

# The modern city in the latin-american context



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Throughout Guillermo del Toro's *Cronos* and Luis Buñuel *Los olvidados*, it is apparent that the overall sense of unease, horror and despair are ingrained within the ambiances of each of these films, with the backdrop of the city playing a vital role in the development of this idea. However, the extent to which the idea of the city itself acts as a character on its own within these films is a question that requires a consideration of the contextual and formal differences between them, allowing one to think about whether it is Mexico City, an undefined city, or something else entirely that shapes the narratives of these stories.

Beginning with *Cronos*, and the role of Mexico City in particular as a vehicle for the themes the film deals with, the contextual aspects behind del Toro's work is paramount to an understanding of the vampirism and the general sense of a moral decay throughout it. With regard to a "contaminating" conception of the modern city, the changes occurring during 1990s Mexico are felt in a striking and unsettling way, with the vampirism serving as a cover for examining the economic or cultural relations between Latin America and its powerful northern neighbor the United States. The link between the alchemy of the colonial period and the creation of the *Cronos* device juxtaposed with the present day interference of the *de la Guardias* in *Jesús Gris'* life paints a picture of a troubled Mexico, a Mexico that has been continually contaminated by foreigners, or cultural predators. However, Ann Davies suggests a reading of the film in an apolitical way, saying that whilst a message of the film is that the death, disease and bodily dissolution suffered by *Gris* must be policed and guarded against, the embodiment of such an infiltration is what proves to be terrifying. Whilst the physical decay

of *Gris* is a terrifying spectacle from a cinematic perspective, Davies' argument is a particularly weak one, for the reasons why del Toro has chosen the genre of the vampire film are what gives the film its allegorical significance. Furthermore, whilst Davies' explanation of the heterotopic elements of the vampire is indeed an important one, it overlooks the fact that the name of the device and the film's title, *Cronos*, translates into English as "stopwatch", an element which allows for an interesting consideration for how the film's relationship with time fits into a critique of urban modernity, something we can later link to *Los olvidados*.

Continuing with Davies' ideas, she criticizes John Kraniauskas' consideration of the vampire as a symbol of neo colonial economic relations in Latin America, favouring Ann Marie Stock's argument against trying to perceive the film as a vehicle of Mexicanness. However, considering that the film was released on the eve of Mexico's absorption into the North American Free Trade Agreement, and that the cities in Latin America were beset by fevers of demolition and reconstruction, with new investment money tries to liquidate old assets and speculators awash with capital from US and European markets, this argument appears to be a weak one, for the allegory of the industrial Americans versus the humble Mexican shopkeeper is clear throughout the film. Coming back to del Toro's work as a stage for the portrayal of an economically anxious Mexico, a fear of globalisation is present in the featuring of street signs in Arabic and Chinese, and the multilingualism of the dialogue, switching between Spanish and English. Here, del Toro presents us with a Mexico City that is changing, an important point when taking into account that for the director, the setting of the film in

Mexico City was of high importance, With Kantaris going on to highlight the significance of the city's presence in the film's credit sequence, with its fast traffic, multilingual signposts and litter of Christmas shopping strewn across the streets, and Gris' small house dwarfed by modern buildings. This house, then, represents a piece of the past (as it were frozen in time, in a crono/stopwatch) that this new Mexico City is trying to hold on to in the dawn of this new economic era. Thus, Mexico City itself becomes a character of this film, with the context surrounding Cronos allowing it to become a manifestation of socio-economic concerns in 1990s Mexico.

Moving on to Los Olvidados, it is undoubtedly clear during the opening credit sequence of the film that Buñuel had set out for this film to be a critique of this new, urban environment that his protagonists find themselves trapped in, an extremely hostile environment which offers no escape from the horrors of the city. Interestingly, the use of footage from a variety of cities, New York, Paris and London, along with the voiceover explaining how these "grandes ciudades modernas esconden tras sus magníficos edificios lugares de miseria", leaving no doubt that this film is going to show urban life as it really is, with no illusions of optimism. Buñuel's fierce cynicism may stem from the fact that he was living in a Spanish exile in Mexico during the time of the film's production, hence, unlike del Toro, his Mexico has a more bitter connotation. Furthermore, the importance of Mexico City specifically is not as clear as is it for del Toro, for the Spanish director seems to be painting a narrative of an impoverished city life that is universal. This is supported by J. Rubia Barcia, who says that Jaibo could be a hoodlum boy of the streets of Rome, Paris, Madrid, or London, and that, more noticeable than anything

else, is the absolute absence from the film of reason, of moral feeling, of true religion, as if the two thousand years of Christianity had not existed at all, even in its formal aspects, for there is not a single religious image nor a prayer in the whole film. As a result, Buñuel's film appears to be the opposite of del Toro's allegorical tale, with the way in which the film is directed taking it more into the realm of the neorealism that was occurring in Italy at the time.

However, if we look at these two films side by side, although they were filmed over 40 years apart, anxieties stemming from a fear of the contaminating, predatory, and anarchic conceptions of the Latin American city can be seen in both, with *Los olvidados* concerned with the development and increasing populations of the urban world (especially important when considering that Mexico City was one of the fastest-growing cities in Latin America at the time), whilst *Cronos* deals with the later fears produced by a globalizing world. Both films, then, deal with the problems with urban life and the effect of this on inhabitants, however, del Toro does this in a way that is specific to Mexico City, whilst Buñuel's city is almost an anonymous one, with his film becoming a piece of art that shows these urban horrors in an unashamed way, similar to Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*. Going back to the way that word "crono" these films' relationship with time fits into a critique of urban modernity, for *Los olvidados*, the time within which the narrative takes place, just like the city it is set in, can be said to be meaningless, merely a repeat of scenes across cities around the world, with the stopwatch repeating on an endless cycle, with the modern city contaminating the innocence of the

film's characters, with the predatory nature of the urban turning these children into perpetrators of the horrors of city life.

To conclude, then, the allegory of the US invaders into Mexican culture and life is clear from Guillermo del Toro's narrative in *Cronos*, with the vampire metaphor representing the moral decay produced by this capitalist interference in the city. Mexico City plays a specific role within this film, with the Mexican director taking this sprawling metropolis and using it to portray the economic and social anxieties produced by the increasing globalisation and American power at the time. In contrast, Luis Buñuel's *Los olvidados* appears to be a criticism of all cities, not just the Mexican capital, but his message is still very similar to del Toro's, acting as a warning of the degradation produced by life in this urban environments. As a result, the modern city is indeed conceived as predatory, contaminating and anarchic, however, for Buñuel, this is not strictly in a Latin American context.