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**CASTLE OF MACHISMO:  
A MEDITATION ON ARTURO RIPSTEIN'S FILM  
*EL CASTILLO DE LA PUREZA***

Dennis West

Arturo Ripstein, director of *El castillo de la pureza*, is one of several young Mexican cineastes who, since the mid-1960's, have undertaken renovation of their national cinema. They have rejected the superficial slickness of much previous commercial output in order to strive after increased directorial control over production as well as authenticity and depth in the exploration of Mexican themes. The 1972 *El castillo de la pureza*, scripted by Ripstein and the well-known poet-author José Emilio Pacheco, is the first of this director's films to receive regular distribution in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Intolerance has always been Ripstein's central thematic concern.<sup>2</sup> *El castillo de la pureza* examines a specific variation of this theme: Mexican machismo, seen as the exaltation of the masculine personality achieved through the oppression of the weak, of those less macho. The following meditation explores the phenomenon of machismo as exemplified by the film's protagonist, Gabriel Lima.

Ripstein's study of dangerously abnormal, domestic authoritarianism unravels via a simple, linear plot development. Gabriel Lima, father of three, has kept his family locked up in their deteriorating colonial mansion in Mexico City ever since the birth of the first child, eighteen years ago. Now, however, problems are developing: the teenage brother and sister move toward an openly incestuous relationship; Gabriel's obsession with the impurity and corruption of the outside world and his desire to "protect" his family become all-consuming; and, finally, increased bureaucratic restrictions and vigilance make the domestically-produced raticide—source of the family's livelihood—increasingly difficult to market. A routine check of the product by two policemen triggers a fanatic response in the now insane Gabriel; he responds by holding his family hostage at knifepoint and setting his house on fire. As the wife and son disarm the father, the police extinguish the flames. Lima is taken off in a patrol car; the fatherless family becomes a household without a head.

Space in the film naturally divides into two areas: outside the house and inside the house. The outside is where only Gabriel Lima may go—the

metropolis where the manufacturer-salesman ventures to peddle his product. Don Gabriel walking the streets of Mexico City as he makes the rounds delivering handmade rat poison incarnates the lonely figure of the rigid, fossilized authoritarian moving doggedly through an ever-changing world which is fast leaving him behind. The city, as seen by the camera which accompanies Lima, is becoming modernized, Americanized, cosmopolitan: garish advertising on walls; female passers-by dressed in the latest fashions; construction sites, traffic signs, a constant flow of cars and buses; and U.S. marketing techniques as exemplified by the rival poison sold in the latest convenient plastic pouches and advertised via the mass media. Though outside surroundings change, Gabriel does not. For years he has personally delivered the homemade product, transporting it on foot in a suitcase rather than using modern transportation. Lima sells to small non-chain retailers, is paid in cash, and does his own accounting at the time of the sales. The modern sidewalk taco stand where Gabriel stops for a snack provides an example of a small businessman who has successfully modified a traditional enterprise in order to face changing times—in contrast to the commercial intransigence of the raticide manufacturer, who continues to control all phases of production and marketing personally.

One day the modern, external world invades the sanctity of the Lima home; Gabriel encounters an illustrated flier advertising men's suits that has been somehow slipped under the huge wooden doors of the old house. This foreshadows the final violation of the home when the police impudently douse the flames—and the impassioned head of the family—with the foam from a newfangled fire extinguisher. The invasion of the home causes Gabriel to frantically expose his obsession to public view; he is driven berserk when his ego is attacked in the very heart of the mini-world it had conceived and controlled.

"A man's home is his castle" runs the saying in English. The house at 99 Donceles<sup>3</sup> is both home and castle. In the heart of the modern city, the Lima house combines the primary functions of the medieval castle—to serve as residence and defensive fortress. The nuclear family is defended from the outside world by the walls of the constantly locked house. The shape of the dwelling is rectangular, the same form as the rat cages<sup>4</sup> in the room used as a workshop. The design of the residence is that of the typical seignorial Spanish dwelling of the colonial period. Large wooden doors at the front of the house, when opened, provide passage to the interior patio. The rooms of the house face *inward* and give onto the courtyard. No yards surround this structure since the Hispanic builder placed a wall directly between his existence and the world outside. Observers such as Salvador de Madariaga who locate individualism and the ego at the center of Spanish character and existence<sup>5</sup> would see in the Lima house the continuing presence of the Spanish spirit. Whereas the traditional North American dwelling is bounded by front and back yards providing the resident with a transitional, tapering-

off zone between himself and the world, the Spanish colonial house clearly and sharply delimits and encompasses the self while blocking out the other. The Lima residence has no back door, thus heeding the Spanish proverb that a house with two doors is difficult to guard, and enhancing its prison-fortress functions.

The sole openness of the house is the courtyard, which, significantly, faces the sky and the elements rather than the street intercourse with mankind. Gabriel's desire to protect the purity of the family leads him to the mad restructuring of the living space to create a cell-within-a-cell existence: the external walls and locked front door; the patio, itself enclosed by the surrounding interior walls and galleries; the punishment cells in the basement, the better to lock up misbehaving children; and the bedrooms, refashioned by the master of the house into cells with padlocks. An obsessed man has converted a home into a prison and the first visual image brought into focus by the camera in the initial sequence is that of rusty tin cans hung by Gabriel so that they clang together when the main door opens or closes. The greyish-brown tones of the cans fill the screen emblemizing the drab existence lived within. Such primitive detection devices not only tend to create a feeling of eerie, homespun repression but also cause the viewer to wonder about their maker. The cans hanging outside Gabriel's bedroom door furnish a symbolic key to his authoritarian character and way of life: four small tins suspended around a larger one which, when it jiggles, forces the others to move. Gabriel Lima is the axis, the center, while the wife and three children are mere satellites directly, immediately, and necessarily subjected to that central force.

Gabriel Lima's trajectory from author (maker, creator) to authoritarian signals the entrance of Dr. Frankenstein into the Mexican domestic scene. Gabriel, not content with having created a family and then incarcerating it, must go beyond to become sole molder of every facet of his family's life. He runs his home as he does his business—his is the single, unquestioned jurisdiction.

To exercise this total control Lima assumes all the roles that reinforce the direct verticality of the power structure: he is instructor in morals and physical education, disciplinarian and jailer, foreman in the workroom where the raticide is produced; in addition to being the typical Hispanic master of the house who, at the head of the dinner table, can brusquely decree that there be no talking. In his role of moralistic prophet Lima not only molds the present to his egocentric ideation but even tailors the predictions of Nostradamus to his own obsessions.

Gabriel's relations with his wife, Beatriz, show the lack of respect and consideration that Maria Elvira Bermúdez considers the most frequent characteristic of the Mexican middle-class family.<sup>6</sup> Gabriel constantly orders her about, never discusses his business plans with her nor his program for raising the offspring and abuses her verbally and physically. The depth

of his belief in woman's innate inferiority is evident when he experiences the need to help Beatriz pour water down the drain. His lack of trust in his spouse drives him to the extreme of regularly spying on her through a peephole as she sleeps. The couple's sex life flickers only on the occasion of the husband's brutal, mechanical beck-and-call.

Gabriel Lima's adherence to a double standard is, in the eyes of students of the Mexican character such as Octavio Paz, a common characteristic of Hispanic man.<sup>7</sup> Gabriel freely visits prostitutes but at home attacks his wife for alleged infidelity years ago. He imposes a vegetarian diet for his family but devours meat tacos while making his rounds. He openly playfully chucks his own daughter under the chin and displays a Mexican male's *de rigueur* interest in her.

The inspector<sup>8</sup> provides an important point of comparison with Gabriel Lima. The two middle-class men travel around the city making calls and dress alike when they do so—suit, tie, and brown raincoat. Both have developed the pattern needed to break the ice with those they come in contact with. And both men consider complimenting attractive females a natural right and a masculine duty. The inspector represents the norm, as Gabriel generally appears to do—when he roams the outside. Inside the castle, however, removed from the sanctions of society, Gabriel's ego reigns supreme giving shape to a monstrous abnormality. The figure of Gabriel Lima forces us to ask what are appropriate criteria for distinguishing abnormality from normality in a male-dominated, authoritarian society?

The raticide manufacturer earns a niche in the gallery of classic Mexican machos as delineated by Octavio Paz in *El laberinto de la soledad*. The essential attribute of the Mexican macho, according to Paz, is power, generally used aggressively to wound, humiliate, or destroy.<sup>9</sup> Gabriel Lima—in his absolute authoritarianism—is the representative, on the domestic plane, of the powerful machos who have dominated Mexico: the caciques, feudal lords, generals, politicians, and captains of industry.

The counterpart of Mexican machismo is, according to Bermúdez, *hembrismo*—the attitude of the wife characterized by humility, resignation, lack of initiative, obedience, and exaggerated submission to and economic dependence on the male.<sup>10</sup> These traits generally apply to Beatriz. She stands up to her husband when he attacks her children but is incapable of breaking out of her dependent, secondary role. At the end of the film the petty tyrant is carried off, and, as the family returns home, it is now the wife who possesses the keys to the castle. Inside the foam-splattered study-gymnasium the panning camera observes the ruins of the house built on the shifting sand of egocentricity and despotism. Ending the revelation pan is Beatriz' face, which the camera slowly approaches as the tempo of the musical score increases.

Bermúdez has maintained that much of the domestic solidarity of the traditional Mexican home is nothing more than the absolute economic

dependency of the wife.<sup>11</sup> What will happen to this wife who knows nothing of her husband's business methods and contacts? The final human image in the film is the close-up of Beatriz' countenance. Her enigmatic gaze calls Mexican women to an examination of their situation in a changing world. Is authoritarianism inherently a key feature of Hispanic life?<sup>12</sup> How can a woman meaningfully function and define herself in a world ruled by machismo? Can male chauvinism be tempered without the destruction of the masculine ego? How does a woman alone raise children already conditioned to male authority? Ripstein poses the questions; the audience must ponder the answers.

#### NOTES

1. Distributed by New Yorker Films, 43 W. 61st St., New York, New York 10023.
2. Beatriz Reyes Nevares, "Arturo Ripstein" (interview), *Trece directores del cine mexicano* (México: Sep/Setentas, 1974), p. 169.
3. The sophisticated Mexican viewer is likely to recall the eccentric old woman who inhabits a decaying colonial mansion, shut-off from the world, on the same unlikely downtown street in Carlos Fuentes' well-known novel *Aura* (1962).
4. The obvious symbolic equivalency between the rat cages and the house is their function as prison. The new rat trap that Gabriel has designed is called a "castle," further extending the equivalency. Lima, of course, is keeper of the rat traps and keeper of the castle.
5. See Madariaga's comparative study of national characters entitled *Englishmen, Frenchmen, Spaniards* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969). Madariaga links the individual Spanish ego to the family in the following manner: "in Spain the family is but the first collective sphere which the individual meets in his expansion as he travels outwards from his egocentric self. It is therefore the strongest of the group units in Spanish life" (p. 133). In an afterward to the 1969 edition of his essay, Madariaga endeavors to concentrate the national character of the Spaniard into the single symbol of the man-castle (p. 246).
6. Marra Elvira Bermúdez, *La vida familiar del mexicano* (México: Antigua Librería Robredo, 1955), p. 58.
7. Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad*, 4th ed. (México y Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económico, 1964), p. 165.
8. This role is played by David Silva. Mexican film buffs will remember his role as the young house-to-house vacuum cleaner salesman in Alejandro Galindo's 1948 *Una familia de tantas*. In this key study of a middle-class family harshly ruled by an old-fashioned authoritarian father, Silva also invades the house, first as salesman and then as the daughter's suitor. As in *El castillo de la pureza* this paternally unsanctioned interest in his daughter provokes the fury of the master of the house. *Una familia de tantas* is an important precursor of *El castillo de la pureza* in its depiction of the fruits of abusive paternal authoritarianism in a changing world: the absolute submission of the wife and the intense frustration of the children.
9. Paz, p. 69.
10. Bermúdez, Chapter 5.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.
12. Anthropologists Eric R. Wolf and Edward C. Hansen argue persuasively that it is. See *The Human Condition in Latin America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), particularly the summary on p. 241.