

## Chapter 1. Introduction

What is the child for Latin American cinema? This book aims to answer that question, tracing the common tendencies of the representation of the child in the cinema of Latin American countries, showing the place of the child in the movements, genres and styles that have defined that cinema, and devoting sustained attention to representational trends and themes surrounding the child-figure characterising the period from the late 1990s to the 2010s, as well as to the experiments with film aesthetics precipitated by the child-figure, and the narrative and stylistic techniques at play in the creation of the child's perspective. Whilst the book's chapters look in detail at films from the recent and contemporary period, this Introduction aims to place those analyses in a historical context, by examining earlier representations, in particular those of the mid-century movements of melodrama and the New Latin American Cinema.

Recent years have seen an increased interest in the place and meanings of the child on screen within theoretical and critical discourse, and the publication of important contributions on the relationship between the child and cinema. Vicky Lebeau's *Childhood and Cinema* (2008) and Karen Lury's *The Child in Film: Tears, Fears and Fairytales* (2010a) are landmark studies that give sustained, in-depth attention to the topic, and examine films from a number of global traditions, yet neither of these important works deals with any Latin American film.<sup>iii</sup> Further, as is well-documented, Latin American cinemas have undergone something of a renaissance – an increase in output,

popular appeal and critical acclaim – during the period in question.<sup>iii</sup> A not inconsiderable number of recent and contemporary films – including some very significant ones – feature child protagonists, many of which are dealt with in this volume; from Walter Salles' *Central do Brasil* (Brazil, 1998) to Lucrecia Martel's *La ciénaga* (Argentina, 2001), Andrés Wood's *Machuca* (Chile, 2004) and Mariana Rondón's *Pelo malo* (Venezuela, 2013), film portrayals of children comprise some of the most striking material of recent and contemporary Latin American cinema.

The conjunction of new theoretical insights with new film material has given rise to a number of publications which deal specifically with the topic of the child in Latin American film, with which this book is in dialogue and which, together with it, form a new branch of Latin American film studies. Chief amongst the contributors are Carolina Rocha and Georgia Seminet, whose two edited volumes (2012a; 2014) and one special issue (2012b) on this topic constitute a marvellous resource for researchers. More recently, Rachel Randall's *Children on the Threshold in Contemporary Latin American Cinema* (2017) further defines the field, pinpointing a number of important theoretical concerns around nature, gender and agency, with specific reference to films from Brazil, Chile and Colombia. Rocha and Seminet point to an intensification of Latin American cinematic interest in children and young people, a 'boom' which they relate to 'society's increased preoccupation for the safety and well-being of children' (Rocha and Seminet, 2012a, 12). As I will show in this Introduction, though, these groups have been prominent in Latin American film since the mid-twentieth century, and have performed

important roles congruent with the main ideological thrusts of the movements of melodrama and then militant filmmaking that defined cinema on the sub-continent during much of the twentieth century, the codes and tropes of which continue to inform contemporary filmmaking. This book shows how contemporary representations of the child are rooted in long-standing cultural imaginaries of childhood and Latin American cinematic traditions, whilst also showing how representations of the child are changing, especially in relation to their political meanings and aesthetic modes.

This book contains a particular focus on the pre-adolescent child, and this is partly due to the emergence of new theories and films as discussed above, but also because this is an area which, compared with the analysis of youth in Latin American film, has received relatively little attention.<sup>iv</sup> Of course, the two categories are not easily separable, and whether one counts as a child may depend on behaviour and activity, and in turn on class or ethnicity, as well as age. This is important in Latin America, where many lives do not conform to Western bourgeois familial models, and where, for example, many minors work. Sophie Dufays argues in a more philosophical vein that two criteria define the child on screen: the objective age category, and the 'relationship that the child [...] has with sexuality [...] and death, that is, the two limits of his or her existence' (2014b, 22). Some of the 'child' characters I discuss in this book are approaching or commencing puberty, but generally I focus on younger children and this is because I am particularly interested in the cultural idea(l) of the child and with a range of connotations and associations of this figure in the cultural imaginary, including innocence, authenticity, neutrality,

among a range of other meanings, as they translate into the cinematic signifier 'Child' in Latin American film. In his book *Centuries of Childhood*, historian Philippe Ariès claimed that childhood is historically contingent (1996 [1962]). This has led to an understanding within the discipline of Childhood Studies of childhood as a construct that can be investigated alongside categories of gender, race and class, and that is constituted by the adult view of it as 'other'. In her book *The Case of Peter Pan, Or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* Jacqueline Rose examines the ideology of childhood from Rousseau to *Peter Pan*, arguing that the cultural meanings of the category 'Child' can be understood as a 'portion of adult desire' (1984, xii), since the child's association with nature and truth—with instinct not the cerebral, with innocence not decay— 'carries the weight of one half of the contradictions which we experience in relation to ourselves' (50). The meaning of the cinematic signifier 'Child', as it pertains to the Latin American screen, is part of what this book seeks to elucidate, and, because it focuses almost exclusively on the role of the child in films addressed to adult audiences,<sup>v vi</sup> the question of the cinematic child's meaning for and effect on the adult spectator underlies many of the analyses contained here.

### **The Child and Cinema: Theoretical Perspectives**

In theoretical discussions of the child in film there is likewise a strong focus on the adult spectator's desires, responses and feelings in relation to the on-screen child. In 1924, Béla Balázs wrote an early account of the appeal of the child in film, which speaks to many later developments in film theory including the medium's indexical nature and questions of visual pleasure and

voyeurism. For Balázs 'the naturalness of [children's] unconscious expressions and gestures' (2011 [1924], 61) makes looking at children deeply compelling. It gives us the 'sense of eavesdropping on nature' (61); and 'to watch children who imagine themselves unobserved is like a glimpse of Paradise lost' (61). If, as later theorists would argue more comprehensively, the cinema produces and fulfils voyeuristic desires (Metz 1982 [1977]; Mulvey, 1989 [1975]), then the presence of the child intensifies these, and it is especially, according to Balázs, the possibilities for close-ups that the medium affords, which are so effective at allowing the sense of 'eavesdropping on nature' as close-up shots 'bring their facial expressions and gestures so close to us that we can delight in them as a natural phenomenon' (62). Continuing this emphasis on spectator-desire, André Bazin's devoted a 1949 review of *Germany, Year Zero* to an analysis of cinematic treatments of the child, contrasting Rossellini's neorealist film with Géza Radványi's *It Happened in Europe* (1947). Rossellini's is one of many post-WWII Italian neorealist films in which children are prominent. Bazin writes:

Mystery continues to frighten us, and we want to be reassured against it by the faces of children; we thoughtlessly ask of these faces that they reflect feelings that we know very well because they are our own. We demand of them signs of complicity, and the audience quickly becomes enraptured and teary when children show feelings that are usually associated with grown-ups. We are thus seeking to contemplate ourselves in them: ourselves, plus the innocence, awkwardness and naiveté we lost. This kind of cinema moves us, but aren't we in fact just feeling sorry for ourselves? [...] these films treat

childhood precisely as if it were open to our understanding and empathy; they are made in the name of anthropomorphism (1997, 121).

Bazin argues that, as an example of the conventional cinematic regimes against which he contrasts Rossellini's innovative neorealist approach, *It Happened in Europe* anthropomorphises the child. In that film, in which the child dies, Bazin argues that his death 'is so moving only because it confirms our adult conception of heroism' (1997, 123). This kind of cinema emphasises the child's vulnerability whilst constructing the child as mirror-image of adult emotion in which the adult spectator can recognise themselves; both act as means of bolstering adult spectatorial subjectivity and mastery. As a contrast to this mode of child-representation, Bazin posits *Germany Year Zero*, which, rather than anthropomorphising the child, allows for the child's radical otherness by refusing to project adult motivations or emotions onto the child (1997, 122). Rather echoing Balázs's emphasis on the child's special indexicality, Bazin makes of the child an ideal figure of neorealism, since it is (in part) Rossellini's treatment of the child which for Bazin defines his neorealist style: 'isn't this, then, a sound definition of realism in art: to force the mind to draw its own conclusions about people and events, instead of manipulating it into accepting someone else's interpretation?' (124). Here, too, the question of the politics of the child's representation begins to be formulated in relation to film, since Bazin's discussion hinges on the question of the adult's colonisation of the child-figure, the mastery of the viewer-subject as opposed to the colonised object of the gaze, a relationship which, of course, reflects the social positioning of these groups.

In Carolyn Steedman's book *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority 1780-1930* she proposes that the child has come to stand in modern culture as a figure for human interiority, which she defines as 'a sense of the self *within*' (1995, 4). Steedman argues that 'much literary and psychological endeavour' in modernity has concerned itself with 'the search for the lost realm of the adult's past, for the far country of dreams and reverie' and that this search 'came to assume the shape of childhood from the end of the eighteenth century onwards' (1995, viii). The figuring of the cinematic child is part of this wider thrust of modern culture which Steedman posits. For both Bazin and Balázs the act of watching the child on screen is a means of recapturing something: 'paradise lost' (Balázs) or 'the innocence, awkwardness and naiveté we lost' (Bazin). In this sense both theorists hint that what the child fulfils for the adult spectator is also the desire to return to the child self, to re-inhabit that self, or to recapture the past. Indeed, as Christian Metz argued in *The Imaginary Signifier*, the power of the cinema-viewing scenario is that it makes of the spectator a child once again, it positions the spectator as child;<sup>vii</sup> how much more powerful, then, must this effect be, when the chief identificatory figure on screen is also a child, or when images and close-ups of the child are to the fore. Recent work on the child in film has proposed that films with child protagonists, when viewed by adult audiences, tend to invite a 'conversation', between the adult viewer and her/his own childhood self, since the on-screen child evokes and calls forth that previous child self.<sup>viii</sup> These perspectives recall the psychoanalytic work of thinkers like Adam Phillips who stresses the effects on adults of spending time

with young children: they 'take us back to' or remind us of our child selves (1998, 47).

Contemporary theory of and commentary on the child-film echoes these perspectives. For Hemelryk Donald et. al. in their book *Childhood and Nation in Contemporary World Cinema*, 'Emotional impact and identification are [...] sharper on screen when there is a child protagonist in play, whether because we take responsibility for the child or because we project our own remembered childishness onto the protagonist. An intensity of recognition occurs [...]' (2017, 3). These writers suggest that the cinema's ability to repeat the structures and processes of the human mind is intensified by the fact of looking at a child on screen, since 'Looking at a child and thinking about childhood, at least in the abstracted context of visual representation, the human mind loses an element of distance, or at least its span of judgement shifts' (3). Perhaps this is because, as Ludmilla Jordanova argues 'Our capacity to sentimentalise, identify with, project onto, and reify children is almost infinite' (1990, 79). Drawing on Carolyn Steedman's work, Karen Lury in her book *The Child in Film* argues that 'childhood, in its innocence, intensity of experience and its personal veracity, offers a compulsive route back to the past. [...] By making the child the figure that witnesses or participates in events there is what amounts to a form of prosopopeia: that is, a conversation between the living (the adult survivor) and the dead (the child self [...])' (2010a, 110-11). We might think also, in this regard, of contributions to film theory which emphasise the way film revivifies, the way it brings the dead back to life (Bazin, 2005 [1967], 10).

If Bazin stresses the ways in which on-screen children function to affirm the adult spectator's own feelings and shore up the adult subject in a position of mastery, the appeal of the child film may equally be about adult spectatorial *movement*: the possibility of a flexible or perhaps fractured spectatorial position—in space-time, between past and present, or self and other—the child's view thus allowing for a defamiliarisation or a shifting between the familiar and the unfamiliar, a flexible, heterogeneous or mobile spectatorship. This view supports Claudia Castañeda's reading of the child in her book *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds* (2002), in which she argues that the child is constructed in modern culture as a figure of possibility and transformation, of potentiality and becoming. The child is a figure through which the adult subject experiences or imagines transformation, a figure which is always available to be inhabited by adults and which permits the disruption of subjective and identitarian limits.

A second, and related set of questions regarding the relationship of the child and the cinematic medium is centred on the affinities between the child's gaze, perception or experience, and the cinema's particular capacities or specific tendencies. Béla Balázs was an early contributor to this strand of enquiry also, in his linking of the camera's gaze and its capacity for close-up to the perceptual tendencies of the child. For him, the cinematic medium itself is 'childlike', in the sense that:

The poetry of ordinary life that constitutes the substance of good films is more easily visible from the closer perspective of little people [...]. They know more about the little moments of life because they still have time to dwell on them. *Children see the world in close-up*. [...] Only children at play gaze pensively at minor details (2011 [1924], 62).

This identification between the child's perspective or look, and the camera's gaze, arises again in Gilles Deleuze's *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, in which he sets out his theory of the shifts in cinema occurring after the Second World War. For Deleuze, the events of the European mid-twentieth century ushered in a new era of modern cinema beginning with Italian neo-realism, 'a cinema of the seer and no longer of the agent,' (2005b, 2) in which 'the character has become a kind of viewer' whose 'situation [...] outstrips his motor capacities on all sides' (3). Echoing Bazin's focus on the links between the child and neo-realism, Deleuze writes:

What constitutes [the new image] is the purely optical and sound situation which takes the place of the faltering sensory-motor situations. The role of the child in neo-realism has been pointed out, notably in De Sica (and later in France with Truffaut); this is because, in the adult world, the child is affected by a certain motor helplessness, but one which makes him all the more capable of seeing and hearing (3).

The child's limited ability to act or affect his situation means that he is largely limited to observing the world around him rather than effecting change in it,

meaning that the child becomes a kind of protagonist of neo-realism and bearer of the time-image *par excellence*. This shift in cinema and the associated shift in subjectivity, which for Deleuze is encapsulated by the child's lack of motor ability, is expressive of a generalised sense of disempowerment brought on by the historical circumstances of war and its aftermath. Here, then, the child's perceptual and physical capacities are associated with a new kind of cinematic gaze.

The related question of how the medium emulates or expresses child perception or experience has also motivated some important recent contributions to theory of and criticism on the child in film. In her thought-provoking introduction to a *Screen* special issue on 'The Child in Film and Television', Lury refers to Gaston Bachelard's proposition that children tend to be engaged in 'seeing' – a 'timeless and ahistorical' form of looking (2005, 308) whilst adults tend to be engaged in 'showing'; Lury aligns seeing with the imaginary and showing with the symbolic and suggests that cinema shows whilst creating the impression that we are simply 'seeing' (308-9). Lury's comment returns us to the idea discussed above, that film returns us to a child's experience of looking, but also invites us to think about what and how child-films represent: what they look at and how they look at it, in order to emulate the child's gaze. Such things might include 'the absorbed but pointless gaze which follows ants and beetles as they labour in the grass, returns again and again to the scab on your knee, explores cloudy breath on a windowpane' (Lury, 2005, 308). Ideas about the way that the presence of the child may inflect the film language increasingly motivate scholars. In her

article 'Children, Emotion and Viewing in Contemporary European Film', Emma Wilson examines representations which convey an 'embodied experience of childhood' (2005, 329), which 'mould the medium to child perceptions' (332) or which 'open us up to the child's emotions' (340). Annette Kuhn has written about the way the organisation of a film's spaces can reflect the child's drama of individuation (2005; 2010). For Kuhn, 'film's capacity to evoke the spatial, liminal and kinesic qualities of transitional processes enables the medium uniquely to convey, as it were from the inside, the feeling-tone and the psychical investments of key processes and activities of childhood' (2010, 96). Both Wilson and Kuhn's analyses contain a focus on the adult spectator's experience; echoing Deleuze, Wilson argues that, through the aesthetics she details, the films she analyses 'seek to return the adult spectator to the child state of helplessness (motor, emotional or political)' (2005, 330), whilst Kuhn argues that 'films can invite viewers to re-enter, as adults, the world of childhood' (2010, 96). Both scholars, then, continue with the focus (which as I have mentioned has motivated much theoretical discussion of the child in film) on the figure's effects on the adult spectator; however, both move away from the understanding of the child as object in the representation and discuss ways in which films convey children's worlds from the inside. In this sense, these analyses and the films they discuss challenge the politics of child-representation, and especially of the kinds of representations critiqued by Bazin, in which children appear as objects which serve to confirm adult spectatorial power and subjectivity. These questions, of the child's power and agency in the representation, and of how the representation disrupts or shores up traditional power relations and

identitarian positions between children and adults are returned to many times in this book, in particular because this book argues that, whilst children have traditionally been confined to the position of (suffering) objects in Latin American cinema, a new current of filmmaking is emerging which privileges the child's experience and agency.

### **The Child in Latin American Cinema: History and Interpretations**

Whilst this book devotes most of its in-depth analysis to the child protagonist in recent and contemporary Latin American cinema (late 1990s-2010s), a understanding of recent material has much to gain from a historical perspective, and in particular from an exploration of the presence of the child in the two defining currents of Latin American filmmaking in the twentieth century: melodrama and the New Latin American Cinema. This section argues that – despite the overt ideological differences between these two modes of filmmaking – there are important continuities surrounding the figuring of the child between the two. This section also attempts to understand the figure and the function of the child in these movements through recourse to the theoretical perspectives outlined above, and through discussion of the dominant cultural myths, imaginaries and ideologies of the child, especially as these interface with Latin American cultural preoccupations. These myths include the dominant fantasy of childhood innocence, which has its roots in Romantic thought and in which the child as embodiment of natural goodness is opposed to the corruption of the adult and of society, and variously to sexuality, degeneracy and modernity. They include the related trope of the suffering or victim-child (which as we have seen via Bazin is a traditional

cinematic figure), as well as the identification of the child and the nation, and the particular positioning of the child-figure in relation to the political: as a figure which simultaneously exists beyond or outside politics (another aspect of the innocence myth), but whose very perceived neutrality makes of him/her a convenient cipher for any given political message, equally available to both conservative and progressive politics, even, as Edelman claims 'the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention' (2004, 3).

Melodrama has been a defining genre of Latin American cinema since the early twentieth Century, and made special use of children and in particular of the figure of the innocent child. Melodrama enjoyed a hegemonic position from the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s with production concentrated in the main film-producing countries, Argentina, Brazil and Mexico. Film melodrama usually combines domestic settings and family stories with intense emotion or sentimentality, meaning that the child has often had an important role to play therein. Indeed, as Sadlier notes, 'the figure of the child is vital to the emotional trauma that is played out in melodrama' (Sadlier, 2009, 103), even if the figure does not always occupy a leading role. In addition, melodrama often features simplistic or Manichean plots, in which the notion of childhood innocence may be conveniently employed. Sadlier discusses prominent narrative tendencies of Latin American melodramas, including the 'sanctity of the mother-child relationship' as well as the 'theme of the abandoned child who is found and raised by a surrogate mother' which characterised several films from the mid-century, including the Bolivian *Hacia la gloria* (Camacho

and Jiménez, 1932) and the Mexican *Víctimas del pecado* (Fernández, 1950) (Sadler, 2009, 11), and also resurfaces in more recent works including *Central do Brasil* which is discussed in detail in Chapter 3. In an illuminating essay, Julia Tuñón and Tzvi Tal discuss the function of the child-figure in Mexican melodramas including *El calvario de una esposa* (1936) and *El papelerito* (1950). They relate the ubiquity of the child in Mexican melodrama to the demographic growth of the period, and the State's interest in fostering a concern for children (652). They also identify a number of dramatic, narrative and symbolic functions of the child-figure in this genre, finding that, in classical melodrama, the child-figure is always idealised, and serves to 'radicalizar el drama' ('intensify the drama') and to 'incrementar el nivel de la tragedia' ('heighten the tragedy') (2007, 655). The child's innocence, and at times, victim-status is crucial to these dramatic functions.

An emblematic film of the Mexican Golden Age, *Nosotros los pobres* (Ismael Rodríguez, 1948) has been described by Carlos Monsiváis as 'la cúspide del melodrama' ('the melodrama *par excellence*') (1994, 144), and features the child-star Chachita (Evita Muñoz) in a leading role.<sup>ix</sup> For Monsiváis, *Nosotros los pobres* has a special place in Mexican culture:

Todos la han visto, es un recuerdo colectivo envuelto en una ironía protectora y es imprescindible en la construcción de un mito, 'la cultura de la pobreza' y su manejo de ternura, devociones familiares y solidaridad que no sólo compensa, también arriaga en el desamparo. (Everyone has seen it, it functions as a part of collective memory, and one bound up with a certain

protective irony. It's essential to the construction of a myth, that of the 'culture of poverty', and the way in which tenderness, familial devotion, and solidarity operate therein, not only as a means of compensating poverty, but also as born of it) (1994, 144).

<Figure 1.1 ABOUT HERE>

The film revolves around the reputation and location of the mother from the child's perspective. Chachita's innocence is emphasised – her 'father' Pepe el Toro (Pedro Infante) (actually her uncle) covers her eyes in one instance to protect her from the sexuality of neighbours; more importantly, she is unaware of the true identities of her parents. Her portrayal is not entirely without complexity; she takes in chores behind Pepe's back to earn money even though he forbids this, but her principal function is to act as a shorthand for a sentimentalised virtue, encapsulated by the two-shots of Chachita and Pepe gazing wistfully into the distance (Figure 1.1), images which emphasise the child's vulnerability, dependency and tears, eliciting spectatorial responses of compassion and thereby reinforcing the adult spectator's powerful position *vis-à-vis* the on-screen child. As Patricia Holland writes:

Pictures of sorrowing children reinforce the defining characteristics of childhood, dependence and powerlessness. [...] As they reveal their vulnerability, viewers long to protect them. The boundaries between childhood and adulthood are reinforced as the image gives rise to pleasureable

emotions of tenderness and compassion, which satisfactorily confirm adult power (2004, 143).

Chachita's face in this image recalls the 'soulful expression, with eyes uplifted to heaven [which was] a stock-in-trade of postcards and popular imagery of the second half of the nineteenth century' (Holland, 2004, 144). The film ends with the death of two mothers – Pepe's, and Chachita's – and the child's role here is to heighten the emotional pitch, to 'radicalizar el drama' and – as throughout – to facilitate the audience's tears. Chachita is the poor child who valiantly suffers poverty and misfortune, who weeps as Pepe el Toro is wrongfully imprisoned, and whose mother tragically dies just as Chachita discovers her identity, inducing many more tears. In *Pricing the Priceless Child*, Viviana Zelizer proposes that a 'profound transformation in the economic and sentimental value of children' (1985, 3) took place between the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries alongside processes of modernisation, producing, along with other cultural shifts of modernity, an 'economically "worthless" but emotionally "priceless" child' (1985, 3), a sacralisation of childhood, as child life became more ardently protected, and child labour more harshly judged. If, as Monsiváis writes, a key function of the Mexican melodrama was the mediation of secularisation and the concomitant replacement of old ideals with new idealisations (1994, 73-4) this use and portrayal of the child can be understood as one such idealisation, a repository for the feelings of (familial) devotion and tenderness which for Monsiváis acts as a representation of virtue in poverty. *Nosotros los pobres* establishes the (innocent) child as a new altar at which to worship, and in

doing so incorporates Christian traditions of the innocent Christlike or angelic child into a secularising and modernising culture. The family becomes a new sacred entity in a secular society, and the – innocent, idealised – child is at its centre.

For David MacDougall, echoing Bazin,

In one subgenre, children are typically seen as victims and are sought out for their victim status. The desires that this satisfies are complex, combining feelings of indignation, parentlike devotion, physical identification, rescue fantasies, morbid curiosity, and sentimentality (2006, 74).

For Tuñón and Tal, this is an important feature of melodrama, in which abandoned, suffering and victim-children abound, and in which:

Los niños llevan a un nivel más grave lo que podría no ser más de una anécdota, porque la vive alguien a quien se considera sin defensas [...] pero además, de esta manera encarna el sacrificio y en una cultura católica el perdedor ganará el cielo (Children make that which could be a mere anecdote more serious, because it is experienced by someone we consider to be defenseless [...] and so the child also embodies the idea of sacrifice, and in a Catholic culture the person who loses goes to heaven) (2007, 655).

Echoing Bazin and MacDougall, Tuñón and Tal find that the tendency towards such representations can be attributed to the viewer's desire. The genre of

melodrama intensifies the cinema's general capacity to position the spectator as a child: cinema during this period was characterised as 'la otra familia [...] el otro pueblo natal' ('one's other family [...] one's other birthplace') (Monsiváis, 1994, 60); seeing a film was akin to experiencing, in the words of one commentator of the period in Mexico 'una ilusión infantil' ('a childish illusion') (Urbiña, cit. Monsiváis, 1994, 50). Whilst in this childlike state, the representation of the child as innocent victim allows the adult spectator access to a purity and innocence which 'permite a los espectadores solucionar simbólicamente la contradicción entre creer ser "buenos", es decir, "inocentes", mientras se saben pragmáticos, guiados por intereses, en la vida real' ('allows spectators to symbolically solve the contradiction between thinking of themselves as "good", that is to say, "innocent", whilst knowing themselves to be pragmatic, to be guided by interests, in real life') (Tuñón and Tal, 2007, 661). In this sense the genre draws on the meanings of childhood posited by Jacqueline Rose which I mentioned earlier, in which childhood is understood as a 'portion of adult desire' (1984, xii), part of what she terms 'the ongoing sexual and political mystification of the child' (1984, 11).

A landmark moment in the representation of the child in Latin American cinema came in 1950, with Luis Buñuel's *Los olvidados*. I analyse this film in more detail in Chapter 2, positing it as a founding text for Latin American films about marginalised children. *Los olvidados* was innovative in its combination of neo-realist and surrealist techniques with the genre of Mexican melodrama in which Buñuel had been working, and it twists the tropes and conventions of the melodrama in unexpected and disturbing ways. It takes from melodrama

the centrality of the family, the child and the domestic, as well as the tendency to use children to 'incrementar el nivel de la tragedia'; it dialogues in particular with *Nosotros los pobres* which provides it with its 'point of departure for an attack on the sentimental treatment of delinquency' (Evans, 1995, 75) – as well as that of children.<sup>x</sup> Instead of idealising the child and emphasising innocence, Buñuel's film represented children in a more complex way, making manifest the harshness and hunger which defined the lives of many poor Mexicans and figuring its child characters as desiring, and hungry for love, and at times as violent, and full of hate. As Tuñón and Tal write, with *Los olvidados*: 'Buñuel sacó [a] los niños del terreno almibarado de la infancia para sumergirlos de golpe duro en la dureza de la vida social de Mexico a mediados del siglo XX' ('Buñuel removed children from the sickly-sweet terrain of childhood, and thrust them into the harshness of Mexican social life of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century') (2007, 662). And whilst the children in *Los olvidados* are certainly victims – of a society which has failed them, of poverty, and of violence – their visual figuring emphasises agency rather than passive victimhood; they roar like monsters at the camera, or throw things at it (Figure 1.2). In its gritty depiction of children in extreme poverty *Los olvidados* can be seen to usher in elements of the child-representation which characterised the *cine de denuncia* of later decades.<sup>xi</sup>

<FIGURE 1.2 ABOUT HERE>

*Los olvidados* was strongly influenced by Italian neorealism, in which, as previously mentioned, the child played a central role in portrayals of postwar devastation and poverty. In films such as *Bicycle Thieves* (De Sica, 1948) and

Rossellini's trilogy *Rome, Open City* (1945), *Paisà* (1946) and *Germany, Year Zero* (1948) the child came to be associated with the defining characteristics of neorealist filmmaking, including a focus on the poor and working classes, a concern with social inequality, the use of natural actors and on-location shooting, as well as with a certain kind of gaze or point of view. In neorealism the child's gaze not only functions to express cinema's shifting relationship to time and action as discussed by Deleuze, but also as witness to the ills of poverty and devastation. Where filmmakers wish to denounce injustice or wrong, the child's gaze is particularly useful, since cinema 'tends to project into the gaze of the child a certain ideal of visual neutrality' (Dufays, 2011, 22), rendering images or events particularly affecting to the spectator, as it would go on to do frequently in Latin American cinema of a political and social bent; in this sense, then, the child again serves to 'radicalizar el drama' (including that of documentary). Neorealism, which 'offered models for constructing emotional appeals as a means to strengthen a film's denunciation of socioeconomic ills and structural inequalities' (Podalsky, 2011, 34) was also influential in laying the foundations of what would become the New Latin American Cinema, the Marxist-influenced filmmaking movement which began in the late 1950s with films by Fernando Birri and Nelson Pereira dos Santos, and which gathered pace in the mid-1960s with theoretical manifestos in which some of its leading figures called for a militant aesthetic enactment of film's political content (García Espinosa, 1976 [1969]; Getino and Solanas, 1969; Rocha, 1982 [1965]). Important early films of the New Cinema such as dos Santos's *Rio 40 Graus* (1955) and Birri's *Tiré dié* (1960), made the image of the child central to their political and social critique,

drawing on an 'archive of emotions' found in the earlier works by Rossellini and De Sica (Podalsky, 2011, 34), as did lesser known films of the same period such as the Argentine *Shunko* (Murúa, 1960) which employs the (suffering) child in a protagonic role in a drama about rural education. The documentary *Tiré dié* was filmed in the Argentine city of Santa Fé. Much as *Los olvidados* does, the film begins with establishing shots and a voiceover which show the city as a place of wealth and progress, documenting its thriving economic, industrial and educational sectors, before settling, finally, on its outskirts and on the child inhabitants of a shanty town who run alongside the trains which pass through every day, calling up at the passengers to throw them ten pesos ('tiré dié'). In arresting sequences, the camera's position, filming the children from the moving train, evokes the modernity of cinema and train travel which rushes past the children whose lives have not caught up (Figure 1.3).

<FIGURE 1.3 ABOUT HERE>

Drawing on the legacies of melodrama and of neorealism, the New Latin American cinema made ample use of the child-figure, and especially the suffering child, as a way of reinforcing its political messages, and of affecting viewers emotionally.<sup>xii</sup> In canonical New Latin American Cinema documentaries such as *La hora de los hornos* (Getino and Solanas, 1964) and *Chircales* (Rodríguez and Silva, 1965) the figure of the suffering child is deployed for its shock value. In *La hora de los hornos* we see malnourished and diseased children in shanty towns, and some images from *Tiré dié* are

also incorporated, and in *Chircales*, we see images of a child of perhaps 3 or 4 scrabbling in the dirt to find bugs to eat. As Podalsky – who bases her analysis on the films *Rio 40 Graus*, *La hora de los hornos*, *El chacal de nahueltoro* (Littín, 1969) and *El coraje del pueblo* (Sanjinés, 1971) – argues, ‘the use of children as symbols of the precarious state of the nation to provoke an emotional reaction on the part of spectators was a key device of numerous films of the NLAC’ (2011, 38). Children were used to elicit the emotional engagement which was required to produce the ‘sustainable cognitive transformation’ sought by the makers of this politically motivated cinema (Podalsky, 2011, 45). A similar strategy is employed in dos Santos’ *Vidas secas* (1963), an emblematic film of the *Cinema Novo* adapted from the novel by Graciliano Ramos. In it, a migrant peasant family traverse the arid territory of the Brazilian Northeast, looking for work and struggling to survive. The family is composed of a mother, a father and their two children, and whilst the adults’ subjectivity is more developed, the children are quite prominent in the diegesis, with segments presented from their perspective, including a point-of-view shot that sees the world sideways on, as one of the children lays his ear to the ground. The children function, in *Vidas secas*, to intensify the film’s message about poverty. In one of the film’s most compelling sequences, the older boy (Gilvan Lima) looks around him and repeats the word *inferno* over and over again, an expression of the family’s situation. The presence of the children in this film, their vulnerability and the littleness and fragility of their bodies, dwelled upon by the camera, deepens the film’s pathos. And yet at other points they pose cutely for the camera, or are followed by it as they scamper about with their dog, Baleia, and could also be said to provide some

light relief from the film's harshness. To the sound of the children's anguished howls, Baleia – who is possibly just more of a burden than the family can bear – is shot by the father near to the end of the film; like the suffering child, she is used to reinforce the denunciation of poverty.<sup>xiii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> This question beginning my opening paragraph is an adaptation of Vicky Lebeau's 'But what is the child *for* cinema?' (2008, 12, emphasis in original).

<sup>ii</sup> Also emerging around the same time, is a body of work published in French on the relationship between the child and cinema, and on depictions of the child in film (Barillet, 2008; Paigneau, 2010; Brémard, 2016). Within this French corpus, there are a number of analyses of Latin American films. See Brémard (2016), Mullaly (2008).

<sup>iii</sup> On the boom in and conditions of contemporary Latin American filmmaking, see Shaw (2007), Podalsky (2011, 1-3), Delgado et. al. (2017). The increase in production is partly linked to the diversification of funding models, including the shift from state to private finance and the increasing tendency towards transnational co-production, which often combines European and Latin American funding sources. On the funding arrangements behind what she calls a 'new canon of Latin American film for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century', see Shaw (forthcoming).

<sup>iv</sup> Scholars focusing on adolescents in Latin American film include Kantaris (2003), Podalsky (2008; 2011, 101-24) and Maguire and Randall (forthcoming). Rocha and Seminet (2012a) explicitly focus on children and teenagers.

<sup>v</sup> The one exception here is Juan Carlos Cremata's *Viva Cuba* (2005) which is aimed at both children and adults, and which is analysed in Chapter 3.

<sup>vi</sup> This book focuses exclusively on films made by adults. For a film made by children, see *Marangmotzingo Mirang/From the Ikpeng Children to the World* (2001, Brazil) a video made by four children of the Amazonian Ikpeng tribe

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(Brazil) in response to a video-letter from children in the Cuban Sierra Maestra.

<sup>vii</sup> Comparing the act of film viewing to the position of the infant during the mirror-stage, Metz writes of the cinema that it is 'A very strange mirror, then, very like that of childhood, and very different. Very like [...], because during the showing we are, like the child, in a sub-motor and hyper-perceptive state; because, like the child again, we are prey to the imaginary, the double, and are so paradoxically through a real perception. Very different, because this mirror returns us everything but ourselves, because we are wholly outside it, whereas the child is both in it and in front of it' (1982, 49).

<sup>viii</sup> A related body of work looks at childhood memories of the cinema. Annette Kuhn analyses the 1930s generation's memories of cinemagoing as children: 'So uncommonly vivid and detailed are these stories that it sometimes seems as if, in the process of narrating them, informants are accessing the "child's voice" within themselves' (2002, 66-67). Alain Bergala and Nathalie Bourgeois also discuss how memories of cinemagoing as a child affect adult viewing (1993).

<sup>ix</sup> Chachita was a prominent star of the Golden Age of Mexican cinema, starring in many films by the Rodríguez brothers (to whom she was exclusively signed) in her childhood and adolescence. On Chachita, see Various Authors (2002).

<sup>x</sup> The plot of *Los olvidados* contains echoes of *Nosotros los pobres*, including the theft from the workshop, while in both films, a principal villain is (as in many Mexican films of the period) played by the actor Miguel Inclán.

<sup>xi</sup> Cinema which is overtly critical of the social and political status quo.

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<sup>xii</sup> This supports the wider view that the emotional responses sought by the melodramatic and militant models of filmmaking were quite similar, as discussed by Sadlier (2009, 12).

<sup>xiii</sup> As Podalsky discusses, this is a common use of animals in the New Latin American Cinema (2011, 45).