

Nosotros los pobres (1948)

Matthew Bush

dir. Ismael Rodríguez; prod. Ismael Rodríguez; photography José Ortiz Ramos; music Manuel Esperón. 35mm, black/white, 115 mins. Producciones Rodríguez Hermanos, distrib. Clasa-Mohme.

There may be no other film more closely associated with Mexico's long history of cinematic melodrama than *Nosotros los pobres*. Carlos Monsiváis, Mexico's most prescient and prolific commentator on Mexican melodrama, called *Nosotros los pobres* the height of Mexican melodramatic cinema (1994, 144)—and it was not only a smashing success in its day but has also displayed impressive longevity. *Nosotros los pobres* is a mainstay of television broadcasting and was for many years Mexico's leader in box office earnings (Mora 81). Beyond its broad popularity, *Nosotros los pobres* epitomizes much of what has come to be known as the Golden Age of Mexican cinema, a period spanning from approximately 1935 to 1955. As Monsiváis observes, this era of Mexican film is typified by, among other elements, an idealization of rural life and a moralistic taming of characters in urban tales, a celebration of machismo and noble poverty, state censorship and public morality ordained by the Catholic Church, and the use of stereotypical characterization in the service of formulating a national imaginary for the cinematic spectator (2008, 67-68). *Nosotros los pobres*, *Ustedes los ricos* (1948), and *Pepe el toro* (1953) form a trilogy directed by the enormously productive Ismael Rodríguez, centered on the character Pepe »El Toro« (played by Pedro Infante). The *Pepe el Toro* trilogy illustrates many of the largely conservative traits of Golden Age Mexican film that thrilled early- to mid-20th century audiences and continues to serve as a point of reference for contemporary Mexican filmmakers.



Nosotros los pobres' plot is imbued with forbidden romance, hidden identities, late-recognized virtue, and the eventual triumph of justice over villainy—indeed, some of the core features of melodrama. The film tells the tale of Pepe el Toro, a carpenter in a Mexico City neighborhood, who cares for his niece, Chachita (played by Evita Muñoz), who believes that Pepe is her father and that her mother, Yolanda (played by Carmen Montejo), is deceased. In fact, Pepe's sister Yolanda was banished from home after bringing dishonor by becoming pregnant out of wedlock, a shock that leaves her mother (played by María Gentil Arcos) paralyzed. Pepe raises Chachita as his own daughter, keeping her origins secret as the young girl jealously guards Pepe from other women so as not to soil her mother's memory—or so she would believe. Pepe, however, carries on a secret romance with Celia, played by Blanca Estela Pavón—Pavón and Pedro Infante being an iconic couple in Mexican cinema until the former's untimely death in a 1949 plane accident. Problems ensue when Pepe is robbed of the money he had received from the lawyer Montes (played by Rafael Alcayde) as a down payment for a project. While it was Celia's stepfather, the marijuana-addled Pilar (played by Miguel Inclán), who stole the money, Pepe is accused of theft and forced to work as a handyman for a woman who is a loan shark. When his new employer is found murdered, Pepe is accused of the crime, prosecuted by Montes, and put in jail.

Celia takes up work with Montes, offering him romantic favors hoping that he might help liberate Pepe but to no avail. With Pepe incarcerated, his mother and Chachita are left to fend for themselves. After having their possessions taken from them in retribution for Pepe's supposed crimes, they have to live with Celia's family. Eventually Pilar attacks Pepe's mother, who saw him steal Pepe's money, leaving the paralytic woman hospitalized. When Pepe learns of his mother's condition, he escapes prison to visit her at the hospital just before her death. Yolanda, who suffers from tuberculosis, is in the same ward and is reunited with Chachita just moments before Yolanda's passing. After being found by the police at the hospital, Pepe is returned to prison, where he encounters the actual murderer of his former employer and beats him to confess his crime. Ultimately, Pepe is liberated, and the film offers a happy ending as he and Celia are united, able to care for Chachita and raise a child of their own.

Monsiváis notes that *Nosotros los pobres* typified a form of emergent urban melodrama in Mexico that celebrated rural values like honor (1994, 148) while educating a broad audience about a new form of citizenship in urbanized society (2008, 86). This perspective is consistent with his understanding of Golden Age Mexican melodrama as a means through which the masses »accept invented costumes, customs, the joy of living without privacy, a singsong voice tone, [and] unpretentious, unrefined speech« (1994, 148; my translation). Monsiváis thus suggests that spectators imitate the screen and reproduce an urbanity provided to them by the film industry. In the broader context of Latin American melodrama, this top-down perspective is contested in the analyses of Jesús Martín-Barbero, albeit with regard to the contemporary *telenovela*. Martín-Barbero questions if the success of melodrama in Latin America is linked to a search for social recognition and an acknowledgement of a »primordial society« built upon familial and close-knit social relations through which the masses see themselves represented. Within Martín-Barbero's analysis, melodrama is not projected upon a docile spectator to whom culture is dictated, but rather to an active participant in the construction of cultural identity because »what gives the culture industry force and the stories meaning is not simply ideology but culture and profound dynamics of memory and cultural

imagination» (227). For Martín-Barbero (226) as well as for Hermann Herlinghaus (57), Latin American melodrama offers up a cultural anachronism through which subaltern cultural practices contest a capitalistic reification of time and social relations.

While *Nosotros los pobres* can certainly be read from a subaltern studies perspective, it is evident that it also upholds a series of hegemonic cultural and moral values. Importantly, as Elena Lahr-Vivaz has noted, the melodramatic social unity of the film is forged through its musical numbers and accompaniment. The film's musical score helps drive home Chachita's pain in lamenting the loss of her mother, and she is consoled that she is not alone in the valley of tears, thus clinging to religious faith in the absence of familial unity. Emotive musical accompaniment stirs melancholic affect, connecting the audience with a broader moralistic sense of belonging beyond the film. Such a scene illustrates Monsiváis' postulation of melodrama as a form of social catechism in which »theological reason« doles out suffering—and in the pain of others, a sense of pertinence to a group, be it familial or national, is fomented (1994, 152). A similar moralizing pattern is also on display in the film's representation of alcohol and drug consumption. The characters La Guayaba (played by Amelia Wilhelmy) and La Tostada (played by Delia Magaña) are neighborhood drunkards who, while offering comic relief, illustrate wanton tendencies through their general gossip and vagrancy as well as through their mistreatment of Pepe's mother in a festive scene central to the film. Of course, no other character is more abusive to Pepe's mother than Pilar, the noted marijuana addict in the film, and his abuse of the paralytic woman is presented as if it were a psychedelic freak-out in which hallucinations of prying eyes merge Pilar's Catholic guilt for his theft with the consequences of his illicit substance abuse.

Nosotros los pobres also presents a largely stereotypical take on gender roles, common to Mexican melodramas of the era in which contemporary and historical identities were cemented at »the level of the family as the basic unit of the social structure« (Noble 101). Celia is largely portrayed as a stereotypically pining domestic character, yet she demonstrates feminine agency beyond the confines of the home by taking on work to help Pepe. Similarly, while Pepe exhibits many stereotypically macho characteristics, he is »at once active male, and passive sexual object; at once violent and able to cry; at once virile father and suffering/sacrificing father/mother« (Slaughter 35-36). It is perhaps due to such complexities in the ostensibly static characterization of *Nosotros los pobres* that the film has achieved such staying power. Without question, *Nosotros los pobres* is a melodramatic standard in Mexican cinema. It reveals the melodramatic mode in all its dynamism. There are stock characters but also evolutions, however gradual, in its conceptualization of gender. There are clichéd representations of citified environs and innovative visual effects in the aforementioned psychedelic sequence and musical numbers that fuse Pepe and Celia across space and time. Accordingly, *Nosotros los pobres* provides both a lasting example of a melodramatized approach to the cultural forces that shaped Mexico's urban growth in the early 20th century and an appeal for a nostalgically imagined mode of social morality.

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