidate the portrayal of these gender distinctions, and examine how they undermine gender-specific discourses of cultural nationalism, particular emphasis will be placed on Butler's (1999) theory of gender performance and Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity. I will also draw on aspects of the Virgin/*Malinche*⁹¹ archetypes. In the second part of the chapter, I focus on the issue of female characterisation, examining how subversive humour is employed to denaturalize previous representations of the feminine in traditional post-Revolutionary Mexican cultural production. The assertive characters of Lavinia and Susana San Juan exemplify this attitude and disassociate sexual humour from its 'natural' connection to traditional paradigms of normative hegemonic masculinity. Finally, I turn to the figure of the idealized Mexican mother and explore how the works undermine and hybridize this particular cultural stereotype.

3.1 Masculinities in Mexico

With reference to Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony⁹², and the cultural value placed on certain types of masculinities, Connell (1995: 77) suggests that '[a]t any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted'. This may refer to powerful male political and historical figures, exemplary film actors, and even fictional characters that supposedly embody these shared cultural values. In the case of post-Revolutionary Mexico, *machismo* has often been seen as an intrinsic part of national identity.

⁹⁰ See Chapter 1, section 1.3.2., for an outline of Butler's (1999) theory of gender performance.

⁹¹ Bartra (1987), Ramírez Berg (1992) and Paz (2002) all discuss the importance of the Virgin/*Malinche* paradigm in Mexican culture.

⁹² See the Introduction. Essentially, with respect to gender-specific hegemony, some expressions of masculinity and femininity are capable of being articulated in public discourse while others are elided.

In his seminal study of the Mexican male psyche, in particular the marginalized figure of the *pelado* (male working class) Ramos (2014: 55) interprets exaggerated displays of ‘manliness’ as stemming from a desire to compensate for an inferiority complex through the aggressive control of women: ‘Como él [el pelado] es, en efecto, un ser sin contenido sustancial, trata de llenar su vacío con el único valor que está a su alcance: el del *macho*’ (my emphasis). The insatiable need for control and domination that characterises patriarchal or hegemonic masculinity is defined by Harris (2011: 120) as follows:

Patriarchal masculinity can be understood as anything that men think, say and do, in their relationships with women and other men, in order to occupy or continue to occupy a position of dominance.

In a political sense, the set of values associated with hegemonic masculinity are often associated with the patriarchal structure of the state⁹³. Highlighting the word’s ideological import in Mexico, Ramírez Berg (1992: 23) sees machismo as ‘not just an entrenched social-sexual tradition but a reciprocal ideological agreement between the individual male and the Mexican state, empowering each’. This view is shared by Gutmann (2007: 224) who suggests that ‘[b]eginning especially in the 1940s, the male accent [on the virtue of courage] itself came to prominence as a national (ist) symbol. For better or worse, Mexico came to mean machismo and machismo to mean Mexico’.

The male desire to dominate is manifest even on a socio-linguistic level. Hegemonic or patriarchal masculinity in Mexico is closely associated with the widespread use of the verb *chingar* in popular speech. The verb connotes aggression, dominance, penetration, and violence done to another person, and the meaning varies considerably according to the tone and the context of its utterance. That which is ‘*chingado*’ is passive, feminine, defeated, while ‘*El chingón*’ is the alpha male who penetrates and dominates the female, as Paz (2002: 85) outlines: ‘El chingón es el macho, el que abre. La chingada, la hembra, la pasividad pura, inerme ante el exterior. La relación entre ambos es violenta, determinada por el poder cínico del primero y la impotencia de la otra’⁹⁴.

⁹³ With respect to the connection between masculinity and the state, Connell (1995: 73) maintains that ‘[t]he state, for instance, is a masculine institution. [...] state organizational practices are structured in relation to the reproductive arena’. In other words, recruitment and promotion are tied in to questions of gender. As a result, the majority of top office holders are men.

⁹⁴ In *El laberinto de la soledad*, it should be noted that Paz (2002), by writing about what he personally felt was intrinsically Mexican, was also creating qualities of *mexicanidad* while ostensibly reflecting on them. (Bartra: 1987; Gutmann: 2007)

In relation to the key role of post-Revolutionary literature in the ideological construction of the nation, and defining national standards of ‘maleness’, Francisco Monterde described *Los de abajo* (1915) by Mariano Azuela as being the apotheosis of ‘una literatura viril’ (quoted in Monsiváis 2012: 65). These male-oriented discourses are also particularly evident in the *costumbrismo* and mythologisation (Barthes, 1972) which surrounded literary representations of the figure of Pancho Villa. Two such notable examples are to be found in *El águila y la serpiente* (1928) by Martín Luis Guzmán, and *¡Vámonos con Pancho Villa!* (1931) by Rafael F. Muñoz. The iconic depiction of Villa in these works arguably created a symbol of the Mexican nation as well as advocating a traditional, patriarchal, and Catholic version of Mexican masculinity. Chávez (2013: 3) outlines this process of ideological construction in the following terms:

El régimen posrevolucionario se valió tanto de la literatura como el cine para crear una noción de identidad nacional a través de la representación de Pancho Villa [...] la imagen de Villa sirvió como un arquetipo específico de masculinidad nacional que encarnaba los elementos más sobresalientes de la clase en el poder.

In *El águila y la serpiente* the mythmaking power of the cinematic image, described though the literary medium, is evident in the episode entitled ‘La película de la Revolución’. Reacting to an image of Villa shimmering on the screen, Guzmán’s (1995: 353) author/narrator enthuses: ‘caracoleó bañada de luz, sobre su caballo magnífico, la magnífica figura de Pancho Villa, legendaria, dominadora’. The narrator then goes on to describe the ‘aura’ emanating from the cinematic procession of revolutionaries as follows: ‘Durante cerca de una hora, o acaso más, se prolongó el desfile de los adalides revolucionarios y sus huestes, nimbados por la luminosidad del cinematógrafo y por la gloria de sus hazañas’ (353).

With respect to the popular genres of Mexican national cinema⁹⁵, one can argue that these ideals of Mexican masculinity are epitomised in the figure of the *charro*, the Mexican cowboy. Nájera-Ramírez (1994: 1, 2) sees the *charro* as both ‘a master symbol of Mexican culture’, and, ‘a cultural construction of maleness’. The *charro* was often the central protagonist of the ideologically conservative *comedia ranchera*. Early versions of this genre, such as *Allá en el rancho grande* (1936), directed by Fernando de Fuentes, displayed a certain nostalgia for the hierarchal, well-ordered, rural idyll of the *Porfiriato*. The larger-than-life *machista* screen personas of stars of the era such as Pedro Infante and Jorge

⁹⁵ See the Introduction for an outline of the main genres of Mexican national cinema.

Negrete⁹⁶ also played an integral part in the construction of the image of the Mexican male. With respect to the considerable cultural influence of the latter, Gutmann (2007: 228) suggests that ‘[o]ne stood out as “a macho among machos”. Ever the handsome and pistol-packing *charro* [...] Jorge Negrete came to epitomise the swaggering Mexican nation’.

The revolutionary epic⁹⁷ was another key genre which consolidated the ubiquitous image of the *macho* Mexican male all throughout the Golden Age of Mexican cinema. Prominent examples include *El compadre Mendoza* (1933), and *¡Vámonos con Pancho Villa!* (1935) directed by Fernando de Fuentes. Despite the fact that these films often dealt with the failures of the Revolution, rather like the literary representations in *La Narrativa de la Revolución*, they often portray resolute, heroic male leaders who continue to fight on for the revolutionary cause despite the fact that its original ideals and objectives have been compromised.

The 1940s saw the fusion of the *comedia ranchera* with the more nationalist ideology of the revolutionary epic, or revolutionary Western, to produce the provincial melodrama. For instance, in *Flor Silvestre* (1943), directed by Emilio Fernández, the *charro* (played by Pedro Armendáriz) leaves behind his *hacendado* class allegiances in order to fight for the greater glory of the Mexican nation. The combined influence of these genres on ideas of masculinity and the Mexican national imaginary is outlined by Ramírez Berg (1992: 99) as follows: ‘The *comedia ranchera*, the revolutionary Western, and the provincial melodrama demonstrate how the *charro* hero, the *macho* ethos, and national ideals combined to produce a male image that came to stand for the nation’s’.

3.2 Femininities in Mexico

The principal female archetypes present in Mexican nationalist discourses can be traced right back to the Conquest. In 1519, after landing on the coast of what is present-day Tabasco, the conquistadores were attacked by the indigenous people of the region. Due to the superiority of the Spanish weaponry, they were swiftly defeated by Hernán Cortés and a peace treaty was agreed which was later sealed with an interchange of gifts. In exchange for twenty young women, including *la Malinche*, the indigenous people received a statue of the Virgin, along with an edict to abandon their old religion. The symbolism of this act is outlined by Bartra

⁹⁶ Buñuel (1992: 27) once jokingly described the actor as ‘un niño grande y más macho que Dios’.

⁹⁷ See the the Introduction for a detailed discussion of this particular genre.

(1987: 173) as follows: ‘De esta manera ocurrió el primer intercambio carnal, simbólico y material de vírgenes por madres entre españoles e indígenas. Tanto unas como otras fueron símbolos protectores y maternales; todas fueron seducidas y violadas’. As a consequence of this initial exchange, the ‘original’ nature of both female figures was seen to be damaged: in the case of *la Malinche*, the violation was literal, and produced the first *mestizo*; while the ‘tainting’ of the image of the Virgin was figurative, given that her image evolved into the Virgin of Guadalupe, who was dark-skinned and supposedly appeared on the hill of Tepeyac (located in the present-day suburbs of Mexico City) in 1531.

La Malinche, a corruption of her indigenous name (*Malintzin*), was initially known as doña Marina by the Spanish. While doña Marina was without question an extraordinary woman, highly respected by both the indigenous people and the conquistadores, nationalist mythology in Mexico has been far from kind to her legacy. The tarnishing of her image can be said to coincide with the emergence of the modern nation-state. There is a pervasive mythology surrounding her life which suggests that she betrayed her country, an absurd notion if one considers that the Mexican nation only really came into being in 1821. Bartra (1987: 179) outlines how the stigmatised figure of *la Malinche* became inscribed in the ‘narrative’ of the Mexican nation:

El nacionalismo mexicano del siglo XIX —como el de hoy, aunque con otros matices— tuvo necesidad de inventar una patria originaria: y esta nación primigenia debía tener sus héroes y sus traidores. A Malintzin le fue asignada la obligación de encarnar la infidelidad y la deslealtad.

Some of these creative ‘imaginings’ (Marroquí, 1887) also link her to the mythical *Llorona*, a guilty outcast unable to find peace in death and condemned to wander the earth. Nationalist discourses towards the end of the nineteenth century drew parallels between, on the one hand, Eve and the Virgin Mary, where mankind is condemned by one former virgin and redeemed by another, and, adapting in the case of Mexico, to *la Malintzin* and the Virgin of Guadalupe, the saviour of the nation. The two figures even appear to be confused in the lines of the popular song ‘la Llorona’:

Salías del temple un día, llorona,

Cuando al pasar yo te vi.

Y hermoso huipil llevabas, llorona,

Que la Virgen te creí. (quoted in Bartra 1987: 181)

The cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe is closely related to that of the Mexican mother who compensates for the frequently absent father figure. The paradoxical representation of the mother as a debauched giver of life can be traced back to the Aztec goddess Coatlicue⁹⁸, the devouring mother who encompasses both the womb and the grave. According to this pre-Hispanic mythology, she was magically impregnated by a ball of feathers, thus engendering Huitzilopochtli, the male god of the sun. Syncretic links can thus be drawn with the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary. As a consequence of this initial ‘violation’, the Mexican mother must undergo purification through self-sacrifice. According to Ramírez Berg (1992: 58), these contradictory elements are epitomised in the figure of:

[t]he long-suffering Mexican mother, who gives life by succumbing to the will of the father, who provides lifelong nourishment, out of love like the Virgin of Guadalupe, and like La Malinche perhaps, out of a need to expiate her guilt for betraying her roots and for allowing herself to be physically violated and spiritually debased.

These cultural discourses have given rise to a series of maternal stereotypes in Mexican cultural production. In the Golden Age of Classical Mexican cinema, being a mother was often depicted as being linked with self-sacrifice. In films like *Flor Silvestre* (1943) directed by Emilio Fernández, made at the height of cultural nationalism, Dolores del Río’s character, María Candelaria, epitomises the physical beauty and passive resignation characteristic of the Virgin paradigm. By maintaining the conventions of melodrama, Dever (2003: 47) notes that ‘filmmakers like Emilio Fernández aestheticized the indigenous and fetishized the feminine in an attempt to gather all Mexicans under the banner of a unified national subject’. According to this binary view, the Mexican male is primarily attracted to two paradigms of femininity. One is the chaste virginal female who will be an ideal mother to his children; the other is a seductive, sexualised woman of his fantasies. It should be noted that this second role is limited to his bedroom, and has no place in the public sphere (Massey, 1994).

In addition to drawing attention to gender as a performance, Buñuel’s and Rulfo’s texts present strong, assertive female characters who employ subversive sexual humour to contest the exercise of hegemonic masculinity. In more traditional Mexican cinema, women were

⁹⁸ The central position of the statue of Coatlicue in the Mexican national imaginary is underlined by Franco (2004: 210) as follows: ‘In the wake of the Revolution, however, scholars began to rewrite Mexican history, so that gradually the statue took on a new significance both in relation to the ideology of *mestizaje* and in art history’.

often the foil for male jokes about sexuality, used as erotic objects, and were generally expected to exude an aura of non-threatening sentimentality. For instance, as we have seen earlier, the Mexican mother was expected to be asexual in order to distance herself from the ‘treachery’ associated with the *Malinche* masternarrative⁹⁹. In particular, sexual humour in women was seen as the possession of a kind of ‘forbidden’ awareness of sexual matters, frowned on by patriarchal discourses. As Barreca (1991: 50) puts it, ‘[t]he connection between humor and sexual invitation is made up of many links, among them the thought that it takes a certain ‘fallen’ knowledge to make a joke’. Scenes or references of an explicit sexual nature were often elided in *La Narrativa de la Revolución*, and in Mexican ‘national’ cinema, to avoid reprisal from government censors. If sexual humour was employed by a female character then it was generally in the role of a ‘fallen’ woman, or femme fatal, for instance, the character portrayed by María Félix in *La devoradora* (1946) by Fernando de Fuentes. We will now examine the issue of gender as a performance in *Ensayo de un crimen* and *Pedro Páramo*.

3.3 Gender as Performance

In the opening scene of Buñuel’s *Ensayo de un crimen*, the viewer learns that Archibaldo’s murderous intentions towards beautiful women stem from a curious incident in his childhood, which takes place around the turbulent time of the Mexican Revolution, idealized depictions of which, as we have seen earlier, were a particular source of hegemonic masculine discourses. His penchant for dressing up in his mother’s clothes is discovered by his governess who scolds him for this transgression of ‘gender-normative’ behaviour. However, his cross-dressing does not necessarily indicate a transgender issue or homosexual impulses; it may simply indicate an exploration of social taboos, a frequent interest of Buñuel’s, as it was of other Surrealist artists like Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray. Nevertheless, by having the leading male character perform these actions, which might be considered ‘deviant’ from the strict heterosexual masculinity characteristic of earlier depictions, the film undermines prescriptive codes of traditional normative masculinity. Archibaldo’s highly groomed urbane appearance, teetotaling habits, pottery-making, and genteel mannerisms, characteristics

⁹⁹ Drawing on revisions of the figure of the Malinche, in the writings of Elena Garro (‘La culpa es de los Tlaxcaltecas’ (1964)) among others, Messinger-Cypess (1991: 171) suggests that ‘the Malinche sign can be stripped of its negative signifieds regarding nationalism and female subordination. In its stead, a new image of sexual equality and cultural diversity seeks its place on the palimpsest of Mexican cultural history’.

usually associated with the feminine, also destabilize these rigid paradigms of masculinity¹⁰⁰. In addition, the episode highlights the performative nature of gender identity as distinct from the biological sex of the individual. Heteronormativity is thus destabilized through drag performance. In relation to the humorous undermining of traditional gender relations, Butler (1999: 175) suggests the following:

In place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their prefabricated unity.

Archibaldo is extremely possessive of his mother and resents her going out to the theatre with his seemingly absent father. As a way of placating him, she gives him a music box with a spinning ballerina on top, again undermining traditional paradigms of masculinity which might not consider this to be a particularly 'gender-appropriate' toy. She instructs the governess to tell him the 'story of the king' with a knowing wink¹⁰¹. The latter duly makes up the story on the spot, telling Archibaldo that the box once belonged to a king whose wife was suspected of treason. Tricked into believing the false accusations of his prime minister, and making use of the box's 'magical' properties, the king turned the key, causing it to chime, and simultaneously thought of the queen who was struck dead on the spot. The young protagonist is enthralled by the story and decides to see if it is really true. While the melody is chiming, he thinks of the governess, who is coincidentally hit in the throat by a stray bullet from a revolutionary skirmish in the street outside. Archibaldo is erotically thrilled and repulsed by the combination of her lifeless body, the blood on her neck, and her shapely stockinged legs which are partially exposed as she falls to the floor. As an emotional response, it could be argued that he thus links this traumatic incident with the sound of the music box, to which he attributes supernatural forces. Furthermore, due to the gendered nature of the governess's story about the box and its murderous power over women, it is possible that he unconsciously associates it with male power, death, and sexual possession.

¹⁰⁰ The presence of feminine traits in the male has often been associated with homosexuality. As Connell (1995: 78) puts it, '[g]ayness, in patriarchal ideology, is the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity'.

¹⁰¹ With that complicit gesture, both women are linked with exercise of surreptitious feminine power through the spinning of fanciful yarns to control the male, as Evans (1995: 102) asserts: 'The gift is also a mark of female collusion, stressing not only power over the male, since both mother and governess are identified with discipline, but also the association of women with falsehood'.

The camera lingers on the image of her legs from Archibaldo's viewpoint and can be seen as a representation of the 'male gaze'¹⁰², which appropriates the female as an erotic object.

As an adult, triggered initially by the sound of the very same box (looted during the Revolution and later recovered) at the antique dealer's shop, and later by the sight of blood when he cuts himself shaving, he tries to recreate this first brief moment of sexual frisson by murdering beautiful women, but it remains tantalisingly, and comically, out of his reach. His homicidal urges seem to stem more from an obsession with the exercise of dominant male power over the female, than redirected aggression¹⁰³, as he confesses to Sr. Trinidad at his hospital bedside: 'el placer de sentirme poderoso'. This can be related to his position within the discourse of hegemonic masculinity, where dominant men seek to exercise power over females and other subordinate males.

The ironic and darkly comical nature of the governess's death, with its satirical appropriation of abjection¹⁰⁴ through the presence of blood, can thus be read as a parody of the rigid moral and social codes characteristic of Mexican *machismo*. It particularly satirizes the 'natural' sense of entitlement to dominate the female through violence. Crucially, this incident underlines the *random* and subjective nature of Archibaldo's association between sexual attraction and violent death. In his subconscious, the mythical story of the all-powerful music box invented *arbitrarily* by the governess, which supports hegemonic masculine discourses in its portrayal of female betrayal and deceit, is intertwined, by the *chance* intervention of a revolutionary bullet, with the erotic image of her dead body. This has the effect of cementing his association between female deceit (the *Malinche* paradigm), male power, sex, and death. His playful undermining of traditional gender identity through cross-dressing is also evidence of the *arbitrary* nature of gender roles in society. Consequently, in this scene, the text highlights that many cultural values are essentially arbitrary constructions, mythical narratives engendered by a chance combination of human invention and ironic coincidence. Gutiérrez-Albilla (2008: 130) suggests that:

¹⁰² With reference to the portrayal of women in narrative cinema, Mulvey (1975: 10) explains this concept in the following terms: 'The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote "to-be-looked-at-ness"'.

¹⁰³ With reference to Freud's theory of neurosis, Acevedo-Muñoz (2003: 139) argues that '[i]mplicitly, the impulse to kill women is sublimated by Archibaldo's homosexual inclinations, since his misogynist attitudes are a projection of his homoerotic desires'.

¹⁰⁴ See Chapter 1, section 1.4.4., for a detailed discussion of Kristeva's (1982) concept of abjection.

[t]he film's celebration of chance as a revolutionary principle can be linked to the potential of chance to disrupt and undermine the bourgeois notion of history as progress, thereby opening to doubt the validity of modern cultural assumptions about the strength of modern culture itself.

Archibaldo's neurosis, stemming from random and indiscriminate violence, can thus be read as an allegory of how the nation itself was traumatised by the events of the Revolution. It finds itself condemned, like Buñuel's anti-hero, to ritualistically 'perform' scripts of reified discourses of hegemonic masculinity, mythical narratives of 'maleness' which have indelibly shaped the ideological landscape of modern Mexico. These discourses, derived from the fusion of exaggerated accounts with the actual traumatic events of the Revolution, and which played a key role in national cultural production, would later break down and precipitate what has been termed a 'crisis of normative masculinity'. Some critics have linked this cultural crisis to the economic and political crisis in the nation¹⁰⁵ in the late 1940s and early 1950s. However, rather than textualising a national 'crisis of masculinity', which presupposes a 'coherent' version of masculinity immediately after the Revolution, Buñuel's experimental film tends to articulate a humorous disruption and a transformation of these 'traditional' norms. In direct contrast to the panoramic images of battle, glory, and heroism of previous representations, *Ensayo de un crimen* satirically reduces these epic images to the momentary creation of a childhood neurosis linking sex and death. Fuentes (2000: 96) describes this difference as follows:

Las escenas de la Revolución, tan usadas en el cine mexicano para cantar la gloria nacional, adquieren en esta película un giro típicamente buñueliano, convirtiéndose en un simple marco para que una bala perdida atraviese la garganta de la institutriz de Archibaldo.

The theme of transvestism is also explored when Archibaldo is sitting in a bar waiting for his customary glass of milk. He notices Lavinia's face through the flames at the top of a cocktail glass that she is holding, and will subsequently confess to her the significant impression that this brief superimposed image had on him: 'Me atrajo desde que la vi rodeada de llamas como una pequeña bruja condenada a la hoguera, mi pequeña Juana de Arco'. The image is at once erotic and demonic, and links religious transgression, sacrifice, and heightened sexual desire. Joan of Arc was burned at the stake for claiming to have had religious visions, bearing

¹⁰⁵ Acevedo-Muñoz (2003: 124) suggests that '[t]he critical portrayal of men in Buñuel's films *El bruto* (1952), *Él* (1952) and *Ensayo de un crimen* (1955) turns the instability of national politics and the economy into metaphoric renditions of troubled men'.

arms, and wearing men's clothes/armour, actions which deeply offended the religious and social mores of the time. One can argue that she is a figure who embodies both elements of the Saint/witch paradigm¹⁰⁶, the former on account of her subsequent canonisation as a martyr, and the latter regarding the crimes for which she was originally accused and subsequently executed¹⁰⁷. In Mexico, the Virgin/*Malinche* dichotomy can be seen as analogous to this binary rendering of femininity. Although Lavinia is not a transvestite, her assertiveness certainly threatens hegemonic masculinity. As Evans (1995: 108) suggests: '[Lavinia's] expropriation of male power corresponds to the crime of which Joan was accused, and of which her transvestism was denounced as the visual symbol and proof'. The implicit reference to Joan of Arc's transvestism echoes the young Archibaldo's cross-dressing episode, and further illustrates the text's playful Surrealist questioning of social and 'gender normative' behaviour. Gutiérrez-Albilla (2008: 121) states this in the following terms:

This challenge to the 'naturalness' of gender roles and displacement of essentialist versions of identities allows for a much more fluid process of cross-gender fantastic identification with and among the characters and audiences. The flux of identity positions, which the dominant society arbitrarily polices, is opened up.

The use of the image of Joan of Arc as a term of endearment for Lavinia 'mi pequeña Juana de Arco' also has a darkly humorous edge to it, given that it ironically and 'affectionately' refers to the persecution and torture of strong assertive women, and is also presumably evidence of Archibaldo's murderous intentions towards her. To a certain extent, Archibaldo can be considered a victim of circumstance, unconsciously driven by a childhood neurosis, and yet, at times, he displays a morbid concern with the aesthetic nature of his 'crimes'. For instance, when he witnesses Carlota's infidelity with Alejandro on the night before the wedding, his initial response is to kill her immediately. However, he coldly reasons that this impulsive act will only end up as 'un vulgar homicidio', a lurid affair perpetrated by a jilted lover seeking revenge. Instead, he fantasises about shooting her in the bridal suite on their wedding night, something he believes will elevate his crime from the ordinary and rescue it from banality. In a perverse re-enactment of the scene in her home chapel, he forces her to

¹⁰⁶ Gilbert & Gubar (1979) suggest that women are often stereotyped in a binary fashion as virgins or whores, saints or witches.

¹⁰⁷ With respect to the blending of aspects of masculinity and femininity in the figure of Joan of Arc, Waltonen (2004: 187) maintains that 'Joan's historical contemporaries labelled her a witch, in part because she chose to break free of the sex-gender system of her time'.

kneel and recite the prayer 'Dios te salve'. After the passage which refers to one of the principal archetypes of female betrayal, 'A ti clamamos, los desterrados hijos de Eva', he callously shoots her dead¹⁰⁸. With respect to Carlota's deception, Evans (1995: 105) states that 'Carlota's submission to Archibaldo's demands represents her forced awareness of her identification with Eve and with all sinners, especially females. She is shot dead while lying on the nuptial bed, in Archibaldo's eyes the symbolic site of all women's betrayals'.

The film's blackly humorous approach to the aesthetics of cold-blooded murder recalls Thomas De Quincey's 1839 essay 'On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts', included in Breton's *Anthology of Black Humour* (1940), and about which Breton (2009: 85) suggests: 'Leaving aside the all-too-conventional horror it inspires, murder, according to him [De Quincey], demands to be treated *aesthetically* and appreciated in terms of its qualities, as one would appreciate a work of art or a medical case study'. The viewer is also involved in this ethical dilemma: namely, whether or not it is appropriate to laugh at such an irreverent and emotionally detached representation of criminal motive. By portraying the absurd lengths to which Archibaldo will go in order to assert his perceived dominance over women, the film satirizes the rigid codes of hegemonic masculinity.

The distinction between biological gender, gender identity, and gender performance is also wryly explored in *Pedro Páramo*. In fragment 36, Dorotea humorously takes issue with Juan Preciado's account of how he died through asphyxiation:

De no haber habido aire para respirar esa noche de que hablas, nos hubieran faltado las fuerzas para llevarte y contimás para enterrarte. Y ya ves, te enterramos.

—Tienes razón, Doroteo. ¿Dices que te llamas Doroteo?

—Da lo mismo. Aunque mi nombre sea Dorotea. Pero da lo mismo.

—Es cierto, Dorotea. Me mataron los murmullos. (*PP*: 117)

Juan Preciado is initially confused as to her gender and is therefore not sure whether to call her Dorotea or Doroteo. Her response 'Da lo mismo' seems to comically refer to the fact that

¹⁰⁸ The shock value of the incident is increased by the incongruous insertion of a preceding conversation between a priest, a functionary, and a military officer who extol the theatrical virtues of a Catholic wedding as opposed to the 'prosaic' nature of a civil ceremony: 'la pompa de la Iglesia Católica'. The functionary also remarks on the deep emotion he feels while watching military parades. In their discourse, the Church and the nation are seen as one and the same, and the sudden shooting of Carlota has the effect of satirically deflating the theatrical grandeur of both institutions.

biological gender becomes irrelevant after death, since they obviously cannot use their physical bodies. It appears that they now exist partially as ghostly beings, as consciousness separated from physical matter, and partially as dead bodies curiously trapped under the earth in a kind of ‘living death’. Indeed, much of the subversive critical power of the novel resides in its refusal to distinguish between what are traditionally considered binary categories: life and death, male and female. Rather than placing the focus on biological gender, characteristic of the world of living beings, it would seem that gender identity and gender performance are more important in the underworld of Comala. For instance, even though Dorotea is dead, she still appears to hold on to the idea of her gender identity, that is, she refers to herself in the feminine by ‘performing’ or uttering her gender identity: ‘Ahora que estoy *muerta*, me he dado tiempo para pensar y enterarme de todo’ (PP: 119). Certainly, her use of gender agreement with ‘*muerta*’ may refer to biological gender or gender identity. However, her earlier comment about whether Juan Preciado should call her Doroteo or Dorotea suggests that the text is playing with, and thus problematizing, this distinction. This passage combines various elements of the grotesque and the absurd, and amusingly highlights the uncanny persistence of gender identity and gender performance post mortem, thus illustrating how these social constructs are not necessarily tied to biological gender.

The implicit reference to biological gender, that is, Dorotea’s witty comment ‘Da lo mismo’, leads the reader to focus on and consider the spatial and *physical* nature of their situation. We have already explored the idea of the village cemetery rendered as a foucauldian heterotopia of deviation where the characters are situated¹⁰⁹. Consequently, the repulsive and admittedly darkly humorous idea of two bodies physically rotting in the earth, while conversing in a colloquial manner, can also be linked to the concept of abjection¹¹⁰. In this respect, it is worth noting the outline of the notion of abjection offered by Kristeva (1982: 4) with its special emphasis on the body:

The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.

As we have seen in Chapter 1, the grotesque can be viewed as a satirical use of abjection (Stott, 2005) and it is utilised here in the text by the oblique reference to the physical situation

¹⁰⁹ Chapter 2, section 2.3., examines the novel’s treatment of spatiality and the cemetery.

¹¹⁰ See Chapter 1, section 1.4.4., for a definition of the concept of abjection (Kristeva, 1982).

of the two bodies. If the human body, as a bounded system, can be seen as representative of the social system, then male and female bodies decomposing together in the same grave can be seen as a grotesque metaphoric representation of the entropic¹¹¹ dissolution of traditional social and gender norms, the limits of one body decaying into another. This dark, disturbing humour addresses the inescapable physical nature of our existence, while problematizing what is considered ‘normally’ and ‘abnormally’ comic in a given social milieu. Moreover, such humour serves both to alleviate concerns about mortality through laughter and also to deride the lofty pretensions of metaphysical musings on the nature of consciousness and reality, particularly targeting ascetic intellectualism. Indeed, a particular target in the case of Mexico would be the nationalist narratives of teleological progress which manifestly failed to engage with social equality¹¹². The text combines the concept of entropy on both literal and metaphoric levels: the bodies decay in an entropic process, while the reference to the grotesque, through the distinction between biological gender, gender identity, and gender performance, emphasises the dissolution of the social construction of traditional gender identities. In other words, normative gender distinctions become *fluid* in the heterotopic space of the grave.

Female fertility, an important part of both biological gender and feminine identity, is addressed later on in the fragment when Dorotea speaks about her desire to have a child and how she feels that this was denied to her by God. Her reflection on the events in her life seems to represent a melting away of false consciousness, constructed by gender-specific national cultural hegemony, and which is represented in her narrative by two dreams: el «bendito» and el «maldito». In her darkly comical ‘cursed’ dream, she ironically portrays Heaven as a type of ‘factory’ where, due to a bureaucratic mix-up, she was somehow given the ‘wrong’ body parts: ‘En el Cielo me dijeron que se habían equivocado conmigo. Que me habían dado un corazón de madre, pero un seno de una cualquiera’ (PP: 119). The use of ‘cualquiera’ references the stereotype of a ‘fallen’ woman, linking physical reproduction ‘seno de una cualquiera’ with Catholic ideas of sinfulness and depravity. In contrast, her heart, or emotional response, is linked with the Virgin archetype, ‘corazón de madre’, and can be seen as an ironic reference to the reified and idealized view of Mexican motherhood in

¹¹¹ See Chapter 1, section 1.4.6., for a more detailed discussion of the concept of entropy and entropic humour.

¹¹² Regarding the pervasive state discourses of progress in this era, Sánchez Rolón (2012: 65) notes that ‘[i]niciaba la presidencia de Adolfo Ruiz Cortines (1952-58) y desde el periodo anterior, con Miguel Alemán (1946-52), se había hecho gala de triunfo del Progreso en este país’.

nationalist discourses. The text thus satirizes the polarized paradigms of Mexican femininity which were more prevalent in more traditional national cultural production. Her fretful enquiries about her imaginary son are met with cold indifference by the angels, all ‘hechas con el mismo molde’ (*PP*: 119), and even by extreme and grotesque violence when one of the ‘saints’ plunges his hand into her body in an act reminiscent of Aztec human sacrifice¹¹³, albeit syncretically combined with Catholic iconography:

Hundió una de sus manos en mi estómago como si la hubiera hundido en un montón de cera.
Al sacarla me enseñó algo como una cáscara de nuez: “Esto prueba lo que te demuestra”
(119-120)

The expression ‘This proves what it shows you’ can be seen as a verbal parody of the vague, circuitous, question-dodging tactics employed by representatives of the official Catholic Church when confronted with existential questions that are difficult to answer. The grotesque image also parodically references the Bible, John 20: 27, where Jesus instructs doubting Thomas to ‘[r]each out your hand and put it into my side’ so as to confirm that he has indeed risen from the dead. Dorotea’s protest that this ‘shell’ in fact represented her stomach instead of her womb, shrivelled through hardship and malnutrition, falls on deaf ears and she is sent packing in a haughty, patriarchal and extremely patronising manner:

[...] otro de aquellos santos me empujó por los hombros y me enseñó la puerta de salida: “Ve a descansar un poco más a la tierra, hija, y procura ser buena para que tu Purgatorio sea menos largo” (*PP*: 120)

Towards the very end of the fragment, Juan Preciado is suddenly startled by a strange noise: ‘—Siento como si alguien caminara sobre nosotros’ (*PP*, 120). He is immediately reassured by Dorotea, who gently rebukes him for his fearful attitude: ‘—Ya déjate de miedos. Nadie te puede dar ya miedo. Haz por pensar en cosas agradables porque vamos a estar mucho tiempo enterrados’ (*PP*, 120). This playful and darkly humorous tone rounds off the fragment as the reader is encouraged to imagine the interminable post-mortem conversation on which the characters are embarking.

In addition to the distinction between biological gender and gender performance, the gendered nature of social space is also an important consideration in the novel. Spaces and places often exude symbolic meanings intrinsically tied in with conventional gender roles,

¹¹³ As part of this ritual, the heart of the victim was cut out while they were still alive (Acosta, 2003).

with some culturally determined ‘rules’ regulating access to these locations being tacitly enforced, while others are explicitly maintained through force or coercion. For instance, according to hegemonic masculine discourses, certain public spaces, such as the workplace, have been considered to be the sole preserve of the male, to the exclusion of women, while other intimate domestic spaces tend to be associated with the female¹¹⁴.

The traditional separation of male and female social space is evident in fragment 40 where Padre Rentería hears Dorotea’s confession. The priest’s side of the confessional is coded as masculine, a Catholic manifestation of the patriarchy, while Dorotea’s side is represented as female and submissive as she begs for his absolution. In fragment 53, when Pedro Páramo negotiates the terms of a deal with the revolutionaries, the text makes no mention of the presence of women, thus reinforcing the conventional male association with matters of power and politics. In Latin America, the gender division between private and public spaces can be seen as yet another manifestation of male hegemonic domination. From the colonial period right up to the twentieth century, Franco (1988: 507) maintains that ‘the subordination of the feminine [in Latin America] is aggravated by the rigid confinement of women to private spaces [the home, the convent, or the brothel]’. When administering the last rites to Susana San Juan, Padre Rentería glances around the room and the third-person narrator describes the spatial orientation of the male and female characters: ‘Pedro Páramo aguardaba con los brazos cruzados; en seguida, el doctor Valencia, y junto a ellos otros señores. Más allá, en las sombras, un puño de mujeres’ (*PP*: 169). The hierarchal structure of their spatial orientation is evident, the priest, doctor, and other male characters closest to Susana, with the women being relegated to the secondary position of the shadows. It can be argued that these traditional representations of gendered social spaces are *posited* in order to be undermined later in the novel, particularly in the heterotopic space of the cemetery.

Consequently, one can argue that in fragment 36, featuring the circumstances of the burial of Juan Preciado and Dorotea in the same grave and their subsequent humorous interaction, has an alienating de-gendering effect on these traditional distinctions between male and female social spaces and places. The imaginary heterotopic space¹¹⁵ of the grave, where the characters are suspended in a parodic Purgatory between Heaven and earth, can be seen as a liminal place which breaks up the semiology of traditional gender conventions.

¹¹⁴ See Massey’s (1994) concept of gendered spaces in Chapter 1, section 1.3.2.

¹¹⁵ See Chapter 2, section 2.3., for a discussion of Comala as a heterotopia of deviation.

The counter-hegemonic use of narrative space and gender performance in the works of Buñuel and Rulfo is also supported by their complex treatment of female characters. Through an analysis of Lavinia and Susana San Juan, we will now examine how their ‘knowing’ sexual humour (Barreca, 1991) denaturalizes traditional ‘gender-appropriate’ female behaviour, thus undermining previous patriarchal representations of the feminine in Mexican cultural production.

3.4 Subversive Characterisation of Women

In Buñuel’s *Ensayo de un crimen*, Archibaldo’s first encounter with Lavinia happens at the same time he is exposed to the sound of the music box as an adult. She is in the company of her elderly ‘sugar daddy’ who wants to buy the box for her. Entranced by the all-too-familiar melody, Archibaldo cannot help intervening and telling them that the box was looted from his house during the Revolution and that it is of considerable sentimental value for him, having been a gift from his mother. Lavinia is moved by his story and acquiesces to his request to buy the box, an action which links her to the gift-bestowing gesture of his mother, much to the visible irritation of the man who she refers to as her ‘papá’.

Archibaldo’s association with Lavinia deepens after they meet at the bar. He is obviously attracted to her but his motives appear to continually shift between romance, sexual attraction and homicidal intent. Acquiescing to his request to see her again, she gives him the address of a fashion boutique, ‘La Moda Elegante’, where she mischievously says she is to be found day and night. When he visits the boutique, instead of the real Lavinia, Archibaldo is both surprised and amused to find a mannequin¹¹⁶ in her exact likeness. The episode sparks off a flirtatious and humorous series of cat-and-mouse practical jokes between both evenly matched characters. On their next meeting, outside the mannequin maker’s workshop, where Archibaldo has secretly purchased one of her doubles, he ironically notes that she was quite ‘mute’ and appeared ‘paralysed’ on their last meeting. The figure of the dummy¹¹⁷ can be seen as a parody of traditional representations of Mexican femininity where women are figured as submissively conforming to the strict social codes established by the patriarchy,

¹¹⁶ The sexual neutrality of the dummy also raises the question of androgyny, a theme which Buñuel and Dalí had already explored in *Un chien andalou* (1929). Given the text’s deconstructive treatment of gender roles, the gender neutral mannequin can be seen as a symbolic representative of this un-mapping process.

¹¹⁷ The trope of the dummy as being representative of compliant femininity was also humorously explored in the film *The Stepford Wives* (1975) directed by Bryan Forbes and based on the satirical novel by Ira Levin.

and the female is often portrayed as a passive figure onto which the male can project his sexual desires without being challenged.

When she comes to his house to model for him, the repartee continues and the sexual tension also builds. In another reference to his childhood fetish for women's clothes, it emerges that Archibaldo has dressed the dummy for this special occasion, choosing the clothes according to his own particular taste and illustrating his desire to control and possess the female body. He is shown sensuously stroking the underwear, before he is interrupted by the doorbell. In a witty revenge for her earlier joke, he introduces Lavinia to his 'cousin' who is 'deaf', creating an amusing moment when she recognizes her 'hermanita'. At this point, the comical sexual innuendo becomes manifest when she cheekily asks him whether or not he has 'behaved like a gentleman' with her 'little sister'.

While he has gone to get some drinks, taking a short detour to warm up his kiln, macabre evidence that he intends to kill her and burn the body, Lavinia mischievously switches clothes with her double. While rejecting the social conventions of demure femininity in her real life, that is, by being an independent woman through her employment as a tourist guide, and by also supporting herself through her sexual liaison with her elderly sugar daddy, she trades places with the dummy in a playful manner which shows that she is briefly willing to be a 'mannequin' for Archibaldo, but only on her own terms; crucially, she plays the *role* of a dummy within a comical and theatrical context. Her act thus highlights the arbitrary nature of socially constructed 'gender normative' behaviour which causes Archibaldo to comically speak to the wrong 'person' when he returns. This 'performance' by Lavinia finally causes the sexual tension to spill over. After closely examining the underwear on the mannequin, he attempts to kiss the real Lavinia, and when she initially refuses, he kisses her double instead. He makes another attempt to kiss her and this time she accepts his advances. As a love scene, it is an obvious parody of more traditional representations given that it shows the performative nature of gender roles and thus of the human courtship ritual.

Despite his apparently successful seduction, Archibaldo proceeds with his murderous plan and carefully arranges the room in order to kill Lavinia when she is perusing an album of his travel photographs. He has visited the place where Joan of Arc was burned at the stake, and has a photograph of it in his album, ready for her to inspect. Just as he is about to knock her out with a truncheon, the doorbell rings, situational irony again comically depriving him of his opportunity to kill. It emerges that she has asked the American tourists to visit his house,

which she suggests is emblematic of an authentic Mexican artist, albeit one who is ‘original’ and ‘doesn’t follow rules’. With this statement, she seems to recognize him as a kindred spirit who doesn’t respect established social codes. In relation to the transgressive nature of Lavinia’s and Archibaldo’s behaviour, Evans (2004: 109) suggests that:

[t]hese comic strategies of masquerade and identity, of fantasy and taboo-transgressions, stress the empathy between rebel heroes, both respectful as well as irreverent towards the prohibitions of the social order.

Archibaldo is visibly frustrated by their unwelcome presence and becomes incandescent with rage when Lavinia tells him that she won’t be able to see him again and provocatively suggests: ‘Puede usted consolarse con mi hermanita’, before leaving with her inquisitive charges. In his fury, he rushes inside and drags the mannequin towards his workshop to enact a slapstick¹¹⁸ theatrical purging of his homicidal tendencies. He watches in ecstatic glee as this substitute for Lavinia is consumed by the furnace; shot from the point of view of the dummy, his maniacal and delirious face is superimposed on the image of the flickering flames, mirroring his first glimpse of her face in the bar. The images of the burning mannequin hint at the grotesque and yet are considerably more anodyne than the physical horror of blood that characterises the other real and imaginary deaths in the film. Ironically, Archibaldo’s only ‘true’ crime is the comical ‘murder’ of an inanimate mannequin –to be distinguished from the fantasy murders– perpetrated within a fictional narrative, which in turn is comprised of a retrospective first-person confession to a judge. It could be argued that this narrative structure constitutes a self-reflexive *mise-en-abîme* technique, characteristic of entropic parody, which illustrates the Surrealist championing of the freedom of the imagination, and, perhaps more importantly, draws attention to the construction of the text itself. The meta-cinematic self-awareness of the text is outlined by Evans (2004: 110-111) as follows:

These identifications between protagonist, victim, and audience once again highlight the text’s patterns of self-consciousness. Furthermore, the confessional structure [...] is, as in

¹¹⁸ This highly physical form of comedy, present in the films of Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton, often involves a painful intervention from an external source which undermines a character’s dignity. With respect to the audience’s lack of empathy with the fate of the character, Stott (2005: 93) suggests that ‘[h]owever often the body was assaulted it was largely indestructible, rendering concern or sympathy for a character’s pain irrelevant. In this sense, slapstick may be said to represent a socially acceptable expression of masochism, as the viewer takes no sadistic pleasure in the pain induced, or, perhaps, a liberation from the compulsion to empathize’. Buñuel’s film takes this distancing device a step further, by having the protagonist burn a mannequin of his tormentor and object of his affection/obsession.

other films, not only motivated by a desire to focus on a character driven by guilt to be shriven to a figure of authority [...], but also to expose, in this precursor of postmodernist aesthetics, the text's artificiality.

Piqued by Lavinia's subversive humour, this act seems to briefly purge him of his homicidal instincts, although there is nothing in the film to suggest that he has been completely cured. The sudden trite 'happy ending' seems ironic and out of place with the other events in the narrative. Instead of the sinister electric organ score, originating from the melody of the 'cursed' music box, an optimistic orchestral score, characteristic of melodrama, swells up to bring the film to a close. Given the multiple levels of narration, that is, the retrospective narration to Sr. Trinidad, then to the judge, intercalated with fantasy flash-forwards – Archibaldo's fantasy of killing Patricia and Carlota –, the viewer is constantly unsure of the primary level of narration, that is, whether the events presented are really taking place or whether they are part of a dream or fantasy. Consequently, the ending may also be read as a subjective fantasy, an oneiric representation of Archibaldo's desire to be 'normal', and therefore a parody of the conventions of romantic melodrama which was a staple of Mexican 'national' cinema in the 1940s and 1950s.

Sexual humour which destabilizes the patriarchy is also a feature of Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*. We will now examine how Susana San Juan resists patriarchal domination through subversive sexual humour and fantasy. In fragment 63, Padre Rentería attempts to instil a terror of divine justice in her mind, and shake her out of her trancelike state with grotesque images of hell¹¹⁹. The fragment begins with dialogue but the identity of the speakers is unknown until later on when they are identified as Padre Rentería and Susana San Juan respectively. Initially, there seems to be a breakdown in communication between them:

—Tengo la boca llena de tierra.

—Sí, padre.

—No digas: «Sí, padre.» Repite conmigo lo que yo vaya diciendo (*PP*: 167).

The paternalistic and hegemonic control exercised by the Catholic Church is illustrated in this part of the narrative, as the priest instructs her in what to say. In Mexico, hegemonic masculinity is often linked to a Catholic ethos. For example, in the classic melodrama

¹¹⁹ These images are reminiscent of those found in the third panel of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490-1510) by Hieronymus Bosch, a work which arguably portrayed Heaven and Hell with an ironic slant.

Cuando los hijos se van (1941), directed by Juan Bustillo Oro, the Mexican family, with patriarchy and *machismo* at the core, is shown to be the ideological bedrock upon which the stability of the nation is founded. The complicit relationship between traditional conceptions of masculinity and the Church in the film is outlined by Ramírez Berg (1992: 26-27) as follows:

The church exists here as it does in many Mexican films, as an unseen force whose values and precepts —sacrifice, self-abnegation, and passive acceptance of “God’s will”— are underlying assumptions of Mexican life. They have a powerful hold on Mexicans, having established a tradition of commonly held values and norms as well as helping to justify —or at least make acceptable— patriarchy, *machismo*, and capitalism.

Susana undermines the priest’s demand for her spiritual capitulation by employing verbal irony as subtle mockery. She shows her impatience and lack of interest by simply uttering a laconic ‘Sí, padre’ to what he has just said. When she is informed that it is not a confession and that, in fact, he is preparing her for imminent death, she becomes openly angry and defiant: ‘—¿Por qué entonces no me deja en paz? Tengo ganas de descansar’ (PP: 168). The Church’s central part in the ritual of death is thus contested by Susana, as De Valdés (1998: 47) asserts: ‘Susana San Juan rejects not only the social authority of the Church but also, what is more significant, the ideology of death¹²⁰ which elevates the Church and its priests to the role of necessary intermediaries between the individual and salvation...’. At this point, the third-person heterodiegetic narrator describes the spatial surroundings, generating an atmosphere of physical, if not somewhat sexually suggestive, intimacy between the two characters. Padre Rentería is described as sitting on the edge of the bed with his hands on her shoulders:

Con su boca casi pegada a la oreja de ella para no hablar fuerte, encajaba secretamente cada una de sus palabras: «Tengo la boca llena de tierra.» Luego se detuvo. Trató de ver si los labios de ella se movían. Y los vio balbucir, aunque sin dejar salir ningún sonido. «Tengo la boca llena de ti, de tu boca. Tus labios apretados, duros como si mordieran oprimiendo mis labios...» (PP: 168)

The text generates considerable suspense by having Padre Rentería whisper in her ear, and then delays Susana’s reaction. Her response, as a thought report, blasphemously transforms the sanctified, penitential, mortified nature and tone of the priest’s utterance: ‘Tengo la boca

¹²⁰ See Chapter 4 for a detailed discussion of death and the Mexican nation.

llena de ti... instead of, 'Tengo la boca llena de tierra'. Following the previous linguistic structure, she manipulates the meaning of the priest's utterance, using the wordplay of the Mexican *albur*, and makes reference to her erotic fantasies involving Florencio. Padre Rentería, as a character in the story world, is unable to hear her response, and his bemusement is made quite comical as the narrative progresses, given that only the reader and the narrator are privy to her innermost thoughts. The priest's inability to comprehend the situation can be described as character 'fallibility'. Chatman (1990: 151) defines this term as follows: 'In fallibility [...] the narrator asks the narratee, his or her interlocutor in the discourse, to enjoy an irony at the expense of a filter character'. The 'filter character'¹²¹, in this case is Padre Rentería. Susana's mischievous glance out of the corner of her eye is also indicative of the enjoyment she derives from her own private joke: 'Miró de reajo al padre Rentería' (*PP*: 168). His failure to apprehend the double meaning of her reply signifies that Susana has succeeded in metaphorically penetrating him, according to the 'rules' of *los albures*: sexually explicit wordplay in which the loser, according to Paz (2002: 43) is, 'poseído, violado, por el otro. Sobre él caen las burlas y escarnios de los espectadores'. In this case, the fact that the female 'penetrates' the male through humour adds to the satirical destabilizing of 'gender normative' behaviour, where women, according to traditional discourses, are not supposed to be in possession of 'forbidden' sexual knowledge. The fact that he is a priest also heightens the text's transgressive nature. Susana's subversive humour is therefore a direct challenge to Padre Rentería's patriarchal authority.

At this point, the narrator draws attention to the growing spiritual distance between them by describing an opaque barrier like misted glass which is also indicative of Susana's feverish consciousness: 'lo [Padre Rentería] vio lejos, como si estuviera detrás de un vidrio empañado' (*PP*: 168). Undaunted by the lack of reaction, Padre Rentería renews his spiritual assault and the narrator's description of the spatial closeness of the characters augments the already implicit sexual overtones: 'Luego [ella] volvió a oír la voz calentando su oído' (*PP*: 168). He continues to deploy further self-mortifying, suffocating images of suffering and torture that await unfortunate unrepentant sinners in the afterlife:

—Trago saliva espumosa; mástico terrones plagados de gusanos que se me anudan en la garganta y raspan la pared del paladar... Mi boca se hunde, retorciéndose en muecas,

¹²¹ According to Chatman (1990: 144), "[f]ilter" [...] seems a good term for capturing something of the mediating function of a character's consciousness —perception, cognition, emotion, reverie— as events are experienced from a space within the story world'.

perforada por los dientes que la taladran y devoran. La nariz se reblandece. La gelatina de los ojos se derrite. Los cabellos arden en una sola llamarada' (*PP*: 168).

The narrator then states that the priest is somewhat surprised by the fact that these hellish visions do not seem to have terrified her: 'Le extrañaba la quietud de Susana San Juan. Hubiera querido adivinar sus pensamientos y ver la batalla de aquel corazón por rechazar las imágenes que él estaba sembrando dentro de ella. Le miró los ojos y ella devolvió la mirada' (*PP*: 168). Her inner strength and defiance of his authority is illustrated in her direct return of his gaze. Hannan (1999: 457) argues that 'the return of the gaze is a particularly powerful challenge considering the scopic economy [...] which has objectified her for so long, rendering her a passive object of contemplation for Bartolomé or Pedro'. The narrator's use of 'las imágenes que él estaba sembrando dentro de ella' are suggestive of a 'spiritual' violation, or rape, perpetrated on her consciousness. To further perplex and fluster the cleric, it seems that she is vaguely amused by his efforts: 'Y le pareció ver como sus labios forzaran una sonrisa' (*PP*: 168). Susana therefore resists Padre Rentería's patriarchal religious hegemony through subversive humour. With respect to the transgressive nature of Rulfo's female characters, Franco (2002: 137) suggests that:

Rulfo establishes the feminine (which clearly does not simply include women) as the antithesis both to the state and to the *ressentiment* of the antistate; it is a privileged arena on which to stage everyday acts of resistance'. Since these marginalized characters are unable to speak via the dominant discourse, they employ irony, subtlety, and silence.

The transformation of enclosed domestic space into a space of active resistance to the patriarchy is also discussed in Ludmer's 'Las tretas del débil' (1991, 1st pub. 1984), in relation to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Through her verbal ingenuity, Susana transforms the claustrophobic enclosure of the bedroom into a space of 'feminine resistance'. As we have seen earlier, out of all other female characters, the mother forms a central pillar in the post-Revolutionary national imaginary. We will now turn our attention to the texts' subversive treatment of this 'sacred' national figure in Buñuel's *Los olvidados* and Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*.

3.5 The Mexican Mother

In addition to the socio-realist and often brutal portrayal of events, Buñuel's *Los olvidados* (1950) also explores the ambiguous subconscious of delinquency, in particular the hidden turmoil of emotions which motivate the protagonist Pedro. The subversive and alienating portrayal of his mother Marta and her pervasive influence on his developing psyche is of particular importance. The film shows how Marta effectively performs the traditionally required social roles of the Mexican mother according to necessity. When Pedro is wrongly arrested and incarcerated in the farm school for juvenile delinquents, she comes to visit him wearing a highly symbolic shawl. The garment, when taken with the expressionistic lighting of the scene, is arguably reminiscent of iconic religious depictions of the maternal Virgin in mourning after the death of Christ, especially those utilizing the chiaroscuro technique, such as *The Madonna in Sorrow* (17th Century) by Sassoferrato. Indeed, Pedro makes open reference to this when he berates her for what he perceives as her insincere public display of affection, and need to be seen by the management of the facility as a good Mexican mother. Her costume suggests an uneasy coexistence of conceptions of Mexican femininity in one body, that is, the virginal rebozo¹²², associated with the Guadalupe archetype and Catholic discourses of motherhood, combined with more sexualised high heels. Along with the subversion of the Virgin paradigm, one could add the text's alienating representation of the idealized indigenous mother, a common stereotype in Classical Mexican cinema. With reference to the text's treatment of this particular reified ideal of Mexican femininity, D'Lugo (2003: 57) notes that Marta's 'incongruous costume mix of rebozo and high heels and angelic face [...] seems to parody the notion of the suffering indigenous mother figure'. It would seem that she is conscious of playing the role of the concerned mother in public. In the private space of their home, however, she treats Pedro with thinly disguised contempt. With respect to the camp aesthetic¹²³ in the film, and how it problematizes the monolithic tendencies of cultural nationalism and aspects of previous post-Revolutionary cultural production, particularly concerning questions of identity, Gutiérrez-Albilla (2008: 37) suggests that:

¹²² The identification of the shawl with the figure of the Virgin is evident in the words of the popular Mexican song 'La llorona': 'Hermoso huipil (rebozo) llevabas llorona, que la Virgen te creí'. The *llorona* is a mythical Mexican figure, with pre-Hispanic origins, who mourns for her lost children. (Bartra, 1987)

¹²³ Regarding the foregrounding of aesthetics and self-reflexivity in camp, Sontag (1982: 106) suggests that '[i]t is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon [...] not in terms of beauty but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization'.

Buñuel hybridizes the image repertoire of Mexican popular culture aesthetics, thereby reintegrating the notion of camp into his cinematic project. From this perspective, *Los olvidados* could undermine the depth model of identity, being a kind of parody and mimicry that hollows out from within, making depth recede to its surfaces.

The shawl makes another appearance, when Marta is frantically searching for him at the end of the film. She passes Meche and her father, unaware that Pedro's body is hidden on the donkey. Marta also takes centre stage as the protagonist in Pedro's unsettling nightmare.

Pedro's nightmare sequence contrasts sharply with the predominant use of the socio-realist mode of narration employed up to this point. The film extends its penetrating gaze beneath surface appearances. Paz (1983: 9) notes that '*Los olvidados* es algo más que un film realista. El sueño, el deseo, el horror, el delirio y el azar, la porción nocturna de la vida, también tienen su parte'. In addition to giving the viewer an insight into Pedro's subconscious, the scene also functions to illustrate the psychological impact of Julián's murder. Far from being indifferent to death and suffering, it shows that Pedro is a sensitive character despite his participation in the brutal assault on Don Carmelo earlier in the narrative. This 'alienating' combination of brutal realism with psychological intimacy allows the film to explore in great depth the complex motivations for juvenile delinquency. Polizzotti (2006: 11) describes the scene's uncanny interweaving of the real and the irrational as 'the fine balance between the believable and the impossibly strange, that narrow space where true disorientation takes hold. Occurring fairly early in the film, the scene infuses all that follows with an aura of unreality that lifts it above the melodrama of the story line'.

Dreams in the epic and tragic modes tended to be prophetic, inspiring, or cautionary, and they didn't often contradict the 'integrity' of the hero's waking life. According to Bakhtin (1984: 147), it is in Menippean satire where '[t]he dream is introduced there precisely as the possibility of a completely different life [...] Dreams, daydreams, insanity destroy the epic and tragic wholeness of a person and his fate (116). As we have seen in Chapter 1, the serio-comic form of the menippea (the carnivalesque) opens up new dialogical meanings, as opposed to the monological tendencies of tragedy and epic. In *Los olvidados* the fantastical elements of the dream, juxtaposed with the film's slum naturalism, can be said to constitute a search for dialogical meaning within the character's subconscious, both for the audience and Pedro himself.

The scene is set in the communal bedroom and opens with dreamlike flute music and a faint sound of howling wind, both of which are maintained throughout. The room is bathed in a strange light which signals the depiction of a parallel dream space. The dialogue is treated with heavy reverb effects to maintain the otherworldly atmosphere, and is also out of synch with the movement of the characters' lips. All these effects contribute to making the spectator uneasy, and distance the events depicted in the scene from the ordinary, everyday sounds of the real world presented in the realist part of the narrative. The film makes use of the camera technique of double exposure to show a transparent image of Pedro getting up out of his own sleeping body. At this point we are simultaneously presented with the story world of the realist narrative of Pedro's body as he sleeps and the parallel story world of the subconscious narrative as Pedro enters his nightmare. The spectator is also offered two perspectives on Pedro's dream: we see the any-point-whatsoever view of the camera, which can be seen as a third-person narrator, and we also experience the dream from Pedro's first-person narrative perspective. He sees a chicken falling down through the room, again by using double exposure, and then leans over to investigate something under his bed. We see Pedro's horrified face as he contemplates the writhing figure of Julián, in what might be pain or even laughter, covered in blood, while chicken feathers fall downwards in slow motion. The narrative employs slow motion to evoke the chronology of dream, and shows how all sense of normal time is lost¹²⁴.

The already palpable sense of the uncanny now takes centre stage as his mother then gets up and moves towards him, also in slow motion; she is smiling in an unnerving, almost sensual, fashion. Her idealised appearance, somewhat characteristic of the Virgin archetype, differs sharply from that portrayed in the socio-realist portion of the narrative. Rather than berating him, her face is angelic and she asks him tenderly what he is doing. He replies that he has done nothing wrong and then accuses his mother of not loving him. She responds by saying that her lack of affection is because she is tired from working so hard and then shows him her callused hands. This image is presented from Pedro's first-person narrative perspective, and is arguably used to make the viewer identify more with his character. In his utopian fantasy, she then hugs and comforts him.

The sound of the wind grows louder and, as she returns to her bed, he asks her why she didn't feed him the day before. She suddenly turns around and now has a large slab of raw meat in

¹²⁴ The scene was actually shot in reverse and then switched in post-production (Polizzotti, 2006).

her hands, an image suffused with the disturbing aspects of the grotesque and the abject. There is a sound of thunder and the wind grows louder still. She moves towards him, this time menacingly, smiling strangely all the time and offering him the meat. Maternal care and nourishment are thus ‘alienated’ and associated with the emotions of fear and disgust. Evans (1995: 85) suggests that ‘her monstrous apparition in the dream seems to concur further with Kristeva-inspired theories of horror as abjection, especially as regards the representation of the monstrous-feminine (Creed, 1993)’. A hand then reaches up from under the bed and suddenly the character of El Jaibo wrenches the meat from his grasp, perhaps a visual manifestation of Pedro’s feeling that his mother has betrayed him by taking his sworn enemy as a lover. His mother stands by impassively and his nightmare ends as he throws himself back in despair on the bed. With respect to the film’s depiction of Marta, and particularly her interaction with el Jaibo, Polizzotti (2006: 60-61) suggests that ‘[w]hat we can certainly read in it –as did many outraged Mexicans– is a subversion of the sacrosanct image of motherhood. The ‘long suffering’ mother alluded to by Paz is as much a piece of the national folklore as the revolutionary virtue of Pancho Villa’.

In this scene, the film explores how characters are not just motivated by rational socio-economic forces. These subconscious events are non-realist, irrational, yet they inform our understanding of what has been happening in the plot. They deal with hunger, rejection, guilt, violence, wish-fulfilment and desire. There is no direct attempt to explain these images; they simply serve to connect the character’s dreams to our own experience of the unconscious mind. While the images in this scene have obvious Freudian overtones, such as the implied oedipal attraction towards the mother, it can be argued that the film has many more layers of symbolic meaning corresponding to both universal and Mexican archetypes of femininity. Fuentes (2000: 103-4) maintains that:

[l]as imágenes y símbolos de la película no se pueden reducir a la proyección teórica freudiana; a veces nos llevan a otra dimensión mítica y religiosa, irreductible a la primera. El tema de la atracción de la madre, por ejemplo, rebasa los límites del complejo edípico. Nos lleva [...] al mito de la Madre Tierra, y también al nocturno y funerario de la Diosa de la Muerte.

The depiction of Pedro’s intimate psychological motivations contrasts sharply with the animalistic portrayal of the other gang members and harsh realism of earlier scenes. Paz (1983: 9) feels that in Pedro’s nightmare sequence Buñuel has touched upon some intrinsically Mexican archetypes:

Y los niños, los olvidados, su mitología, su rebeldía pasiva, su lealtad suicida, su dulzura que relampaguea, su ternura llena de ferocidades exquisitas, su desgarrada afirmación de sí mismos en y para la muerte, su búsqueda sin fin de la comunión –aun a través del crimen– no son ni pueden ser sino mexicanos. Así, en la escena clave de la película –la escena onírica– el tema de la madre se resuelve en la cena en común, en el festín sagrado. Quizá sin proponérselo, Buñuel descubre en el sueño de sus héroes las imágenes arquetípicas del pueblo mexicano: Coatlícue y el sacrificio. El tema de la madre, que es una de las obsesiones mexicanas, está ligado inexorablemente al de la fraternidad, al de la amistad hasta la muerte.

While these paradigms of *mexicanidad* are undoubtedly present throughout the film, it can be argued that the narrative posits these cultural constructions in order to subvert them. The male emphasis on never opening up to others, that is, ‘rajarse’, and Pedro’s constant search for acceptance from his mother both precipitate the tragic outcome of the film.

The reified figure of the Mexican mother is also subversively undermined in Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo*. This is primarily achieved through Juan Preciado’s interaction and identification with his mother. The scenes with Eduviges Dyada and the mule driver Abundio also destabilize the nationalist mythology surrounding maternal stereotypes in Mexican cultural production.

In fragment 1 of the novel, while recalling his last conversation with his dying mother, Juan Preciado recounts that he intended to promise her anything: ‘...y yo en plan de prometerlo todo’ (*PP*: 65). The reverence shown towards the figure of the mother evokes the ‘saintly’ half of the dual nature of Mexican motherhood. Indeed, he reiterates this promise to such an extent, and with such fervour, that he fails to notice that in the meantime his mother has passed away and he subsequently has difficulty removing his hands from hers: ‘a mis manos les costó trabajo zafarse de sus manos muertas’ (*PP*: 65). This scene is obviously tragic and poignant, yet his self-absorption in reverence and grief precipitates a rather grotesque and blackly humorous moment where he tries to disentangle his hands from hers. As always, any amusement provoked in the reader is simultaneously problematized by the text, in that it plays with what is ‘acceptably’ comical. It could be argued that this distancing device undermines the tragic tone and previous ‘saintly’ depiction of his mother, and therefore highlights the text’s destabilizing treatment of the reified ‘Guadalupe’ paradigm.

In the absence of his father, and despite his idealized view of him, many of Juan Preciado’s observations come from the feminine viewpoint of his mother. Indeed, his narrative

perspective at one point is through her eyes: ‘Traigo los ojos con que *ella* miró estas cosas, porque me dio sus ojos para ver’ (My emphasis). His deep emotional attachment to his mother is further illustrated in a later passage: ‘Sentí el retrato de mi madre guardado en la bolsa de la camisa, calentándome el corazón, como si ella también sudara’ (PP: 68).

He then recalls another conversation prior to this where she urges him to demand atonement from his estranged father, Pedro Páramo, for the years that he has forgotten them: ‘—No vayas a pedirle nada. Exígele lo nuestro. Lo que estuvo obligado a darme y nunca me dio... El olvido en que nos tuvo, mi hijo, cóbraselo caro’ (PP: 65). However, at the start of the third paragraph of the fragment, he confesses: ‘Pero no pensé cumplir mi promesa’ (PP: 65). The previous use of the verb ‘*zafarse*’, with reference to his mother’s hands, now takes on an additional meaning: it can mean remove or release, but also to get out of an obligation or promise. He gives the following reason for not wanting to fulfil his mother’s wish: ‘Hasta que ahora pronto comencé a llenarme de sueños, a darle vuelo a las ilusiones. Y de este modo se me fue formando un mundo alrededor de la esperanza que era aquel señor llamado Pedro Páramo, el marido de mi madre’ (PP: 65). As we have seen in Chapter 2, from this excerpt, it can be inferred that we are dealing with a narrator who is given to flights of fancy, who allows subjective dreams to invade his view of reality. It is also worth noting that the Spanish syntactic structure, ‘*se me fue formando*’, is used to indicate an involuntary action, that is, the ‘*se de matización*’. Therefore, this can be seen as a metafictional reference to the story world forming itself around him without his conscious rational control. As is the case with the ‘construction’ of the prototypical Mexican male in the national imaginary, Juan Preciado’s view of his father is idealized in his imagination ‘la esperanza que era aquel señor llamado Pedro Páramo’ and is contrasted with his mother’s feminine, and arguably more pragmatic, discourse which highlights the neglect and social injustice perpetrated by his absent father.

One of the novel’s central themes is the search for patriarchal legitimacy. Under this schema, the father’s name implies social status, a ‘recognized’ son who has a legal place in the hierarchy of society and is capable of inheritance of his patrimony. However, this elusive chimera comically evades the naïve protagonist. Fragment two of the novel opens with a description of his journey to Comala. His enigmatic travelling companion, the mule driver Abundio, asks:

¿Y a qué va usted a Comala, si se puede saber?

—Voy a ver a mi padre —contesté. (PP: 66)

The dialogue between the two characters is punctuated by laconic descriptions of the bleak, arid surrounding landscape, lengthy silences, enigmatic exclamations such as ‘¡ah!’, or random sounds, thus illustrating the somewhat comical awkwardness, and communicative difficulty, of the encounter between two social codes, that is, between the exiled, urban (*apretado*) Juan Preciado, and the rural (*pelado*) mule-driver¹²⁵. The reason for these breaks in the dialogue may be due to a desire to represent regional mannerisms and the traditional reticence of the *campesino*, but it certainly has a comic aspect and also frustrates the reader’s desire for background information by interrupting the flow of the narrative. In addition, contrary to the traditional taciturnity of the *campesino*¹²⁶ it appears that Juan Preciado is the person unwilling to open up. Along with suggesting an innate shyness, or perhaps an aloof attitude due to his social class, his reluctance can be seen as a parodic rendering of the discourse of *machismo*, where the Mexican male is strictly forbidden to ‘rajarse’, that is, discuss intimate matters with a stranger.

According to Paz (2002), the strongest insult to a Mexican *macho* is to be accused of opening up to others, ‘rajarse’, to crack or split open; according to these discourses, it implies a weak, untrustworthy male who has a vagina (crack) instead of a penis. The traditional taciturnity demanded of the Mexican male is emphasised by Paz (2002: 32-33) as follows: ‘el ideal de la “hombría” consiste en no “rajarse” nunca. Los que se “abren” son cobardes [...] El mexicano puede doblarse, humillarse, “agacharse”, pero no “rajarse”, esto es, permitir que el mundo exterior penetre en su intimidad’. According to this *machista* discourse, women are inferior to men because of their emotional openness, and, in a physical sense, because of their vagina, a ‘wound’ which never heals.

For instance, when the mule driver reveals that he too is Pedro Páramo’s son, a statement which would surely provoke immediate questions and a recognition of their common origin, Juan’s response is to describe the surrounding landscape: ‘Una bandada de cuervos pasó cruzando el cielo vacío, hacienda cuar, cuar, cuar’ (*PP*: 67). His next comment involves the weather, and seems to constitute a clumsy and comical attempt to avoid dealing with the

¹²⁵ Allegorically, with reference to national history, this conversation can be seen as a clash between post- and pre-Revolutionary Mexico, the mule-driver’s barbed comments evincing the residual, traumatic traces of the transition from tradition to modernity. The satirical dialogue thus underlines the difficulty of communication between these two worlds, as Dove (2004: 129) asserts: ‘Above and beyond the question of local character, this exchange illustrates transition [pre- to post-Revolution] as the emergence and partial failure of the signifier’.

¹²⁶ As Rulfo (1992: 879) himself stated: ‘Por eso escogí a esta gente [campesinos o pueblerinos], que aparte de ignorante casi no habla’.

‘elephant in the room’: ‘—hace calor aquí —dije’ (PP: 67). His refusal to acknowledge and respond to Abundio’s revelation, and apparent lack of brotherly solidarity, is countered with sardonic wit by the mule driver:

—Sí, y esto no es nada —me contestó el otro—. Cálmese. Ya lo sentirá más fuerte cuando llegemos a Comala. Aquello está sobre las brasas de la tierra, en la mera boca del infierno. Con decirle que muchos de los que allí se mueren, al llegar al infierno regresan por su cobija (PP: 67)

Abundio’s barely concealed mockery of politeness, evidenced by his parodic use of ‘si puede saber’, illustrates his hostility towards the newcomer, as does his ironic, self-effacing anecdote which highlights their common illegitimate status:

El caso es que nuestras *madres* nos malparieron en un petate aunque éramos hijos de Pedro Páramo. Y lo más chistoso es que él nos llevó a bautizar. Con usted debe haber pasado lo mismo, ¿no?

—No me acuerdo.

—¡Váyase mucho al carajo!

—¿Qué dice usted?

—Que ya estamos llegando, señor.

—Sí, ya lo veo. ¿Qué pasó por aquí?

—Un correcaminos, señor. Así les nombran a esos pájaros.

—No, yo preguntaba por el pueblo, que se ve tan solo, como si estuviera abandonado. Parece que no lo habitara nadie.

—No es que lo parezca. Así es. Aquí no vive nadie. (PP: 69)

The mule-driver’s reference to their improper, bastard origin, ‘nuestras *madres* nos malparieron’, according to Dove (2004: 130), can be seen as ‘a parodic condensation of the discourse of *mexicanidad*, often ironically celebrated in the phrase: ‘¡Somos todos hijos de la Chingada!’.

When Juan Preciado says that he doesn’t remember his own baptism, Abundio appears to take this as a further rejection of his expression of brotherly solidarity: ‘¡Váyase mucho al carajo!’, an insult which is sharpened further by the ironic use of the polite form ‘se’ (for

‘usted’). Taken aback at the sudden rude outburst, Preciado questions Abundio to make sure that he has heard him correctly and the latter dissimulates by telling him: ‘—Que ya estamos llegando, señor’. There are several possible reasons for the insult: he may have been surprised or even annoyed that Juan Preciado does not remember his own baptism –surely an impossible memory; he may feel that Juan Preciado does not trust him enough to speak about such personal matters, perhaps that he is somehow superior in social class; or a *correccaminos* may have startled him into uttering the expletive. This sets in motion a humorous chain of misunderstanding. When Juan Preciado asks him ‘Qué pasó por aquí’, Abundio tells him the name of the bird that he has just seen, perhaps thinking that he wants to know its name. The verb ‘pasar’ in Spanish can mean ‘to happen’ or ‘to pass through’. The text therefore exploits the instability of meaning in language and rounds off the exchange with a witty remark from the mule-driver: ‘No es que lo parezca. Así es.’ In a novel which blurs the boundaries between reality and unreality, between seeming and being, and where subjective impressions seem to hold sway over concrete reality, this statement is laden with darkly ironic intent. While deconstructing patriarchal legitimacy is a central concern, the novel also contests traditional gender relations by humorously depicting Eduviges Dyada’s sly undermining of Juan Preciado’s ‘matriarchal legitimacy’.

His encounter with Eduviges can be read as another insidious slight on his ‘legitimacy’ but this time from a feminine maternal perspective. While initially appearing to welcome him, she exudes a veiled malice and exhibits the strange physical characteristics of what could be termed as the ‘living-dead’: ‘Su cara se transparentaba como si no tuviera sangre’ (*PP*: 79). She explains her over-familiar way of addressing him as follows: ‘Perdóname que te hable de tú; lo hago porque te considero como mi hijo. Sí, muchas veces dije: “El hijo de Dolores debió haber sido mío”’ (*PP*: 73). At first, he is baffled by this enigmatic assertion and believes her to be mad. Later, she goes into greater detail about the wedding night between Pedro Páramo and his mother, and he begins to doubt his mother’s account of events: ‘—Pues sí, yo estuve a punto de ser tu madre. ¿Nunca te platicó ella nada de esto? —No. Sólo me contaba cosas buenas’ (*PP*: 78). Juan Preciado is obviously taken aback by this apparent deception and makes reference to the sanitised version of events that his mother has given him. By insinuating that Dolores was unwilling to sleep with Pedro Páramo on her wedding night, Eduviges appears to be contesting the privileged place occupied by his mother and suggesting that his birth was more to do with ‘accident’ than design. Later in the narrative, the reader learns that Dolores was having her period and this is part of the reason for her

reluctance to spend the night with her new husband. In fragment twenty-one, narrated by the third-person narrator, when the ironically named Fulgor¹²⁷ Sedano asks Dolores to have the wedding on the day after tomorrow she replies: ‘—Pero además hay algo para estos días. Cosas de mujeres, sabe usted. ¡Oh!, cuánta vergüenza me da decirle esto, don Fulgor. Me hace usted que se me vayan los colores. Me toca la luna...’ (PP: 99). Fulgor’s answer seems to betray his naivety and comical lack of understanding of the common idiom, or it may be that he pretends not to understand: ‘—Y qué? El matrimonio no es asunto de si haya o no haya luna. Es cosa de quererse...’ (PP: 99).

Eduviges recounts a slightly different version to Juan Preciado, which she says was told to her by Dolores, and which seems to stem more from lunar superstition than from biological reasons. She mentions Inocencio Osorio who is a ‘provocador de sueños’, a ‘witch doctor’ of sorts who she says sometimes used to dance naked around the women in order to tell their fortune: ‘La cosa es que el tal Osorio le pronosticó a tu madre, cuando fue a verlo, que “esa noche no debía repegarse a ningún hombre porque estaba brava la luna”’ (PP: 79). Furthermore, the fact that she mentions Osorio’s hypnotic influence on women: ‘Y a tu madre la enredó como lo hacía con muchas’ (PP: 79), again represents a sly undermining of his paternity, hinting that his mother may have had sexual relations with the ‘provocador de sueños’. Eduviges claims that Dolores asked her to spend the night with Pedro Páramo: ‘—Ve tú en mi lugar —me decía’ (PP: 80). However, due to Pedro Páramo being excessively drunk, it is suggested that the union was not consummated on that night:

‘—Qué te hizo? —me preguntó

‘—Todavía no lo sé —le contesté.

Al año siguiente naciste tú; pero no de mí, aunque estuvo en un pelo que así fuera’ (PP: 80). Due to biological factors, a father’s paternity is most commonly placed in doubt. Nevertheless, through the character of Eduviges, the text parodies this gender specific issue by having her absurdly call into question Dolores’ maternity. Not only does he have an absent father, but Eduviges tries to undermine the role of his mother, hinting that he could easily have been born to her instead. Regarding this ‘usurpation’ of his mother and the disorienting effect that this information has on Juan Preciado, Perus (2012: 194) suggests that:

¹²⁷ Brightness or brilliance.

[u]na vez “aflojado” así el ánimo de Juan Preciado, el terreno queda abonado para la *vileza*, que consiste simple y llanamente en la *suplantación* de la madre, *rebajándola y desacreditándola en el corazón del hijo*, y en dejarlo a él como hijo “postizo” o “bastardo”, sin padre ni madre “legítimos”.

The reasons why she tells Juan Preciado this story are initially unclear. It may be that she feels that she has to reveal the truth to him. Since they are in a kind of Purgatory, perhaps she feels the need to confess her perceived guilt and shame. However, as the fragment unfolds, the reader learns that she may be still jealous¹²⁸ of Dolores, given that she admits that she too was attracted to Pedro Páramo: ‘Me valí de la oscuridad y de otra cosa que ella no sabía: y es que a mí también me gustaba Pedro Páramo’ (PP: 80). After this revelation about the wedding night, the voice of his mother appears again in italics:

...Llanuras verdes. Ver subir y bajar el horizonte con el viento que mueve las espigas, el rizar de la tarde con una lluvia de triples rizos. El color de la tierra, el olor de la alfalfa y del pan. Un pueblo que huele a miel derramada (PP: 80)

This poetic description of Comala contrasts incongruously with the rather sordid details of Juan Preciado’s apparent near ‘mis-conception’. In ‘traditional’ comedy, marriage is seen as bringing about the final resolution of the plot. Stott (2005: 77) suggests that it ‘serves as the conclusion towards which traditional comic narrative inevitably moves, a cultural symbol of the harmonious symmetry and the resolution of troubles’. However, in the case of *Pedro Páramo*, the comic aspects of Dolores’s marriage to the *cacique*, subvert this traditional paradigm.

In conclusion, we have seen how traditional gender identities and normative ‘gender-appropriate’ behaviour patterns are denaturalised through subversive narrative techniques. The texts’ playful representation of rigid social taboos, mean that certain activities and beliefs become less associated with a particular gender. The depiction of Buñuel’s troubled anti-hero Archibaldo destabilizes unitary notions of Mexican masculinity, and his childhood neurosis

¹²⁸ On a more sinister note, the fact that Eduviges deliberately places Juan Preciado in the room where Toribio Aldrete was hanged (she tells him that it is the only room available) strongly suggests that she wishes him to hear the latter’s ghost and therefore be psychologically damaged from the experience. At the end of fragment 11, she asks him: ‘Has oído alguna vez el quejido de un muerto?’ (PP: 85). His response in the negative is followed by a menacing rejoinder which anticipates his ultimate fate: ‘Más te vale’ (PP: 85). Having been terrified by Toribio’s ghostly cries, it is Damiana who finally tells him about the unfortunate man’s fate when she comes to rescue him. Furthermore, the fact that Abundio tells him to ask for Eduviges betrays a malicious motive on his part, since these encounters in turn lead him to experience the ghosts, and ultimately cost him his life.

can be seen as a random construction, a discourse formed through an ironic coincidence of chance events. The traumatic episode can also be read as an allegory of the Mexican Revolution. The film shows 'gender-appropriate' behaviour to be a performance, an arbitrary social construction. The subsequent references to Lavinia and Joan of Arc portray gender identities as constituting a system of social relations rather than occupying defined categories. In *Pedro Páramo*, the darkly comic post-mortem conversation between Juan Preciado and Dorotea problematizes the distinction between biological gender, gender identity and gender performance, through the use of grotesque humour suffused with the presence of the abject. Dorotea's bizarre dreams also highlight the hegemonic nature of traditional gender roles in Mexican society, discourses closely linked with Catholic ideology, and syncretically linked with Pre-Hispanic beliefs. Rulfo's experimental novel demonstrates the absurdity of the existence of Purgatory and deconstructs traditional distinctions between men and women in a liminal, albeit conceptual, space after death. In relation to female characterisation in the works, Lavinia and Susana San Juan show that subversive humour and fantasy are the most effective weapons with which to combat patriarchal discourses. Lavinia plays the comic role of a mannequin on her own terms while Susana takes spiritual refuge in humour and erotic fantasy. The 'forbidden' sexual humour deployed by both characters contests earlier Manichean depictions of Mexican women. The idealized figure of the Mexican mother is also given a revised treatment in their texts. In *Los olvidados*, Buñuel uses dream imagery to deconstruct the stereotypical image of Mexican motherhood, while *Pedro Páramo* plays with the distinction between notions of patriarchal and 'matriarchal' legitimacy.

Chapter 4: Death and the Mexican Nation in Buñuel and Rulfo

'Si me han de matar mañana,

Qué me maten de una vez'

(*'La Valentina'*, revolutionary *corrido*)

In this chapter, I examine the representation of Mexican attitudes towards death in the works which are the focus of this study. It is evident that death forms a central part of the Mexican national imaginary. Indeed, Lomnitz (2008: 20) maintains that 'the nationalization of death is a singularly Mexican strategy'. I contend that Buñuel's and Rulfo's narratives undermine the use of death as a marker for Mexican national identity. In their works, cultural attitudes towards death are shown to be continuously evolving, hybrid constructions, existing between the complex interaction of popular culture and state hegemony. While some aspects of their narratives contribute, to a certain extent, to the national fascination with death, these very aspects are also tacitly undermined by the deployment of subversive narrative techniques incorporating black humour, the result of which is a distinctive blend of tragic drama and mordant social satire. Themes relating to mortality and decline are prominent features of their works, manifesting themselves especially in the barren plains of *El llano en llamas* (1953), the ghostly underworld of *Pedro Páramo* (1955), the streets of Santa Viviana in *El río y la muerte* (1954), and the smouldering embers of 'civilization' in the music room at the end of *El ángel exterminador* (1962).

I first outline some of the main features of attitudes towards death in Mexico, focussing on discourses of cultural nationalism, and in particular examining how these attitudes became reified in post-Revolutionary cultural production. I then turn to the central role of the national celebration of the Days of the Dead, examining how Buñuel's and Rulfo's works expose the links between this festival and the cultural hegemony of the state. In the second part of the chapter, I turn to the texts' subversive representation of heroism, death and class conflict.

4.1 Death and Mexico

Mexican attitudes towards death are often represented as being impatient, ironic, and defiant, as evidenced in the immortal lines of the revolutionary *corrido* 'La Valentina': 'Si me han de matar mañana, que me maten de una vez'. Paz (2002: 63) suggests that a playful indifferent attitude towards death is a fundamental part of Mexican national character:

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

The predominance of death as a central trope in the Mexican national imaginary can be traced back to pre-Hispanic conceptions of mortality. In their cosmology, death was an intrinsic part of an infinite cycle of life, death, and resurrection. Paz (2002:59) outlines this idea as follows: 'la oposición entre muerte y vida no era tan absoluta como para nosotros. La vida se prolongaba en la muerte. Y a la inversa. La muerte no era el fin natural de la vida, sino fase de un ciclo infinito'. Human sacrifice was seen as a 'selfless' gesture, undertaken for the sake of the entire community, so as to give thanks to the gods for the gift of life; it was also indicative of their perceived fatalistic outlook on life: 'Nuestros antepasados indígenas no creían que su muerte les pertenecía, como jamás pensaron que su vida fuese realmente 'su vida', en el sentido cristiano de la palabra' (60). This 'detached' attitude towards their personal fate would appear to stem from the inherent determinism of their cosmology, that is, the notion that their lives were mapped out in advance, predestined according to the precise time and space in which they were born.

After the Conquest, their world-view would be radically altered. There was a sense that the pre-Hispanic gods had abandoned their people, and consequently this ancient belief-system was gradually supplanted by the Catholic faith, albeit with aspects of the indigenous faith syncretically¹²⁹ absorbed along the way. In contrast to the collective sacrifice of pre-Hispanic belief, the emphasis now shifted from society to the individual, given that redemption was now a personal matter. And yet, one central concept links these seemingly opposed cosmologies: the belief in an afterlife, as Paz (2002: 61) outlines:

¹²⁹ See Chapter 2, section 2.2., on religious syncretism between Catholicism and pre-Hispanic religions.

Ambas actitudes [Christian and pre-Hispanic] por más opuestas que nos parezcan, poseen una nota común: la vida, colectiva o individual, está abierta a la perspectiva de una muerte que es, a su modo, una nueva vida.

With the rise of the rationalist secularism associated with the Enlightenment, the epitome of which can be seen as Nietzsche's 'Death of God' in *The Gay Science* (1882), comes the modern conception of death, detached from the comforting embrace of religious belief. Death becomes another incontrovertible fact, an inexorable part of the natural process, hollowed out of its former transcendent function¹³⁰.

After the Revolution, it can be argued that death evolved to become a symbol of the new nation¹³¹. As part of the nation-building discourse espoused by successive post-Revolutionary Mexican governments, ancient pre-Hispanic heritage¹³² and its associated mythology was often integrated with dominant Creole social structures to construct an 'imagined' past which would serve to legitimize the foundation of the nation state. In the case of post-Revolutionary Mexico, it can be argued that nationalist discourses achieved this sense of continuity by fusing Catholic and pre-Hispanic cosmologies with the destiny of the nation-state. The progressive teleology of modern Mexico thus reflected the predestined nature of existence in pre-Hispanic times and the Christian salvation of the Catholic faith. Drawing on the concepts of 'codification' and 'aging' developed by Anderson (1991), in relation to post-colonial nations, Acevedo-Muñoz (2003: 18) traces this idea back to the ideology underpinning the Revolution: 'In the case of Mexico, this [imagined] past was the heritage of the Aztecs, the Mayas, and the Mexicas, which became the departure point for the fictional historical continuum out of which the Revolution evolved'. Bartra (1987: 74) cites the Mexican poet Xavier Villarrutia who saw a connection between race and attitude towards death: 'Aquí [en México] se tiene una gran facilidad para morir, que es más fuerte en su atracción conforme mayor cantidad de sangre india tenemos en las venas. Mientras más criollo se es, mayor temor tenemos por la muerte'. Certain sectors of Mexican cultural production, particularly in the visual arts, contributed to the creation and maintenance of this essentially nationalist mythology.

¹³⁰ See the changing attitudes towards death in Western culture in *The Hour of Our Death* (1981) by Philippe Ariès.

¹³¹ Lomnitz (2008: 24) suggests that '[b]y the 1940s, Death, especially in its representation as a playful, mobile, and often dressed-up skeleton, had become a recognizably Mexican sign'.

¹³² See the discussion of *mexicanidad* in the Introduction.

The strange ‘attraction’ that Mexicans feel towards death is manifest in the poem *Muerte sin fin* (1939) by José Gorostiza, where the creative and destructive forces of nature are revealed to be two sides of the same coin. The following description of the bleak landscape from Rulfo’s ‘Luvina’ (*LL*: 121) is also particularly emblematic of the trope of death: ‘Usted verá eso: aquellos cerros apagados como si estuvieran muertos y a Luvina en el más alto, coronándolo con su blanco caserío como si fuera una corona de muerto...’¹³³. In classical Mexican cinema, the hugely popular *rancheras*¹³⁴ often evinced a collective, innocent laughter which did not question the constructed nature of Mexican attitudes towards death, for instance, *Si me han de matar mañana* (1947), from an original script by Miguel Zacarías, and starring the iconic Pedro Infante. In the film, the lines from the revolutionary *corrido* are used in the climax of a comical singing ‘duel’ between the male and female romantic leads: ‘Si me han de matar mañana, qué me maten de una vez’. The devil-may-care attitude of the hero is what finally endears him to his beloved.

One can argue that many of these conceptions of death can be seen as ‘fictions’ or narratives which have been imagined into existence by traditional post-Revolutionary Mexican national cultural production. Indeed, Bartra (1987: 78-79) maintains that this attitude towards death is a myth only present in Mexican cultural production, and in essays on ‘*lo mexicano*’ [*mexicanidad*], arguing that the idea of ‘*La muerte fácil*’ is an artificial construct, tacitly reinforced by national cultural production along with certain sectors of the intelligentsia. While aspects of this argument are undoubtedly valid, it is also important to take into account the role of popular culture in the construction of these nationalist discourses. We will now examine the subversive treatment of the national festival the Days of the Dead in Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo* and Buñuel’s *El río y la muerte*.

4.2 The Days of the Dead

There are two main arguments regarding the ritual of the Days of the Dead: the first sees it as a direct tradition beginning with the Aztecs and continuing to the present day; the second sees the festival as an invented tradition, generated by the hegemony of the post-Revolutionary

¹³³ It should be noted that the description of the terrain is from the perspective of the disaffected teacher-narrator, arguably a representative of the ideology of the state. His suggestion that ‘*la patria*’ is the ‘mother’ of government is satirically undermined by the local inhabitants: ‘Pelaron sus dientes molenques y me dijeron que no, que el gobierno no tenía madre’ (*LL*: 127).

¹³⁴ See the Introduction for an outline of the *ranchera* genre.

Mexican state (Bartra, 1987). The reality can be said to lie somewhere in between these two theories. The Catholic conception of purgatory¹³⁵ originally gave rise to the mortuary rituals surrounding All Souls' Day. These rituals gave the Church a central role as an intermediary between the individual and death¹³⁶. In relation to the power of the Church over the salvation of the soul in Mexico, Lomnitz (2008: 263) suggests that 'Catholic hegemony rested on an elaborate politics of the afterlife. Justice was only completed after death, when all sins, great and small, would be accounted for'. Through a process of cultural syncretism, All Soul's Day and All Saints Day became gradually fused with pre-Hispanic mortuary rituals. The national festival, the Days of the Dead is celebrated on the 31st of October, and the 1st and 2nd of November. According to Paz (2002: 64), Mexicans rebel against the sense of melancholy and isolation which reportedly afflicts their character, exploding with vital energy: 'Y allí, en la altura del frenesí, sentimos el vértigo: la muerte nos atrae'. During these annual celebrations, the transitory nature of human existence is underlined, while 'serious' attempts to comprehend mankind's common fate are mocked in an irreverent fashion, using brightly coloured imagery such as sugar skulls, aristocratic *catrinas*, and bread in the shape of bones. The festival is particularly emblematic of the hybridity (*el mestizo*) at the heart of the project of cultural nationalism, a syncretic fusion of pre-Hispanic and Catholic traditions.

It can be argued that there are two main types of humour which are associated with death in Mexican cultural production: that which laughs along with state ideology; and that which goes against the grain and questions this ideology. Distinguishing between these two types of humour is made more complex by the fact that the mythology of indifference towards death itself tends to place death in an ironic light. This playful attitude is manifest in many of the rituals and narratives associated with the Days of the Dead. The skeletal caricatures drawn by José Guadalupe Posada are emblematic of this stance, in particular his famous image of *la Calavera Catrina*, which humorously depicts how death comes to rich and poor alike. Initially, these drawings had a strong satirical function but one can argue that they gradually became integrated with the national imaginary after the Revolution, and were subsequently incorporated into the national cultural narrative.

Death imagery derived from Posada's engravings became part of the national narrative partly through representation in influential murals, such as Rivera's *El patio de las fiestas* (1923-24)

¹³⁵ See Chapter 2, section 2.3., for an analysis of the treatment of purgatory in *Pedro Páramo*.

¹³⁶ See Chapter 3, section 3.4., for a discussion of the fragment where Padre Rentería administers last rites to Susana San Juan.

in the Ministry of Education. In the part of the mural entitled *Day of the Dead —City Fiesta*, a band of skeletons, with Emiliano Zapata at the centre, perform for a crowded marketplace. The influence of Posada's imagery is also found in Rivera's *Sueño de una tarde dominical en la Alameda Central* (1946-47), a foundational work which unites the distinct timelines of Mexican history in one panoramic artistic space. Consequently, despite the fact that this national celebration of death, along with Posada's imagery, contains elements which might be described as blackly humorous, it can be argued that this form of humour has evolved into a kind of 'collective laughter' which tends to reinforce the ideology of the state, given that it has become part of the national imaginary through representation. Even though the juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane in the Days of the Dead still has a certain satirical function, it tends to emphasise the common fate of all mankind rather than singling out a particular ideology for critique, and does not problematize its own nature as a cultural representation. In relation to the decline of Posada's images as political satire, Lomnitz (2008: 439) suggests that:

[t]he image of the skull as an equalizer, and of death as an ironic trope, was captivating for citizens of nineteenth-century Mexico, but the bite had been taken out of these images in the 1950s and 1960s, when the various uses and displays of death imagery were abstracted into general qualities of 'the Mexican' and *lo nuestro*.

Crucially, the mirth associated with this national festival can be seen as tacitly sanctioned by both Church and state –via the syncretic link to All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day– and reinforced by mainstream national cultural production. Regarding the false consciousness generated by laughing in connivance with ideological constructs, Adorno & Horkheimer (1979: 141) argue that:

[i]n the culture industry, jovial denial takes the place of the pain found in ecstasy and in asceticism. The supreme law is that they shall not satisfy their desires at any price; they must laugh and be content with laughter.

In their schema, then, comedy is a veil used by state discourses to entertain the masses and obscure the true nature of its ideological systems. To counteract this state rhetoric, it would seem that Adorno & Horkheimer advocate the 'ecstasy' and 'asceticism' of tragedy. However, their argument does not take into account the association of the tragic mode with

foundational texts which often underpin and reinforce the hegemonic discourses of state ideology¹³⁷.

In contrast, dark entropic humour blends the comic and tragic modes, eschews a sense of utopian community, has an acerbic edge to it, requires a victim or target, and constantly strives to destabilize the core ethical values and traditional representations operating at the heart of the national imaginary (O' Neill, 1990). One can argue that it therefore resists incorporation into the types of comedic texts characteristic of mainstream cultural production. Furthermore, cultural texts which employ dark entropic humour do not tend to place themselves above the objects of derision, given that they are knowingly self-reflexive, and therefore lack the 'superior' moral viewpoint and prescriptive tendencies of normative satire¹³⁸. Both Buñuel's and Rulfo's works continually question their own nature as artistic representations, and thus undermine any hermeneutic attempts to extract a monolithic, unmediated version of the 'truth'. The popular tradition of literary *calaveras*¹³⁹ associated with *El Día de los Muertos* in Mexico also maintains this sharp satirical slant, often incorporating self-aware narrative strategies. We will now examine some key aspects of pre-Hispanic mythology and the texts' subversive representation of the Days of the Dead.

One of the central themes of Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* is death. Franco (2010: 142) notes that in Comala 'los límites ya se borran y los muertos invaden el territorio de los vivos'. A key subversive element in the treatment of the theme is the presence of a mythical pre-Hispanic structure underlying the narrative. This is realised primarily through the image of the evening star. Throughout the text, Juan Preciado, frequently focuses on Venus, 'el astro vespertino'. In fragment 31, situated in the mysterious liminal space of 'Los Confines', he describes the view through the broken roof:

Por el techo abierto al cielo vi pasar parvadas de tordos, esos pájaros que vuelan al atardecer antes que la oscuridad les cierre los caminos. Luego, unas cuantas nubes ya desmenuzadas por el viento que viene a llevarse el día. Después, salió *la estrella de la tarde*, y más tarde la luna. (*PP*: 113)

¹³⁷ See the Introduction for an outline of cultural production within the Mexican national imaginary. Dove (2004) links the tragic mode with foundational literature.

¹³⁸ See Chapter 1, section 1.4.6., on entropic humour.

¹³⁹ *Calaveras* are satirical rhyming poems, many of them anonymous, circulated at the Days of the Dead celebrations, and are designed to lampoon well-known politicians and public figures; they are also used to affectionately tease close friends. (Brandes, 2003)

The star is obviously a key point of reference for him, as it appears many more times in the text. In the fragment immediately following, story-time appears to run backwards¹⁴⁰ for the narrator-protagonist, and the evening star is again prominent: ‘Como si hubiera retrocedido el tiempo. Volví a ver *la estrella junto a la luna*. Las nubes deshaciéndose. Las parvadas de los tordos. Y en seguida la tarde todavía llena de luz’ (PP: 114). In many pre-Hispanic cultures, Venus was identified with Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli in the morning, and Xólotl in the evening. As a deity, Xólotl was representative of death, duality, and monstrosity, due to being lame, or having a foot in the shape of a ball. Jiménez (2010: 60) outlines the god’s role in pre-Hispanic cosmology as follows: ‘Adoptaba la forma de un perro y bajo esa figura se convertía en *el conductor* de las almas de los muertos hacia su última morada en el Mictlan, que sólo él, entre las deidades del exterior, podía visitar’ (My emphasis). The appearance of the evening star in *Pedro Páramo* can thus be linked to Xólotl, and specifically to the character Dorotea, who, like Xólotl, is lame and acts as a *guide* for Juan Preciado through the underworld of Comala.

The significance of the evening star is further underlined if one considers the original title that Rulfo had considered using for the novel: ‘Una estrella junto a la luna’. It first appears in a letter from Rulfo to Clara dated the 1st of June 1947. In the collection of Rulfo’s private letters *Cartas a Clara*, Alberto Vital (2012: 309) states that: ‘Como saben los especialistas, “Una estrella junto a la luna” es uno de los primeros títulos provisionales de *Pedro Páramo*’. Jiménez (2010: 63) maintains that Rulfo could not have populated his novel with dead characters without incorporating some kind of mythical (pre-Hispanic) dimension in the narrative:

Y muy probablemente en las primeras fases de gestación de su obra trató de hacerlo mediante el papel asignado en la teogonía de México antiguo a Xólotl, la Estrella Vespertina. Esto debió tener una gran importancia para el autor en aquella etapa, al grado de constituir el rasgo principal de la obra y poder, incluso, dar así nombre a la misma.

With respect to the pre-Hispanic conception of death, in particular the deity Xólotl, Bartra (1987: 87) maintains that ‘Xólotl es un numen ligado a la muerte y a las transformaciones:

¹⁴⁰ By employing the rhetorical device of ekphrasis, that is, ‘the verbalization, quotation, or dramatization of real or fictitious texts composed in another sign system’ (Sager Eidt 2008: 19), the passage evokes the cinematic technique of running the film backwards through the projector. This inter-semiotic transposition, from the cinematic to the verbal, can be read both as a vivid representation of Juan Preciado’s hallucinatory consciousness and also, via entropic parody (O’Neill, 1990), as a subversive and self-reflexive commentary on the nature of the literary medium itself.

transformación en diversas formas extrañas al huir de la muerte [...] transformación de los huesos, robados al señor de Mictlan, en hombres vivos'. He argues that there is a common thread running right through these ancient myths dealing with Xólotl: '*una constante lucha contra la muerte, un permanente huir de ella*' (87). Consequently, it can be argued that Rulfo's mythical (pre-Hispanic) structure in *Pedro Páramo* implicitly undermines the twentieth-century nationalist Mexican mythology of 'indifference in the face of death', given that the protagonist is guided by a character linked, via the image of the evening star, to Xólotl, the deity who flees from, rather than embracing, death.

Despite this mythical reference to Xólotl, the novel frequently portrays characters that appear to display indifference towards death. For instance, an irreverent mocking attitude towards death is evident in the scene dealing with the aftermath of Miguel Páramo's funeral. In fragment 15, a scene reminiscent of the grave diggers' dialogue in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, having returned from the cemetery, the exhausted pall bearers discuss the day's events:

—A mí me dolió mucho ese muerto —dijo Terencio Lubianes—. Todavía traigo adoloridos los hombros.

—Y a mí —dijo su hermano Ubillado—. Hasta se me agrandaron los juanetes. (PP: 90)

Terencio's playful and subversive use of 'doler', bathetically substituting quotidian physical discomfort for what the listener expects to be a heartfelt expression of emotional distress, humorously echoes the poetic, and similarly ambiguous, description of the effect of Miguel's death on the community, offered by the third-person narrator in fragment 13: '*Aquel cadáver pesaba mucho en el ánimo de todos*' (PP: 86). This wry skewering of elevated poetic rhetoric, and the conventions surrounding the public display of grief¹⁴¹, is further emphasised by Ubillado's grotesque reference to his swollen bunions. Dark humour is thus present in both the story and discourse planes of the text at this point. Furthermore, in a meta-narrative sense, these distinct planes and fragments are linked through the shared reference to Miguel's body which 'weighed heavily', both emotionally and physically, on the spirit and shoulders of the community. While the pall bearers' attitude towards his death is unquestionably *irreverent* in this scene, particularly with respect to Catholic discourses, that is, to not speak ill of the dead, one can argue that it is not necessarily representative of the mythology of *indifference* towards death. The violent and abusive Miguel Páramo was not popular and his death arguably comes as a relief to many of the characters. For instance, Terencio's reference

¹⁴¹ See Chapter 2, section 2.4., for a discussion of the public performance of grief in Rulfo's 'Talpa'.

to the shooting stars is sarcastically appropriated by Jesús so as to deride Miguel's reception in the afterlife: '—Es que le están celebrando su función al Miguelito' (*PP*: 90). The use of the diminutive 'Miguelito' for affection is obviously used in an ironic sense, as is the notion that the morally corrupt Miguel is being welcomed joyously into the kingdom of Heaven. The antipathy towards Miguel is also shared by padre Rentería, who, going against his Catholic principles, asks God to condemn the former's soul¹⁴².

The representation of Susana San Juan, particularly the depiction of her funeral, also contests the traditions surrounding death in Mexico, and the 'official' nature of the Days of the Dead. From her childhood, she is symbolically associated with death in the novel. In fragment 49, the third-person narrator recounts how she was forced by her father to search for gold coins in an old mine shaft. The downward movement, deep into the bowels of the earth, is suggestive of the tropes of grotesque realism (Bakhtin, 1984), which emphasise the lower stratum, as well as ironically prefiguring her final resting place beneath the earth. Dangling on the end of a rope, and groping in the darkness, she finds a skull which she drops in terror when it is suddenly illuminated by the lamp. The manner in which the bones disintegrate is described as follows: 'El cadáver se deshizo en canillas; la quijada se desprendió como si fuera de azúcar' (*PP*: 147). The jawbone which breaks up 'as though it were made of sugar' is a clear reference to the candied skulls traditionally made in Mexico to celebrate the Days of the Dead. However, in this scene, the playful attitude towards death associated with this festival is replaced by sheer psychological trauma which continues to affect her throughout her life.

Susana's tragic death is announced in Comala by the sounding of church bells that, as the third-person extradiegetic narrator dryly notes in fragment 65, 'duró más de lo debido' (*PP*: 170). This break in normative behaviour, that is, 'más de *lo debido*', marks the beginning of a festive transgression which ultimately brings about the ruin of the village. After three days of constant tolling to lament her passing, the bemused locals, rather than being spiritually edified, are eventually deafened by the noise. Instead of concentrating on a description of the sense of grief, the narrator makes a humorous reference to the fact that everyday conversation had become impossible: 'Los hombres gritaban para oír lo que querían decir' (*PP*: 170). The penetrating sound begins to attract all kinds of people from the surrounding villages:

De Contla venían como en peregrinación. Y aun de más lejos. Quién sabe de dónde, pero llegó un circo, con volantines y sillas voladoras. Músicos. Se acercaban primero como si

¹⁴² See chapter 2, section 2.4., for an analysis of the ironic depiction of Miguel Páramo's funeral.

fueran mirones, y al rato ya se habían acercado, de manera que hasta hubo serenatas. Y así poco a poco la cosa se convirtió en fiesta' (*PP*: 171)

The subversion of conventional Catholic morality evidenced by this scene, especially regarding mourning and the social rituals surrounding the public expression of grief¹⁴³, can be clearly linked to Bakhtin's (1984) concept of the carnivalesque, as discussed in detail in Chapter 1. The text's irreverent depiction of tragedy arguably permeates both the story and discourse planes of the narrative. It is manifest in the attitude of the people who come to Comala, and the somewhat ironic and detached attitude of the third-person narrator respectively. The formerly lugubrious streets of the village are thronged with people and the atmosphere is briefly transformed in an incongruous display of festivity. One can argue that Pedro Páramo's hegemonic domination of the area is thus temporarily suspended, and communal social space is 'reclaimed' by the apparently indifferent revellers. Regarding the carnival subversion of the dominant ideology in the medieval age, Bakhtin (1984: 88) notes that 'it [carnival laughter] builds its own world versus the official world, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state'.

Nevertheless, to a certain extent, one could argue that carnival expression is built into the fabric of Mexican society, part of 'official' Church and state culture in the sense that it allows for a brief anarchic eruption of 'deviance and carnality' once a year¹⁴⁴. As we have seen in Chapter 1, within social rituals, a distinction can be drawn between *liminal* (sanctioned) and *liminoid* (spontaneous) celebrations. In this case, however, the festivities show no sign of abating, and thus challenge the normative regulation of the 'official' dates prescribed with respect to carnival celebration:

Las campanas dejaron de tocar; pero la fiesta siguió. No hubo modo de hacerles comprender que se trataba de un duelo, de días de duelo. No hubo modo de hacer que se fueran; antes, por el contrario, siguieron llegando más. (*PP*: 171)

As we have seen earlier, one of the characteristics of the Mexican national holiday the Days of the Dead, which has become part of the national imaginary, is an indifferent mocking attitude towards death. Nevertheless, in this case, the liminoid street party erupts spontaneously, without Pedro Páramo's permission, and thus tacitly challenges his authority over the lands surrounding Comala. Therefore, with respect to the revellers' indifferent

¹⁴³ See the analysis of 'Talpa' in Chapter 2, section 2.4.

¹⁴⁴ In Latin America, carnival is a celebration of the body and the libido usually beginning the week before Lent (Grant-Wood, 2003).

attitude towards Susana's death, one can argue that, just like the violation of the prescribed period of the carnival before Lent, it is also crucially situated outside the officially sanctioned dates for the national celebration of the dead. Bakhtin (1984: 89) alludes to this 'legitimized' bracketing of normative behaviour as follows: 'Free laughter was related to feasts and was to a certain extent limited by the time allotted to feast days'. As the local *cacique*, assisted and legitimized in an ideological and moral sense by Padre Rentería, the figure of Pedro Páramo can arguably be read as a symbolic representative of state power. Incensed by the apparent affront to his authority and by what he perceives as a lack of respect for Susana's death, the arrogant *cacique* swears to exact his vengeance on the village: '—Me cruzaré los brazos y Comala se morirá de hambre' (*PP*: 171).

While the village is ultimately destroyed because of the unruly festival, its demise represents a definitive break with a past which has been dominated by *caudillismo*. With respect to the subversive aspects of this impromptu festival, Munguía Zatarain (2012: 179) suggests that '[e]l pueblo se condena a muerte en esa fiesta, pero es esa feria la que afirma la derrota total de Pedro Páramo: gran funeral regocijado por el poder de la loca [Susana] que derribó la estructura opresora del cacique, por la fiesta que posibilitó la muerte'. Consequently, through its subversive depiction of the complex attitudes towards death in Mexican culture and related cultural production, the scene can be read as a satirical commentary on the rigid nature of official state culture and its repressive attitude towards what it perceives as 'illegal' expressions of spontaneity. As we have seen earlier, the tragic mode is often associated with foundational nation-building texts, through its tendency to focus on the punishment of personal hubris and social transgression. The continual subversion of the tragic mode in *Pedro Páramo*, through dark humour, thus undermines the reified stereotypes of *mexicanidad* associated with 'official' state festivals and culture, by ironically spilling out over the licenced moral borders imposed by the *cacique*, who, in turn, is ironically shown to fabricate his own laws and boundaries in order to slake his insatiable thirst for power. In the end, Pedro Páramo is a broken man, figuratively shattered into a pile of rubble: 'Dio un golpe seco contra la tierra y se fue desmoronando como si fuera un montón de piedras' (*PP*: 178). With this destructive and entropic image, the novel seems to suggest that the *cacique* will leave behind no commemorative statue with which to celebrate his patrimony. It can be argued that this subversive depiction of Pedro Páramo's death undermines the use of death as a marker for *mexicanidad*, and tacitly critiques the tendency towards the glorification of past heroes of the nation. Segre (2013: 11) maintains that:

[A]s if to avert symbolically the possibility of those official exhumations that resuscitate the spirit of the powerful as validations of the supposedly historically sanctioned status quo, Rulfo elides the death mask altogether, dismantling the legacy of post-Revolutionary hagiography and historicism.

Nationalist preconceptions about death, ‘imaginatively’ derived from pre-Hispanic cultures, are also a feature of Buñuel’s *El río y la muerte* (1954). In this case, the Days of the Dead celebrations assume a darkly ironic role in the unfolding tragedy. In a rural Mexican setting, the film examines the related themes of violence and death by depicting a one-hundred-year-old feud between two rival families who are enmeshed in a vicious cycle of tit-for-tat killings. Even though Buñuel fundamentally disagreed with the film’s moral and ideological slant (to the effect that education would eliminate violent behaviour), he was contractually obliged by CLASA films to direct it. However, a detailed examination of the narrative shows that while it effectively transmits the ‘social message’ on one level, it simultaneously subverts and satirizes that message with implicit irony, particularly by employing incongruous cuts and changes of tone throughout.

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

One way this is achieved is via a humorous disjunction between the information conveyed by the cinematic narrator and the voiceover narrator. For instance, over a tranquil shot of a woman walking along a quiet side street with her young child, the voice-over narrator states that the casual observer might be deceived into thinking that this is a peaceful village. Having

sown a little doubt in the viewer's mind with this utterance, his tone now changes abruptly: 'Sin embargo, la vida del pueblo está presidida por la *muerte*'. On the word 'muerte' the camera cuts to an extreme close-up of a sugar *calavera* wearing a crown. Simultaneously, a rather jaunty piece of festive music starts up, which is later revealed to be diegetic. The juxtaposition of the celebratory music with the image of the skeleton has the effect of destabilizing the viewer's apprehension of the tone of the narrative, as it alternates rapidly from threatening to festive. The contrast between the images also makes the voice-over narrator's dramatic tone more comical, as the viewer is primed to expect a more terrifying image than that of a sugar skeleton. In relation to the depiction of male aggression and the implicit critique of nationalist discourses in the film, Acevedo-Muñoz (2003: 108) maintains that '[t]his juxtaposition of images and sounds in the first two minutes of the movie downplays the "social thesis" of *El río y la muerte*, emphasizing in its playful contrasts the absurd nature of violence imposed by national tradition'.

The camera now cuts to a medium close up of a wire figurine of the skeleton held in an anonymous hand. The man who has been inspecting the figurine then replaces it and the camera pulls back further to reveal male and female skeletal dancers flanked by a little band of skeletons with musical instruments. They are positioned on a table with bottles of alcohol to the left and right, with some real musicians standing behind them. This humorous *mise-en-abîme* technique mirrors the actual musicians and dancers at the fiesta, mischievously portraying them as 'puppets' acting out an orchestrated 'performance' of the Mexican national festival. Along with the parodic reference to Rivera's *El patio de las fiestas*, these skeletal caricatures of death also have the effect of alerting the viewer to the mock-serious tone of the voice-over narrator's statement. The man then picks up a female figurine and begins to dance comically with it. As the camera tracks back further, the scene is revealed to be a joyous and festive traditional celebration of Mexico's Days of the Dead. The film's particular depiction of one of Mexico's most important national festivals contains certain elements of parody and situational irony, given that is juxtaposed with the beginning of a vicious family feud. Acevedo-Muñoz (2003: 107) outlines this aspect of parody with respect to previous artistic representations of the festival: 'The scene is clearly reminiscent of Eisenstein's *¡Que Viva México!* (1979) [short features from which were released in 1934] in which a traditional Day of the Dead fiesta is presented as a cliché of Mexican culture'.

The black or entropic humour in this scene of the film operates at one remove from the 'traditional' earthy humour associated with this festival, that is, where people celebrate and

even make fun of death. Rather than the wholesome collective laughter characteristic of official celebrations of the dead, the film problematizes the social conditions which give rise to this festive laughter, playing with what is considered ‘normally’ and ‘abnormally’ comic in contemporary Mexican society. Through its ironic representation of this particular aspect of Mexican culture, one can argue that it is precisely this attitude of laughing at death which is satirized in the film. The viewer is interpellated as a detached observer of the macabre situational irony, where a man is murdered at a national celebration of death. In relation to the film’s humorous subversion of the death trope of cultural nationalism, Fuentes (2005: 101) suggests that it achieves a ‘desdramatización humorística del drama de «la muerte fácil» mexicana’. Arguably, the dark humour is not elicited by a cruel, detached enjoyment of the tragic fate of the Anguiano patriarch, although it is a perverse form of mirth, or by entering into the spirit of the national celebration of death, but rather by an appreciation of the ironic social conditions, specifically the *machista* honour code¹⁴⁵, linked to an indifferent attitude towards death, which cause this tragedy to unfold. The cavalier attitude towards death in Mexican cultural production suggests that life is cheap, perhaps even because of this ‘irreverent’ stance, as Paz (2002: 63) suggests: ‘La indiferencia del mexicano ante la muerte se nutre de su indiferencia ante la vida’. On an ideological level, this indifferent attitude also plays into patterns of hegemonic domination by nationalist discourses, given that, as we have seen earlier, this day of national celebration is tacitly ‘approved’ by both the state and the Church. This experimental scene also satirically undermines traditional representations of attitudes towards death in Mexican national cinema, the ideological limitations of which Ayala Blanco (1968: 270) acerbically outlines as follows: ‘sólo hay cráneos de azúcar y culto florido a los muertos. Comedido, respetuoso y servicial, el cine mexicano, cómico o serio, ignora sistemáticamente la existencia del humor negro’. As we have seen earlier, patriotism and heroic death are cultural values which form a central part of the national imaginary. I will now examine the texts’ alienating portrayal of heroism, self-sacrifice, and revolutionary conflict.

¹⁴⁵ See Chapter 3, section 3.1. This ‘code’ is evident in the following analysis of Mexican machismo by Paz (2002: 89): ‘El “Macho” es el Gran Chingón. Una palabra resume la agresividad, impasibilidad, invulnerabilidad, uso descarnado de la violencia, y demás atributos del “macho” poder’.

4.3 Death, Heroism, and Class Conflict

A disdainful and fatalistic attitude towards death can be linked to the idea of heroism, of fighting and dying for the cause of the nation. Bartra (1987: 77) cites a study carried out by Jean Plumyène, where the latter establishes a link between Freud's death instinct and nationalist sentiment. He maintains that the rallying cry 'Patria o muerte' can be seen as a direct manifestation of this phenomenon. This attitude towards death in Mexico has another key source, which involves a struggle between the social classes. Bartra (1987: 74) outlines this particular aspect as follows: 'es una manifestación del desprecio de las clases dominantes por la vida de los hombres que se encuentran en la miseria'. Indeed, class conflict between the *campesinos* and the *hacendados* was a central feature of the Mexican Revolution. Mexican national cinema tended to romanticise the violent and heroic aspects of the Revolution, with a view to making it commercially successful at the box office, as Monsiváis (2013: 66) suggests: 'Entre iluminaciones comerciales de la vocación sangrienta de la raza, brota el escamoteo de la realidad y todo se reduce a demasiadas cananas y la cumplida *indiferencia* ante la muerte' (My emphasis).

Essentially, one could argue that discourses of cultural nationalism simplified, or may indeed have misrepresented, whether intentionally or not, pre-Hispanic beliefs so that they align ideologically with notions of patriotism and heroic death in the service of the nation. As Bartra (1987: 78-79) puts it, '[a]sí surge el héroe mexicano prototípico, que juguetea con la muerte y se ríe de ella: es [...] una creación intelectual emanada de la mística revolucionaria de los años veinte' (78-79). These discourses implicitly assumed that pre-Hispanic cultures embraced death gladly, as a natural part of the cycle of life, due to their use of human sacrifice. The reality, however, is much more complex, and evinces a considerably more nuanced attitude towards mortality.

Rulfo's '¡Diles que no me maten!' (1953) is a dramatic short story which deals with a variety of interrelated and quintessential Mexican themes such as violence, death, religion, vengeance, memory, heroism, and the central importance of land question, the primary motivation behind the Mexican Revolution. The spare prose and pessimistic outlook in the text is often mitigated by dark sardonic humour. I contend that its visceral and subversive portrayal of the paralyzing fear of death undermines previous representations of heroic

outlaws, macho characters who defied death with their brave and reckless actions¹⁴⁶. Consequently, its ambiguous depiction of death can be said to tacitly address and undermine the nationalist mythology of *la muerte fácil*.

While the story is primarily recounted in the socio-realist mode, it is also narrated in a highly experimental fashion, and is comprised of five fragments. The narrative switches continually between dialogue, first-person narration, and third-person narration. This is a common modernist technique which, incidentally, is also reminiscent of the multiple points of view offered in cinematic narratives. It has the effect of reminding the reader that he/she is reading a narrative, of highlighting the text's 'literariness', and thus making the conventional suspension of disbelief required in such realist narratives difficult. Moreover, the order of presentation of the events goes against the 'natural' chronology of the story¹⁴⁷, an effect which changes how the reader perceives the morality of the past and present actions of the terrified protagonist.

The story opens *in medias res*, where a coronel of the militia is about to execute Juvenio Nava for the crime of killing his father (Guadalupe Terreros) 35 years previously. The problem of the land, as a source of conflict, evidenced by the hacendado's name, Don Lupe Terreros, can be read as an oblique reference in the text to the Mexican Revolution. With respect to questions of land and power, Richardson (2015: 78) observes that 'the initial killing [...] is motivated by a dispute over land, a dispute which is related, crucially, to the land's fecundity'.

One of the principal characteristics of the Rulfian chronotope¹⁴⁸ is a bleak indeterminate rural setting, as evidenced by many of the stories in the collection *El llano en llamas* and indeed *Pedro Páramo*. There is a clear lack of spatial or temporal location, which has the effect of abstracting the story world, to a certain extent, from concrete socio-historical referents. Perus (2012: 23) notes the 'marcada ausencia de referencias espaciales y temporales precisas en la ambientación de las acciones' in Rulfo's works. Any indication that it is set in rural Mexico is supplied by the use of local patterns of speech, for instance the verb: 'afusilan' (*PP*: 112).

¹⁴⁶ See Chapter 3, section 3.1., on masculinities in Mexican cultural production.

¹⁴⁷ See Chapter 1, section 1.1., on modernist narrative techniques.

¹⁴⁸ Spatiality and the chronotope are explored in Chapter 1, section 1.3.

In essence, one could argue that the lack of spatio-temporal context in Rulfo's story contributes to the palpable sense of 'transcendental homelessness'¹⁴⁹, or existential *angst*, challenging the 'totality' of previous socio-realist representations. Furthermore, there is no apparent introduction of the section of dialogue by an extradiegetic narrator, and the reader's attention is thus focused entirely on the immediate dramatic interaction between the characters:

—¡Diles que no me maten, Justino! Anda, vete a decirles eso. Que por caridad. Así diles. Diles que lo hagan por caridad (*LL*: 111).

Justino is understandably concerned that he and his family will be put in danger if he acquiesces to his father's wishes, but decides to go anyway:

—Voy, pues. Pero si de perdida me afusilan a mí también, ¿quién cuidará de mi mujer y de los hijos?

—La Providencia, Justino. Ella se encargará de ellos. Ocupate de ir allá y ver qué cosas haces por mí. Eso es lo que urge (*LL*: 112).

The reference to Providence as a caring mother figure is highly ironic in the text, contrasting with the desolate, existential nature of the story world. In reality, as a consequence of extreme *fear* of death, it appears that his father will say anything to avoid being shot, even if that involves putting his own son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren in danger. In relation to the story's nuanced depiction of death, Lorente-Murphy (1988: 42) suggests that '[c]ontrariamente a otros personajes de Rulfo que denotan una especie de desprecio por la vida y no temen la muerte, Juvencio Nava lucha desesperadamente por seguir viviendo'.

The first perceptible spatial orientation for the reader in the story is when the third-person narrator intervenes to describe when Justino gets up to leave. The pile of rocks can be seen as symbolic of a burial mound, and foreshadows the grim events to come. The third-person narrator then introduces the background to the story and provides further spatial details: 'Lo habían traído de madrugada. Y ahora era ya entrada la mañana y él seguía todavía allí, amarrado a un horcón, esperando'. The 'horcón' can be seen as a symbol of death since it was where animals were tied before being slaughtered. This action has the effect of dehumanizing the victim, given that he is treated like an animal.

¹⁴⁹ See Lukács (1971). The term refers to the nostalgic quest for a place of belonging from which a person has been estranged by circumstance.

The narrator gives intimate details of his mental and physical state, emphasizing his raw fear. Through a narrative analepsis (flashback) the third-person narrator then introduces what appears to be a fragment from Juvencio's memory and which appears to be from the court case:

Don Lupe Terreros, el dueño de la Puerta de Piedra¹⁵⁰, por más señas su compadre. Al que él, Juvencio Nava, tuvo que matar por eso; por ser el dueño de la Puerta de Piedra y que, siendo también su compadre, le negó el pasto para sus animales (*LL*: 112).

There is a strong naturalist impulse in the text. To a certain extent, it appears that Juvencio was forced by socio-economic circumstances to commit his crime: 'tuvo que matar'. And yet, the level of violence that he inflicts on Don Lupe seems disproportionate. The text makes continual reference to Juvencio's growing frustration:

Primero se aguantó por puro compromiso. Pero después, cuando la sequía, en que vio cómo se le morían uno tras otro sus animales hostigados por el hambre y que su compadre don Lupe seguía negándole la yerba de sus potreros, entonces fue cuando se puso a romper la cerca (*LL*: 112).

After the presentation of the dialogue of the confrontation with Don Lupe, the narrative now switches to the first-person viewpoint of Juvencio himself who declares: 'Y me mató un novillo'. This is obviously the point in the narrative where he decides to kill Don Lupe, and yet there is no description of this violent act. Through this particular ellipsis, Juvencio, in collusion with the implied author of the text, tacitly builds up the reader's sympathy for his current predicament. Arenas & Moreno (2007: 47) make reference to this misleading narrative strategy on the part of Juvencio, arguing that 'hace que la actitud emotiva del lector hacia él sea de simpatía'.

There then follows a first-person account of how he made certain 'payments' to a judge and subsequently went on the run as an outlaw:

No me valieron ni las diez vacas que le di al juez, ni el embargo de mi casa para pagarle la salida de la cárcel. Todavía después, se pagaron con lo que quedaba nomás por no perseguirme, aunque de todos modos me perseguían (*LL*: 113).

It is not clear in the text whether these 'payments' to the judge can be considered as a bribe, bail money, or official compensation for the victims. There is certainly no mention of the

¹⁵⁰ The name of the ranch 'Puerta de Piedra' is an image which evokes a gravestone.

cattle being given to Don Lupe's family. If it is indeed a bribe, the most likely explanation, then Juvencio's complaint about its ineffectiveness betrays yet another subtle satirical slant in the text. It mocks and exposes the irony of his complaint about the lack of justice and morality as applied to illegal and immoral payments so that he can escape from the justice system. The text also seems to imply that corruption may be the norm in these matters.

Much of the first-person account, narrated by Juvencio himself, seems to be in the form of a 'confession' to an unknown interlocutor, a desperate attempt to justify what he has done. He continually portrays himself as a victim of circumstance, complaining that the villagers often took advantage of his fugitive status:

"Pero los demás se atuvieron a que yo andaba exhortado y enjuiciado para asustarme y seguir robándome. Cada vez que llegaba alguien al pueblo me avisaban: —Por ahí andan unos fureños (outsiders), Juvencio' (*LL*: 113).

The third-person narrator's account of the events serves to balance Juvencio's biased narration. Indeed, the former's somewhat sardonic comments, at some points, seem to suggest that Juvencio deserves his fate:

Y ahora habían ido por él, cuando no esperaba ya a nadie, confiado en el olvido en que lo tenía la gente; creyendo que al menos sus últimos días los pasaría tranquilos. "Al menos esto - pensó- conseguiré con estar viejo. Me dejarán en paz" (*LL*: 114).

The colonel's description of the sadistic manner of his father's death is in direct contrast with Juvencio's sanitized account:

Luego supe que lo habían matado a machetazos, clavándole después una pica de buey en el estómago. Me contaron que duró más de dos días perdido y que, cuando lo encontraron tirado en un arroyo, todavía estaba agonizando y pidiendo el encargo de que le cuidaran a su familia (*LL*: 117).

Juvencio's death by firing squad is not depicted in the text. The third-person narrator later informs the reader that he and his son will arrive in Palo de Venado in time to organize the wake. There is no depiction of grief at his death; rather, his son addresses his dead father with what appears to be complete emotional detachment:

Te mirarán la cara y creerán que no eres tú. Se les afigurará que te ha comido el coyote cuando te vean con esa cara tan llena de boquetes por tanto tiro de gracia como te dieron (*LL*: 118).

The reference to a ‘coup de grâce (mercy killing)’ is ironically juxtaposed with the grotesque description of Juvencio’s disfigured face after the stream of bullets from the firing squad. He makes continual reference that his life hasn’t been worth living since he committed the crime, so his death comes as a kind of relief. This idea is conveyed by the subsequent description of the aftermath of his death: ‘por fin, se había apaciguado’ (*LL*: 100), in particular the use of the verb ‘apaciguar’. Boldy (1986: 400) highlights this sense of release from suffering in the text: ‘The “tiros de gracia” which put him out of his thirty-year-long agony suggest that, like his victim, he had been virtually dead for that time’. As part of his analysis of the text, which focuses on the complex relationship between ‘indifference towards death’ and social inequality, Bartra (1987: 75) suggests that ‘el arte de Rulfo nos descubre la forma en que la “indiferencia por la muerte” tiene su origen en el desprecio por la vida ajena’. The idea of Juvencio as a heroic revolutionary who stands up to the tyranny of the *hacendado* is thus undermined, showing the circular nature of violence and death in Mexico.

In *Pedro Páramo*, the closely linked themes of heroism, death, and revolution are also briefly explored, while the surrounding mythology is also satirically undermined. In fragment 53 of the novel, where the revolutionaries have dinner with the eponymous *cacique*, the extent of their ignorance and naivety in the face of the ideological conflict in which they are immersed is manifest. When Pedro Páramo asks what he can offer them, one of their leaders replies:

—Como usted ve, nos hemos levantado en armas.

—¿Y?

—Y pos eso es todo. ¿Le parece poco?

—¿Pero por qué lo han hecho?

—Pos porque otros lo han hecho también. ¿No lo sabe usted? Agúardenos tantito a que nos lleguen instrucciones y entonces le averiguaremos la causa. (*PP*: 153)

Although this fragment represents aspects of a ‘serious’ ideological conflict, with tragic consequences for many Mexicans, the darkly ironic interchange illustrates the underlying satirical intent of the text. The ‘leader’ believes that he is in charge of the group and yet blindly follows what others have done, obviously having no idea of the root cause or ideology for which he intends to fight. As soon as instructions arrive from higher up in the ranks, he will be able to ‘determine’ the cause of the uprising. Consequently, the text links revolution, heroism, and indifference towards death, valued attributes in the process of nation-building,

to ideological ignorance and lawlessness. With respect to the kinship fostered by nationalist sentiment, Anderson (1991: 7) suggests the following: ‘Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly die for such limited imaginings’. An agreement is finally reached where Pedro Páramo promises to give them 100,000 pesos and the loan of three hundred men. The irony of the situation is that their revolution is now financed by one of the very people they are trying to depose.

Buñuel’s *El ángel exterminador* also satirically engages with patriotic nationalist discourses. As we have seen in Chapter 2, the title can be seen as a parodic rendering of the monument, *El Ángel de la Independencia*, in Mexico City. The satirical treatment of this ‘sacred’ national emblem recalls Roquentin’s acerbic observations on the statue of Gustave Impétraz in Sartre’s *Nausea* (1965: 44): ‘At the service of their narrow, firm little ideas he has placed his authority and the immense erudition drawn from the folio volumes crushed under his heavy hand [...] a man of bronze has made himself their guardian’. At the dining table, Blanca and the Colonel have an odd conversation about the latter’s apparent contempt for the ‘virtue’ of heroism and his curious distaste for gunfire. His comments strike the viewer as being incongruously and comically transparent, as if he were unwittingly expressing his innermost thoughts in public. When pressed to justify these comments with respect to his country, he replies rather contemptuously: ‘My country is a collection of rivers which flow into the sea’, to which Blanca interjects, adding a poetic tone: ‘The sea, which is Death’. His sardonic reply punctures the poetic tone and betrays his lack of interest in patriotic sentiment: ‘That’s it [...] death for one’s country’.

As we have seen in Chapter 2, a particular source of tension, resulting in black humour, is the way the guests in Buñuel’s *El ángel exterminador* try to maintain strict decorum in the face of absurdity, chaos, and death. As is the case with the ghosts in *Pedro Páramo*, the characters are mysteriously trapped in a liminal space, or heterotopia of deviance, momentarily suspended between life and death¹⁵¹. One can argue that the entrapment creates another conceptual space, or rather psychologically reconstitutes the space which they initially enter, and which has alternative norms to the refinement normally characteristic of the bourgeois music room. For instance, when some of the guests, spurred on by Raul, want to sacrifice their host, in the belief that this might allow them to escape, Edmundo, at pains to avoid a

¹⁵¹ See Chapter 2, section 2.3., on the film’s disruption of normative social space.

violent 'scene', intimates that he will 'politely' commit suicide. It appears that maintaining good manners and propriety are more important to him than his own physical survival. Arguably, the target of this dark humour is the social ideology which gives rise to Edmundo's absurd offer. On one level, it can be seen as a wry satirical skewering of bourgeois social etiquette where the ultimate price is to be paid by an individual so as to maintain social order, and deliver the rest of the group from peril. However, it also has deeper resonances with pre-Hispanic narratives about death in Mexican cultural production and indeed patriotic narratives of self-sacrifice. When faced with a life-threatening situation beyond their control, the more irrational elements in the group demand a human sacrifice.

This episode can be read as a reference to the pre-Hispanic roots of the Mexican mythology of '*la muerte fácil*', where death is seen as being intimately bound up with life in an infinite cycle, and where sacrifice is seen as a generative and redemptive force. With respect to the pre-Hispanic aspects of this mythology, in particular the value of human sacrifice, Paz (2002: 59) suggests that '[l]a vida no tenía función más alta que desembocar en la muerte, su contrario y complemento; y la muerte, a su vez, no era un fin en sí; el hombre alimentaba con su muerte la voracidad de la vida, siempre insatisfecha'. By invoking this pre-Hispanic narrative, which is also an intrinsic part of the Mexican national imaginary, the text satirizes the constructed nature of attitudes towards death in national cultural production. Edmundo's altruistic offer to sacrifice himself in order to save the group is also suggestive of narratives of national heroism where one brave individual pays the ultimate price to save the nation. However, in this case, the option is clearly forced upon him. Just before Edmundo can carry out this act, Leticia makes the connection between their current spatial orientation and the positions where they were before their entrapment. Consequently, one form of superstition has been replaced by another.

The theme of indifference to the suffering of others is also explored with a bitterly satirical slant. When recalling a train accident, the bourgeois character Ana adopts an anguished tone, and her eyes take on a glazed, faraway look, as she apparently revisits the horror of a train derailment in her mind. She recounts, in melodramatic fashion, her dismay after witnessing the bloodshed inside the third-class carriage. However, at this point, her attitude changes and she begins to smile strangely. Curiously, she seems to gently reproach herself for not being sufficiently moved emotionally by the suffering of the occupants of the crushed carriage: '*debo ser insensible porque no me conmovió el dolor de aquellos infelices*'. The sincerity of this statement, however, is undermined by her tranquil appearance and neutral dispassionate

tone. When she is reminded that she fainted at the lying-in-state of Prince Luttar she defends her position as if it were a self-evident truth that the untimely demise of a member of the nobility requires a different emotional reaction to that of someone from the lower classes. This blackly humorous and incongruous statement once again draws attention to the satirical intent of the text. The next statement by Rita is delivered in a chilling matter-of-fact tone which bluntly outlines the difference she perceives between the social classes: 'Yo creo que la gente del pueblo, la gente baja, es menos sensible al dolor. ¿Usted ha visto un toro herido alguna vez? Impasible'. The film interpellates the viewer as a detached witness to this dialogue, the dark humour being produced by the brutally indifferent attitude towards: 'aquellos infelices', rather than their tragic fate.

The subversive depiction of death in *Los olvidados* also steers clear of the nationalist mythology of *la muerte fácil*. There are few noble heroic gestures to be found as many of the characters prey on each other in the constant struggle for daily survival. There is also a clear emphasis on the gulf between the social classes. In a sense, the film suggests that the tragic and futile deaths of the street children fall outside the teleology of the 'national narrative', that is, they are elided from the discourses of progress and modernity which characterised Alemán's *sexenio*. They seem destined to be overlooked by the dominant classes and the state. The symbolic abjection of these forgotten children becomes concretized by the end of the film, culminating in a municipal rubbish tip. While the police try to intervene at times, their response is shown to be ineffectual in stemming the cycle of violence. The locals are also mistrustful of the authorities and this arguably aggravates their already hopeless situation.

The construction worker Julián is murdered in cold blood, ambushed from behind and then mercilessly beaten. The crime takes place in broad daylight and is set against the stark image of a building under construction. The skeletal structure could be read as a reference, perhaps, to Alemán's project of modernity, particularly its rhetoric of social and economic progress which failed to address the situation of the inhabitants of the slums. Consequently, the shot of the impassive steel structure juxtaposed with the depiction of Julián's death can be read as an ironic commentary on the state discourses of modernity in 1950s Mexico. The metal framework hints at a potentially brighter future for Mexico, an image redolent of industry and employment. However, the unfinished building is set to bear silent witness to Julián's brutal death. Gutiérrez-Albilla (2008: 30) suggests that 'the film's *mise-en-scène* thus depicts the incompatible coexistence of construction and destruction at the core of modernity'. The

deaths of Pedro and el Jaibo both take place in darkness, a tonal aesthetic which engulfs the later part of the film. This cinematic technique foreshadows the tragic denouement and heightens the viewer's growing sense of unease. After fighting in Meche's loft, el Jaibo brutally beats Pedro to death with an iron bar. Instead of accentuating the tragedy of the moment, the film uses the image of a white hen perched on his lifeless corpse, an alienating technique which diffuses the sense of pathos in the audience. The image also recalls Pedro's attack on the hens at the farm school. The image of a black hen is also used in conjunction with sinister non-diegetic music just after the gang's earlier assault on Don Carmelo. The film highlights poverty and injustice yet also simultaneously undermines and satirizes the sentimental portrayal of these themes.

El Jaibo is eventually shot in the back while running from the police. His death is celebrated in a grotesque fashion by Don Carmelo, who extends his hands towards the sky and exclaims: '¡Uno menos. Uno menos. Así irán cayendo todos. Ojalá los mataran a todos antes de nacer!'. The blind musician certainly has his reasons for wishing El Jaibo dead, but he also has no qualms in taking advantage of the children, especially Ojitos, for his own selfish ends. Don Carmelo is a representative of the old guard, a canny troubadour who extolls the 'virtues' of the *Porfiriato*. The moment of Jaibo's death is portrayed through a collage of surreal images and sounds, which contest the film's earlier depiction of him as a hardened villain. As he lies on the ground, his final thoughts, via an interior monologue, betray a confused and terrified hidden self: 'No, no, ya caigo en el agujero negro [...] estoy solo'. These final thoughts also resonate with the exploration of the subconscious of juvenile delinquency in Pedro's nightmare sequence¹⁵². The slow motion image of a stray dog running down a wet street is superimposed on a close up shot of Jaibo's face while Pedro's voice warns him of its approach. A female voice, perhaps his mother, or Marta, then comforts him: 'Duérmase m'hijito'. The film seems to suggest that there is no transcendence in death, that is, there is no suggestion of el Jaibo's soul entering another world. Rather, the advancing figure of death is represented as a mangy dog (perhaps a cultural reference to Xólotl, the pre-Hispanic god of death) leading to a black hole (el agujero negro), in other words, existential oblivion. It could be argued that this particular treatment of death undermines previous clichéd depictions of death as a transcendent event where the soul typically advances towards an ethereal light. Polizzotti (2006: 70) suggests that this sequence 'provides the film with an emotional peak

¹⁵² See Chapter 3, section 3.5., for an in-depth analysis of this sequence.

and an iconic image, revealing Jaibo at the point of death to be what, deep down, he has always been: a lonely, frightened little boy’.

To avoid any possible trouble from the police, Meche and her grandfather wrap Pedro’s lifeless corpse in a blanket and carry it on a donkey towards the rubbish dump. On their way there they pass Marta wearing her iconic shawl¹⁵³. She is seemingly repentant for the way she has treated Pedro, and calls out his name in vain. The use of the donkey to carry the body has parodic resonances with the Bible, both in terms of the symbolic status of the animal and the senseless sacrifice of Pedro’s life. Christ triumphantly enters Jerusalem on a donkey and yet is brutally sacrificed a few days later. Rather than the religious transcendence achieved through Christ’s crucifixion, Pedro’s tragic loss of life seems destined to be forgotten. In the final image of the film, Pedro’s body rolls down a pile of garbage and his earlier symbolic abjection as a slum dweller has now become complete. In a spatial sense, the slum can be seen as a marginal space in the city and the rubbish tip is a marginal space in the slum. Consequently, the various layers of spatial abjection constitute a *mise-en-abîme* structure which undermines the stability of the bourgeois world view. In relation to the treatment of rubbish and detritus in the film, Gutiérrez-Albilla (2008: 28) notes that ‘garbage becomes an aesthetic strategy that challenges the bourgeois distribution of space and bourgeois subjective interrelationships by celebrating the scum, leftovers and refuse of all classes’.

To sum up, we have seen how Buñuel’s and Rulfo’s works tacitly undermine the totemic use of death as a marker of *mexicanidad*, particularly in relation to discourses of cultural nationalism. The use of a mythical pre-Hispanic structure in *Pedro Páramo*, via the image of the evening star, links the text to the figure of Xólotl, the god who flees from death. This alternative view of pre-Hispanic culture challenges discourses which tend to link the Aztec idea of human sacrifice (the embracing of death) with post-Revolutionary conceptions of death in Mexico. The indifference towards death displayed by the gravediggers at Miguel Páramo’s funeral simultaneously posits and then deconstructs the idea of ‘*la muerte fácil*’ through dark, ironic humour. This subversive vein is continued in the novel’s alienating treatment of the social and religious rituals surrounding death, in particular the Days of the Dead, and is especially manifest in the depiction of Susana San Juan’s funeral. The liminoid (unsanctioned) festival which erupts spontaneously after her burial challenges the dominance and hegemonic influence of the *cacique*. It ultimately destroys Comala but crucially brings an

¹⁵³ See Chapter 3, section 3.5., for a detailed discussion of the Marian symbolism of Marta’s shawl.

end to his tyrannical rule. This event can also be interpreted as an indication of the importance of popular, rather than 'official', culture in the national imaginary. Buñuel's *El río y la muerte* tackles the Days of the Dead celebrations more directly, satirically portraying the national festival as a cliché of Mexican culture. The use of dark situational humour, where a man is brutally stabbed at a festival celebrating death, contrasts sharply with the traditional 'state-aligned' humour associated with this cultural event. The texts also engage with nationalist discourses which advocate patriotic heroism, self-sacrifice, and death. Rulfo's '¡Diles que no me maten!' subverts the idea of heroism by vividly portraying the paralysing effects of fear of death on the protagonist and the cyclical nature of class conflict and revolutionary violence in Mexico. The darkly humorous depiction of Edmundo's offer to commit suicide in Buñuel's *El ángel exterminador* plays with and destabilizes the idea of self-sacrifice for the greater good of society. The film also exposes the darker side of class conflict between the bourgeois and the working classes. *Los olvidados* examines the connection between abjection and death and illustrates how the slums are excluded from the Mexican national imaginary.

Conclusion

We have examined the innovative use of subversive narrative techniques and *mexicanidad* in the works of Buñuel and Rulfo. The questioning of the project of the Institutional Revolution in Mexico was a feature of many cultural texts from the late 1940s onwards, with the 1950s and 1960s being particularly fertile decades for innovative narrative experimentation. The previous reliance on socio-realist styles of narration, often associated with discourses of cultural nationalism, was perceptibly waning by the late 1940s. While Buñuel's and Rulfo's narratives form just a small part of a vast web of contemporary Mexican cultural texts, they constitute an important intervention in cultural debates surrounding the nature of *mexicanidad*. Unitary and utopian interpretations of *mexicanidad* were frequently associated with projects of cultural nationalism, particularly evident in certain works from the fields of Mexican national cinema, 'La Narrativa de la Revolución', the Muralist Movement, and in intellectual essays exploring 'national character'. This study has shown that *mexicanidad* is a complex and highly subjective term which cannot be reduced to any one particular set of meanings. Rather, it can be seen as a cultural construct continually formed and transformed through a constant dialectic between discourses of popular culture, independent cultural production, and state-influenced national cultural production. Instead of trying to affix a particular meaning to *mexicanidad*, Buñuel's and Rulfo's works take issue with attempts to narrow the term to any defined list of attributes, thus underlining its inherent hybridity. For Rulfo and Buñuel, the subversion of formal and tonal dynamics brought about by self-reflexive narration, and the blending of tragic and comic elements in their narratives, call into question the place of artistic production as a means of exerting nationalist cultural hegemony. While they utilized different media, their texts display many subversive narrative techniques in common. With respect to inter-semiotic transposition, cinematic techniques are evident in Rulfo's works¹⁵⁴ and Buñuel often adapted novels for the screen¹⁵⁵.

An innovative approach to spatiality has been identified as a central feature of their works, and this structural aspect is particularly important regarding their counter-hegemonic critique of discourses of cultural nationalism. In contrast to the panoptic gaze of state discourses, that

¹⁵⁴ See Negrín (2008) in the Introduction. 'Cinematographic literature', or literature which employs cinematic techniques, is also theorized by Duffey (1996) as part of an investigation of the influence of cinema on twentieth-century Mexican literature.

¹⁵⁵ For instance, *Nazarín* (1958) is based on a novel by Galdós, while *Ensayo de un crimen* (1955) was based on the novel by Rodolfo Usigli.

is, the cultural 'mapping' of the national territory, both artists create bizarre, and at times irrational, story worlds which have the effect of destabilizing conventional ideas of, and patterns of behaviour associated with, social spaces. Since a particular 'space' becomes a 'place' by association with a particular narrative (Tuan, 1977), the disruption of narrative space thus effects a deconstruction of the conventional narratives and mythologies which accumulate over time and consequently become 'naturalised' and 'attached' to that particular space. A striking feature of their narratives is how Buñuel and Rulfo manage to depict vivid and disorienting fantasy worlds while also remaining firmly rooted in socio-realist verisimilitude. It can be argued that this particular facet of their work creates and maintains *tension* between the planes of story and discourse, a technique which foregrounds the active role of the reader/audience. With respect to fantasy, the strangeness and unreality of their worlds can, to a large extent, be attributed to psychological delusion on the part of the characters. For instance, Juan Preciado's hallucinatory view of the 'inframundo' of Comala is from his own subjective viewpoint, a spatio-temporal world which 'comes into being' around him: 'se me fue formando un mundo' (*PP*: 65). Similarly, it is suggested that the guests in Buñuel's *El ángel exterminador* are responsible for 'fabricating' their own psychological prison out of blind adherence to the rigid guidelines associated with social and religious rituals.

These two artists' fictional worlds can be read as heterotopias of deviation, alternative spaces, simultaneously physical and mental, where conventional discourses, mores, and patterns of behaviour are broken down. These locations tend to counteract the utopian characteristics of more traditional cultural production. To a certain extent, the process can be compared to the incongruous juxtaposition of diverse objects in surrealist art, that is, the humorous disruption of traditional semiotic systems. In essence, the images created by these artists dissolve the conventional conceptual links between the objects, people, and situations that they portray. In a similar manner, the surrealist tendencies in Buñuel's and Rulfo's works disrupt the semiology associated with conventional representations of *mexicanidad*.

The representational space of the theatre can also be seen as a form of heterotopia, due to its ability to depict a diverse range of spatio-temporal locations on one stage. This idea clearly links spatiality to theatrical performance (Brecht, 1974), and it has been shown to apply equally to the chronotopes of cinema and literature, particularly in the graveyard of Comala and the music room in *El ángel exterminador*. The self-reflexivity of Buñuel's and Rulfo's works highlights the constructed, rhetorical nature of social practices, such as ritual, religion,

and traditional gender roles, denaturalizing these customs as essentially a form of social 'performance'.

These heterotopic worlds also deal with the issue of abjection (Kristeva, 1982). They portray desolate spaces and marginalized characters which have been excluded and set apart from conventional society. This is particularly evident in such spatial settings as the barren wilderness which forms the backdrop for many of the stories in the collection *El llano en llamas*, the decrepit slums of *Los olvidados*, the physical graveyard and psychological underworld of Comala, and the isolation and destruction of the music room in *El ángel exterminador*. These hybrid spaces, both physical and conceptual, can be read as alternative locations which run counter to the reification and celebration of the 'national' narrative in places such as museums and public squares. When spatiality is allied with the temporal aspects of their works, the resultant experimental chronotopes (Bakhtin, 1984) can be said to subvert existing generic conventions, especially with respect to the audience's horizon of expectations.

In a narrative sense, this is often achieved by a disruption of the socio-realist conventions of narrative development. Rather than linear narrative causality, the use of fragmentation, unconventional montage, and non sequiturs breaks up the diegetic development and the teleological drive of the narrative. The fragmented structure of *Pedro Páramo* reflects Juan Preciado's otherworldly experience when he enters Comala. Sudden cuts from one scene to the next, from one spatio-temporal location to the next, have a similarly disorienting effect on the reader. *El ángel exterminador* and *Ensayo de un crimen* also play with the traditional logic of the linear narrative, seamlessly blending flashback and flashforward with reality and fantasy. All these techniques draw attention to the constructed nature of the text, and problematize attempts to understand the world through exclusively rational means.

Along with the use of fragmented, incongruous, narrative structures, the 'critical distance' or alienating effect in their works is achieved through the use of humour and irony. Indeed, these two effects often function symbiotically in the texts in question, that is, humour is often generated by the incongruous juxtaposition of narrative fragments. Humour acts as a subversive discourse and often functions as a counterpoint to the palpable sense of desolation and melancholy in their narratives. The type of humour present in Buñuel's and Rulfo's works tends to be on the darker side of the spectrum, incorporating elements of the carnivalesque, the absurd, and the grotesque. It is often combined with experimental

narration, what O'Neill (1990) terms entropic parody, a comedy of narration. Rather than the collective mirth associated with laughing along with the ideology of the state –that is, the state seen as an integral part of the 'Culture Industry', as theorised by Adorno & Horkheimer (2001)– it can be argued that their works tend to go against the grain, countering the unitary tendencies of cultural nationalism. Their narratives exude a problematic dark laughter which questions what is conventionally regarded as humorous and thus disrupts normative social values. Humour is also tied in with spatiality, often elicited by an incongruous juxtaposition between the 'rules' which govern human conduct in a given social space, and the impulses and desires of the individual, that is, the 'appropriate' behaviour expected in a normatively regulated social milieu. These artists' use of humour can be seen as depicting a clash between *place* and *self*. This subversive mirth opens up a plurality of interpretations, as opposed to the monological tendencies of tragedy, a mode which is closely associated with foundational texts (Dove, 2004).

On a thematic level, the conventional patterns of behaviour associated with ritual and religion are continually undermined in Buñuel's and Rulfo's works. These reified rites are closely intertwined with *mexicanidad* and the Mexican national imaginary, particularly emblematic in the 'holy' trinity of God, Nation, and Home. They often take place in designated 'sacred' spaces, such as the church, the cemetery, and the family home. In these narratives, the ideological framework underpinning these traditional rituals is laid bare and thus exposed as constituting a form of 'theatre' or 'performance'. *Pedro Páramo* conjures up a dark parody of the Catholic idea of purgatory, a heterotopia of deviation or transient 'non-place' (Augé, 1995), where condemned bodies and spirits struggle to liberate themselves from the repressive dictates of the faith. The novel's subversive treatment of Catholic discourses is especially evident in fragment 38 where Dorotea recounts how she and her soul went their separate ways. Rejecting the 'official' doctrine of the Church with respect to purgatory, that is, to continue to examine her conscience and torture herself through guilt, she appears to find spiritual peace in the terrestrial embrace of the earth: 'El Cielo para mí [...] está aquí donde estoy ahora' (*PP*: 124-5). In *El ángel exterminador*, the comforting surroundings of the luxury family home are transmogrified through mass psychosis to become a terrifying threat which consumes the Mexican bourgeoisie from within. This aspect of the film parodically echoes the grim portrayal of the slums in *Los olvidados*, where Pedro's home is represented as the antithesis of love and security. The allegory of class degradation in *El ángel exterminador* is extended to the level of the national through the images of the crowd

clashing with the police. Indeed, the film is particularly critical of an elite social class which arguably appropriated the images and ideology of the Mexican Revolution only to recreate the utopian excesses of the *Porfiriato* in another guise. In a final irony, the *Te Deum* which the guests intone to celebrate their eventual release precipitates yet another entrapment, this time in the sacred space of a cathedral. The depiction of religious characters is also considerably more rounded in the works, avoiding previous simplistic and binary depictions characteristic of both state and Church discourses. Rulfo's Padre Rentería is shown to be a miasma of contradictions, a man tormented by self-doubt, guilt, and impulses of revenge. He is torn between the dictates of his conscience and an abiding sense of duty to follow the teachings of the Church. Buñuel's Padre Nazario is also a similarly conflicted character, struggling to reconcile his own utopian idealism with the harsh realities of the world. The hegemony of the official Church is also shown to be legitimized and strengthened by the blind belief of ordinary citizens such as Tanilo and Beatriz.

The works are also linked through their subversive depiction of traditional gender relations in Mexican society. Like their treatment of ritual and religion, conventional 'gender-appropriate' behaviour is again shown to be a 'performance'. In particular, the works underline how certain attitudes towards gender roles in Mexican society can be seen as arbitrary constructions, fictional narratives intercalated with random historical coincidence. Buñuel's *Ensayo de un crimen* explores this idea with its implicit reference to the Mexican Revolution and the construction of traditional ideas of dominant hegemonic masculinity. With frequent recourse to dark, ironic humour, the film shows the protagonist to be helplessly enmeshed in these masculinist discourses, or ways of behaving as a man, having endured a childhood trauma. *Pedro Páramo* also employs dark grotesque humour to illustrate the physical and metaphorical breakdown of normative gender roles between Juan Preciado and Dorotea in the liminal space of the grave. Buñuel's and Rulfo's narratives also feature strong, assertive, and independent female characters. Their innovative and nuanced approach to female characterization questions the traditional roles normally assigned to male and female characters in earlier representations. Through their use of subversive humour, the characters Lavinia and Susana San Juan resist the dominance of hegemonic masculine discourses. The sacred figure of the Mexican mother, as reified and codified by discourses of cultural nationalism, also comes under scrutiny in *Los olvidados* and *Pedro Páramo*. The texts depict Mexican mothers as complex, rounded individuals, thus disassociating them, and other female characters, from the binary Guadalupe/Malinche stereotypes.

The study has shown that in the post-Revolutionary period death and its associated skeletal imagery became elevated to the status of a symbol for the Mexican nation. The theme permeates many aspects of Buñuel's and Rulfo's works, lending a lugubrious tone to the proceedings, and yet it is often viewed with a subversive, satirical slant. While representing the centrality of death in the Mexican national imaginary, the texts simultaneously problematize the idea of death as a marker for *mexicanidad*. The mythical structure of *Pedro Páramo* makes an implicit reference to Xólotl, the deity who flees from death. With characteristic dark humour, Buñuel's *El río y la muerte* underlines the close association of the Days of the Dead celebrations with the hegemonic influence of the Church and state. The unsanctioned 'liminoid' festival in *Pedro Páramo* spills over the prescribed dates for 'official' celebration, thus challenging the normative systems of power in Comala. This spontaneous event is what precipitates the destruction of the village, but it also brings the *cacique's* reign to an end. The values of heroism and patriotic death, closely linked with the nationalist mythology of *la muerte fácil*, are also undermined in the works. Fear of death characterizes the narrative in '¡Diles que no me maten!', while *El ángel exterminador* executes a dark parody of the pre-Hispanic roots of *la muerte fácil* with the depiction of Edmundo's altruistic offer to take his own life. *Los olvidados* employs various degrees of abjection to critique nationalist discourses of progress and modernity.

In Buñuel's and Rulfo's works, the trope of death is disassociated from the collective symbol of the Mexican national narrative and thus assumes a more individual, introspective, and philosophical role. The liminal space of the grave allows for a degree of ironic reflection on the absurdities of life. In *Pedro Páramo*, Dorotea finds spiritual peace in the earth, free at last from the repressive discourses of Catholic guilt. Towards the end of his life, Buñuel (2012: 327) remarked that he would like to occasionally rise from the dead to read a newspaper and then return to 'el refugio tranquilizador de la tumba'.

I have situated the works of Buñuel and Rulfo in a fertile and influential period between the earlier post-Revolutionary cultural production of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, and the more radical and politically conscious texts of the early 1960s. Their innovative narratives can be considered as part of a trans-medial genre of darkly humorous experimental cultural production, formed, on the one hand, by the acknowledged mutual formal and aesthetic

influence between experimental cinema and the Latin American New Novel¹⁵⁶; and on the other, by the cultural and historical zeitgeist of mid-twentieth century Mexico. Subsequent evidence of the effects of intermedial cross-pollination and experimentation in their texts can be seen in many later Mexican works. For instance, *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962) by Carlos Fuentes, is a complex novel which arguably fuses the literary with the cinematic¹⁵⁷, while deconstructing previous hagiographic representations of the Revolution. The early 1960s also saw the emergence of the more politically conscious Third Cinema movement, a radical genre which drew inspiration from these earlier experimental works.

The investigation of the works of Buñuel and Rulfo has also highlighted a number of issues which could be pursued in further studies. The mutual influence operating between many different forms of Mexican cultural production could be applied to countless other works from the same period. Another fruitful line of enquiry might explore the myriad connections between Buñuel's films and Rulfo's photographic and screenwriting output. A final question which has remained implicit throughout the thesis is the degree to which their works transcend national boundaries. Both artists certainly deal with the local and the political and yet it is evident that they also retain an ability to communicate universal themes far beyond the spaces in which their fictional worlds are set.

¹⁵⁶ See Fuentes (2004) for a detailed discussion of the mutual influence between cinema and literature in 1950s Mexico.

¹⁵⁷ According to Carlos Fuentes, the novel was also influenced by Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) and incorporates cinematic techniques such as flashback, cross-cutting, deep-focus, and close-up (Fraser, 1982).

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Filmography Luis Buñuel

Las Hurdes. 1933. Producer: Ramón Acín (Spain); director Luis Buñuel; photography: Eli Lotar; editor: Buñuel; narration: Buñuel and Pierre Unik. Black and White, 27 minutes.

Los olvidados. 1950. Producer: Ultramar Films (Óscar Dancigers, Mexico); director: Luis Buñuel; screenplay: Luis Buñuel and Luis Alcoriza; photography: Gabriel Figueroa; editor: Carlos Savage; talent: Stella Inda, Alfonso Mejía, Roberto Cobo, Miguel Inclán, Alma Delia Fuentes. Black and White, 88 minutes. (LAVA)

El río y la muerte. 1954. Producer: Clasa Films (Armando Oribe Alba, Mexico); director: Luis Buñuel; screenplay: Luis Buñuel and Luis Alcoriza, based on the novel *Muro blanco sobre roca negra* by Miguel Álvarez Acosta; photography: Raúl Martínez Solares; editor: Jorge Bustos; talent: Columba Domínguez, Joaquín Cordero, Miguel Torruco. Black and White, 93 minutes. (LAVA)

Ensayo de un crimen, 1955, Producer: Alianza Cinematográfica (Alfonso Patiño Gómez, México); director: Luis Buñuel; screenplay: Luis Buñuel and Eduardo Ugarte, inspired by the novel by Rodolfo Usigli; photography: Agustín Jiménez; editor: Jorge Bustos; talent: Ernesto Alonso, Miroslava Stern, Ariadna Welter, Rita Macedo, Andrea Palma, Black and White, 91 minutes. (New Yorker Films, LAVA)

Nazarín. 1958. Producer: Manuel Barbachano Ponce (Mexico); director Luis Buñuel; screenplay: Luis Buñuel, Julio Alejandro, and Emilio Carballido, based on the novel by Benito Pérez Galdós; photography: Gabriel Figueroa; editor: Carlos Savage; talent: Francisco Rabal, Marga López, Rita Macedo, Ignacio López Tarso, Jesús Fernández, Luis Aceves Castañeda. Black and White, 97 minutes.

El ángel exterminador. 1962. Producer: UNINCI, S.A., and Films 59 (Gustavo Alatríste, Mexico/Spain); director: Luis Buñuel; screenplay: Luis Buñuel and Luis Alcoriza; photography: Gabriel Figueroa; editor: Carlos Savage; talent: Silvia Pinal, José Baviera, Luis Beristain, Claudio Brook, Tito Junco. Black and white, 93 minutes.