

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **A MARVELLOUS WORLD / Un mundo maravilloso (2006)**

Luis Estrada

### **OVERVIEW**

*Un Mundo Maravilloso* is a film by Luis Estrada, Mexico, an influential and often controversial director who does not shy away from critiques of political and social institutions. Estrada, who is known for being a strong opponent of globalization and the vast social inequalities that it creates, has won numerous awards for his films, which include *La Ley de Herodes* (Herod's Law), *El Infierno* (marketed in the U.S. as "Narco"), and *La Dictadura Perfecta* (The Perfect Dictatorship). *Un Mundo Maravilloso* (2006) features Damián Alcázar, who is one of Estrada's favorite actors to lead and set the tone in Estrada's biting satires. With his masterful camera technique and use of visual metaphor, Estrada brilliantly captures the minute details, gestures, and expressions of every day life that reveal the inconvenient truths about society, its leaders and institutions.

### **MAIN CHARACTERS**

<i>Juan Pérez:</i>	A ne'er-do-well vagrant who lives on the streets of Mexico City
<i>Ministro:</i>	The Minister of the Ministry of the Economy for Mexico
<i>Rosita:</i>	Juan Pérez's love interest
<i>El Tamal:</i>	One of Juan Pérez's drunken vagrant buddies, part of his "street family"
<i>El Azteca:</i>	One of Juan Pérez's drunken vagrant buddies, part of his "street family"
<i>Director del Periódico:</i>	Managing editor for Mexico City's largest newspaper
<i>Joven Reportero:</i>	Young reports for Mexico City's largest newspaper
<i>Lalo, Secretario Particular:</i>	The Minister's right-hand man and henchman
<i>Cara de Rata - padre de Rosa:</i>	"Rat Face" Rosita's father

### **PLOT**

The Mexican Minister of the Economy makes the bold claim at a World Bank gala that poverty has been eradicated in Mexico, thanks to the implementation of his program of expanded free markets and globalization. In the very same building (the World Finance Center), Juan Pérez, a derelict who lives on the street with his "family" of bums, who has sneaked into an office to sleep, has just found himself locked out on the ledge at least 25 floors up. Assuming he's about to jump, a reporter asks him why he's going to commit suicide. Pérez replies: "Because of this nation's horrible poverty!" and a tragicomic series of events occurs as the Minister attempts to save face, and Juan Pérez sees a way to get his girl, Rosita, and live out his dream of living in a model home in a model community. When his "family" of bums decide that they, too, would like to live in a model home, they threaten suicide by making dramatic threats in famous buildings and monuments in Mexico City. They also expose Juan Pérez as a fraud, leading to his arrest and sentence of three years in prison. The government then declares poverty to be a crime, and all the poor and all the shanty towns are surrounded by razor wire (instant prisons) or simply razed to the ground. When Juan returns home, he finds his home has collapsed in the dust and dirt, and his wife has died. The Minister has received a Nobel Prize in Economics, while Juan is shunned. He has a momentary return to a dream home with his family, but it's hard to tell if it's real or a dream.

### **SCENES**

*Mexico declares victory of the War on Poverty.* The Minister of the Economy declares the war is over; poverty has been eradicated, thanks to the implementation of his program of expanded free markets and globalization. The main newspaper emblazons the message across the front page: No More Poor People! The scene starts with an establishing shot that sets up juxtapositions between the gritty poverty

of Mexico City and the modernist skyscraper, the World Financial Center, where the World Bank meeting is taking place.

*Pathetic, filthy bum, drunk and sleeping on the street.* Juan Pérez is an unrepentant bum who is never seen without a bottle of cheap rot-gut alcohol. He's on the bottom of the bottom rung of society, and he's physically and emotionally a wreck. He lives on the street with a clutch of similarly positioned alcoholic bums who often claim they are family. Estrada uses a series of medium shots with quick cuts to give the sense of following the narrative / story of Juan Pérez.

*The Press vs the Minister of the Economy.* The editor of the main newspaper is a political enemy of the President and want nothing more than to discredit his claims that globalization will eradicate poverty. When it is suggested that perhaps Juan Pérez was driven to suicide by poverty, he sees it as a wonderful indictment of globalization.

*Suicide or a comedy of errors?* Juan Pérez, a drunken street bum, is looking for a place to stay and happens upon the World Financial Center (WFC). He sneaks into an office on the 25<sup>th</sup> floor, but upon hearing the approach of the cleaning person, he opens the window and hides on the ledge. When the cleaning person locks the window, Juan is stuck. His shouts (and desperate peeing off the ledge) attract attention. The police and ambulance are called to rescue the "suicidal person." Of course, it's nothing of the kind, but Juan Pérez goes along with it and explains he was driven to suicide by poverty.

*Juan loves Rosita.* But the feelings are not mutual. Neither Rosita nor her father are eager to have a useless vagrant in the family. Rosita tells Juan Pérez she'll marry him if he has a nice house and a future. No one believes it will ever come to pass. Estrada uses over-the-shoulder shots to demonstrate the relationships (or lack of), and the long-shots visually demonstrate how Rosita has no real feeling for Juan Pérez – just her own fantasy of a future.

*HE DID IT!* Threatening suicide to protest poverty. Juan Pérez and a group of his buddies go back to the same building, with the hopes of gaining free housing and a small retainer if they threaten to fling themselves off an upper floor of the World Financial Center. Juan slips and falls to the ground. He survives, but just barely. The press loves it – the headlines are HE DID IT! They predict wave after wave of suicides from buildings. The printing press is a quick-cut shot – adds a sense of urgency.

*Recovering in the Hospital.* Juan Pérez is in paradise in the hospital. With three meals a day, personal attention from the nurse, and enormous bouquets of flowers, he does not want to leave. The President's right-hand takes him out in a wheelchair and offers him a deal: "If you do everything I ask, all your dreams will come true." And, they do – new clothes, a total makeover (shave, haircut, expensive suit), and a new home. The point of view shots in this scene demonstrate how reality follows representation. The image is reality.

*Press conference:* The Minister of the Economy frames the conference with the following preface: There has been a conspiracy by the press to accuse our government of lying about our having eradicated poverty. They have twisted the experience of Juan Pérez. Now he is here to tell us the truth." So, Juan Pérez proceeds to prevaricate and to spin a tale about how he was rejected by his girlfriend, and he decided to fling himself from the World Financial Center.

*FRAUD!* The newspapers continue to "make bank" on the saga of Juan Pérez. They feature the scandalous revelation of Juan Pérez on the front page (Fraude!\_) but there is no real sense of outraged morality. All they are doing is selling scandal, and further impugning the President. The quick cuts and cutaways to printing presses and to the long shots of the news room with reaction shots show the rapid pace of changing opinions.

*Wedding with Dogs.* In his wedding dinner, Juan Pérez and his bride, Rosita, who is outfitted with a beautiful white wedding dress, addresses the invited guests. It is an open-air dinner, which makes a visual echo of the scene with the Ministro and his wife. Instead of an elegant colonial-style mansion in the background, one sees the squalor of their little favela which juxtaposes the skyscrapers of downtown. In

contrast with the elegant breakfast (juice, coffee, fruit, pastries) of the Ministro and his wife, the food on the table consists of hand-wrapped tamales. In front of the table are two scroungy street mutts nosing around for scraps. The long shot reveals the real story and the ironic juxtapositions (shanty town against the backdrop of hypermodern skyscrapers, and the mongrels against the tablecloth-covered tables in the wedding dinner.)

*If Juan Pérez can do it, we can, too!* Juan's jealous buddies start climbing all high points and shout that they are going to commit suicide due to poverty and that they deserve more than Juan Pérez. The government officials promise them houses even bigger than Juan's. The Press is delighted to see the chaos.

*The Minister's Immorality.* There are 60 million people living in poverty in our country. What if the truth gets out? The Minister gathers with his cabinet and they conclude that to pay off all the poor would bankrupt the country. There is no other option but to throw Juan Perez in jail.

*A cavalcade of false accusations.* A long line of people who had contact with Juan Perez now appear in court to denounce him and to accuse him of all kinds of crimes. He is convicted and goes to jail. In jail, he promises Rosarita he'll work and they will have their paradise when he gets out. Cutaways and point of view shots predominate.

*Everything that rises must fall.* The Minister decides that instead of trying to eliminate poverty, it is much better to eliminate the poor. So, to do that, they will abandon the idea of paying all the poor \$2 per day, and pay nothing. The budget deficit would be eliminated.

*Three years later.* Juan Perez gets out of jail. It's a Rip Van Winkle moment. He goes back to his dream home – and it topples over into the dust. "Paraiso" is now a desert wasteland behind razor wire and the homes are being sold as "terreno" (acreage). The slum neighborhood is likewise collapsed. He interrupts a funeral to find his father in law, who blames him outright for the collapse of the family, and the fact that Rosarita flung herself from a bridge.

*A visit to the model home.* One stormy night, Juan Perez goes by the model home and sees the family of his dreams (American Dream), and they emerge to offer him food. They are very kind and assure him that there is hope and that yes, God exists.

*The priests who kick you when you're down.* But, the spirit of God no longer exists in the church that Juan goes to for help. The priests are aligned with the government and are part of the effort to clear Mexico of poor people –not by giving them help, but by literally kicking and starving them.

*Notes from the underground.* Juan Perez and his scalawag buddies decide that being underground is no longer acceptable and they emerge.

*The consequences.* In the newsroom, one of the reporters hands the managing editor the paper – "This is going to give you a heart attack!" The managing editor reads it and then looks at the young reporter who ran with the Perez story in order to boost circulation. The managing editor says, "Thanks to you and your cursed Perez, now the entire world will be doomed!"

*A Nobel Prize.* Minister of Economy, the Doctor Pedro Lascurain Hartman receives the Nobel Prize in Economics for his new theory and economic plan: "Globalization and Free Markets: Tools of Social Justice to Get Rid of the Poor." It is probably not an accident that the theory sounds suspiciously like the Third Reich's economic plan that included eugenics and literally eliminating the "useless feeders." He resigns from the Mexican government to accept a position as the president of the World Bank, where he has carte blanche to implement the plan and replicate globally the "Mexican Miracle."

*A rainy reprise* Across town, Juan Perez and his buddies have taken over the model home, which looks just like a fantasy home from the 1940s and a Norman Rockwell painting. Suddenly his child appears, who seems to be around 6 or 7 years of age, and Rosarita appears from the kitchen, bearing a

turkey also fit for a Norman Rockwell painting. They sit around a Thanksgiving table, smiling and drinking. Juan raises up his bottle: "One day being rich is better than a lifetime of poverty."

*Indeterminate end.* The camera pans out, and we see dead children and parents sprawled in the grass in front of the front door of the model Dream Home. The film is over, without more explanation.

## THEMES

**The Poor in Society.** Most governments would like the inconvenient problem of poverty in their country to simply disappear. One of director Luis Estrada's great talents is the ability to convert the camera in a "dehumanizing lens" that allows the audience to see people from the point of view of absolute dehumanization. The psychologist and literary theorist, Jacques Lacan, would point to this as creating the Other and Otherness in film.

Luis Estrada creates a humorous, satiric effect by juxtaposing the two points of view – the dehumanizing gaze of privilege, with the rehumanizing voice of the people.

For example, in one scene, the Minister and his wife are breakfasting outside with his elegantly dressed, light-skinned, slender wife. She is chatting with her husband about the reasons people give for the existence of poverty in Mexico. "Why are people poor?" she asks. Her husband maintains that people attribute poverty to a number of causes, but not the government. Then, he calls the maid, María over and asks, "Why do you think you and your family are poor?" María responds: "I used to think that it was due to fate, bad luck, or laziness. Now, I don't think so at all. It's all the fault of this (expletive deleted) government." His wife is very worried, and exclaims, "What will happen if there are too many of these poor parasites? "They'll eat us alive!"

The scene is humorous because the previously dehumanized maid answered in an articulate, thoughtful manner, using the same words that the educated politician had used. In that way it illustrates Aristotle's idea about drama, that the humor occurs in seeing the high brought low. The scene is also humorous because it gives a voice to the previously voiceless and demonstrates that she is well aware of how governmental corruption and the consequences of globalization have materially affected the people.

**Social Mobility.** Social mobility is an illusion in *A Marvellous World* and in fact takes a fatalistic view, entitling one section, "What Must Come Up, Must Come Down." The ridiculous lengths people will go to in order to get ahead, especially if it does not require any work or study. Social mobility is further complicated by the lack of solidarity among the poor. Instead of working together, it's everyone for himself / herself, with jealousy and greed contributing to the undermining of efforts to escape. An example is when Juan hides from his former friends and does not invite them to his wedding. He is now ashamed of them. They find him after the wedding, enter his home, eat wedding cake and steal household items before leaving. They then do all they can to imitate his manipulations (threatening suicide due to all the poverty to shame the government into action). Needless to say, it backfires. What comes up, later comes down.

Director Luis Estrada's films often feature hapless heroes – society's losers – in the role of protagonist. They are weak and their heads are easily turned by the appearances of prosperity. In *Un Mundo Maravilloso*, Juan Pérez undergoes a tremendous transformation when he cuts his hair, shaves his beard, takes a shower and dons a suit. He loses his street savvy (of which he had very little, but at least he knew how to survive from day to day), and becomes a star-struck naïf who wants all the trappings of the appearance of wealth. He's a willing "useful idiot" for the Minister and also for the press, both of which have competing notions and objectives.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Juan Pérez** Juan Pérez is a ne'er-do-well living on the streets of Mexico City. When we meet him, he regularly drinks so much cheap alcohol that he passes out in the gutter and stray dogs nose around, looking for anything of interest they can lift from his body. He is completely repulsive, at least from the point of view of society. Later, as he is cleaned up, we see he has more endearing qualities, but they are not too evident at the beginning. As a poor wretch, he is dehumanized and unsympathetic.

*Discouraged.* At the beginning of the film, Juan is living in the gutter, literally mistaken for dead by a dog that probes his body for possible scraps of food, and by the morgue van that collects the daily street dead. It is useful to note that the van is chock-full of bodies – Juan's would have occupied the very last available space on the van. Each body sports a toe tag.

*Corruptible.* Juan is fully capable of being corrupted if the incentive is attractive enough. As he languishes in the hospital after his fall from the building, he thinks of how much he loves Rosita, but that she is unattainable. When the Ministro offers to make his dreams come true, Juan finds that becoming corrupt is a very easy bridge to cross.

*Romantic.* Juan has a very romantic and idealized notion of love. He wants to marry the lovely, but poor Rosita, who rejects him out of hand for being poor (and a drunk). When he cleans up, gets sober, and turns up with a house and a bank account, she marries him. Of course, he thinks it's for love.

*Nouveau Riche:* Juan moves into his new house with his bride, Rosita, and everything seems to be a dream – until he's visited by his former buddies from the street. They arrive, drunk, filthy, and envious – ready to move in. They are angry that Juan is not sharing his good luck with them, and they accuse him of behaving like a “pinche nuevo rico” (dratted new rich).

*Naïve:* Juan is willing to believe the politicians and go along with their plan, without having any idea that he is being taken advantage of by them. He does not yet realize that he cannot play the system without being played by them.

*Humiliated.* After completing his three years in jail, Juan goes to a cathedral to pray. He begs God to forgive him. A very kindly-seeming priest comes up to him to help, but suddenly is joined by other curates who hit him over the head with a large crucifix and then kick him before throwing him out. They say it is good that they got rid of one more poor person. He lands in a trash heap, and then is rescued by his former friends, who tell him they have been living underground to keep from being exterminated like rats.

**The Minister of Economy and Commerce** Doctor Pedro Lascurain Hartman, the Minister of Economy, is an ambitious, amoral government official who has the grand ambition of eliminating poverty (and people who could potentially destabilize his lifestyle). He and his wife are eager to preserve the status quo, which assures that they form a part of the privileged few. The minister favors “free markets,” and globalization which result in the increasing concentration of wealth within the hands of a few.

*Machiavellian.* The Minister is willing to do whatever it takes to silence Juan Pérez and keep his existence a secret. He devises a plan to entice Juan to change his story, and also to enter the world of the middle class.

*Impatient.* When faced with a budget deficit, the Minister is not willing to work on long-term solutions. His approach is to eliminate all funding to social programs and payments to the poor, and keep all the poor locked away and hidden.

*Dehumanizing.* In the Minister's world, the people who are human are easy to identify. They wear suits, tuxedos, elegant dresses, jewels, and evening gowns. If you are poor, dressed in rags, and/or are filthy, you are not considered fully human. Thus it is perfectly acceptable to eliminate you, particularly if you interfere in any way with the massive profits of the supper wealthy.

*Corrupting.* Perhaps Juan Pérez was more or less honest as a bum. As an ambitious man desperate to marry Rosita, he is easily swayed by promises of wealth. So, the Minister plays to his weaknesses in order to achieve his overall objectives.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In *A Marvelous World*, the Minister of Economy wants the world to believe in the “Mexican Economic Miracle” that resulted in the eradication of poverty and the elimination of poor people. However, there are, in reality, 60 million poor in Mexico (according to what was said in a meeting of the minister’s staff). What we see in the movie is a kind of social construction of reality; the government wants to construct a reality by manipulating impressions. Describe how they manipulate appearances, first with Juan Pérez, and then later with all the poor.

2. Juan’s relationships with his street “family” comes full circle. At first, they are the only true friends he has. Then, when he has his windfall, he tries to distance himself from them, much to their disgust. Finally, after being brutally kicked by a group of priests after he is out of jail, he relies on his erstwhile friends to nurse him back to health. Describe the attitudes of his friends toward him in this circular journey. Please point out scenes, and describe what they say to him in each one, and what their attitudes reveal about themselves, their belief systems, and society at large.

## ILLUSTRATIVE SCENES



The Minister of Economy announces that Mexico has won its war against poverty. This scene is the very first one of the film.



Juan Pérez in his natural habitat. He's passed out near the train tracks and a mongrel dog sniffs him, looking for food. The mobile morgue truck stops by to pick up his body, and the morgue workers are surprised he wakes up when they grab him to transport him on a gurney. "Well, we'll be back tomorrow for you," the say as they leave.



Juan's wedding party. He is joined by his happy wife, Rosita, who longs to have a nice home and a middle class lifestyle. After the wedding dinner, they will drive to their dream home.



The entrance to the “urbanización” or “fraccionamiento” – the subdivision “The Woods of Paradise” that has been a permanent feature of his dreams and fantasies of upward mobility. They are wooden frame homes, and unlike the name of the development, there are no trees and no grass.



Juan and Rosita as they prepare to move into their dream home. It is built in the custom of North American homes in the suburb; the post- WWII wooden frame homes. It is useful to note that in Mexico, it is not customary to have wood-frame homes. Stucco, adobe, or brick are the norm.