

Chapter Six

***Alias la gringa* (Alberto “Chicho” Durant 1991): Identity, violence and social responsibility**

Section 1: Introduction

Alias la gringa, the only Peruvian film released in 1991, is a prison drama set amidst a backdrop of political conflict.¹ The film took five years to make and was a project that suffered, as did *Ni con Dios*, from a lack of funds and state support for national cinema. As noted in Chapter Two, while the 1972 legislation for promotion of the national film industry was still officially in place, faith in it as an effective and efficient system had diminished significantly and relations between exhibitors and producers were tense. Indeed, the former reneged on their commitment to screen all national films approved for domestic exhibition by the government-sanctioned administrative body *Coproci*. As a result, Durant drew upon international funding and co-production support from six different investors, including *TVE* (Spain), *ICAIC* (Cuba) and Channel 4 (UK), and this threatened to complicate the film’s status as a national film. Inspired by two sets of topical events, and tackling perennial themes such as friendship, loyalty and betrayal, Durant offers a pessimistic vision of Peru during the mid-1980s in a film that achieved domestic box office success as well as critical acclaim alongside a clutch of international festival awards.² By addressing the film’s themes, narrative structure and

¹ Four other films were made but none of these achieved commercial release in Peru. Instead they went straight to video release in the US as part of a low-budget production project sponsored by Roger Corman and produced by Luis (Lucho) Llosa of Iguana Films. See Bedoya, *Un cine reencontrado*, pp. 294-301.

² According to Bedoya and Wiener, the film attracted over 400,000 spectators during its commercial release, making it the third most successful film screened in Peru in 1991. See Bedoya, *Un cine reencontrado*, p. 298; Wiener, ‘El cine peruano en los noventa: la historia sin fin’, *La Gran Ilusión*, 5 (1995), 96-104 (p. 103). Released at 12 cinemas in Lima, it remained on screens for 4 weeks, even though the guaranteed screening benefit of the 1972 Cinema Law had been abandoned by exhibitors on commercial grounds. Unusually, it was also screened in the provincial towns of Arequipa and Trujillo and the film’s stars travelled to those cities for promotional reasons.

character development, this analysis explores the representation of political conflict and associated issues of national identity and culture. It also compares the instantaneous reporting of events by the mass media with the retrospective semi-fictional representation of those events in the cinema, and considers the capacity of each mode of expression to shape public opinion. Finally, it considers more generally the ethical role and responsibilities of the intellectual and of cultural production at times of crisis, and explores the self-reflexive aspects of this film which allow for interrogation of the process and purpose of creative activity.

Section 2: Context

The primary topical level of Durant's drama is loosely based on the unpublished memoirs of Guillermo Portugal, to whom the film is dedicated, and who escaped from prison for the last time in 1985 after seventeen years in total behind bars. While the film appears to take the more objective form of a typical third person narrative, it in fact adopts the literal and ethical point of view of the protagonist, known as La Gringa (Germán González).³ The narrative focuses upon a key episode of transformation for the main character, anachronistically contrived in the film so as to coincide with a momentous episode in the *Sendero* conflict. Moreover, the film follows La Gringa as he embarks upon a reluctant voyage of self-discovery and experiences the awakening of a sense of collective responsibility as a result of the surprising relationships he forges while imprisoned. His story also provides an explicit critical reflection of the prison conditions that he and his fellow inmates are forced to endure. This is achieved by

³ Gringo/a is a Latin American term that refers to a white person of European or North American origin. It can be used in a friendly or pejorative way, depending on the context. 'La Gringa' as a nickname in the specific context of this film is based on the protagonist's successful escape attempts when disguised as a white woman and, thus, removed from all suspicion. These attempts are not seen in the film since they took place before the plot begins, but are referred to in dialogue and emphasize the hierarchical superiority of whiteness (even female), over *mestizo* identity.

voice-over readings from the notebooks in which he records the day-to-day events of prison life, and which are suggestive of the importance of creative activity, to this character and more generally. The film also offers implicit comment on Peruvian society from the viewpoint of an individual who has been excluded from it for several years. *La Gringa* hence becomes the vehicle for discussion of the film's perennial themes concerning compassion, friendship and social responsibility

The second topical element of *Alias la gringa* deals with the dramatisation of events that were widely reported and debated in the national media and serve here to provide action, spectacle and a sense of social realism for the protagonist's personal narrative. These were the riots instigated by *Sendero* captives on the prison island of *El Frontón* in June 1986 and the military reprisals that were carried out under the orders of President García himself, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of prisoners.⁴ By fabricating a connection between the personal and the collective, and by flagging up places and events of national significance, Durant prompts reflection on the broad responsibilities of citizens in times of social crisis. Indeed, one reviewer interpreted the film as 'una visión del peruano de los noventa, la de "sálvese quien pueda"'; he compared it with the films of Lombardi which held a similar tone of despair and futility with regard to social commitment in Peru.⁵ Hence, the film might be read as critical of a perceived social lethargy, and as a plea by the film-maker to awaken a collective conscience that might

⁴ Crabtree notes that although the brutality of the intervention might not have been intended by President García, he was 'at the very least seen as guilty of major political misjudgement in his handling of the issue'. See Crabtree, *Peru under García*, p. 81.

⁵ Núñez del Pozo cited by Bedoya, *Un cine reencontrado*, p. 296.

provide an alternative solution to crisis in the light of growing lack of confidence in an apparently ineffective and abusive regime.⁶

Section 3: Synopsis

In terms of generic categorisation, *Alias la gringa* combines a prison drama that draws attention to the structural violence and claustrophobia of Peruvian institutions, with the spectacular elements of the action-adventure genre such as escape attempts, bomb attacks, basketball matches and fights that contribute towards the development of tension and anticipation. The film begins with an escape sequence that prompts early audience interest in, if not immediate sympathy towards, the protagonist La Gringa. After being briefly reunited with his loyal and loving girlfriend Julia (Elsa Olivero), he is captured after betrayal by the prisoner he left behind, Loca Luna (Juan Manuel Ochoa), who henceforth becomes his mortal enemy. There follows a long section on the prison island of *El Frontón*, during which a range of interactions with other prisoners and the warden are shown, including La Gringa's encounter with the inmate, Professor Montes (Orlando Sacha), whose plight eventually pricks his conscience. This is followed by the second escape, and a short spell in a safe house where plans are made for a new identity and further escape to Guayaquil in Ecuador. This time, however, La Gringa decides to return to the prison island in a bid to rescue the Professor who earlier saved his life and encouraged him with his literary endeavours. However, the rescue bid goes wrong and La Gringa is locked up in solitary confinement until the sudden bombing attack on the island by the military provides him with a further opportunity to escape, though not before he has tried again to help the Professor. The final image of the

⁶ During one promotional interview at the time of the film's release, Durant stressed that, for him, 'el individualismo puede llegar a ser nuestro peor enemigo', and that his film was one way to show the need for social responsibility in Peru. Isaac León Frías, 'Alias la gringa', *El Peruano*, 7 December 1991, p. 15.

film shows La Gringa swimming away from the island after having witnessed the slaughter of *Sendero* prisoners who refused to surrender, and the killing of the Professor who wanted to be saved. The final voice-over conversation between La Gringa and Julia signals that they have made it to Ecuador, and that he plans to publish his diaries so as to make public the abuse he has seen committed in Peru's prisons.

Section 4: Analysis

The specific political context of the *Sendero* conflict and the nation's social and economic problems are introduced in the opening scene when La Gringa becomes involved in an argument about torch batteries, during which mention is made of the electricity blackouts caused by the violence. As La Gringa wanders through the city, he notices several more acts of delinquency. Having been in prison and thus removed from everyday life for some time, he seems genuinely surprised by the general level of anti-social behaviour all around him. As Crabtree explains, during the mid-1980s the 'climate of violence was ... enhanced by social as well as explicitly political forms of violence and was especially evident in the cities'.⁷ When La Gringa takes a taxi, he hears a radio news report that refers to him as a dangerous and cunning criminal and that causes him to bristle with some pride at the notoriety he has achieved. The same report then gives news of terrorist action (the killing of the parliamentary deputy and the subsequent rounding up of 15,000 suspects) which contrasts sharply with his own materialistically-motivated crime of armed robbery. The taxi-driver reacts with depressed familiarity rather than shock and this early sequence thus serves to draw attention to the entrenchment of violence and delinquency in everyday life, and to the resignation of citizens to such situations over which they appear to have no control. Instead, the film shows the emergence of alternative survival tactics such as theft,

⁷ Crabtree, *Peru under García*, p. 184.

bribery, and deceit that threaten to atomise society and lead to the collapse of a fragile democratic state.

In fact, the return to democracy in Peru had taken place only in 1980 when it was welcomed with high expectations of social transformation amongst the mobilised masses. As Cotler and Grompone point out:

Después de doce años de régimen militar (1968-1980) la elección de un gobierno constitucional en 1980 culminó la accidentada transición a la democracia iniciada tres años antes, mientras en otros países latinoamericanos se desarrollaban procesos semejantes.⁸

Nevertheless, such high hopes were quickly dashed by several factors that included the legacy of the previous regimes, *Sendero* subversion from 1980, international debt crises from 1982, the impact of the *El Niño* phenomenon on valuable sea resources in 1983 and the Belaúnde government's failure to react adequately to any of these challenges.⁹ The 1980s became known as the lost decade for Latin America generally and Peru, despite its newly democratic status, was no exception. Historical tensions between the main political parties and a heightened sense of social division added to these difficulties, 'así como la clásica debilidad del Estado para formular, organizar y ejecutar decisiones coherentes'.¹⁰ García's regime (1985-1990) was arguably worse than that of Belaúnde in terms of its impact upon social conditions and its response to the political

⁸ Julio Cotler and Romeo Grompone, *El fujimorismo: ascenso y caída de un régimen autoritario* (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2000), p. 17.

⁹ Hunefeldt points out, for example, that Belaúnde (1980-85) 'did little to reverse the reforms implemented by the military, nor did he move them much further along. He began urban building projects in a lukewarm fashion, but he had no funds to do more because interest on Peru's huge external debt was eating up revenues'. See Hunefeldt, *A Brief History of Peru*, p. 237.

¹⁰ Cotler and Grompone, p. 17.

crisis. As shown in *Alias la gringa*, it took a controversial approach to counter-insurgency which included the mass rounding-up of suspects and the targeting of intellectuals as perceived sympathisers, as illustrated in the film. It was also responsible for economic collapse that became the second worst example of hyperinflation in world history, bringing poverty and misery to millions of Peruvian citizens. Although by the end of 1989, the situation had improved a little, real wages were still low and prices high; indeed, as Crabtree concludes, ‘an unprecedented proportion of the labour force was officially categorised ‘sub-employed’ by 1989’.¹¹ Consideration of this contextual detail is important for appreciation of the film’s depiction of entrenched cynicism on the streets of Lima, and the suggestion of a greater degree of social inequality and dislocation resulting from the economic crisis. It also aids understanding of the heightened paranoia and selfish behaviour on the part of the main as well as the secondary characters who appear to have lost all respect for the concepts of citizenship and authority.

The classical approach to film-making, with its invisible editing style, third person narration and linear structure, enables directors to focus spectator attention not only on the drama, but also on the relationships and emotions of the film’s central characters. Durant’s film adopts this apparently neutral and omniscient style in *Alias la gringa*, but encourages a specific reading of his film that emphasizes the point of view of the protagonist La Gringa, a flawed character whose position in relation to the world is transformed by his experiences in prison. His friendship, for example, with Professor Montes, who has been mistakenly and tragically convicted of being a *Sendero* sympathiser, is of particular interest to this analysis. It provides the key to an

¹¹ Crabtree, *Peru under García*, p. 150.

appreciation of what Durant is trying to convey about the military's counter-insurgency strategy, as well as the emphasis he places on collective responsibility over individual freedom. A further contrast is drawn between the ideology of self-sacrifice as extolled by *Sendero* for the sake of revolution, and the single act of sacrifice taken by La Gringa in risking further imprisonment, possible death and estrangement from his girlfriend in order to save another human life and to repay a moral debt.

In order to appreciate fully the significance of this final act of sacrifice, it should be noted that La Gringa is initially presented as an unscrupulous, egotistical individual who cannot bear confinement and wishes to escape not only from the physical constraints of prison, but also from the 'parámetros de la vida social y legal'.¹² He behaves like a caged animal instinctively seeking freedom as soon as it is locked up. Moreover, he shows no sense of loyalty nor compassion towards fellow prisoners, leaving one (Loca Luna) for dead during his first attempt at escape, and indirectly causing the death of two others as punishment for aiding the second attempt. And yet, despite his obviously flawed nature, La Gringa emerges as the character with whom the audience feels most sympathy. This is largely achieved by the tracing of his moral transformation, and in particular by the portrayal of his relationships with Montes and the old man, Viejo (Enrique Victoria), whose own moral codes offer La Gringa a more socially responsible way of living. As Bedoya points out, 'las relaciones dramáticas, centradas en el triángulo de amistad y tensiones entre La Gringa y dos presidiarios ... cotejaban los modos en los que ocurren las transformaciones psicológicas, sociales o culturales de un individuo en prisión'.¹³ Moreover, these characters also risk either their lives or their freedom to save his, suggesting that his survival is paramount, and linking him to the

¹² Bedoya, *Un cine reencontrado*, p. 296.

¹³ Bedoya, *Cien años de cine en el Perú*, p. 269.

mythic super-human protagonists of most action-adventure films. For example, the kindly Viejo, whose fragility and resignation embody the harshness of prison life, dies after a punishment beating for having helped La Gringa to escape. Montes, the reflective intellectual who prefers reading to fishing, kills Loca Luna who has been bribed by the prison governor to eliminate La Gringa permanently. Meanwhile, his saintly girlfriend Julia risks arrest and abuse by finding them a place to hide from the police and by arranging for a new identity for him. La Gringa thus becomes the blessed ‘survivor-cum-superhero’ of this national action movie. Having first survived the apocalyptic environment of prison and triumphed over the authorities, he then sets out to change society for the better having been moved to do so by the suffering of others. His failed attempt to save Montes is followed by a promise to use his diaries to reveal the abuse in Peru’s prisons and the ‘truth’ about the military attack on *El Frontón*, and his redemption is achieved by a commitment to social endeavour.¹⁴

Meanwhile, both *Sendero* and the state, variously represented by the prison governor and guards, military and politicians, are depicted in an irredeemably negative light, the former as emphatically dogmatic and irrational and the latter as unscrupulous, fraudulent and murderous. It quickly becomes clear that the film is critical of both sides of the political conflict, while reserving its sympathies for those in society who are excluded from participating in political debate. As Wiener points out:

los senderistas son vistos con la extrañeza del personaje principal, en un retrato casi robótico e iluminando su modo de accionar, mostrándolos como fanáticos entregados a un culto tanático y exonerando de mayor responsabilidad a los encargados de debelar el motín carcelario.¹⁵

¹⁴ See James Berger *After the End: Representation of Post-Apocalypse* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota, 1999), 24-56, for a fuller discussion of this topic.

¹⁵ Wiener, ‘Miedos de guerra’, p. 19.

Despite the difficulties with disruptive inmates, the dictatorial prison warden (Gonzalo de Miguel) continues in his efforts to maintain order on the island. He acts with impunity: the abuse of prisoners goes unpunished and is indeed encouraged at the highest level. Faced with the sharp-witted La Gringa, however, his power is tested and undermined and his corruption further exposed as he tries first to have him killed, and then resorts to bribery. Yet physical maltreatment only strengthens the protagonist's desire to escape, and subsequent promises of better conditions merely serve to make him feel that he has the upper hand. La Gringa's overtly anti-authoritarian stance infuriates the governor to the extent that he is willing to order his elimination. This troublesome prisoner represents a threat to the governor's professional future in that one more attempt to escape by the former will result in a loss of promotion, and the longed for escape from the island, by the latter. The governor is bound by a destiny which has been shaped by conflict and corruption, and over which he has limited control given the ultimate intervention of the military high command, and thus might also be understood as a prisoner of the state he is ordered to protect, with violence if necessary. He tries to compensate for this lack of power by heaping the abuse on his prisoners, and by constantly reminding them of who is in control.

By explicitly emphasizing and inviting critical comment on the abuse meted out to common criminals, Durant implicitly challenges the response of the military to the rioting of the political prisoners held on the other side of the island in their own block. At the time (1986), public opinion was shaped largely by press, TV and radio coverage which encouraged the population to understand and accept the bombing, if not to agree with the action necessary to regain control of the *Sendero* rebellion. For example,

Peralta's study on press reporting of the conflict informs us that editorials in the dominant national daily newspaper *El Comercio* expressed regret for the high number of casualties but considered this outcome as 'inevitable ante la única oportunidad que se había presentado para acabar con un tácito bastión de Sendero Luminoso'.¹⁶ This view was compounded at the time by reports the following day that a ship packed with weapons had been apprehended on its way to the island where it was to have provided ammunition for the prisoners to strengthen their campaign of violence. The view advanced by the military, according to Gorriti's historical study based on visits to the prison just before the attack, was that the prison had become a *Sendero* centre for training, internal advancement, planning and indoctrination. It was feared that conquest of the prison by the insurgents was 'an encapsulated version of what the Shining Path insurrection was trying to achieve throughout the country'.¹⁷ Indeed, the press even speculated that *Sendero* activity nationwide was being masterminded from the prison cells.

The film's prison governor acts as the mediator of the dominant counter-insurgency discourse that held such views, and articulates the hegemonic point of view regarding the conflict on several occasions during the film. In so doing, this character assumes a more emblematic status as symbolic of the state that denies him (like his prisoners) any individual freedom, and the prison island he seeks to defend thus becomes a microcosm for the nation itself. The governor's bullying behaviour and relative impotence in controlling the prisoners, however, reinforce the film's intention for audience identification with a protagonist whose attempts to escape threaten the warden's retirement plans, and emphasizes the director's attempt to critique the violent methods

¹⁶ Peralta Ruiz, p. 112.

¹⁷ Gorriti, *The Shining Path*, pp. 244-5.

of the state in seeking to quell insurgent behaviour. The emotive depictions of the violent deaths of apparently innocent inmates Montes and El Viejo, the former gunned down by soldiers as he walks out with a white flag of surrender, and the latter as a result of a severe beating ordered by the governor, add further weight to the ideological force of the film and its condemnation of violence as integral to national identity.

At the same time, the film falls short of evoking sympathy for the revolutionary cause, since the *Sendero* group is portrayed as a slogan-chanting undifferentiated collective, with a crazed leader who will tolerate neither negotiation nor surrender. Instead the film reserves its empathy for the unfortunate prisoner, Professor Montes, who is portrayed as having been caught in the political crossfire.¹⁸ Through conversations between Montes and La Gringa, the Professor's story is recounted in some detail and the audience is encouraged to regard him as a victim of political paranoia. He acts to a large extent as the moral conscience of the film, a bridge between the political and the petty in criminal worlds, and a sounding board for La Gringa's ideas and ambitions. He is despised by the *Sendero* group with whom he is locked up, and subjected to the 'constant pressures, routine insults and permanent hostility' that Gorriti reports were faced by prisoners who refused to give themselves to the revolutionary cause.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the Professor is also labelled a terrorist by the prison guards and separated from the common criminals. Moreover, his murder by the military is depicted as a cruel act of aggression given that he was waving a white flag of surrender. His tragic demise thus draws critical attention to the collateral damage that the armed forces were willing to commit for the wider

¹⁸ Professor Montes is loosely based on Pastor Anaya, the priest accused by the Peruvian state of being a *Sendero* sympathiser and who was adopted by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience. See Gorriti, p. 248.

¹⁹ Gorriti, *The Shining Path*, p. 248.

national cause. It also shows that, like Jeremías in *Ni con dios*, the Professor's failure to affiliate himself with a particular social group within the prison isolates him from protection and places him in a dangerous position of liminality that is only really understood, in the end, by La Gringa.

Rather than blame one side or the other, the film's downbeat portrayal of Peruvian society damaged by ten years of political violence and economic mismanagement suggests that both sides of the conflict caused terrible damage to its people. The film conveys an overwhelming feeling of social entrapment by criminality and despair, and La Gringa's story becomes a metaphor for 'un país tomado por el miedo, donde la libertad está permanentemente amenazada'.²⁰ The general atmosphere of fear and claustrophobia is emphasized by the film's portrayal of both Lima and the prison island as restrictive spaces, bounded by walls and rocky beaches, within which violence could erupt at any moment. The depiction of the city as an extension of the prison space creates the effect of a "prisión nacional" en la que los "peores" no son necesariamente los que están "adentro".²¹ Furthermore, the film's reflective moments – shown mainly when La Gringa is writing about his experiences or watching city life go by from the anonymity of the rooftops – articulate the depressing idea that it will be a long time before Peruvian citizens are ever free from economic, political and social chaos. As Bedoya further points out, the juxtaposition of city and prison life reinforces the notion of the prison as a microcosm of a nation in which opportunities are restricted:

Abundaban en ella [Lima] los mismos callejones intrincados, las mismas zonas desprotegidas, exhibiéndose como el microcosmos donde se

²⁰ Emilio Bustamente, 'Diccionario temático del cine peruano: violencia', *La Gran Ilusión*, 6 (1996), 70.

²¹ Bedoya, *Un cine reencontrado*, p. 298.

encuentran todas las razas, todos los gestos, todos los resentimientos y un desorden o desesperación unánimes.²²

However, thanks mainly to the determination and initiative of his girlfriend, Julia, La Gringa is offered the opportunity to renounce his life of violent crime, if only he can find the strength and the will to break his apparent addiction to fighting against the authorities. She takes on and negotiates her way through the demands of the state institutions that inhibit her partner's freedom, persuading the judiciary to forward his appeal for release, only to find that he rejects all concept of negotiation by escaping during the journey to the court. Meanwhile, she both studies and works hard to acquire the resources they need to leave the country in their joint bid for a different kind of freedom beyond the national borders. In spite of her support and their plans, however, he defies all logic and returns to the prison once more, this time of his own volition. It is as if the very real chance for physical escape triggers a realisation that wherever he goes, he will remain trapped by his selfish behaviour. In order to set himself free on a more profound psychological level, perhaps inspired in part by Julia's selfless actions, he determines therefore to risk his own life for someone else. Her attitude to life, and in particular her determination to find a way out of a situation of relative impoverishment, offers a challenge to the more macho approach adopted by La Gringa himself.

The plan to leave Peru was one that many citizens shared in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when democracy and economic fortune seemed to have reached an all-time low. As Bustamente points out, 'muchacha ajena a cualquier actividad delictiva, dejaba el Perú amedrentada por el terrorismo y la crisis económica'.²³ *Alias la gringa* points to the general suffering of Peruvian society at the end of a traumatic decade, and La

²² Bedoya, *Cien años de cine en el Perú*, p. 269.

²³ Bustamente, p. 70.

Gringa's story of resistance and escape, from prison and from the nation, serves as a metaphor for social trends at the time. Moreover, his eventual rejection of the criminality and anarchic behaviour that he had accepted as an integral part of his nature suggests the possibility of change, and the rejection of violence generally as a constituent part of national identity. An alternative model based on negotiation is offered by Julia's story which shows her contributing to society and engaging with the authorities in a way that emphasises responsibility, solidarity and constructive dialogue over conflict and destruction. The function of her character on a broader, symbolic level is quite complex. On the one hand, she is portrayed as an attractive woman and dutiful partner who affirms La Gringa's active, macho identity in accordance with traditional interpretations of gender in classical cinema.²⁴ The deliberately erotic display of her body further reinforces her position as object of the male gaze and her willingness to wait for La Gringa to return as subject to patriarchal forces. On the other hand, however, her confidence and intelligence, her ability to assume agency and power, and the framing of her body as sexually liberated all serve to suggest a tentative image of the nation as modern rather than reactionary and one where different models of behaviour should be acceptable.²⁵ As such, the film complicates the notion of Peruvian national identity as dominated by repressive machismo and points gently to the possibility for change via non-violent means, a theme that is further pursued in the later films discussed in this study.

²⁴ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 5th edn, ed. by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 833-844.

²⁵ Hayward, p. 99.

In order to convey a sense of the diversity of the nation's underclass and to emphasise the far-reaching consequences of national decline, Durant insisted on the use of Peruvian non-professional extras from a range of ethnic backgrounds (indigenous, *mestizo*, black, Chinese) in the scenes that focus on the 'common' criminals. Likewise, the group of *Sendero* prisoners appears to be composed of a range of ethnic identities but is even less differentiated than the delinquents. This aspect resonates with Gorriti's own observations at *El Frontón* that, although the *Sendero* prisoners might have looked like 'a demographic cross section of the country [...] no single type predominated', and the collective identity and ideology of the group and its cause was more important than individual concerns.²⁶

The Peruvian population, whether locked up in *El Frontón* or trapped within the streets of Lima, is presented as oppressed, restricted in terms of life options, and possessing neither the motivation nor the inclination to behave in a more socially responsible way. Indeed, it is the prison which is the space 'en el que se crea la solidaridad entre los mejores, es decir los más fuertes, los más resistentes'.²⁷ By contrast, within Lima, solidarity had collapsed, and criminal behaviour became ingrained into the daily life of the capital as well as a means of individual survival. As Crabtree notes, by the late 1980s 'criminal violence, especially armed assault and robbery, became particularly common as a result of the fall in living standards ... [and contributed to] ... creating a climate of fear not just among the wealthy and the middle class, but also among wide sectors of the poor'.²⁸ Indeed, de Cárdenas argues that the main strength of the film is its development of a sense that there really is no escape from such desperate times,

²⁶ Gorriti, *The Shining Path*, p. 245.

²⁷ Bedoya, *Cien años de cine en el Perú*, p. 270.

²⁸ Crabtree, *Peru under García*, p. 184.

except perhaps for those who, like La Gringa, have the option of leaving altogether.²⁹ Indeed, his nickname suggests that the best opportunities (for physical or economic escape from deprivation and violence) are reserved for those of European or North American descent. Moreover the element of disguise refers specifically to the construction of a preferred identity for the sake of social integration and advancement, if not by changing skin colour then by adapting everyday practices, attitudes and appearances.³⁰

The loss of social cohesion and sense of belonging is perhaps the film's main concern and in some respects, the bonding between different social groups within the prison offers an alternative to the fragmented society observed by La Gringa as he watches from the rooftops. It is by contrasting how the different groups in this prison respond to their circumstances that the protagonist finally realises the responsibility he has towards helping those he left behind. It dawns on him that, like Montes, he needs to become actively engaged in the struggle for a better society rather than focusing all his attentions on himself. Hence his dangerous return to the island to pay an honourable debt of gratitude to the men who helped him, and his despair at being unable to save their lives as they did his. By closing the narrative with an act of self-sacrifice that demonstrates the extent of La Gringa's moral transformation, the film ends on a note of subdued optimism. The message that seems to be offered is that it is better for the development of a nation if its people act as caring and responsible citizens rather than as selfishly competitive individuals, whatever their background. It also suggests that

²⁹ Federico de Cárdenas, 'Alias la gringa', *La República*, 20 September 1991, p. 4.

³⁰ As noted in the discussion of *Ni con dios*, this process is known as whitening, or *blanqueamiento* – a psychological and cultural changing of one's self along with a rejection of ethnic origin associated with a darker skin colour that has connotations of barbarism and backwardness.

change is possible, and that identity – whether personal or collective – is fluid. Just as La Gringa changed himself once (superficially) to escape the confines of prison, so he succeeds in changing again, on a more profound level, in order to break free from a personality that is apparently addicted to criminality, violence and narcissistic behaviour.

La Gringa traverses a rich terrain of ambiguity and liminality with his actions of escape and return and, more symbolically, by his refusal to conform to social stereotype. In her discussion of thematisations of nation, Hjort suggests that a depiction of issues and events of national interest will often be used, ‘not to affirm some inherent and enduring [national] identity ... [but to emphasise the notion that] ... human beings forge their own destinies and can become the vehicles for change’.³¹ This, she further suggests, might be achieved by focusing critical attention on current national identities. Indeed, La Gringa’s encounters with Montes and Viejo force him to reassess his own relationship with the world around him. Explicit change can be detected in the growing awakening of a moral conscience in La Gringa. Through his experience of topical events of national importance, his story becomes an appeal for a more general shift in collective attitude. The ‘real’ story on which this fiction film is based therefore becomes subordinated to its main political concern to provoke a broader debate about social responsibility.

Section 5: Concluding Thoughts

In summary, Durant’s third feature film offers a critique of Peruvian society at a time of crisis, oppression and depression. It challenges aspects of the state’s economic and

³¹ Hjort, p.115.

counter-insurgency strategy specifically, through reconstruction of the adventures of an individual who defied the system and refused to become a victim of it. It acts, hence, as a film of protest both against institutional and structural violence and against social lethargy on the part of individual citizens, at a time when acute poverty and political violence had given rise to feelings of despair and hopelessness. Although Fujimori had just claimed victory as the new President when this film was released, everyday life was still dominated by the economic crisis and political violence that had characterised the 1980s. By identifying with the anti-authoritarian protagonist, domestic spectators could participate in an escapist fantasy wrapped in topical detail that was specifically targeted at their own situation. Meanwhile, the film urges collective action and creativity in facing up to difficult times that seem out of control. It appeals to citizens of all backgrounds to reclaim power and control at a community level and to promote positive human relations as fundamental to the rebuilding of a better society.

Moreover, it claims a stake in the important role of cultural production in shaping national identity, and appeals to intellectuals and artists to become active in the struggle to rebuild a society, and to apply their skills and talents to the political cause. For Durant, a national cinema should be regarded as ‘el rostro de un país’ (1991: 13), depicting and exploring issues of national concern.³² Indeed, the very existence of ‘national film’ at a time of crisis for Peruvian cinema may even be considered as an act of protest in itself. While *Alias la gringa* is not a film that interrogates in detail the complex social and political reasons for the chaos of contemporary Peru, it nevertheless provides a critical snapshot of a society in collective decline. It reveals a picture of systematic abuse and structural violence in Peruvian prisons and on the streets, and

³² During an interview with Isaac León Frías, Durant further protested that ‘la larga crisis que vive el país está poniendo en peligro la continuidad de la producción

suggests that the only real options are to get out or work together for a better future. La Gringa himself defies the system one last time by fleeing the country, but his egotism is redeemed by his decision to put his life at risk for the sake of another and by his final commitment to use his memoirs to make others aware and ashamed of the inhumane conditions of Peruvian prisoners. By closing in this way, the film seems finally to suggest that since a government engaged in dubious counter-insurgency and ineffective economic policy cannot be trusted to guarantee the safety of its citizens – whether in prison or on the streets – then individuals of all backgrounds must take that responsibility themselves.