

Chapter Nine

***Bajo la piel* (Francisco Lombardi 1996): Inescapable violent identities**

Section 1: Introduction

Bajo la piel, Lombardi's sixth feature differs from those discussed thus far in that, instead of taking its inspiration from the social and material context of Peru, its main concern is with the psychological development of individual characters and their relationships with each other and with their immediate environment. Moreover, rather than overtly pointing to particular historical events, it uses the strategies of allegory and mythification to establish critical comment on violence and national identity within a fictional tale of erotic passion and death, thus eschewing the more directly social realist approach of the director's earlier work. This approach was taken in part because of financial imperatives: after the release of *La boca del lobo* in 1988, Lombardi made two further films that dealt explicitly with the socio-political reality of his country, but they were less commercially successful than *La boca*. The first, *Caídos del cielo* (1990), inspired by a short story by Julio Ramón Ribeyro, interlinked the lives of three sets of characters who had been profoundly affected by the national economic crisis of the late 1980s. The second, *Sin compasión* (1994), a loose adaptation of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, is set amidst the deprivation of an ailing Lima in the early 1990s. *Caídos* offers a pessimistic view on the possibility of achieving social and economic change in Peru, while *Sin compasión* suggests a general loss of faith in the state and its institutions. Both enjoyed moderate critical acclaim but performed poorly at the box office, producing no financial return for their international investors. With no possibility of state support, pressure mounted for Lombardi to make a film that would hold appeal beyond national borders and that relied less heavily on knowledge of specific topical contexts.

Section 2: Context

Bajo la piel retains a Peruvian setting and a vision of a nation in crisis, but has a looser attachment to topical concerns.¹ The story idea was inspired by Jim Thompson's *noir* thriller *The Killer Inside Me* (1952), regarded as the 'prototype novel of compulsive killing'.² Drawing on some of the book's central themes of violence and the human condition, Lombardi set about creating a thriller with Peruvian screenwriting partner Augusto Cabada. The director recalls that Cabada was keen to develop 'un personaje oscuro que descubre dentro de sí cosas que nunca se hubiera atrevido a confesarse a sí mismo que era capaz de hacer',³ while Lombardi worked on linking this to a tale of passionate desire. They set out to provide a greater focus on ideas that explored the human psyche that would be understood by spectators regardless of their own cultural or national affiliation. Thus, they hoped to find a point of identification with an international audience unfamiliar with the specificities and diversities of Peruvian culture and everyday life. Nevertheless, they provide local markers, visual and aural signifiers of everyday life that encourage the viewer to make connections between the film's themes and issues pertinent to Peruvian identity. They locate their tale of murder and intrigue, for example, within the distinctive northern coastal region of Peru, and draw heavily on the legends, artefacts and architecture pertaining to the prehispanic Moche culture that ruled the area from AD200-800. While Thompson's novel provides

¹ Funding for this film was provided by companies from Spain and Germany, with some support also from the *Instituto de Cooperación Iberoamericana*. The impact of the co-production arrangement on the content and tone of the film is discussed later in this analysis.

² Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 159. Note that Lombardi had wanted to make a closer screen adaptation of Thompson's novel but the rights proved impossible to negotiate. Reported in Alberto Servat, 'Entrevista con Francisco Lombardi', *TV+*, 4 November 1996, p. 11.

³ Lombardi cited by Bedoya, *Entre fauces y colmillos*, p. 200.

the framework within which to explore perennial ideas about the dark and violent side of human nature, the particular geographical, historical and cultural context imbues the film with local colour. At the same time, it provides opportunity for debate about the relevance of its themes to the national situation. Moreover, this multi-pronged approach to the development of key themes allows different forms of pleasure depending on the audience. For a Peruvian audience, it serves to locate the film within a national discourse of violence and identity, while for international audiences, the local indicators used to connect the different themes serve to exoticize and fetishize the unfamiliar 'other'.

Instead of focusing on the historical aspects of the political struggle with *Sendero Luminoso*, *Bajo la piel* takes a broader approach that puts the very question of violence at its centre. By linking the present inextricably with the past, 'violence' is thus developed as a characteristic theme of the Peruvian nation. Indeed, this element signifies the nation as an integral, deep-rooted feature of Peruvian national identity, thereby sustaining and reinforcing the myth that it is somehow intertwined with a primordial and immutable notion of violence. As suggested by its title, the film also seeks to go beyond the racial divisions found in Peru and, by juxtaposing ancient and contemporary cultures, attempts to define the very essence of Peruvian national identity regardless of cultural difference. Hence, rather than addressing specific details of social and economic concern, this analysis highlights and explores the film's portrayal of Peruvian identity and its complex relationship with violence by looking closely at the development of the main characters, as well as their triangular relationships and ties to their cultural and geographical environment. It considers the ways in which certain features of the ancient Moche culture are depicted and drawn upon in such a way as to suggest the inescapability and inevitability of violence in human behaviour, and to indicate the interdependent relationship between beauty and horror, death and passion. In particular,

it investigates the film's apparent mission to confront its audience with a possible link between the actions of a serial murderer and a copycat killer operating in the 1990s, the insurgent violence of *Sendero Luminoso*, and the rituals of human sacrifice as practised by the ancient civilization.

Section 3: Synopsis

The film opens with close-up shots of tree foliage and water spurting from the end of a hose pipe, taken – it is then revealed – from the point of view of a man rocking peacefully in a hammock. His face is calm as, through voice-over, he ponders the true nature of happiness. He ends this brief prologue by declaring that until just a few months ago he had considered contentment to be no more than a utopian illusion. The film then cuts to its title sequence, during which images of a group of youngsters playing football in the streets are shown. Their fast-paced and emotionally charged game is interrupted when one of them runs to collect the ball and makes the gruesome discovery of a decomposing human head lying in the rubbish, its eyes gouged out. A piercing shriek of horror is heard as the titles end and the screen fades to black. Having thus established and interlinked its two levels of intrigue, the first concerned with human nature and the second with violent crime, the film then sets out to investigate both of them in the manner of the classical crime thriller.

The next stage of the narrative, and the beginning of the crime investigation, takes place not inside a police station but at the local museum based on the site of the Moche ruins. Rather than deploying the conventional establishing shot of classical cinema, an intriguing extreme close-up shows the detail of an ancient Moche artefact and a man's voice is heard explaining its significance. This voice is that of Catalino Pinto (Gianfranco Brero), the guide and archaeologist of the site, who is leading a tour of a

group of students, some of whom are less respectful than he would like towards both the treasures and himself. The local police captain Percy Corso (José Luis Ruiz), appears from behind a pillar where he has been listening closely to the details Pinto is offering about the rituals of human sacrifice practised by the Moche and about the instrument designed to carry them out. He is intrigued in particular by the fascination with the human head in Peruvian art, and with Pinto's thoughts on the coexistence of beauty and horror within a single entity. On the way back to town, he and Sergeant Faura (Gilberto Torres) manage to prevent an angry father from shooting a young man, later identified as Gino (Diego Bertie), accused of seducing and harming a local girl. Gino, the debauched but charming son of the mayor, unwittingly provokes his own murder later on at the hands of the police captain who has just saved his life.

Back at the police station, it is reported that four young men from the locality have been decapitated in the recent past and their eyes extracted. Corso already suspects that Pinto is the perpetrator of these very precisely executed murders. He is further convinced of this by the findings of Marina (Ana Risueño), the pathologist who confirms that the crimes must have been carried out with an unusual instrument that reminds her of the pendulum imagined by Edgar Allan Poe.⁴ Without further hesitation, this leads Corso to arrest the archaeologist, charging him with having murdered and decapitated his victims with a Moche ceremonial *tumi* kept in the museum. Meanwhile, an affair begins between the captain and the pathologist.

⁴ The reference here, and on several further occasions, is to Poe's horror story *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1842). Marina suggests this link to Corso herself and later finds that he has an old copy of the book on his shelf. The clue leads Corso to believe he has 'solved' the murder case in that the weapon used in Poe's story, the pendulum, is similar in shape, design and function to the weapon used by the murderer, the Moche *tumi*. Edgar Allen Poe, *The Pit and the Pendulum* (London: Travelman Publishing, 1998).

Eventually, Marina ends the affair and the devastated Corso discovers that she is now involved with Gino, his nemesis, whom he already despises for his lack of self-discipline and enviably carefree attitude to life. Corso is also under pressure to extract a confession from Pinto. However, returning to the station one night, he discovers that Pinto has killed himself. Distressed at having lost his suspect, and betrayed by Marina and Gino, Corso's sense of self as both police officer and lover is on the verge of collapse. He decides to hide Pinto's body in his own home and accuses his sergeants of allowing the suspect to escape. Later that night, Corso kills Gino in a jealous rage, then decapitates him and gauges out his eyes with the *tumi* from the museum that he had held as evidence. He buries the bodies of the archaeologist and Gino in a desolate spot by the coast, but is seen by a villager. This villager reports Corso to the Public Prosecutor, the mayor and the local journalist, but when they examine the site of the illicit burial, only the body of the captain's dog is found. This cyclical narrative concludes with an epilogue that returns to Corso on his hammock. He and Marina are back together and she is expecting a child. Corso's voiceover explains again that he at last feels at peace, having come to terms with Marina's unpredictable temperament, and is determined to consign the violent crime he has committed to oblivion.

Section 4: Analysis

Rather than emphasizing issues relating to contemporary Peru, *Bajo la piel* alludes to them by setting up provocative associations: between the serial and copycat killings that form the nucleus of the film's drama; the rituals of sacrifice of the ancient Moche culture that provide the cultural context; and the *Sendero*-versus-state political conflict of the 1980s and 1990s that is explicitly referred to only once. The central importance of the Moche, including the fascination expressed by several of the characters for the ancient

culture's approach to life and death, emphasises the key role that history plays in understanding the film's core message about violence, human behaviour and national identity. Moreover, the continuation, repetition and mimicry of murder suggest an endless and insurmountable impulse for violence as integral to the specific Peruvian context.

As Pinto points out to Corso when they first meet at the museum, study of the rituals and beliefs of the Moche culture might help contemporary Peruvians to understand their own culture and identity by demonstrating the apparently essential element of violence, as well as the need to reconcile them as inevitable, even somehow beautiful. He points to the Moche practice of human sacrifice and describes the rituals in some detail, provocatively suggesting that the instinct for violence courses through the veins of the Peruvian people. He mentions the battle with *Sendero* as proof that such violence continues and that the notion of sacrifice of self for the greater good remains important. For the Moche, human sacrifice (usually of prisoners of war) was integral to their sacred rituals relating to protection of land from invaders, and the collective celebration of triumph in battle. For *Sendero*, appropriation of the prehispanic Peruvian past was an important – albeit politically expedient – element of its ideology. Moreover, it required a commitment by all its recruits to renounce subjective emotional ties (symbolic self-sacrifice).⁵ Finally, the destruction of those who represented the old, oppressive order was considered by the guerrilla organization to be a necessary step en route to the creation of a new nation state. Meanwhile, Pinto's acts of murder seem also to have been driven by a determination to change society, with the aim of eliminating elements of ignorance and disrespect. At the same time, his appreciation of the Moche regard for the

⁵ As Gorriti explains, 'the quota's very concept and the feverish, fulminating fervor of its expression gave the Shining Path the reputation ... of being a death cult'. Gorriti, 'The Quota', p. 317.

seemingly contradictory concepts of beauty and horror is made clear. He is portrayed as intelligent and sensitive, and thus decapitates his victims with the precision of an artist.

As Bedoya suggests:

... es que el arqueólogo aparecía como descendiente directo del Degollador de Túcume, el mítico personaje precolombino, cuya efigie está impresa en los murales de la cultura a la que perteneció.⁶

Bedoya refers to another connection that might be made between the cynical vision of society offered by this film, and the overwhelming air of resentment that was prevalent in Peru in the mid-1990s, citing a general ‘incapacidad para imaginar nuevos horizontes de vida’ and a loathing of those structures and systems that resulted in widespread marginalization and despair.⁷ Indeed, Pinto’s violent response to such systems represents a form of human behaviour that might have been particularly familiar to domestic spectators whose daily lives were traumatized by violence of various forms.

Bedoya further argues that:

El impulso criminal del arqueólogo era un producto de la frustración, el rencor acumulado y el desprecio por los “otros”, que lo marginan sin tener méritos para ello. ... el asesino tentaba las vías del crimen y la automortificación como una forma de expresar su dolor y su protesta. Era, pues, un perdedor, un marginal, un personaje sublevado por la vida mediocre que le ofrece una provincia del Perú.⁸

In fact, each of the main characters in *Bajo la piel* is depicted as struggling to cope with an existential crisis that leads them to question their place in the world. On its deepest level, *Bajo la piel* might be interpreted as a film about the dark place within all of us,

⁶ Bedoya, *Entre fauces y colmillos*, p. 143.

⁷ Bedoya, *Entre fauces y colmillos*, p. 143.

⁸ Bedoya, *Un cine reencontrado*, p. 321.

that draws attention to the possibility of being identified and positioned as both victim and villain simultaneously.⁹ It explores complex and contradictory human urges that lead apparently law-abiding and morally committed people to commit the most appalling deeds. More specifically, it shows how even a conventional figure of authority such as Corso, the avowed pacifist, might be capable of the most brutal action, which points again to the film's understanding of the human capacity for violence in general. Corso is at first disturbed by the contradictions at the heart of the Moche culture and, while investigating Pinto as the key suspect, interrogates him about the connection he has already highlighted between the practice of human sacrifice and the beauty of Moche cultural production. Bedoya provocatively, and perhaps problematically, describes such rituals as barbaric, while at the same time acknowledging 'la belleza creada por los artesanos y arquitectos que dieron un sentido de eternidad a sus obras'.¹⁰ The film, through Pinto's ruminations and Corso's growing fascination with them, suggests that prehispanic culture might offer lessons for contemporary Peru in terms of providing a thorough understanding of the deep-rooted nature of violence, and perhaps offering a controversial justification for it, given that the Moche justified the use of violence as part of their system of control and order. The archaeologist's explanations, based on what he has learnt about Moche beliefs, in turn provide Corso with a potential solution to his own problems. Like Pinto, he justifies the murder of Gino to himself as an act of social cleansing, eliminating one more chaotic and disrespectful individual from society. While the older man's obsession was with the Moche, Corso is spurred on in his gruesome mission by his desire for the enigmatic Marina.

⁹ Vich, p. 47.

¹⁰ Bedoya, *Entre fauces y colmillos*, p. 144.

In fact, Corso's reasons for giving in to his instinct for violence are more complex than that. They derive, like Pinto's, in part from a deep resentment for those who lack self-discipline, and frustration at the bureaucratic system that has prevented him from fulfilling his own personal and professional ambitions. He is further enraged by his inability to satisfy Marina sexually. In effect, he and Pinto blame others for their personal inadequacies, and by aligning themselves in their method of killing with the powerful and enduring Moche culture, both Pinto, the ridiculed archaeologist, and Corso, the cuckolded police officer, attempt to acquire a sense of the macho masculine authority they lack. A crucial relationship is therefore established between violence, traditional masculine identity and the taking or reclaiming of power, which can also be aligned with Peru's own identity formation, in the name of which violent conflict has repeatedly been used to gain authority over land and people.

With a long-repressed sexual instinct at last unleashed by his desire for Marina, Corso cannot seem to stop himself from giving in to a similarly repressed instinct for aggression. Indeed, the development of the characters within this drama takes on the structure and force of a predetermined and inescapable ritual, as was also seen in the encounter between Vitín Luna and lieutenant Roca in *La boca del lobo*. Indeed, as Stephen Hart suggests, Lombardi tends to develop his films 'around a set of conflictive moments'.¹¹ Each time the various characters in *Bajo la piel* interact, their conversations and interactions become an opportunity for debate about the purpose of life, love and death. Contradictory opinions about these aspects are most clearly expressed during the intense confrontation between Corso and Gino, when the former finally reveals his resentment for the disrespectful, carefree ways of the younger man

¹¹ Stephen Hart, "'Slick Grit': Auteurship Versus Mimicry in Three Films by Francisco Lombardi', *New Cinemas*, 3:3 (2006), 159-167 (p. 166).

and puts an abrupt end to his mocking banter by shooting him dead. Gino's murder is hardly planned, and is instead conveyed as an act of compulsion over which Corso has little control. It is as if a larger force has inhabited him, and guides him to destroy the man who stands in his way. He tries at first to block out the memory of what he has done with alcohol, but when Marina comes to him in some distress, he takes pleasure in comforting her and in knowing that, as far as their relationship is concerned, he has regained control and restored traditional patriarchal order.

Throughout the film, the principle of inexorable cyclicity that was important to Moche beliefs is further developed and expressed by thematic motifs and narrative devices such as doubling and repetition. For example, the archaeologist-cum-serial killer commits suicide, but the murders do not stop, and the chilling possibility that a murderer is still active concerns the local community greatly. Freud's essay on the uncanny, implicitly referenced by the diegetic connections made to Poe's horror text, offers useful weight to this aspect of the analysis. In it Freud argues that dread and horror are frequently aroused by and related to the phenomenon of the double, including, for example, 'the constant recurrence of the same thing – the repetition of the same features or character traits or vicissitudes, of the same crimes'.¹² Freud's work is frequently deployed in discussions of horror in cultural production as an aid to understanding the connections between repressed desires and violent behaviour, both on an individual and a collective level, and in thus establishing how these emotions might be conveyed symbolically. In this film text, just as Pinto continued the sacrificial tradition of the Moche with his perfectly crafted decapitations, so Corso, as Pinto's own 'double', ends up attempting to imitate Pinto's crime so as to eliminate Gino, his rival for Marina's attentions. The

¹² Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Collected Psychoanalytical Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XXVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), p. 234.

endlessness of this cycle is finally suggested in the closing image of the film, first by a shot of the pregnant Marina tending the garden, and then, more darkly, as the camera pans down below the earth to where Gino's body is buried. Corso acknowledges that the equilibrium that he enjoys is ephemeral. He appears resigned to the possibility that his instinct for violence will resurface at a later date, and is aware that Marina's own sexual instinct, temporarily tamed by pregnancy and by her imminent role as mother, might resurface to threaten their relationship again.¹³

The emotional fervour that affects the behaviour of each of the main characters remains unspoken for most of the film and is suggested instead by the occasional facial close-up suggesting psychological entrapment, and by the *mise-en-scène* that emphasizes the claustrophobia of the physical environment. Several of the characters talk of leaving the town of Palle, which in itself might be interpreted as a metaphoric microcosm of the nation in crisis, but they seem unable to do so. They are either thwarted through lack of ambition or opportunity, compelled to remain or return by a strong emotional bond, or prevented from escaping by an act of violent oppression. Corso, for example, recalls how he wanted to be a lawyer, but somehow ended up as a gun-toting policeman, the antithesis of his ambition. Marina, at first portrayed as the intercultural outsider, explains that she has been drawn back to the town of her birth, after growing up in Spain, by a fascination with corpses and the rituals of the Moche in particular. Meanwhile, the final exit for Gino, Pinto, and the four murdered boys, is by violent, unexplained death at the hands of so-called experts and authorities.

¹³ A further association might be made to the myth of Inkarrí, central to prehispanic Peruvian culture and history, which relates that the decapitated and dismembered Inca Túpac Amaru will one day become whole again. This in turn serves as a reminder of his violent death in 1781 at the hands of the Spanish invaders, and as a further key to the guerrilla group *Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru*.

The film's unsettling and foreboding atmosphere is heightened by the unusually tight framing of expansive coastal spaces and the recurrent use of metaphors of violence and death that presage the killings later on. The frequently shown view from the windscreen of Corso's truck, for example, is interrupted by broken glass and by the silhouette of a plastic skeleton dangling in front of him that associates the police captain 'con una dimensión de la muerte que la cinta actualizaba más adelante'.¹⁴ The golden colours normally associated with hot places are subdued and muted, adding to an air of stifling oppression. Many of the locations depicted – the Moche ruins, the museum and the pathologist's laboratory – are used as devices for their associations with death and the ritualistic acts of ancient human sacrifice or modern post-mortem investigation. The unlikely coupling of the restrained Corso and the passionate Marina is linked with the Moche and death from the outset when their first sexual encounter takes place on the ancient sacrificial slab and then, later, on the dissection table at the hospital surrounded by body parts preserved in jars. Moreover, the claustrophobic labyrinth of the Moche ruins within which Corso briefly loses Marina echoes the cyclical, zig-zagging, never-ending structure of the narrative: there is, after all, no way to escape the inevitable destiny of death.¹⁵

Marina serves as the enigmatic object of desire for both Corso and Gino. On their first encounter, she explains to Corso that she has returned to Palle for both straightforward professional reasons and more complex private and emotional ones, but is reluctant to go into much detail. Her narrative function as pathologist allows her to identify the techniques of the first murderer as skilful imitations of the Moche rituals, and to

¹⁴ Bedoya, *Entre fauces y colmillos*, p. 144.

¹⁵ A further association is established here between the fatalistic belief systems of prehispanic civilizations and the destinies of these characters.

distinguish between them and the more obviously amateur efforts of the copycat killer. She functions also therefore as another of the film's authoritative experts (the primary example being Pinto), as a channel for rational explanation of methods of murder. This all links her quite clearly to the notion of death, but her unquestionable fascination with dead bodies goes beyond the coldness of science and into the realms of desire that is less easy to rationalize. Indeed, Marina embodies the very concept of duality and contradiction that was integral to the Moche culture by bringing together the two aspects of beauty and horror. She inspires acts of monstrosity and of passion; she is devoted to the scientific study of the corpse, yet is emotionally fearful of the sight of the blood of a living person. Her unpredictable behaviour confuses and intrigues Corso to the point of obsession, while her manipulative vulnerability suggests a complex character who disturbs the police captain's sense of self and desire for order by transgressing many of the traditional cultural boundaries that have formed the basis for his outlook on life. Her behaviour, like Pinto's, suggests a questioning of the ability of human beings to restrain from committing social taboos, and a challenge to the fixity of such binary concepts as right or wrong, freedom or responsibility. In Kristeva's terms, they refuse to 'respect borders, positions, rules ... [and instead they] disturb [the very notions of] identity, system, order' that form the basis of social stability and structure.¹⁶

Marina might then be likened to the *femme fatale* figure found in the classical *film noir*. Sexually confident and intrigued by science and death, her character might not actively engage in killing but she unwittingly provides the motive for the previously passive Corso to do so. Despite serving as the object of male desire, she moves beyond the passive position traditionally associated with female characters on screen, and asserts

¹⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 4.

control in her relationship with Corso during their initial time together, inflicting emotional pain on several occasions. Apparently disappointed by his lack of drive and passion, she ends their relationship and mocks his failure to satisfy her sexually before turning to the much more self-confident Gino. The scene when Corso observes them dancing and then making love creates the trigger for his descent from pillar of the community to brutal killer of the mayor's beloved son. For the police captain, an initial attraction quickly turns into Hitchcockian obsession, and he is unable to stop himself from wanting to possess her. In order to achieve this, he must first overcome his commitment to social convention and moral restraint, and act according to Marina's more transgressive terms, by unleashing the passion inside him. The broader suggestion here is that if the desire to achieve a certain goal is strong enough, conventional social and moral frameworks of law and order might be abandoned, and acts of aggression become justified, however regrettable. Lombardi's film asks its audience to consider the processes and motives behind acts of violence and shows that, if permissive circumstances are in place, even the most passive human being can turn monstrous. The specific message for Peruvian audiences struggling to come to terms with the violence pervading their own country, turning neighbours and state-appointed protectors into killers, is also one that is relevant on a global scale.

What, however, are we to make of the film's ambivalent ending and of its overall message about violence? By the final image, which returns us to the first, Corso seems to have accepted that the tranquillity he has found can only ever be temporary and that his future with Marina is uncertain. After all, their relationship is founded on instability, on the broken earth around the graves, and also on 'la denegación, ... la falsedad o la

no-verdad'.¹⁷ Marina has denied sleeping with Gino, while Corso has denied killing him, and yet each one knows the truth about the other. He witnessed her making love to Gino by spying on the couple through their window, and she – as case pathologist - observed and commented on the clumsy way in which the decapitation ritual on Gino had been carried out, in direct contrast to the four previous murders. The film has already made clear that Marina, Corso and Pinto are the only characters who share the secret of the precise method of killing. The contentment the police captain has finally found is linked therefore to his escape from punishment, to his denial of remorse, and his flourishing garden is fertilised by the bodies he has buried beneath the surface. His pleasure is inextricably linked to the horror of his deeds.

The film seems to pose questions on a broader level in terms of the national political and social context.¹⁸ The continued denials, seeming lack of regret and complicit silence of Marina and Corso might be interpreted metaphorically as a statement about the silence surrounding the actions of corruption and violence perpetrated by a series of political and military regimes that had acted with impunity in responding to the *Sendero* threat. Moreover, the narrative device of the search for secret graves that conceal the bodies of victims such as Gino is suggestive of those hidden mass burial places that were sought throughout the 1990s. What is more, the apparent disappearance of Pinto while in custody might be taken as an implicit reminder of the thousands of disappearances that took place during the 'dirty war'. Such war crimes were, like the murder of Gino and the disappearance of Pinto's body, 'crímenes que nunca hallaron

¹⁷ Bedoya, *Un cine reencontrado*, p. 322.

¹⁸ Bedoya in fact suggests that the film asks how something solid and enduring might be built upon denial of the obvious and such dubious behaviour. Bedoya, *Un cine reencontrado*, p. 322.

explicación ni castigo'.¹⁹ As Bedoya goes on to argue, the situation was aggravated by the fact that acts of excessive violence committed on behalf of the state 'fueron cubiertos por el "olvido legal", luego de una penosa y muy polémica ley de amnistía'.²⁰ Whereas open debate in the mass media about the ethics of the counter-subversive campaign of the previous decade and subsequent actions after Guzmán's capture was stifled by Fujimori's administration, national cinema was left, more or less, to its own devices.²¹ Lack of funding was regrettable but did at least mean that government interference regarding content was minimal and not linked to any approval scheme for screening.

Without the political interference that might have accompanied state support, Lombardi in particular – protected by his international reputation and as the beneficiary of co-production finance from Europe – was in a position to provoke debate, albeit tentatively, about issues of deep national concern, while masking them in a dramatic tale about violent crime and ancient culture that could appeal more broadly. Although *Bajo la piel* challenges the dominant discourse to a certain extent by bringing certain aspects of the state-*Sendero* conflict to the surface of public attention, its central focus on the inevitability of violence as an immutable feature of Peruvian national identity is more troubling, and even less hopefully than the ambivalent ending of *La boca del lobo* released eight years before. In line with stereotypes created and sustained by both the

¹⁹ Bedoya, *Entre fauces y colmillos*, pp. 149-150.

²⁰ Bedoya, *Entre fauces y colmillos*, p. 150. This 'amnesty' for war criminals was challenged in 2003 by the publication of the report from the *Comisión de la Verdad y de la Reconciliación* which revealed that half of those killed during the conflict against *Sendero* were the victims of military violence.

²¹ Note that by 1996, the Cinema Law of 1972 had been defunct for four years and although the new one had been introduced in late 1994, the administration of funds was slow. *Bajo la piel* was the only Peruvian film to be released in 1996 and did so with very little state support.

nation's elite and many Europeans for reasons of political, cultural and social authority, it offers a picture of a nation that should not expect change but that should learn to tolerate the existing structures and to operate creatively, even subversively, within its limited parameters. It seems to indicate, moreover, that Lombardi's own views about the possibility for change had become more pessimistic and cynical, worn down by the ongoing social chaos, ideological oppression and economic struggles for national cinema and the nation more generally.²²

Section 5: Concluding Thoughts

Depiction of the Moche civilization is clearly crucial to this aspect of the thematic development of *Bajo la piel*. Some of the core features of Moche philosophy are embedded into its narrative, and reinforce, as we have seen, the principles of 'duality, complementarity, reciprocity and cyclicity'.²³ It should be noted, however, that, for the sake of this particular narrative, the Moche culture is selectively imagined and represented as aggressive, hierarchical and obsessed with rituals of sexuality and death; important Moche achievements in the fields of engineering, agriculture and government are disregarded here. Indeed, the use of an ancient prehispanic culture to suggest the predestined, inescapable nature of violence in contemporary Peru serves to perpetuate the idea of a Peruvian nation as somehow inherently and immutably violent. It draws attention to an official history of the nation, collectively imagined and remembered as being marked exclusively by violent struggles and brutal cultures. As such, the

²² Note that after the release of *Bajo la piel*, there would be no further national productions until the second half of 1998, due mainly to the delays in establishing the funding competitions that formed the focus of the new cinema legislation mentioned above.

²³ Rebecca Stone-Miller, *Art of the Andes: from Chavín to Inca* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995), p. 111.

centrality of the Moche culture to an understanding of the film's themes further feeds the myth of the Peruvian nation as endemically violent, and *Bajo la piel* offers a provocative statement on the inextricable relationship between violence and the formation of identity in Peru.

Space and place are as important here as they are to an understanding of Lombardi's work more generally, and some thoughts on this aspect should help to develop further the point about formation of national identity. The considerable involvement of the Spanish co-producer should also be taken into account. On the one hand, the choice of a provincial coastal location for *Bajo la piel* suggests a deliberate move to explore and draw attention to the diversity of Peruvian culture and identity outside the dominant capital. What is more, it provides an opportunity to give critical expression to the uneven, single-minded relationship of authority between the centre and the provinces, as highlighted by Corso's frustration at being denied access to the networks of power in Lima. It also emphasizes his resentment towards the Public Prosecutor who is sent by the state to review the anomalies of the murder investigation. While the outcome of this encounter, humiliating for the Prosecutor, might be mildly suggestive of a resistance to central state pressure and an unwillingness on Corso's part simply to accept an intolerable situation, it goes no further and instead turns back on itself. The provincial community remains fragmented and hierarchical, itself imitating and perpetuating the structures of the centre, and Corso gains pleasure from enacting resistance privately while seeming to continue to comply with the framework of law and order.

Such a downbeat vision of the nation is reinforced and extended by the tense interaction between space and culture. The imagined town of Palle becomes the location for a set of ritualistic struggles that appear to follow a pattern of violence that is predetermined by

its ancient Moche heritage. The violence, imitating that of the *Dios Degollador* – the very personification of death – is depicted as endemic and uncontrollable, ‘como la reactualización de viejos instintos, casi nacionales o genotípicos, asociados con el mundo primitivo’, rather than as a specific response to a specific set of circumstances.²⁴ Moreover, Pinto, the film’s so-called expert killer and its own icon of death, refers during his first exchange with Corso to the violence of *Sendero* as simply the latest demonstration of a national propensity for brutality, and as such, ‘una versión más de antiguas prácticas autoritarias que continúan reproduciéndose en el Perú contemporáneo y que son muestras del “colonialismo interno” en el que todavía seguimos viviendo’.²⁵ The film thus closes down the opportunity for debate about the particular economic, political and social developments that led to the emergence of particular episodes of violence and which – if recognised honestly and dealt with imaginatively – might result in renewed hope and fresh beginnings, if not actual solutions. Instead it offers a portrayal of violence that emphasises repetition, imitation and inexorable cyclicity.²⁶ As such, it risks falling into the trap of essentialist stereotyping of the Peruvian ‘other’ that satisfies the desires of the Spanish (colonial) producer and spectator. It also threatens to perpetuate a self-image of Peru that results at least in part from an internal colonialism controlled by the nation’s social and economic elite that refutes the possibility of social change so as to ensure the continuation of dominant hegemonic structures.

²⁴ Vich, p. 69.

²⁵ Vich, p. 29.

²⁶ Here a link could be made to the capture of *Sendero* leader Abimael Guzmán in 1992 which, it was hoped, would put an end to political conflict in Peru and unite the nation in victory. In fact, while the main *Sendero* threat was undoubtedly overcome, the underlying issues were not resolved and violent crime in many forms continue to rage in

The positive result of the pragmatism of co-production was that the film won awards and audience acclaim at festivals around the world, giving a high profile to a national culture, cinema and film-maker that otherwise risked marginalization. On the other hand, almost inevitably, the co-production arrangement turned out to favour the European partner. The crew was mainly Spanish and German, the female star was Spanish, and the film was released across Spain before it was screened in Peru. Moreover, the film could be viewed as a cynical response to the financial priorities of the co-production deal that exposes a tendency to commodify and to fetishize an unfamiliar nation to suit western tastes and to retain colonialist hierarchies. For this film, the Moche culture is packaged in an exotic way so as to whet the appetite of a mainly European audience. By contriving an allegorical connection between prehispanic culture and contemporary Peru, the film ultimately serves to perpetuate and reinforce the myth of a Peruvian nation that is primordially and inescapably violent, with an official history, collectively imagined and selectively remembered as one that is marked primarily by brutal cultural practices, events and peoples.

part due to centuries of bitter resentment and frustration resulting from social exclusion, poverty and injustice. See Crabtree, *Peru under García*, 184-5.