

Chapter Four

***La boca del lobo* (Francisco Lombardi 1988): Conflicting identities and national crisis**

Section 1: Introduction

As noted in Chapter Three, the politically-motivated conflict between *Sendero Luminoso* and the Peruvian state resulted in close to 70,000 victims – dead or ‘disappeared’ - at a time when the country was also in the throes of socio-political and economic collapse. Peru’s film-makers avoided tackling this potentially fertile but sensitive topic of political violence during most of the 1980s, perhaps mindful of the anti-terrorism legislation restricting public debate that might be perceived as arousing sympathy for the *Sendero* cause.¹ They may also have been affected by a desire to put a minimum degree of distance between past and present – between real events and their cultural representation – perhaps to give time for reflection as well as to establish the individual and collective mechanisms required to cope with such trauma.² Nevertheless, in 1988, the release of Francisco Lombardi’s *La boca del lobo* brought the continuing violence that threatened at that time to engulf the entire nation to cinema screens in the form of a national fiction feature film that enjoyed critical acclaim and a warm reception from domestic and international audiences. This ground-breaking cinematic work explores the emotions and actions of soldiers sent from Lima to fight the insurgents. It draws critical attention to their encounters with the Andean inhabitants they have come to defend, as well as to the varied responses to the violence they are forced to confront. Indeed, it was the first national film to deal with ‘uno de los problemas más graves que

¹ The anti-terrorism legislation, introduced in 1981 and enhanced twice in 1987, made it much easier for the government to imprison anyone suspected of promoting a point of view that was deemed to be sympathetic towards the *Sendero* cause.

² Elizabeth Jelin, *State Repression and the Struggle for Memory* (London: Latin America Bureau, 2003), p. xvii.

afronta el Perú hoy en día'.³ Despite sparking much controversy, it was an enormous success both domestically and internationally, and provided a benchmark for those national directors who thereafter chose to offer their own cinematic responses to the worst political conflict and social crisis to affect the nation in decades.

This analysis unravels the approach of Lombardi's film to the representation of physical and psychological conflict, addressing the ways in which it explores the complex relationship between violence and national identity in Peru, including the interconnections between masculinity and institutional violence. In common with his earlier films, *La boca* explores the various effects of fear, claustrophobia and confinement on the collective and individual human psyche, and these perennial themes will be discussed with regard to the way they impact upon and interweave with the film's more topical concerns.⁴ It is likewise important to note that this was the first (and, to date, only) film made by Lombardi to be located in the Andes. Hence, it is useful to consider how the director utilises the rural landscape to emphasise the gradual subordination of a group of soldiers whose only experience is of an urban way of life and who assume a certain cultural superiority on their arrival in the village they are sent to defend. As such, the analysis looks at the implied dominance of Lima in terms of

³ Guillermo de Guzmán, 'La boca del lobo: máximo galardón en el festival de La Habana', *Lundero*, 18 December 1988, p.8.

⁴ Lombardi's earlier films all portrayed acts of violent crime and provoked debate about issues of identity and violence. They explored the socio-political and psychological motivations for such actions, and considered varying responses to them. These films are: *Muerte al amanecer* (1977) about the last hours of a violent criminal condemned to death by firing squad; *Los amigos* (1978) about the reunion of four childhood friends who become violent when one finds out that another is homosexual; *Muerte de un magnate* (1980), a fictional reconstruction of the 1972 assassination of a fraudulent businessman; *Maruja en el infierno* (1983), about a young woman who dreams of escaping the violence and squalor of her life in Lima; and *La ciudad y los perros* (1985), an adaptation of Mario Vargas Llosa's novel about the harshness of life in a military training camp. See Bedoya, *Un cine reencontrado*, pp. 218-220, 232-235, 250-253, 257-261.

defining and framing the image of the nation, and the subordinate position of the Andean region within that image. Finally, it looks at the manner in which the film highlights various aspects of difference between the soldiers and the villagers, and considers these factors as at least part of the motivation for much of the violence portrayed.⁵

Section 2: Context

By the time that *La boca del lobo* was released in 1988, the García regime had launched a disastrous economic “shock” programme that caused misery for Peruvians everywhere, and ‘guerrilla violence was escalating throughout the country and the capital’.⁶ Pressure was mounting on the government to eradicate the *Sendero* ‘enemy’, but the President was aware of fierce international opposition to the use of excessive military force directed against what the dominant Spanish newspaper *El País* referred to as ‘las clases y culturas dominadas’.⁷ In particular, the public outcry after the prison massacres of 1986 threatened to undermine government plans to crack down more harshly on the insurgent group. Lombardi himself was undoubtedly aware that any film

⁵ Each of the films mentioned in the last footnote is set in Lima. Between 1988 (the year that saw the making of *La boca del lobo*) and 2004, Lombardi made seven films, of which only two are located outside the capital, Lima. *Bajo la piel* (1996) is set in a fictional town in the northern coastal region of Peru, while *Pantaleón y las visitadoras* (1998), another adaptation from the work of Vargas Llosa, was set in the Amazon jungle. Both focus on the response of their young male protagonists to violence around them, and continue Lombardi’s exploration of the relationship between violence and national identity. Both also utilise the nature of the respective landscapes in illustrating and emphasizing the underlying tension and oppression felt by each main character.

⁶ Skidmore and Smith, ‘Peru: Soldiers, Oligarchs and Indians’, p. 216.

⁷ See Peralta Ruiz, p. 145. Headlines that appeared at about the same time as the film’s release in the influential US newspaper *The New York Times* included, for example: “Peru urged to curb abuses in fighting rebels”, 20 December 1987; “Peru’s disappearing democracy”, 29 December 1988; and “Peruvian guerrillas emerge as an urban political force”, 17 July 1988. See Peralta Ruiz, pp.159-163.

that dared to tackle the *Sendero* conflict without conveying unquestionable support for the military, and hence the state, would risk falling foul of the 1981 anti-terrorism legislation, and would attract criticism from those more interested in promoting sympathy for an increasingly harsh counter-insurgency strategy. On the other hand, those concerned about violations on the part of any government, elected or otherwise, were bound to be frustrated by a film that seemed to offer an explanation for such abuses, and which thanked the armed forces for their co-operation in the closing credits.⁸ The impression that Lombardi was worried about such a reaction is confirmed by the relatively high number of interviews he gave around the time of the release of *La boca* in late 1988 in which he set out to articulate his intentions and defend his position. The Lima-based current affairs magazine *Debate* published perhaps the most extensive statement given by Lombardi just before the film was released commercially on domestic screens, after a tense period of negotiation with *Coproci* – the state institution that administered national cinema activity between 1972 and 1992. In this statement, Lombardi begins by revealing that he wanted to ‘reflexionar y hacer reflexionar sobre el problema de la violencia que sufre nuestro país en los últimos años’.⁹ He was, he stressed, eager to prompt discussion on the methods used by all sides in the violent struggle, and to force all Peruvians, especially those living in Lima, to reflect upon what was happening to their country and to their fellow citizens. He continues thus:

La violencia es cada día más cerca de todos nosotros y creo que nos estamos acostumbrando a asimilarla cada vez con mayor naturalidad. ... la película

⁸ In Cuba, for example, where guerrilla-like civil war is also an important part of the nation’s history and collective memory, the film was criticised by some for offering a vision of the battle between military and insurgents that was perhaps too sympathetic towards the former, despite the portrayal of abuses committed by both sides. See, for example, the interview with Lombardi recorded on his arrival back in Lima after the festival screening of *La boca* in Havana in *La República*, 19 December 1988, p.9.

⁹ Lombardi cited by Bedoya, *Un cine reencontrado*, p. 179.

trata de decir: esa violencia de la cual usted quiere mantenerse cómodamente a distancia, es en realidad esto: así de brutal y terrible. Y las personas que viven esta situación son de carne y hueso, tan reales como usted o como yo. Es decir, hacer partícipe vívidamente a la gente de las ciudades de lo que en verdad es la actual violencia en esos pequeños pueblos de la sierra que generalmente ignoramos.¹⁰

And yet, despite such claims of even-handed intentions, there was concern on the part of *Coproci* representatives that the film might be dangerously effective as pro-*Sendero* propaganda due to its apparently critical portrayal of the actions of its military characters as they defend newly-liberated territory from insurgents. Since censorship did not officially exist in Peru there were no overt attempts to ban the film, but for the first time in its history, *Coproci* invited specialist groups, including military representatives, to view it and comment upon it in advance. In fact, as confirmed by one commentator at the time, the film could have been banned for up to ten years for ‘defying the state of emergency’ established by the government during the conflict with *Sendero*.¹¹ The Peruvian authorities were particularly concerned that the release of the film would coincide with a groundswell of resistance to the state’s harsh counter-insurgency campaign, as well as with a deepening economic crisis that dealt a further blow to public confidence in political leaders. It was the first time that a national film had dared to show members of the armed forces, here acting as representatives of the state, in pursuit of and killing apparently innocent civilians.¹² There were protests that it

¹⁰ Lombardi cited by Bedoya, *Entre fauces y colmillos: las películas de Francisco Lombardi* (Huesca: Festival de Cine de Huesca, 1997a), p.180.

¹¹ Mariella Balbi, ‘Entrevista con Francisco Lombardi’, *La República*, 27 November 1988, p. 8.

¹² Lombardi points out in the same interview that one politician even claimed at the time that the film presented a danger to state security, and suggested that national cinema should wait at least fifteen years before tackling such a sensitive topic. This chimes with Jelin’s view that since political authorities are ‘concerned primarily with the stability of democratic institutions’, they will thus prefer the policies of oblivion, or at least deferral. See Jelin, p. xvii.

offered criticism of the armed forces at a time when national unity and belief in the power of the state to defeat the enemy was crucial, especially as the rebels seemed stronger than ever and attacks had begun on Lima-based targets, including government posts.¹³ Furthermore, the authorities would have been aware from press reports that they risked losing the faith of the public in the efficacy of their efforts to combat *Sendero*. As Peralta explains in his study of press reporting on the conflict from the end of 1986 until the early 1990s ‘progresivamente el discurso fue derivando hacia la posibilidad de que este grupo tomara el poder’.¹⁴

Nevertheless, although military chiefs were undoubtedly uncomfortable with what they saw depicted in *La boca del lobo*, they were at the same time reluctant to prevent the screening of this latest work by the nation’s most famous director at a time when the battle for public support was critical, and when yet another restriction might have proved counter-productive. Furthermore, it was the first of Lombardi’s films to be co-produced and financed by a Spanish partner, *Televisión Española (TVE)*, in an arrangement that guaranteed that the production would attract considerable attention and subsequent press speculation, both domestically and internationally. The film was finally approved for release but only with a classification equivalent to the UK ‘18’ certificate which in Peru is usually reserved only for pornographic works. This angered Lombardi, who was keen for his film to be seen by the widest possible audience, especially by young people whom he felt should be at the centre of any debate on

¹³ Mauceri, pp. 116-7.

¹⁴ See Peralta Ruiz, p. 131. Note that in May 1988, a military patrol based in Ayacucho had executed twenty-eight peasants whom they accused of collaborating with *Sendero*. According to Peralta, this new massacre ‘reabrió en la prensa los debates sobre el recrudecimiento de la “guerra sucia”, así como la incapacidad de García para controlar los excesos cometidos por los militares y los policías’. See Peralta Ruiz, p. 136.

national violence, identity and collective responsibility.¹⁵ In the end, the film was one of his most successful in terms of ongoing critical acclaim, and is considered by many to be the highlight of a remarkably consistent career.¹⁶

Section 3: Synopsis

The film opens with a prologue sequence that follows a young shepherdess as she leads her animals through a desolated village square laden with signs of death and destruction. The text that precedes (in Spanish) and subsequently overlays (as English subtitles) these poignant images establishes the very specific time and place of the action as being early 1983, at the beginning of the ‘dirty war’ between the military and insurgents in a remote village in the Peruvian sierra.¹⁷ The narrative then begins by positioning the audience so as to follow the drama from the point of view of its young military protagonist Vitín Luna (Toño Vega). It thus privileges his voice-over and his

¹⁵ De Guzmán, p. 8.

¹⁶ The film, which was shown at festivals around the world, won many awards both for the quality of its production as well as its impact on human rights. It is still screened at events today. Indeed, in Cannes 2005, it was one of four films selected for the special section devoted to Peruvian cinema as part of that festival’s *Cinéma du Monde* strand. Further, it should be noted that the success of this film came at a time when national cinema was on the verge of possibly its worst crisis. Lombardi was applauded and rewarded for his tenacity and achievement in the face of a continued lack of formal infrastructure for national cinema, as well as for the general high quality and social commitment of the film. Even so, despite the record number of spectators, the film did not recoup any more than 50% of its costs because the ticket revenue had decreased in value at least fourfold due to hyperinflation which peaked at 2000% in 1988. Nevertheless, the critical acclaim ensured that Lombardi remained attractive to international investors during most of the 1990s, one the few Peruvian directors to enjoy such a position of independence from state finance and interference. See Isaac León Frías, *The Guardian International Film Guide 2005*, pp. 234-5.

¹⁷ This text in itself, although apparently objective and focusing mainly on the background of the *Sendero* campaign prior to 1983, angered some critics for drawing attention to the notion of a ‘dirty war’ that implied a certain lack of regard for human rights, and for informing audiences that the main victims of that battle for control of Peru’s central sierra were villagers of the Andes. As a final appeal to authenticity, the text ends by asserting that: ‘Esta película se inspira en hechos que se sucedieron entre 1980 y 1983’.

gaze out onto the unfamiliar terrain to which he has been sent, and highlights its difference and subordinated status from the outset. Luna is presented at first as an idealistic cadet who is keen to advance his military career. Inspired by the apparently glorious career and reputation of an esteemed uncle, a high-ranking and decorated military officer, he has requested a transfer which has led to his arrival in the fictional Andean village of Chuspi. The surrounding area has been officially declared a newly 'liberated' zone following successful military intervention, but the newly-formed regiment soon discover that the threat of *Sendero* remains and that the villagers are far from delighted by this fresh intrusion.

Luna and his comrades have evidently arrived in a dangerous place, but although they are advised by their superiors to remain on the lookout for signs of insurgent attack, they fail at first to take the warning seriously due in part to the invisibility of the supposed enemy. The newly-formed and largely inexperienced regiment is under the command of Lieutenant Basulto (Antero Sánchez) who believes they must confront the enemy with aggression but at the same time retain their integrity and humanity. His democratic leadership style upsets and confuses some of the younger men who had expected a more decisive approach. Shortly after arriving, however, Basulto is brutally murdered and his body is mutilated by *Sendero* rebels, while delivering a villager suspected of terrorism to the nearest town. Basulto is replaced by Lieutenant Roca (Gustavo Bueno), a more authoritarian leader who insists on absolute discipline and obedience from all his men, whatever their private feelings or views. Roca redefines the regiment's response to the terrorist threat, invoking the primitive hostility of the soldiers towards an unknown enemy, which results in a widening of the cultural gap between

them and the villagers by drawing on racist sentiment borne out of ignorance, frustration and fear.¹⁸

The rape of a local woman by one of the younger soldiers, and the chaos created by an unofficial raid on a wedding party, provoke an intensely frustrated Roca to order a massacre of civilians in what appears to be a last-ditch attempt to reassert his authority and to restore some sense of order and dominance. Luna is both disgusted and disappointed by this officer's brutal conduct and refuses to shoot the villagers. He is taken prisoner, and then challenges the sneering Roca to a life-or-death game of Russian roulette. Luna feels he has nothing left to lose and deliberately forces the lieutenant to relive a similar moment from his past, the traumatic memory of which he has struggled to repress and had earlier revealed to the younger man. In the end neither soldier is killed, but the experience changes their relationship irrevocably. In the final scene, Luna abandons his post and disappears into the mountains, watched by the shepherdess from the prologue sequence.

Section 4: Analysis

Having viewed and discussed the film before making a decision about its commercial release, the military finally insisted only upon a slight modification to the text that is placed over the images of the prologue sequence. Hence, Lombardi was forced to remove his preferred opening title, 'Masacre en Soccas', which referred explicitly to the

¹⁸ Soon after his arrival, Roca puts his men through their paces by making them run through the mountains, transgressing the terrain that has thus far been the domain of the 'enemy'. They chant the following war cry in unison, thus igniting the passion of hatred Roca feels is lacking and which is required if they are to stand any chance of physical and psychological domination of *Sendero*: 'Terruquitos, terruquitos; ya llegamos, ya llegamos; a barrerlos, a joderlos; de sus tripas saco cebo; se las doy, a mi perro.' Later, while beating the villagers during interrogation, Roca refers to them as 'fucking Indians' and 'trash'.

real attack by the military on the Andean village of Soccos in 1983, during which about forty people – mostly innocent civilians, including women and children – were executed, without trial, on apparent suspicion of collaboration with the ‘enemy’. The rest of the text remains unchanged, informing its audience that the drama is set in 1983, by which time the central Andean region of the nation had already suffered three years of violent repression. The text is fairly lengthy, mindful no doubt of the need to inform its audience in a balanced way of the key details of a complex conflict. It relates the main developments that led to the beginning of the so-called ‘dirty war’ when the military became actively involved in putting an end to the groundswell of insurgency that at first was largely dismissed by Belaúnde’s regime as the mindless acts of delinquents. As well as implicitly referring to the failure of the state to protect its citizens, the text explicitly points out that ‘ataques terroristas a comunidades campesinas y puestos policiales ... se convierten en cosa de todos los días’, thus confirming the film’s central message that *Sendero* was the main perpetrator at this stage.

However benign it might appear, by agreeing to remove those three words that refer specifically to the real tragedy suffered by the village of Soccos, Lombardi conferred upon his film a broader metaphorical dimension that is suggestive of the brutality faced by many such communities located in remote rural areas of Peru. Rather than simply reconstruct the specific events leading up to one act of slaughter and its consequences, the film instead confronts the general terrorist phenomenon of *Sendero Luminoso*. It draws attention to ‘la represión del mismo por parte de las fuerzas del orden’ who were under intense pressure to bring the escalating violence across the central sierra to a swift end.¹⁹ In the event, it seems that such pressure led to what Manrique describes as a

¹⁹ De Guzmán, p. 8.

‘merciless campaign of repression’.²⁰ This was characterised by a desire to ‘isolate Shining Path by demonstrating that the army could exert even greater terror than the guerrillas’, thus drawing on North American doctrines of counter-insurgency that were readily absorbed by key Peruvian military personnel during training.²¹ As a result, more inhabitants of the sierra were killed by both sides during 1983 and 1984 than at any other stage of the conflict as the military’s strategy was based on an indiscriminate use of terror that for a while was difficult to distinguish from *Sendero* tactics.²²

Although *La Boca*, Lombardi’s sixth feature, is intended as a fictional account, it does refer implicitly to a specific historical episode (the slaughter at Soccos) and states explicitly that it is based on what he considered to be ‘true’ events in the conflict (that is, the abuse and indiscriminate killing of innocent villagers by military forces as part of a semi-official counter-insurgency strategy), which prevents audiences from dismissing out of hand the brutal scenes depicted as mere products of the director’s imagination or political bias. The film therefore confronts spectators with the disturbing possibility that the state and its armed forces might find it necessary to attack its own citizens. It thus refuses to let them ignore, or wilfully forget, the possible violations committed by the military, on behalf of the state, in their determination to overcome the terrorist threat.²³ Since the film’s release, extensive research conducted throughout the 1990s has

²⁰ Manrique, ‘The War for the Central Sierra’, p. 193.

²¹ Manrique, p. 193.

²² This conclusion is based on Manrique’s study of statistics relating to deaths of and attacks on Andean villages between 1980 until 1991, and analysis of the different strategies deployed by both *Sendero* and military. See Manrique, pp. 193-223.

²³ This concept of ‘wilful forgetting’ is taken from Susan Hayward’s account of national cinemas and draws on Anthony Smith’s assertion that ‘the importance of national amnesia and getting one’s own history *wrong* (is essential) for the maintenance of national solidarity’. See Hayward, *Cinema and Nation*, p. 90.

confirmed that ‘the lack of direct civilian control or formal oversight mechanisms ... produced massive human rights violations’.²⁴

The release of *La boca* coincided with a renewed period of repression and violation, including disappearances of suspected *senderistas* and apparently indiscriminate executions of *comuneros*.²⁵ The general approach and sympathies of the film also chime with what Hortensia Muñoz describes as a ‘turning point in sensibilities’ regarding such occurrences.²⁶ She suggests that the testimonies of survivors revealed the perverse and impossible situation within which the villagers were placed, caught in the crossfire between army and *Sendero* demands. Indeed, the community portrayed in *La boca* had clearly already suffered at the brutal hands of the insurgents, as highlighted by images of bodies and graffiti shown in the prologue sequence as well as by the fear of those villagers who survived. The subsequent narrative depiction of rape and slaughter of villagers by the soldiers sent to defend them thus emphasises the director’s own desire to express particular concern with officially-sanctioned acts of violence. Such actions also occurred within the police and military forces to such an extent that Crabtree has described them as ‘corrupt, poorly trained, and prone to undisciplined, arbitrary and abusive behaviour’.²⁷ Moreover, national critics such as Bedoya acknowledge that the film should be interpreted at least in part as a ‘denunciation of the policies adopted by

²⁴ Mauceri, p. 137.

²⁵ Muñoz reports that between 1987 and 1992, ‘the number of disappeared persons increased from 125 in 1987 to 410 in 1989, and then declined to 230 in 1992’, and that in 1992, ‘the Human Rights Sub-Commission of the United Nations noted Peru as the country with the most disappearances of that year’. See Muñoz, p. 467.

²⁶ Muñoz, p. 459.

²⁷ Crabtree, *Peru under García*, p. 104.

the government and an indictment of the inhumanity that resulted from the “dirty war” between *Sendero Luminoso* and the Peruvian Army’.²⁸

However, the tension between the topical and the perennial, the thematic and the dramatic aspects of the film, confused and disappointed some critics who expected the film to deal more directly and explicitly with specific contemporary events. For example, film-maker and commentator José Carlos Huayhuaca observed that:

...on one hand (the ‘thematic’), everything seems to be centred around the historical focus made up by the slaughter of the civilian population of Soccos, and, on the other hand (the ‘dramatic’), the centre gradually moves towards the relationship between the two main characters whose end is the sequence of the duel playing the Russian roulette game – through which the importance of such an event (the slaughter of some innocent people as part of the dynamic of the ‘dirty war’) becomes relative and the real topic of the film is finally the old motive pursued by Lombardi since his first films: the turn from a friendship based on admiration (of masculine values) to a breakdown when these are revealed as false and deceptive.²⁹

Nevertheless, there were many who applauded the interweaving of specific socio-political references with broader concerns and who considered this combination to be the real strength of the film. Spanish critic Fernández Santos, for example, suggests that the specific cultural and political dimension of the film gives it its dramatic appeal:

Allí se cuece la intensidad de este filme, que no innova nada, pero que expone con buen sentido polémico sucesos terribles, que otorgan a la ficción cualidades documentales innegables y ciertamente terribles.³⁰

Meanwhile, in a similar vein, Chilean critics Cavallo and Martínez stated that, for them, the specific historical context by which the film’s diegesis is framed contributes to its

²⁸ Ricardo Bedoya, ‘*La boca del lobo/The lion’s den*’, in *The Cinema of Latin America*, ed. by Alberto Elena and Marina Díaz López (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), pp. 185-192 (p. 185).

²⁹ José Carlos Huayhuaca cited by Bedoya, ‘*La boca del lobo/The lion’s den*’, p. 189.

³⁰ Fernández Santos cited by Bedoya, *Un cine reencontrado*, p. 278.

sense of 'trágica universalidad', and argue that while without reference to the *Sendero* conflict the film would have been admirable, 'con ella, se torna excepcional'.³¹ Without doubt, the approach to representation of conflict and its relationship with issues of masculine and national identity seem to have provoked as much debate amongst critics as among politicians and military officials. It is pertinent therefore to take a closer look at some of the main features that continue to give rise to such discussion.

The Peruvian state is represented in microcosm within the film by the small detachment of soldiers. Such an implicit yet strongly felt connection suggests a desire on the part of the director to emphasise the perceived continuing dominance of the military within the democratically elected regime of Belaúnde, and perhaps also, though less overtly, of García. In doing so, he also highlights the dominance of a patriarchal structure and a certain type of macho masculine identity that dominates many images of the Peruvian nation. The detachment that is depicted has been sent out from Lima (the centre) to one of the most remote parts of the Andean sierra (the periphery), where the soldiers arrogantly expect to assume control with ease, an attitude that is suggestive of the dominance of the capital in perceptions of the nation-state and as the centre of law and order. The influence of the state is further reinforced by intermittent radio conversations conducted by officers with the nearest base, which consist mainly of orders from outside on how to behave. The chain of command is thus clearly established as one that is directed from the nation's symbolic centre, albeit one that remains visually absent.

Despite donning masks of bravado, it is made clear that the soldiers are alarmed to find themselves defending such unfamiliar terrain, with its apparently hostile inhabitants.

³¹ Cavallo and Martínez cited by Bedoya, *Un cine reencontrado*, p. 279.

Exchanges between the men reveal that the village is supposed to have been ‘liberated’ and cleared of terrorists, but the threat of *Sendero* is present in every scene. Cinematically, this impression is conveyed by the sombre musical composition that underscores the atmosphere of tension, by the tight composition of each frame that gradually acts to lock its characters in, and by focus within the *mise-en-scène* on evidence of the aftermath of terrorist intrusion. The identity of *Sendero* attackers remains a mystery, and the level of collaboration with the insurgents by the villagers remains unclear.³² *Sendero*, as actor Gustavo Bueno, who plays Roca, has attested, ‘está presente en la película pero como un fantasma, algo que nos aterroriza y mata’.³³ Meanwhile, all radio requests for additional supplies and backup, or even to abandon post, are denied, and the regiment is largely abandoned in a quest that becomes one of survival. The men are shown shivering in the cold as they guard the garrison by night, and maintaining morale by dancing, drinking and recalling more comfortable times in Lima. In this way, the film carefully guides audiences to an appreciation of the extreme situation faced by the soldiers, several of whom are fresh out of basic military training.

Nevertheless, while invoking sympathy for the regiment, the film is equally careful to provoke debate about the soldiers’ varied responses to the fear they face and the paranoia they feel. For example, the eagerness of the young recruits to submit the first suspected terrorist they catch to torture is rebuked by Basulto, who represents a humane

³² Although one *Sendero* suspect is captured, questioned and taken away for interrogation, his identity and status within the village remains unclear, and no further *Sendero* individual is shown. This would appear to add further credence to the view that the film asks us to focus more on the soldiers and their behaviour. Moreover, as Crabtree points out, ‘*Sendero* proved impossible to penetrate and infiltrate ... in great measure due to [its] tight clandestine organization, but [also by] the lack of confidence of local peasant authorities in the military authorities’. See Crabtree, *Peru under García*, p. 106.

³³ De Guzmán, p. 12.

approach to law and order that is portrayed as commendable yet ineffective in this context and which ultimately leads to his own death. They openly condemn his apparent weakness and indecision, failing to understand that Basulto stopped the questioning because the suspect seemed not to understand Spanish. Subsequent scenes reveal ongoing military abuse of villagers, including rape, robbery and racist verbal insults, but they also suggest that the men who perpetrate such brutal acts are in some ways themselves the victims of neglect by the military authorities who have abandoned them. It seems we are invited to reflect upon the intense frustration felt by each of the men when confronted by an enemy that refuses to reveal itself and whose actions seem to carry no logical explanation that would enable them to pursue a considered line of attack. Basulto's killing may be the pivotal act of apparently unjustified violence that triggers a determination to take revenge and that lays the groundwork for an initial acceptance of Roca's less humane attitude by the men. However, it also seems reasonable to suggest that the men have been pushed to the very edge of destruction (of self if not of threatening 'other') by the fear that is intensified by abandonment. Moreover, the film asks us also to consider the line of thought proposed by Freud that 'the inclination to aggression is an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition in man, and ... that it constitutes the greatest impediment to civilization'.³⁴

³⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization, Society and Religion: Group Psychology, Civilization and its Discontents and Other Works*, 12 (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 313. Freud proposes that aggression in so-called civilized society is restrained by external authority (such as parents, school, church, institutions of law and order) and by an internal authority that is associated with the development of a sense of moral conscience and guilt. Both these aspects of authority are stripped away in the case of these soldiers, under attack and abandoned by the state, and both are replaced by the new "father figure" of Roca who does all he can to reignite the repressed aggressive instinct of his men. Freud further points the blame at a failure to establish, or to prevent the collapse of, emotional ties between different sectors of society, suggesting that the strengthening of such ties and the encouragement of shared interests might help to prevent war by replacing one instinct with another (pp. 251-362). This is also echoed in the complete lack of cultural and social bonds between villagers and soldiers in *La boca*.

While the action remains hermetic, and the principal actors few, it might be considered that the whole war against *Sendero* and its impact on the national image is presented here in microcosm. On a broad level, the depiction for example of internal conflict of opinion regarding how to respond to the insurgency is suggestive of the lack of political and military consensus throughout much of the 1980s, which in turn ‘reflected deep conflicts among differing state elites over the role of the state in society and even the nature of Peruvian society itself’.³⁵ However, the film’s dramatic approach focuses as much on complex character development as on the authenticity of the socio-political context, and the set of conflicts that develop within and between the male characters is arguably one of the film’s main points of interest. Indeed, the film might be considered on its broadest level as a close study of ‘un grupo humano en una tierra desconocida, sembrada de peligros, y en una época riesgosa’.³⁶ Many of the film’s most intense scenes set out to demonstrate the fragile emotional and psychological state of its protagonists, locked in a situation ‘exacerbated by fear, loneliness, cultural difference and the irrational threat of an invisible enemy’.³⁷ Much of the controversy regarding portrayal of the military may stem from the number of different character types representing different attitudes towards conflict and violence within the military itself, as well as throughout the nation at large.

Lieutenant Roca, for example, is the flawed father-figure, a charismatic but fanatical leader of men. He is a ruthless, authoritarian, and morally questionable leader, whose actions draw attention to the less humane approach taken by the military towards the

³⁵ Mauceri, p. 136.

³⁶ Bedoya, *Entre fauces y colmillos*, p. 85.

³⁷ Bedoya, ‘*La boca del lobo/The lion’s den*’, p. 186.

enemy and to those innocents caught in the crossfire. Alberto Flores Galindo, in his study of the development of violence in Peru, described how several senior military officers were openly prepared to deploy any means necessary to defeat subversion, even if that led to high death rates of innocent people. He cites a spokesman of the more conservative faction of the armed forces who revealed that, in their view, any human collateral damage was unfortunate but sometimes inevitable. This spokesman suggested controversially that ‘si para eliminar tres senderistas es preciso matar sesenta personas, no hay que tener ningún reparo’.³⁸ Roca’s status as official state representative is further reinforced by images of him saluting the national flag and leading the national anthem, seen framed by a long shot remote from the crowd and almost engulfed by the church building that itself forms an oppressive centrepiece to the village. It should be noted, however, that his position with regard to the nation-state is complicated by his confession to Luna that he was demoted for unjustified violence against a comrade during a previous mission and had requested a transfer to Chuspi so as to prove his worth. Thus, instead of acting as an honourable upholder of state values and defence, it seems that he set himself a more individualistic goal that leads to his total isolation. It could also be suggested that Roca’s seniors, aware of his excessively violent instinct, decided to deploy him as their killing machine with the single aim of enforcing their brutal policy of counter-subversion.

Luna’s so-called “best friend”, Quique Gallardo (José Tejado), is portrayed as similar in temperament and purpose. He too has a history of bad conduct in the army, lacks discipline, and constantly seeks Luna’s approval. His ignorant, racist attitude towards

³⁸ Flores Galindo, p. 174. In an interview at the time of the film’s release, screenwriter Giovanna Pollarolo also pointed out that increasing numbers of Peruvians were convinced that indiscriminate violence was perhaps the only response to *Sendero*, despite earlier sentiments to the contrary. Miguel Díaz Reyes, ‘Entrevista con Giovanna Pollarolo’, *La República*, 18 December 1988, p.10.

the villagers, in particular his objectification, harassment and subsequent rape of Julia (Berta Pagaza), betrays a deeply-felt fear of the apparently inferior and abject Andean (especially female) “other” on the part of an immature, middle-class young man from Lima, and a desire to overcome this fear by destroying its cause. He has little sense of where to draw the line ethically; he believes he has the right to take food from the community, to run up debts to satisfy his drinking habit, and to invite himself to a private wedding party. He relies on alcohol to ward off the cold and fear, which in turn makes his behaviour more aggressive and irrational. He is unwilling to admit to his wrong-doing and expects to be able to act with impunity. Such an attitude ominously echoes that held by many fearful, inexperienced and angry young soldiers who perpetrated abuses during the ‘dirty’ war and expressed no regret in so doing. Gallardo is representative therefore of those officers who seemed to believe that their military status alone placed them beyond reproach and that ‘el uniforme parece colocarlos por encima del orden jurídico al que se sujetan todos los civiles’.³⁹ Moreover, Gallardo seems to feel he is justified in attacking Julia, ‘authorized by an ideology of [patriarchal] supremacy’.⁴⁰ Gallardo’s assumed position of dominance based on a specific approach to gender extends also to racial hierarchy. This is most clearly seen in his disdainful and ignorant attitude towards the villagers, his eagerness to torture individuals suspected of *senderista* activity, and his ability to rationalise the slaughter of innocents by accepting and repeating militaristic discourse on the need to wipe out the enemy using all necessary means. For him, absolute violence is the only way to achieve this and hence to rid the nation of fear. He has no concern for the subsequent threat posed to democratic values nor for the protection of civil liberties at a time of grave

³⁹ Flores Galindo, p. 172.

⁴⁰ Connell, p. 83.

danger for national stability. This view, shared by many in Peru at the time of the film's release and since, is called into question by the development of Gallardo as an increasingly unpleasant and unstable character. It is further compounded by comparison with Luna, whose own instinct for aggression is held in check by a developing sense of morality that is profoundly affected by the events he witnesses, and by Luna's eventual rejection of Gallardo altogether.

Apart from Luna, Sergeant Moncado (Gilberto Torres) is the only soldier depicted who attempts to challenge Roca's brutal methods, albeit with little real force and without success. His protests are dismissed and he appears powerless to prevent the atrocities, eventually choosing to remain silent instead. As such, he perhaps stands for those who chose to turn a blind eye to crimes against humanity. Roca seems to recognise Moncado's weakened instinct for aggression, as well as his reluctance to report any wrong-doing, and dismisses him as passively emasculated. Moncado's different approach further emphasizes the film's critical message about the connection between a macho form of masculinity, patriarchal authority and violence that dominates the image of the nation. Moncado is not chosen to participate in the shooting of villagers, so is not actively involved in the killing, but nor does he seem willing to speak out to his superiors. He appears disillusioned by the apparent abandonment of the regiment by the state and frustrated by the lack of an alternative solution; he had also seen the unfortunate result of Basulto's more benign strategy. As Bedoya points out, the sight of Basulto's body undermines the regiment's faith in rational and lawful methods of conflict resolution, and leads soldiers like Moncado to accept, albeit grudgingly, 'la experiencia de la restitución de los valores castrenses a manos de una autoridad agresiva y prepotente'.⁴¹ Moreover, experience would perhaps lead him to surmise that the

⁴¹ Bedoya, *Entre fauces y colmillos*, p. 93.

appointment of a leader of such dubious temperament and reputation would signal the covert intention of the armed forces to step up their campaign of brutal violence at any cost.

Until the killing of Basulto and the arrival of Roca, the soldiers are portrayed as a unified group, diverse in appearance and ethnic background (for example, one is of Chinese descent, another Afro-Peruvian), but unified by their shared experience of life in Lima that contrasts so greatly with the harsh conditions of the Andes. Drawing on Gellner's definition of national identity, they share the same culture and they '*recognise* each other as belonging to the same nation'.⁴² In the scene that occurs just before the discovery of Basulto's body, the soldiers gather together to sing, dance and reminisce about the food, music, landscape and everyday rituals of life in the capital. Through this sense of shared understanding and mutual opposition to an unfamiliar rural culture, a strong bond is formed that serves to reinforce the gulf between them and the Andean villagers. As such, the film highlights the impossibility of a nation somehow imagined by all Peruvians and emphasises the dominance of the capital in its efforts to construct, or to impose, a sense of nationhood that fails to acknowledge the different cultures, backgrounds and experiences of its citizens. As such, it is an example of a national cinema that seemed, increasingly, to '*problematise* a nation – by exposing its masquerade of unity'.⁴³

After Basulto's killing, the differences within the group and between its members become clearer as each man reacts differently to the all-encompassing fear of attack and

⁴² Gellner, p. 7.

⁴³ Hayward, p. 101.

death, and the bonds between them begin to unravel. Some find comfort and stability by continuing to obey orders blindly, others hesitate or question but then submit to authority, while only one character, Luna, openly refuses to participate in the barbaric slaughter of innocent villagers ordered by Roca. His failure to shoot could be considered a passive reaction, an unplanned response of disgust, as opposed to a decisive action that he knows will endanger him greatly. Roca would not have been sure of Luna's defiance had he not insisted that Luna fire the final shot alone. Nevertheless, this is the point of no return for a young man who has been forced to grow up fast in the harshest of conditions.

If considered as a kind of fictional testimony of his military experience, it is possible to see how the film traces Luna's 'submission to the loyalties of an insular community and strictly organised life, through to his disenchantment with the system'.⁴⁴ He begins as a committed soldier, determined to help wipe out the rebels, and identifies the apparently self-disciplined Roca as a role model, catching up with him on his morning run and revealing his ambition to be a great military man. A multi-faceted character with many flaws, Luna undergoes a journey of self-discovery. His initial blind confidence in the institution is complicated by his experience in the field, and his shock at the killing of comrades marks a turning point in his attitude towards the mission – from viewing it as a potentially glorious opportunity for career development to realisation of the danger they all face as well as the excessive actions they are required to carry out. At first it seems that he will, like Moncado, remain silent about the abuse committed by his comrades as he fails to speak out to confirm and condemn the rape committed by Gallardo. Nevertheless, the revelation that the man he thought he knew well and whom he considered to be a flawed though decent friend might be capable of perpetrating

⁴⁴ Bedoya, '*La boca del lobo/The lion's den*', p. 187.

violence without remorse, comes as a great shock. Amongst other things, it confronts Luna with the possibility that he and his comrades are no less capable of terrible behaviour than the terrorists they are hunting down.

Spectator identification with Luna as a more humane character is encouraged by depicting him as the only soldier who attempts to make an emotional connection with members of the local community. Indeed, it has been reported that troops failed ‘to create a rapport with the local population ... [and] finding it almost impossible to distinguish between *senderistas* and *non-senderistas* ... they therefore treated all with equal suspicion’.⁴⁵ Luna thus stands out, for example, by showing sympathy for Julia’s plight and disgust at Gallardo’s treatment of her. Although he fails to speak out to support her, he later tries to make amends by appealing to Roca not to harm the villagers he has locked up after the raid on the wedding party. It is perhaps also significant that Luna is not involved in the second interrogation scene in the film, in which torture methods of an increasingly brutal nature are encouraged by Lieutenant Roca. A further sign of the tentative beginnings of a mutual bond of kinship comes when the villager who has acted as the regiment’s mountain guide begs Luna personally to save them, as if he recognises that this young man differs from his comrades in his attitude towards the community. In the end, Luna seems bitterly disappointed with himself for failing to defend and protect those who have shown kindness towards him at various points, but even this demonstrates his willingness not to regard the village as one homogeneous enemy. Moreover, by presenting the evolution of its key protagonist as one that involves a developing sense of morality, the film draws attention to a desire for the differences within rural indigenous communities to be understood. Luna’s more

⁴⁵ Crabtree, p. 202.

liberal attitude in a context of war is appreciated as more complex, perhaps bewildering and even dangerous, but his apparent innate kindness towards others regardless of their background is offered as an admirable quality.

The emphasis on Luna's experience as crucial to the film's overall message is further emphasised by the manner in which Roca, already depicted as crazed, hysterical and out-of-control, chooses to regard Luna's decision not to shoot as a sign of weakness and impotence – a crisis of masculinity. This emphasizes again the assumed link between a hard, brutal, violent form of masculinity and the dominant notion of national identity that this film contests. Luna's ability to commit to the struggle is questioned, and hence also his identity as macho soldier. He is imprisoned as a traitor, and the physical confinement he endures is aggravated by a growing realisation that his disgust at the escalating brutality marginalizes him from the rest of the group. The others may not appreciate Roca's inclination for excessive violence, but they can see no alternative, whereas Luna reasons that such a solution is unjustified whatever the circumstances. The slaughter of the community hence triggers a different but no less important episode of conflict between the two main protagonists, the culmination of what Bedoya describes as a battle between:

... una conciencia en trance de maduración – escindida entre la fidelidad a sus creencias personales y el cumplimiento de los requerimientos autoritarios de la institución – y un padre simbólico – la institución misma – que fuera fuente de apetencias de poder, estabilidad, progreso personal pero también de infelicidad.⁴⁶

It may also represent a battle between different types of masculine identity, and thus by extension a questioning of their relationship with violence and the dominant national

⁴⁶ Bedoya, *Entre fauces y colmillos*, p. 105.

image. By challenging Roca to Russian roulette, Luna forces his superior to relive the traumatic event that triggered the psychological breakdown that he has tried to repress by consignment to oblivion. Sneered at by his comrades for his apparent weakness, Luna thereby tries to take control of the situation and reassert a different kind of moral and emotional authority. In so doing, he performs his own act of rebellion against the system of patriarchy, represented by Roca, that he had admired but which has failed and oppressed him. The Russian roulette game thus serves as a dramatic device that draws the two men to a similar level by forcing each of them to confront their own mortality at the same time and within the same space. By leading the challenge with determination, Luna proves to himself and to his comrades that he is capable of facing up to his fears. In contrast, close-ups of Roca's face and hands reveal a trembling vulnerability beneath the surface of the tough image he prefers to project that is fundamental to his sense of self. As the 'game' progresses, Luna draws attention to his lack of respect for his lieutenant by addressing Roca using the informal 'tú' form, and ensures that the whole regiment observes the spectacle of Roca's degradation. While the former thus reasserts his macho masculinity before the group, the latter suffers the loss of his in the most humiliating way. In order to triumph, Luna needs to resort to the tactics of violence, but then rewrites the rules by walking away.

Luna's character is suggestive of a generation of young men who committed themselves enthusiastically to the counter-insurgency campaign, but who ended up as reluctant perpetrators of acts of extreme violence themselves and murderers of thousands of apparently innocent people.⁴⁷ His bold decision to refute the orders of the authorities, and to distance himself from the rest of the group, is what makes him remarkable.

⁴⁷ The psychological consequences of this experience of excessive violence on the young men involved is explored again sixteen years later in Josué Méndez's *Días de Santiago* (2004).

Meanwhile, the representation of Roca's behaviour as excessive and irrational might be interpreted as a critical comment on the state's increasingly desperate response to spiralling insurgent attacks. After all, the main test for the existence and survival of a nation is based upon 'the ability of the state to impose order and monopolize violence within established boundaries'.⁴⁸ The film's overall message of anti-violence is confirmed when Luna does not kill Roca, despite the pressure to do so. By failing or refusing to kill another human being for the second time in the film, the young man is seen to reject violence altogether as a solution to conflict.

One of Lombardi's stated aims with this film was to make Peruvians living in Lima aware of what was happening in the more remote parts of their own country, in keeping with the ideology of *indigenismo* that developed in Peru between 1930 and the 1950s.⁴⁹ The village depicted is caught between two forces of violence, and as a result of the extreme tactics of each, is barely able to distinguish which is the enemy and which the protector. As such, this film is not only a complex exploration of the Peruvian state versus terrorist forces, but also of 'las tensas relaciones que suelen entablarse entre las fuerzas del orden y los habitantes de estos pueblos remotos'.⁵⁰ As far as the villagers depicted can see, the army uses violent methods of repression (torture, abuse and apparently random executions) that replicate those of the terrorists. Moreover, the apparent inability of the soldiers to defend even themselves from attack, as well as their aggressive and disrespectful attitude towards the villagers, prevents the development of any degree of trust. It seems that the regiment, although prepared physically for their

⁴⁸ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995), p. 85.

⁴⁹ Lombardi cited by Bedoya, *Entre fauces y colmillos*, p. 180.

⁵⁰ De Guzmán, p. 8.

mission, has no understanding of the specific needs and characteristics of the people they have come to protect. In fact, from the conversations between the men it seems that they view their mission as one of defence of state territory rather than of citizens they do not recognise as fellow Peruvians.

Attention is drawn to this notion of cultural difference and lack of mutual recognition from the opening scenes when Luna is instructed to raise the Peruvian flag and is watched by huddled groups of apparently uncomprehending villagers. There are no cries of patriotic jubilation in honour of the regime, and no warm welcome for the soldiers that represent it. The problem of lack of national unity as part of the overall conflict is hence signalled by the film from the outset as the remote community depicted fails to recognise one of the ‘conventional symbols of particularity’ of the Peruvian nation.⁵¹ Luna is confused by the apparent defiance of the villagers, as shown by their resentful staring at the flag and by their refusal to sing the national anthem when the state flag is raised for the second time. It would seem that Luna and his comrades fail to appreciate that the anthem itself would seem irrelevant – and perhaps linguistically incomprehensible – to a community that, since independence from Spain, has been largely excluded from participation in the development of a unified and single sense of national identity.⁵²

⁵¹ Billig, p. 86.

⁵² The national anthem is discussed by Billig as one of the other main markers of nationhood. Indeed, Peru’s anthem *Marcha Nacional* was chosen in 1822, just one year after the battle for independence had ended in victory, at which point Peru began to reconstruct itself as a nation in its own right. The lyrics celebrate freedom of oppression and the end of slavery under the Spaniards, and speak of all Peruvians as if they are united and equal in their joy at being liberated, but omit to acknowledge the diversity of experience within the borders of the nation and fail to take account of the new structures of oppression that have developed since 1821.

Instead, the soldiers interpret the behaviour of the villagers as anti-state hostility, perhaps also feeling that such an open display of difference might pose a threat to the fragile sense of national cohesion that the new democratic state they had come to defend was attempting to construct. Apart perhaps from Moncado, only Luna comes to realise that there might be other reasons for the villagers' silence that have more to do with centuries of fear, suffering and oppression inflicted by outsiders, of which these soldiers from Lima might be perceived as the latest. The decision taken by Lombardi to focus attention on the protagonist's growing awareness of and respect for cultural differences would seem to confirm that the film is committed to exploring the enormous divide between Peruvians of different social and ethnic backgrounds as depicted between those familiar with life in Lima and those whose with experience of life only in the *sierra*.

Even before the audience is introduced to Luna, the prologue establishes the film's intended sympathies with the Andean community. It opens with a long tracking shot that follows a young shepherdess leading her flock through the empty village and culminates with a poignant close-up of her face. As she passes the church, she stops to look at the corpses piled up in the village square. She then gazes directly at the camera, before walking on. In the closing scene, she gazes at Luna as he flees, fuelling his guilt for the violence against the villagers in which he has become complicit. In both instances, her facial expression is ambiguous. The young soldier pauses and seems to want to speak to her, to explain, to justify his actions, to apologize even for what has happened to her community, but leaves without uttering a word, unable to communicate and rationalise what he has done. The enigmatic character of the shepherdess may be read as broadly symbolic of the few Andean survivors of the "dirty war" who would eventually – twelve years later – get the opportunity to testify about the brutality they witnessed, but who at this point had no recourse to justice. By contrast, Luna's inability

to articulate his experiences in the final scene perhaps helps indirectly to confirm and explain some of the ugly complexities of the conflict. His lack of words here points to the apparent difficulty of communication and understanding between the different communities of Peru, drawing further critical attention to the divisions and differences that mark Peruvian national identity.

As a director, Lombardi tends to develop his stories by placing an ensemble of characters within a confined and bordered physical space that, given the broad symbolic nature of his films, could be read as suggestive of national borders. This approach then allows for the development of tense dramas that explore the psychological impact of the given environment on human behaviour.⁵³ *La boca del lobo* follows this trend but develops it so as to emphasize the way in which the actual ambiguity of borders and uninhabited spaces can add to the impression of fear. The film is broadly located in the expansive setting of the Andean mountains, and the regiment's lack of familiarity with the *sierra* landscape, which seems to hold so many secrets and to offer so many hiding places for the enemy, intensifies their fear and plays on deep-rooted anxieties about the potential threat of the unknown "other". In fact, the film is situated in an ambiguous no-man's land, 'en la nebulosa y enmarañada zona fronteriza donde termina el control del ejército peruano y comienza el de las guerrillas de Sendero Luminoso'.⁵⁴ The soldiers assume that the area has already been cleared of terrorists before they arrive, but they soon discover that the village is under siege and that the emergency zone has become a liminal space where traditional rules of engagement do not apply and where the boundaries of moral standards have likewise become blurred. At first, the soldiers do little more than gaze fearfully at the mountain terrain, hardly daring to venture beyond

⁵³ Bedoya, *Entre fauces y colmillos*, pp. 86-9.

⁵⁴ Fernández Santos in Bedoya, *Un cine reencontrado*, p. 278.

the edge of the village, and the fear appears justified when Basulto is killed shortly after venturing beyond the invisible boundary. Bedoya describes the significance of this event in terms of the relationship between space and atmosphere as follows:

A poco de iniciado el recorrido, en medio del paisaje andino de altura, sufría una emboscada y encontraba la muerte. Una dimensión exterior ominosa, infranqueable, convertía el confinamiento en una condición esencial de la acción.⁵⁵

Later on, Roca makes it a priority to reclaim physical and psychological dominance of the terrain and to restore confidence by taking his men out on training exercises across the *sierra*, penetrating deep into what was perceived to represent the imperious heartland of the enemy.

By portraying the *sierra* as a battleground, the director goes against the more lyrical and romantic stereotypical view of the Andes. As one critic noted, the film ‘muestra el paisaje serrano sin caer en imágenes exóticamente “bellas” y, por el contrario, se sirve de aquel para propiciar el clima de tensión, de abandono y de desolación dentro del cual evolucionan los personajes y los conflictos’.⁵⁶ Rather than offering an idyllic and mystical impression of the *sierra*, symbolic of many *indigenista* portrayals of a peaceful and traditional way of life, it is presented here as hostile and menacing, a place of death and destruction.⁵⁷ Instead of freedom and space, the mountains evoke restriction and

⁵⁵ Bedoya, *Entre fauces y colmillos*, p. 87.

⁵⁶ De Guzmán, p. 8.

⁵⁷ This film does not fall into the trap of glorifying the indigenous way of life above all others, as Marianne Eyde’s *La vida es una sola* arguably did in 1993. It concentrates instead on highlighting the difficulty of overcoming internal conflict when there is no sense of unified national identity, or indeed one that allows recognition of all the differing cultural identities of Peru, and that embraces the richness of multiplicity rather

oppression, and the soldiers are paralysed by the almost palpable impression that the invisible beast of terror is roaming close by, and by the impossibility of discovering the landscape for themselves. While *Sendero* remains invisible, its “otherness” is constantly reflected in the physical surroundings. Indeed, the landscape also shelters the enemy. As Bedoya points out: ‘en ese paisaje acechan los responsables de la violencia que asedia a los hombres del destacamento y a todo el Perú’.⁵⁸ As such, the mountains come to represent the terrorist enemy itself, while at the same time, the perceived link between the insurgent group and the indigenous populations of Peru is further reinforced by the latter’s belief in the mountains as the traditional home of their own deities.

The film’s dramatic tension is shaped by the tight framing of every image, by the desolate sounds of high winds, and by the sombre musical composition. Most of the on-screen action takes place in the remote village the soldiers have been sent to defend, with its small indoor spaces and narrow, winding streets. Hesitant travelling shots and slow pans are suggestive of a nervous surveillance gaze from the point of view of the soldiers who cannot be sure where the danger resides. As they patrol the village armed with machine guns, close-up shots of their frightened eyes reveal a fear of what might lurk round the corner. Night and day are made to look equally threatening, with the harsh Andean light of dawn and dusk being manipulated so as to benefit from menacing shadows formed at either end of the day. The intense blue sky locks in further the characters and action, contributing to the multi-layered effect of confinement from which escape will prove impossible. This in turn adds to the atmosphere of overwhelming claustrophobia that serves to heighten the frustrations and fears of the

than fears the complexities of fragmentation. It blames this as much as economic inequality for the crisis of *Sendero*.

⁵⁸ Bedoya, *Entre fauces y colmillos*, pp. 88-9.

soldiers, and to accentuate divisions between them and the community. Doors of village houses remain closed and the local wedding proceeds in an enclosed garden, the high walls around which infuriate Gallardo, who feels himself to be unfairly excluded from the event.

This developing atmosphere of imprisonment and isolation on the part of the regiment is emphasised in several key scenes in the film's narrative, including Basulto's fateful attempt to take the *Sendero* suspect to the nearest town. For example, when Roca arrives by helicopter to assume leadership of the garrison he is dropped as if from nowhere and appears with no further backup or supplies. Before that, Luna literally stops in his tracks when he sets out for his first early morning run and spots that the national flag he had raised over the garrison the day before has been replaced by one bearing the *Sendero* symbol. He goes no further than the opposite side of the square before turning back. Unable to leave, the soldiers are forced to conclude that the new flag was raised by guerrillas who slipped in during the night from a hiding place close by, and thus they are confronted with probability that the village borders are porous to the *Sendero* threat.

Luna does finally leave the village, despite his acute awareness of the dangers he will probably encounter beyond its boundaries. In contrast to the upbeat images of the group's arrival by truck via the main road, with protective armour and supplies, the film's closing images show him ripping off his uniform, and running out of the village along a winding track. He pauses as he encounters the young shepherdess before continuing his journey. He then disappears into the same wilderness that, for the soldiers, shelters the enemy they hoped to destroy. He renounces his position as a member of the armed forces and defender of the state, and faces an uncertain future as a

deserter. He also renounces violence as part of his personal identity and more broadly as integral to the image of the nation.

Concluding Thoughts

La boca del lobo functions effectively on a number of different but interrelated levels: as a political indictment of contemporary events in Peru and the national image connected with violence and machismo; as a critical observation of the tense relations between members of the armed forces and the inhabitants of remote Andean communities; and as a psychological drama which explores the reactions of a group of men 'confronted with themselves, at the edge of death'.⁵⁹ Through the portrayal of increasingly brutal encounters between soldiers and villagers, it reveals deep-rooted racism based on ignorance and intolerance towards people who live within the same country but who do not recognise each other as sharing the same national identity. It was also the first national film to invite debate on the methods a democratic state might use to defend itself from threats such as those posed by *Sendero Luminoso*. When released in 1988, the concept and indeed practice of democracy in Peru was still in its infancy and the García regime struggled to retain control over the military. There remained little opportunity for participation in public life by those other than the social elite, most of whom were based in the capital city. The film implies not only that indigenous communities remained isolated from a collective concept of the Peruvian nation, but also that cultural diversity was actually viewed as a threat to stability and coherence rather than as a cause for national pride.

La boca gives expression not only to horrific acts of violence, including rape, torture, mutilation and slaughter of soldiers by guerrillas as well as villagers by soldiers, but

⁵⁹ Bedoya, '*La boca del lobo/The lion's den*', p. 186.

also to the psychological effects of fear and violence on a group of men sent by the state to defend national territory at all costs from a nebulous enemy that remained impossible to locate and identify. Indeed, the impact of such brutality affected their sense of self as well as their place within the nation. Made at a time when the García regime was struggling to contain the *Sendero* threat and was under increasing pressure to pursue more brutal counter-insurgency methods, the film's overriding message are ones of condemnation for the pointless use of violence at any cost, and of criticism of the apparently inextricable link between violence and national identity. Although the film was criticised by a few for presenting an excessively negative view of the military and the director was accused of displaying pro-*senderista* sympathies, it seems far more pertinent to consider the film as a statement against the futility of violence as a means of reinscribing nationhood, and as recognition of the problems of a society in crisis. While the film offers a complex insight into the dilemma facing a regiment such as the one portrayed, particular sympathy is reserved for the indigenous community, which becomes the victim of abuse at the hands of both terrorists and the military forces. Lombardi himself acknowledged that the making of this film was a great risk, but declares in its defence that:

... nuestra preocupación mayor está en que si no podemos distinguir los métodos de las dos partes, en un determinado momento las fuerzas que representan la defensa de la Constitución y del Estado de Derecho se van a confundir infamemente con aquéllas que son la negación de estos valores.⁶⁰

Actor Gustavo Bueno further explains that 'uno de los motivos de la película es entonces hacernos pensar en esto: con este tipo de acciones no se va a poder derrotar a

⁶⁰ Lombardi cited by Bedoya, *Entre fauces y colmillos*, p. 180.

Sendero ... hay que cambiar'.⁶¹ *La boca del lobo* is a film that promotes the notions of social justice, equality of opportunity, and national stability achieved without bloody attacks and abuses of basic human rights. The director and his screenwriters confessed concern to reveal 'el engranaje de la violencia en el Perú y cómo es que ésta continúa alimentándose sin cesar, llegando a trastornar nuestra existencia cotidiana'.⁶² The film offers no specific solutions to the conflict, but in trying to understand the root causes it seeks to provoke debate on alternative courses of action that recognise the need for understanding and respect for all Peruvians.

While the film draws its inspiration from topical material events, its core dramatic interest remains, as Bedoya suggests, 'las repercusiones de un hecho violento en una conciencia individual, sensible y sobresaltado'.⁶³ Protagonist Luna rejects Roca's strategy of victory by any means. He leaves because otherwise he risks being locked up for treason. His military career is over, and possibly also his life, if he is caught by *Sendero* insurgents. More significantly, he is perhaps also scared of what kind of person he might become if he were to remain with the regiment and submit to Roca's aggressive rule. It is a pessimistic ending in so far as the film seems to suggest both that there is no place in the military for the will of the individual, and that the instinct for aggression is an inevitable aspect of human behaviour that one must constantly struggle to contain. As Bedoya points out, Lombardi presents a joyless world:

... en el que no existen posibilidades de esfuerzo individual o colectivo para el cambio institucional y en el que las instituciones terminan por expulsar a

⁶¹ Bueno cited by de Guzman, p. 8.

⁶² De Guzmán, p. 8.

⁶³ Lombardi cited by Bedoya, *Entre fauces y colmillos*, p. 92.

los más lúcidos o incómodos, para reproducir sin fin los modos más aberrantes de su organización y su ideología.⁶⁴

More than that, Luna's departure signals a loss of faith in the institution he had cherished. Even more broadly, the film's message could be interpreted to signal a loss of faith in the state (as represented here by the military) by the people, especially the marginalized, as the moral arbiter and defender of national values and standards that are integral to a common national image. Such hopes had after all been raised amongst rural communities, in particular by the reformist policies of the Velasco regime throughout the 1970s, only to be dashed by their failure and by the subsequent ill-fated return to democracy. Moreover, because of this national crisis, Peru's film directors were powerless to prevent the decline of their protectionist Cinema Law. Under pressure to remain commercially viable amid an economic crisis, cinema exhibitors were largely ignoring the requirement to prioritize national films, and the funds associated with guaranteed screenings therefore disappeared with obvious untoward financial effects.

Despite all these difficulties, including the restrictions placed on its release, *La boca del lobo* was a great success and remains a landmark film in terms of the questions it raises about the military response to the *Sendero* conflict, and the image it presents of a highly fractured and fragmented Peruvian nation. It attracted international acclaim and notoriety even before its release in Peru, and became the focus of much discussion in the domestic mass media. Indeed, this was the first time that Peruvians had been able to watch a feature fiction film based on the *Sendero* conflict that was still raging throughout their country. Its reflective, critical approach provided an opportunity for public debate about issues that affected Peruvians in remote areas on a daily basis. Lombardi was criticised by some for creating an entertaining work of classical cinema

⁶⁴ Lombardi cited by Bedoya, *Entre fauces y colmillos*, pp. 108-9.

on issues of such intense and controversial topical concern that rejected the more overtly political aesthetics and philosophies of his 'Third Cinema' predecessors. Nevertheless, he was applauded by most for having carefully interwoven the topical with the perennial, and for having placed a polemical fiction about contemporary Peruvian reality and identity at the heart of public debate.