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Panopticism and Monarchical Rule in Miguel Ángel Asturias's *El señor presidente*

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Abstract

Revisions to Michel Foucault's concept of panopticism have questioned the actual existence of a unique entity located at its center. Roberto Esposito has also criticized Foucault's ambivalence at defining the limits of panopticism in relation to sovereignty. By employing Esposito's discussion about the overlapping between panopticism and sovereignty, the author analyzes how power is exerted in Miguel Ángel Asturias's *El señor presidente*. First, this paper examines the functioning of utilitarian systems of societal control. Secondly, it focuses on how the character of the President is also described as a sovereign. Finally, it argues that, in the case of Asturias's novel, panopticism does not exclude sovereignty. Asturias's novel reveals the nightmarish contradictions of a panoptical organization of power with a sovereign at its center.

Keywords: *El señor presidente*, Miguel Ángel Asturias, Panopticism and literature, Sovereignty and literature, Power and literature.

In the years following 1975 the increasing tensions of the Cold War and the rise of authoritarian regimes from the Southern Cone to East Asia served as fertile ground for the popularity of Michel Foucault's concept of panopticism. His was viewed as a profound and coherent depiction of the genesis, nature, and functioning of modern State power. Panopticism's use of a central, constant, minimal, and economical gaze that multiplied in anonymous divisions of State apparatus by mirroring the basic structure of the panopticon—that utilitarianistic dream of prisoner surveillance designed by Jeremy Bentham—shed light on many of the political dilemmas of the 20th century. The decades after the publication of *Discipline and Punish*, however, witnessed a growing debate over the actual existence of a society based on the suppositions of panopticism. The arrival of social media only accelerated this process. In 2000 Haggerty and Ericson, by applying Deleuze and Guattari's concept of assemblage to the realm of surveillance, dismantled panopticism's arboreal configuration of power and knowledge and hypothesized a rizomatic distribution of State agencies, private businesses, and individuals that collaborate and compete over the information extracted from the subject (606, 608). In 2009, Hier revised the concept of "surveillant assemblage" created by Haggerty and Ericson and advocated for a more hierarchical approach to the institutions that analyze the actual and digital traces left by citizens and users alike. Advancing Brighenti's notion of *visibility*, Hier believes that the same status cannot be awarded to surveillance at the hands of the State and the tracking of customer preferences via cookies stored in one's computer (20-4).

Bio-politics, particularly in Roberto Esposito's analysis, offered two additional areas of revision and criticism. Although in *Bíos* Esposito mainly refers to Foucault's 1975 and 1976 *Lectures*, the fundamental arguments of his review are directed towards *Discipline and Punish*. The first point has to do with periodization. In Foucault's description of the evolution of sovereignty, panopticism and its discreet and minimal economy replaced and excluded the magnificent display of power transmitted by the terrible punishments ordered by the monarch (*Discipline* 115). For Esposito, however, Foucault did not offer much clarity on the exact differentiation and limits between bio-politics and modernity. Is bio-politics a product of modernity? Or, quite the contrary, does bio-politics accompany modernity? Esposito therefore problematizes Foucault's belief on the end of sovereignty as a consequence of the appearance of modernity (52). The second point refers to the preponderance of life or law in connection to the sovereign paradigm. According to Esposito, Foucault defines sovereignty as "the existence of two entities, namely, the totality of individuals and power that a certain point enters into relation between individuals in the modalities defined by a third element, which is constituted by the law" (*Bíos* 25). Foucault affirms that individual rights counter sovereignty—the more rights a subject possesses, the less power a sovereign can exert on that subject (*Bíos* 25). But the Italian thinker

reminds his readers that sovereignty is exerted precisely in the form of laws and rights, for instance, in the case of war, when “the discourse of rights [is adopted] in order to consecrate the relation of forces the war itself defines” (26). In this case sovereignty, rather than disappearing and morphing into bio-politics, subsists concomitantly with modernity.

In these pages I would like to employ the debate on the coexistence and opposition between sovereignty (or monarchical law) and panopticism as a framework to study a Latin American canonical novel published in 1943 by the Guatemalan author Miguel Ángel Asturias. I would like to advance that *El señor presidente*'s effect on the reader not only presupposes but actually profits from the coexistence of these two representations of political power. Foucault, when defining the characteristics of panopticism in opposition to monarchical law, affirms that “Panopticism is the general principle of a new ‘political anatomy’ whose object and end are not the relations of sovereignty but the relations of discipline” (208). This means that panopticism excludes sovereignty and that the modern State substitutes the supremacy of the monarch with the implementation of a State apparatus whose gaze maintains anonymity thanks to the entrustment of power in the different institutions responsible for State policing and control. At first panopticism, exposed as an army of police agents, informants, and judges, seems to prevail in *El señor presidente*. However, as I hope to demonstrate, fragments from both realms dispute prevalence within the narrative, converting what seems to be a democratic system of civil decision making into a mechanism that mainly benefits the President and his allies.

In his novel Asturias offers a double image of the political evolution of Guatemala in the twentieth century. Written during the 1920s, *El señor presidente* depicts the final implementation of utilitarian reforms and, at least in theory, the absolute absence of sovereignty. Published in 1943, *El señor presidente* foresees the expansion of this process during the anticommunist campaign and the final installment of an institution of societal control that used registrations, notes, transcriptions, reports—in one word, the archive—as a means to exert political determent. Between an always desired social reform that democratized the political institutions of Guatemala and the faceless succession of army officers that governed the country for almost forty years after Castillo Armas's ascension to power in 1954, Asturias depicts two contradictory, albeit simultaneous, versions of political power.

I will begin my analysis by briefly summarizing the plot of Asturias's *El señor presidente* (I will use Frances Partridge's translation of Asturias's novel entitled *The President*). Secondly, I will examine the references to panopticism in the novel. My analysis will consider surveillance in enclosed spaces, such as houses, hospitals, and brothels, and then I will move to larger areas, particularly to *El Portal del Señor*, Guatemala City's main plaza at the turn of the twentieth century—located in today's *Palacio Nacional*. Thirdly, I will provide evidence for a reading of Asturias's main character as a sequel of the monarch, demonstrating the effects of a representation that doesn't necessarily exclude discipline from sovereignty. I will begin this section by examining the instances in which the President defines himself as prince. This will lead me to analyze the reorganization between legality and illegality. I will close this section by providing some ideas regarding the administration of torture and its relationship with monarchical law. Finally, I will draw conclusions on how and why two bio-political systems, originally opposed to each other, survive concomitantly within the same narrative.

A tale of two dictators

El señor presidente begins once the President becomes infatuated with Camila, the daughter of General Canales, a powerful officer in the Guatemalan Army. The opportunity to oust general Canales and force Camila to become part of the President's repertoire of lovers and mistresses—which coincides with the starting point of the narration—arises when a beggar in *El Portal del Señor* kills Colonel Pinales, one of the President's most faithful allies. Canales, as well as other prominent members of the opposition, are blamed using false allegations concocted by the judiciary. In order to avoid an embarrassing trial, the President decides to expedite the disappearance of Canales by encouraging him to escape and having the army, the police, or the secret police, kill him adducing *ley fuga*. The President trusts the whole operation to the hands of one of his aides, Miguel Cara de Ángel, who secures Camila in his own house and, in a turn of events, falls in love with and marries her. The President, enraged by Cara de Ángel's daring decision, devises a plan of revenge. He names Cara de Ángel ambassador to the United States, but once Cara de Ángel reaches the coast, orders his arrest. Supplanted by a double who continues with his mission and never returns to Guatemala, Cara de Ángel is condemned to the anonymity of an underground cell where the fabricated exposés of a fellow prisoner are revealed to him. Hired by the President, this prisoner confesses that Camila has become the President's favorite mistress.

Several passages within Asturias's novel confirm a number of similarities between Manuel Estrada Cabrera and the President, particularly in what concerns his hapless childhood, the establishment of popular celebrations that honored arts and letters, and a number of assassination attempts, the most famous being a bomb planted on a street that missed Cabrera's carriage (*The President* 37, 222-3). Some of the physical characteristics of Jorge Ubico, but most importantly, the ideological battles that plagued his years as President—especially against Communism—and the extent of political corruption, also merge in the narrative of Asturias's novel. Only after Ubico exited the government in 1944 did Asturias decide to publish his novel, since he was afraid that the secret police would discover the only copy of his manuscript stored in his house of the *avenida* La Candelaria (Vásquez 29-30).

Estrada, who served as Guatemala's president from 1898 to 1920, viewed himself as the direct successor of a series of political leaders that since the rise of Miguel García Granados and Justo Rufino Barrios to power in 1871 had made liberal reform their political goal. Granados and Barrios's vision of liberalism, however, was tinted with reactionary policies that protected mestizos, landowners, and economic dependence on foreign investment. Without really fracturing the conservative ideology of Rafael Carrera (1838-1865), Barrios introduced the capitalization of the economy (Figuroa 78-80). Estrada considered himself a direct successor of this line of national envisioning and practice. During his tenure, coffee continued to be the main export thanks to the great economic margins secured by the perpetuation of a labor system that punished joblessness, particularly in the case of the indigenous population. He also supported foreign investment and made banana commercialization instrumental for Guatemala's economy. The land confiscated from the church and non-cultivated areas owned by the State was not distributed among the populace, but served landowners for the purpose of creating larger farms securing Cabrera's popularity among the elites (Lujan 210-220).

Even more significant for the purposes of this essay is the installation of panopticism at the hands of Estrada and Ubico. In 1900, under Estrada, the secret police was created. In 1924, a division within the police was erected with the mission of consigning the particulars of all those arrested, using fingerprinting (*Del silencio* 126). In 1927, the Office of Identification (*Servicio de Identificación* or *Gabinete de Identificación*) was also instituted (*Del silencio* 279). Ubico and his own body of political policing and control (*Policía de Seguridad*) inaugurated the use of *fichas*, a standardized inventory of squared cards that recorded the main physical and racial traits as well as the biographical data of suspects. With the passing of the years, this system grew to incredible proportions, almost to include data pertaining to all Guatemalans (*Del silencio* 280). Although during the years of the *Revolución* (1944-1954) these institutions shed some of their prevalence, the secret police that Estrada created and Ubico consolidated maintained its influence in the years to come.

A city under siege: *El Portal del Señor*

Panopticism, implemented two decades before Asturias began writing his novel and in the process of being revamped while the manuscript remained hidden, merges with the novel through a large number of references. What these references eventually reveal is the contradictory form of national organization in Guatemala. While a modern system of policing and record keeping was being implemented, the existence of democratic institutions that guaranteed the equality of all subjects before the law was null or at least parallel with the same racial and social distinctions of the Colony. However, inside the novel the reforms enacted by the liberal revolution seem to have succeeded in creating a country where the rule of law is guaranteed through the existence of civil and democratic institutions and the separation of powers. When the President asks Cara de Ángel to organize Canales's escape, he warns him of not to let the police know of his mission, as if the President were also subjected to the authority of the judicial branch. "And take care the police don't find out you've been to see him; arrange matters so as not to arouse suspicion and so that the ruffian escapes" (38).

In public proclamations described in the novel, the narrator underlines the democratic base that supports the rule of the President. His office is invested with the duty of guaranteeing peace by patrolling the borders that separate the animal (in the Hobbesian sense) from the citizen in order to keep "the acquisitive desire for everything" in check (Esposito 59). In the following excerpt, the creation of State agencies destined to monitor the population can be understood as a derivation of the social contract (Esposito 60; Foucault 89):

Merely by uttering the name of the President of the Republic we shed light from the torch of Peace upon those sacred interests of a Nation which, under his wise rule, has conquered and will go on conquering the inestimable benefits of Progress in every sphere [...] As free citizens, conscious of our obligation to watch over our own destiny (which is also that of the Nation) and as men of goodwill and enemies of the Anarchy, we hereby proclaim!!! That the welfare of the

Republic depends on the RE-ELECTION OF OUR ILLUSTRIOUS MANDATORY AND NOTHING ELSE BUT HIS RE-ELECTION! (254)

In this sense, panopticism rules within *El señor presidente*, even subjecting the President to its influence. The novel portrays a well-organized system of uniformed policemen and secret police, an intricate net of civil informers, local jails and national penitentiaries, a civil court, magistrates and prosecutors, and a standing army in charge of protecting the borders that serves as the President's Praetorian Guard. Among these separate and independent institutions, information flows in the form of *partes* or police reports. The narrator fictionalizes how top-level officials make decisions using the information these reports provide (see *The President* 132). Most of the time the narrator restricts the flow of information to the reader by describing only witnessed events while revealing missing fragments and details through police reports or conversations between policemen. For instance, through one of these reports the reader is informed that Abel Carvajal, who was one of the members of the opposition condemned for the death of Colonel Parrales, "visited the American Bank, the chemist's shop opposite the Capuchin Monastery and the German Club; there he talked for a long while with Mr. Romsth, who is being watched separately by the police" (65-6). The fact that Carvajal was visiting foreign investors, mainly German citizens who possessed several key infrastructure resources before the Great War, provides the reader with details of his own involvement in revolutionary stratagems.

In a report of less than one page, the logic of the power structure that governs the policing system is revealed to the reader through phrases such as "In accordance with instructions received;" "In accordance with instructions"; "according to instructions received" (*The President* 65-6). In a report of less than one page, the logic of the power structure that governs the policing system is revealed to the reader. Instructions flow from the President to the Judge Advocate General and the members of the different bodies of the police and the judiciary. Informants provide policemen with details that are also included in the reports. These reveal an entangled net of informants that spy continually and mutually, even as they remain unaware of the fact. "The housemaid—but this the cook does not know—has supplied further details [...] The cook—but this the housemaid does not know—was more explicit on the subject" (65). Although the narrator had furnished the reader with fragments of the conversation between Cara de Ángel and Canales in the same chapter in which the police report is used, new information is provided, either as a supplement to what the account lacked or as a misrepresentation of the actual conversation (61-4). "Her master [Cara de Ángel] gave her to understand—so she told me in the telephone—that Canales had come to offer him his daughter in exchange for his effective intervention on his behalf with the President" (65).

The report in chapter 23 is a collection of bulleted fragments that help piece together cases that were secondary in relation to Cara de Ángel's plan to allow Canales to escape. Similarly, the final explanation given of Cara de Ángel's demise is revealed in the final chapters through the words of a secret policeman who was in charge of guarding *El Portal del Señor*. "This chap Ángel Face was mixed up with General Canales; he was fast and loose with the daughter—he married her later on—and didn't carry out the President's orders, so they say" (271). The Spanish original provides a dialectal variation of this same image with a more sexual connotation, highlighting the action of devouring the body of Camila: "se comió el mandado del patrón" (*El Señor* 322).

The logic of panopticism allows policemen, members of the judiciary, the President, and ultimately, the reader, to gather information. The panopticon was based on the possibility of directing a constant gaze to a prisoner located in an immobile cell. Panopticism implies the reproduction of this logic in larger spaces:

an architecture that is no longer built simply to be seen (as with the ostentation of palaces), or to observe the external space (as with the geometry of fortresses), but to permit the internal, articulated and detailed control—to render visible those who are inside it; in more general terms, an architecture that would operate to transform individuals: to act on those it shelters, to provide hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them. Stones can make people docile and knowable. (Foucault 172)

Maids, cooks, and neighbors are able to recall details because their gaze is limited to enclosed spaces susceptible to being monitored at all times. Places of confinement, in which direct observation is exerted, are continuous scenarios in the novel, such as, for instance, the homeless center and the *Casa Nueva*, in which vagabonds are hidden from foreign envoys who visit the capital and women are incarcerated; the police quarters, where suspects are interrogated and imprisoned and the reader is informed of the absurd and trivial reasons that justify detentions; the brothel, where some of the condemned women are sold as sexual

slaves; the General Hospital; and finally, the cells in the national penitentiary, in which the reader is exposed to the intimate confessions and complaints of the prisoners.

The second police report contains several examples of this panoptical mechanism of acquiring information. “Monica Perdomino, patient in the General Hospital, in bed No. 14 in San Rafael ward, states that her bed being next to that of the patient Fedina Rodas, she has heard the aforesaid patient talking about General Canales in her delirium” (*The President* 157). The “calculation of openings, of filled and empty spaces, passages and transparencies” is occupied by the eyes and the ears of the neighbor, now turned into informant (Foucault 172). “The widow Alexandra Bran [...] states that as her business adjoins the Two-Step Tavern she has been in a position to observe several persons who frequent the aforesaid tavern, especially at night” (*The President* 154). This is also the case for bars and brothels, in which inebriated army officers reveal their plans for a revolutionary takeover. “Catarino Regio states: that he is the manager of the property ‘La Tierra’ [...] and that one day last August [General Canales] was visited by four friends, to whom he declared (being drunk at that time) that if the revolutions should take place he had two battalions at his disposal” (156). “Adelaida Peñal, inmate of the brothel called the Sweet Enchantment in this town, wishes to inform the President that major Modesto Farfan told her when drunk that General Eusebio Canales was the only general worth his salt he had known in the army” (157).

The logic of panopticism is also applied to spaces inside the city, especially to *El Portal del Señor*. Due to the continuing surveillance of the police, particularly of the secret police, *El Portal* becomes a transparent space. Here the real value of the creation of docile bodies is shown and the whole overarching schema of panopticism is exposed to the reader. *El Portal* is a space where the post-human dwells in the form of a group of beggars ostracized from the community. In order to access this location the beggars “[leave] the deserted city behind.” They have “nothing in common but their destitution [...] This confraternity of the dunghill had never known pillows or mutual trust” (7). Their separation is described in terms that make them closer to the monster than to the human—monster in the sense of a cultural construct capable of hosting difference, in some cases, features that are contradictory (Cohen 4). In his actions, Mulatto embodies opposite gender differentiations. “It was the voice of Mulatto known as the Widower, sniveling like an old woman.” Other characters resemble creatures that only exist in mythology, such as the satyr or the Cyclops. “[A] one-eyed man laughed till he urinated and beat his head against the wall like a goat.” The effects of the liberalization of the economy and foreign dependence, the policies that punish vagrancy, and years of neglect, xenophobia, and abuse have left inedible marks in the bodies of the beggars. “[T]he Mosquito, who was legless as well as blind [...]” (9). Featured as monsters and prodigies, their bodies are exposed to serve as witnesses to the fallacies of the regime. “Flatfoot was quarreling with the Mosquito, the deaf-mute was feeling her inexplicably swollen belly, and the blind woman was hanging from a hook in her dreams, covered in flies, like a piece of meat at the butcher’s” (10).

El Portal, as a place in which the body evidences the consequences of an irregular process of modernization, is also an ideal location to revolt against normalcy and uniformity. For that reason, *El Portal* becomes a privileged space for both the committing of a crime that avenges and liberates, and an optimal location for applying the logic of panopticism. The crime takes place once Colonel Parrales reminds *El Pelele* of the worst of his memories: his own mother. Parrales, by trespassing into the space of the post-human becomes a monster himself. His eyes, symbols of his power to survey, are gauged. His virility, as a token of his masculinity, is seized by *El Pelele*, until Parrales collapses as a lifeless body: “[g]oing up to the idiot on tiptoe [Parrales] shouted jeeringly at him: ‘Mother!’ That was all. From the ground by the cry, the Zany flung itself upon his tormentor, and, without giving him time to get to his weapons, thrust his fingers into his eyes, tore at his nose with his teeth and jabbed his private parts with his knees, till he fell to the ground motionless” (11).

The committing of a murder and the risk embedded in that murder in relation to the concealed power of the abnormal implies that surveillance in *El Portal* must be redoubled. The bodies that *El Portal* hosts must become docile once again. And I say redoubled because as a space inhabited by the post-human, *El Portal* was already subject to strict observation. “[The beggars] listened for the footsteps of the police going to and fro in the dimly lit square and the click of the sentinels presenting arms” (10). Yet this surveillance is contradictory, because although economical and constant, the punishments it would normally impose on the citizens cannot be applied directly on the beggars. “If they didn’t shut their jaws the police would come. But the police wanted nothing to do with the beggars. None of them had enough money to pay a fine” (9). When the beggars break the rules, either by reacting with violence or by failing to obey the orders of the police, they pay for their defiance with their own lives. While being questioned in the police quarters, the beggars deny Canales’s involvement in the killing of Parrales. “At a sign from the Judge Advocate the policemen who

had been listening outside the door fell upon the beggars, beat them and pushed them into an empty room. From the almost invisible center beam a long rope was hanging” (15).

This redoubled surveillance on *El Portal* is described almost as quarantine. While a secret police agent walks towards *El Portal* he is reminded by his companion that the place is vetoed: “ever since they stopped the beggars sleeping there there’s not a cat stirring” (44). The police, particularly the secret police, are called to fill the gaps of the enormous extension of the area they intend to observe—what Foucault refers to as the opposite logic of the spectacle, in which one single person is able to see a massive group of people (216). The narrator describes the mechanics of the observation launched in *El Portal*: “Even since the assassination of Colonel Parrales Sonriente, the Cathedral Porch had been constantly occupied by the Secret Police. The toughest men were chosen to keep watch there” (44). The narrator also reveals another crucial detail that makes *El Portal* even more ideal for the strengthening of observation and surveillance. *El Portal* is the site in which Turkish merchants lived and had their stores and businesses. Since they probably are affluent, the Turks could support an uprising. The government needs to keep their intentions in check by instilling fear: “the presence of the Secret Police worried them” (45). As the villagers of the town who, besieged by the plague, are ordered to lock themselves up under pain of death, the Turks are not willing to abandon their own houses. “They prudently increased the number of bars, bolts and padlocks on the doors of their shops” (45). The government also imposes fines and penalties that diminish their ability to finance an insurrection. “Let the Turks pay; they are in a way responsible for the death of Colonel Parrales Sonriente, because they lived in the place where the deed was done.” The outcome could have made them altogether bankrupt: “And as a result of this vindictive arrangement, the Turks would have ended up poorer than the beggars who used to sleep on their doorsteps, had it not been for the help of influential friends” (45).

Surveillance serves to control the will of the beggars through observation, questioning, interrogation, and examination. Their bodies must become docile again, but the process fails. The Turks, located outside the community, are observed by the police and targeted by the justice system in order to prevent them from associating and acquiring any agency. The whole process can be summarized in one word: discipline. “[T]he domain of panopticism is [...] that lower region, the region of irregular bodies, with their details, their multiple movements, their heterogeneous forces, their spatial relations [...] Panopticism is the general principle of a new ‘political anatomy’ whose object and end are not the relations of sovereignty but the relations of discipline” (Foucault 208). After *El Pelele* is killed in *El Portal* by the Secret Police, “suddenly a door opened into the Cathedral Porch and the puppet-master peered out like a mouse” (51). The puppet-master’s wife, who was of Turkish origin as well as her husband, despite being “so carried away by her desire to know if one of the Turks had been killed,” didn’t dare leave her house (52).

“An eye is chasing me”

But amid this extended system of observation and control that adapts the logic of observation employed in the surveillance of confined spaces in order to encompass larger areas, there is a character that levitates beyond the realm of law. This character is the President. His is a power of supreme decision making. Many of the features that the narrator employs to represent the President are ingrained within a monarchical understanding of his persona. It seems that in *El señor presidente*, challenging Foucault’s presupposition, discipline and sovereignty do not exclude each other. Foucault defined the body of the prince in complete opposition to the modest, suspicious, and permanent economy of surveillance. “The body of the king, with its strange and material presence, with the force that he himself deploys or transmits to some few others, is at the opposite extreme of this new physics represented by panopticism” (208). In the novel, the narrator assimilates the President’s effigy to that of the monarch in three ways. First, by depicting the President as an entity that is perfectly aware of everything and can bend the law to his own will using the state of exception; second, by conducting a reorganization of legality and illegality; and third, through the application of torture as a theatrical display of power based on an economy of correspondence.

The epithet ‘prince,’ as a reference to the tradition of the monarch in the Renaissance, is not extraneous to *El señor presidente*. Here one cannot forget the many treatises that provided advice to the prince, such as, for instance, the several editions and translations of Andrea Alciato’s *Emblems* during the 16th and 17th centuries. In Asturias’s novel, to usurp the title of prince is a decision punished with one’s life. After Canales leaves Cara de Ángel’s house, he falsely realizes that the action that precipitated his fall and gave the President a reason to accuse him of treason was a discourse in which he called himself “Prince of the Army.” For the President, who views himself as the only embodiment of power, this title is exclusive to him. Any attempt to use or even borrow this title is interpreted as a formal declaration to seize the power that he represents. “‘Generals are the Princes of the Army,’ I said in one of my speeches. What a fool! I’ve paid dearly for that little phrase! The President will never forgive me for those ‘Princes of the Army,’ and as I was

in his bad books, he's getting rid of me now by saddling me with the death of a colonel who always showed affectionate respect for my white hairs" (62).

As Agamben, recalling Schmitt, points out, "Every general rule demands a regular, everyday frame of life to which it can be factually applied and which is submitted to its regulations [...] A regular situation must be created, and sovereign is he who definitely decides if this situation is actually effective [...] The sovereign creates and guarantees the situation as a whole in its totality. He has the monopoly over the final decision" (*Homo Sacer* 16). Throughout the novel, there are several occasions in which the President is able to dismiss accusations formally interposed by the judiciary. Despite advising Cara de Ángel to be careful to avoid getting himself caught by the police, when the Judge Magistrate formally accuses Cara de Ángel of assisting a fleeing suspect, the President orders the dismissal of all charges. "I must ask you to drop this case and listen to me. Neither the Señora de Rodas nor Miguel is guilty; you must set the woman free and countermand the arrest." As an argument to silence the Judge Magistrate, he accuses the police of committing crimes: "But the police can't see an open house without their fingers itching to loot it!" (133). In the last interview with Cara de Ángel, the President mentions once again the accusations introduced by the Judge Magistrate, but this time as a form of warning that corners Cara de Ángel into accepting his new post of ambassador to the United States. "I know all about it, and I'll go further and tell you that this desk contains the charge that the Judge Advocate drew up against you at the time of General Canales's flight" (258).

As the previous passage reveals, the act of knowing seems to be essential in the President's conception of power. As Gutiérrez Mouat has already illustrated, knowing, as a product of the existence of the written document, is central for both the President and the Judge Magistrate who in several instances affirm that they know everything. But knowing is not all there is. Doing everything, as only a demiurge would do, is another characteristic of the President's conception of State management. The prince, transmuted into the image of the President, is transformed into an individualist god who is able to create all things and even offer himself as a sacrificial victim. "I have to do everything myself and supervise everything, because I rule over a nation of 'intenders' [...] [N]obody ever does a thing, and so naturally it is I, the President of the Republic, who has to do everything, and take all the blame as well" (257). In one of his emblems Alciato advises the prince to trust fortune, for sometimes virtue alone is not enough ("Fortuna virtutem superans"). Machiavelli, on the other hand, invites the ruler to use coercion to secure fortune: "For fortune is a woman, and the man who wants to hold her down must beat and bully her" (Zimmerman 359). The President epitomizes a new understanding of this relationship, one that transcends fortune, since he becomes her embodiment. "You might almost say that if it weren't for me, Fortune wouldn't exist, as I have even to take the part of the blind goddess in the lottery" (257).

In the most modern of senses, the "I" that the President emphasizes in his own manifesto coincides with the central location of his "eye." This becomes evident in a dreamlike vision that a future secret police agent sees after witnessing the murder of *El Pelele*. He observes "an eye [that] was travelling over the fingers of his right hand like the circle of light from an electric bulb" (57). Mirroring the previous scene in which *El Pelele*'s impossibility of evading the secret police ended with his death, the character feels himself chased by an omnipotent gaze that "danc[es]": "there is an eye after me! I'm being pursued by an eye, an eye is chasing me!" (58). This eye grows disproportionately and swallows his house—highlighting once again the importance of enclosed locations as primordial loci to exert surveillance—and his son, who will eventually die following the arrest and torture of his mother: "in the darkness the eye grew rapidly bigger and bigger, until it covered the walls, the floor, the ceiling, the roof, the houses, his whole life, his child..." (58; see Rodríguez 64-65).

Since the eye cannot function without the delegation of its own gaze to a compartmentalized system of discrete power, the panoptical background of this image is unquestionable. At the same time, the preponderance of the eye reflects the central location of the President, a position that, although not contrary to the panopticon, certainly opposes panopticism. The narrator provides readers with another representation of the primal position of the President, which deepens even further the contradictions between monarchical law and panopticism as two opposing forms of understanding bio-politics. Between the President and his enemies exists "a wood made up of trees with ears which responded to the slightest sound by whirling as if blown by a hurricane. Not the tiniest noise for miles around could escape the avidity of those millions of membranes. A network of invisible threads, more invisible than the telegraph wires, connected every leaf with the President, enabling him to keep watch on the most secret thoughts of the townspeople" (39). The passage clearly reveals the concomitance of both systems. Panopticism delegates a power that resides only in the centralized body of the President. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault seems to dismiss a similar contradiction between the mutual exclusions of panopticism and monarchical law when he recalls the

disciplinary project of Napoleon who, in a manner similar to the President, was located in the center of a system that also delegated its gaze as a means to instill discipline in its subjects. Foucault's description is similar to *El señor presidente's* aforementioned passage, particularly in connection with the interest of both rulers in knowing the smallest details of the private lives of their citizens. Foucault describes that "[Napoleon] wished to arrange around him a mechanism of power that would enable him to see the smallest event that occurred in the state he governed; he intended, by means of the rigorous discipline he imposed, 'to embrace the whole of this vast machine without the slightest detail escaping his attention'" (141).

How does the President cement sovereignty and transfer it to the different bodies that he, and only he, governs? I must refer one more time to Cara de Ángel's last encounter with the President. After Cara de Ángel accepts his new post and leaves the President's residence, he oversees four indigenous priests performing a rite to the sound of drums—although he is not able to tell if what he sees is real or the product of a vision. The narration turns into a remembrance of the myth of Tohil, who was originally the god of rain and a Promethean figure who furnished humans with fire. At this point of the narration, when the supreme vengeance of the ruler is about to unfold, it wouldn't be wrong to affirm that the narrator is trying to establish a parallel between the President and Tohil. The narrator recalls "the mournful voices of the tribes who had been fighting blindly since birth." They cry upon Tohil "to give them back the lighted torch of fire." Tohil arrives providing water and milk, but "demand[s] human sacrifices." The tribes call themselves "men [who] hunt other men" and accept Tohil's request as long as he gives them the fire back. Tohil concludes: "I am content! I can prevail over men who are hunters of men" (260).

The President, by being represented as one of Tohil's avatars, intimates a mechanism of giving that complements the logic of supreme decision making. Marcel Mauss affirms that "[i]n theory such gifts are voluntary but in fact they are given and repaid under obligation," similar to what occurs with the potlatch at the hands of the chieftain (1). Derrida goes even further when he affirms that "there is no gift without bond [...] but on the other hand, there is no gift that does not have to untie itself from obligation, from debt, contract, exchange, and thus from the bind" (*Given Time* 27)—which finally implies the illegality and at the same time the necessity of the elimination of the one who gives. This *dispositif* of giving contradicts the utilitarian, liberal regime that the President advertises and therefore the theoretical, political, and legal basis of panopticism.

The logic of giving, as an extension of the spiritual bond that governs Tohil's exchange between life, death and fire, is reshaped as a reorganization of the borders between legality and illegality. By giving and spreading the state's wealth among friends and allies, even by directly choosing the winner of the lottery, the President creates a bond that allows him to ask for something in return while still instilling sovereignty in his subjects. This bond also reveals that the President's rule is far from securing the borders that separate the animal from the human and that therefore his power is not interested in guaranteeing liberty, the sacred right of property, or the validity of the social contract. His rule consists of the contention of violence based on a supreme and individual decision between life and death. This decision is not based on the social contract but on the private desire of the ruler and his need to cement his power through the transmission of a sovereign act of giving.

More than a form of clientelism, this symbolic giving implies a reorganization of the conditions of legality and illegality. According to Foucault, the transition between monarchical law and panopticism was marked by a shift between what was considered legal and illegal, for instance, burglary, which used to be tolerated as a means of sustenance but was punished once a market economy was fully installed. As a result, the police were endowed with the task of protecting private property, industrial areas, and harbors (*Discipline* 86-7). In *El señor presidente* this sequence is reversed since the modernization of the State converts the police not into an instrument that protects private property, but into a body that obeys the wishes of the ruler. The President certainly advertises himself and his regime as guarantors of peace, freedom, and property, and therefore requires the participation of the police in deterring any kind of act that intends to break the stability of any of these three elements. However, illegality is tolerated as long as it respects the logic of giving incarnated in the President. While *El Pelele* tries to escape authorities by hiding in the suburbs, the narrator points out the different faces that shape the President's generosity and the intrinsic illegality it supports.

[O]thers got more than enough from the privileged industries of idleness: as friends of the President; owners of house properties (forty or fifty houses); money-lenders at nine, nine and a half and ten percent a month; officials holding seven or eight public posts; exploiters of concessions, pensions, professional qualifications, gambling hells, cock-pits, Indians, brandy, distilleries, brothels, bars, and subsidized newspapers. (18)

In two other passages the narrator stresses the President's conception of legality as an apology of crime. Canales recalls the conversation he had with Cara de Ángel in which the latter maintains that the border between legality and illegality is defined by the support of the President, even if by doing so, one commits a crime. He tells Canales that being innocent of murdering Parrales means nothing. "For that very reason! It would be another story if you were guilty. Crime has the advantage of guaranteeing a citizen's adherence to the Government [...] Whether you're guilty or innocent is irrelevant, General; what matters is whether you are in favor or not with the President; it's worse to be an innocent man frowned on by the Government than a guilty one" (63). Similarly, Cara de Ángel tells Major Farfán that to "get in the right side of the President" is not that difficult at all. "'To commit a crime, for example,' [is] the most effective means to get the leader's good will" (175). Cara de Ángel concludes: "A murderous crime would be best; the annihilation of one of its fellows was the clearest proof of a citizen's complete adherence to the President" (175).

Finally, the administration of torture confirms the ultimate symbolism between the President and the prince, complementing the logic of giving with its opposite: punishment and the ruler's supreme decision on the life of his subjects. Although prisons exist in *El señor presidente*, the body of the condemned, particularly the body of the one who disobeys or is not able to perform at the expected level, is there not to be contained or retrained, but to be scarred. When the President's secretary knocks down an inkwell over an important document and the President orders him to receive two hundred lashes that cause him to die "[the secretary] did not think, as anyone else would have done, that the punishment was unjust, but on the contrary that it was right he should be beaten to teach him to be less clumsy [...] and to be more efficient and not to spill ink over documents" (35). However, torture is not exposed to the eyes of the general public as a way of preventing a future recurrence of the crime. The spectacle is set in place for the reader, who acts as audience and as a result becomes the only one able to remember. One other important feature of Asturias's novel is that torture is not applied indiscriminately (see Foucault 34). Torture, besides following a system of rules and a precise order, maintains a relationship based on "decipherable relations" (Foucault 44). "There was the use of 'symbolic' torture in which the execution referred to the nature of the crime: the tongues of the blasphemers were pierced, the impure were burnt, the right hand of murderers was cut off" (Foucault 45).

In Asturias's novel there is generally a group of semantic correspondences between the offences committed against the President and the administration of torture and punishment. According to the economy of justice that prevails in the novel, punishment, as the expression of the President's ownership of the bodies of his subjects, counters the crime's intention with a poetics of equivalence. When one of the beggars refuses to change his deposition and blame Canales for the death of Parrales, his body is disjointed. The criminal has disobeyed the President and has lost his right to exist as a whole body and therefore is exposed as the fragment of a body. Fedina, who refuses to confess the reasons for her presence at the house of General Canales during his flight and later ceases to speak during interrogation fearing the scribe's writing, is ordered to grind lime with her bare hands. Her agency, unmatched by any other character of the book, and the fact that she is a mother represent autonomy and fertility. The punishment, a painful, useless, and repetitive act of sanding the driest of materials destroys her independence and will and condemns her to roam like a zombie. Cara de Ángel's accusations are pardoned but he becomes the victim of a supreme act of vengeance that reproduces the offense committed against the President. By hiring a prisoner to confess that Camila is the President's favorite mistress while Cara de Ángel remains in a secret cell in the national penitentiary, the crime is finally met with a similar, corresponding punishment.

Not so strange a body

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault affirms that the prince's strange body is in complete opposition to the economy of power inaugurated by panopticism. *El señor presidente* reveals the contradictions of the coexistence of both systems. Fragments of historical, social, political, and biographical nature along with aesthetic demands and ambitions ascend from an undifferentiated bottom towards the surface of *El señor presidente*. One of these fragments attests to the parallel existence of two opposing drives that reflect the contradictory nature of State building in Guatemala. The application of sovereignty during colonial times, extensive in several other countries in Latin America, was violent, fractured, and interrupted. Independence served the interests of the elites while indigenous peoples and mestizos remained outcasts. Modernization was contradictory and patchy: some institutions were modernized (commerce, for instance) while others were not (the separation of powers). Fragments of these incomplete processes, portrayed as exaggerations, migrate into *El señor presidente*. Economic liberalization and foreign investment certainly helped Guatemala, but a large portion of its population suffered the consequences of xenophobia and exploitation. More than projecting an actual version of a political system, Asturias's work renders a nightmarish vision that displays the perversity of democratic institutions of policing and control that serve a unique political figure and his

entourage of supporters. At the same time, Asturias's reconciliation of two opposing visions of power shows that economic liberalization without real social reform can become a source of anomy and social disturbance.

According to Foucault, as two independent systems, monarchical law and panopticism function within a set of rules. In other words, both systems possess features set to perform within normal levels. For monarchical law the spectacle of torture and the scaffold is not the product of a system pushed to its limits. In order for monarchical law to function, the scarring of the body is a normal occurrence within a system that uses grandiose displays of power as an instrument to instill sovereignty. The same can be said about panopticism: surveillance, incarceration, and control of bodies through training, observation, and examination are default processes of the system. In *El señor presidente*, quite the contrary, the system of justice operates to the point of complete exasperation. What is the reason for the reconciliation of these two systems that originally oppose each other?

The President's mythical entrance situates his effigy in a background of primitive violence that recalls Deleuze and Guattari's descriptions of the procession of the despot. The perpetual attacks between tribes that Tohil's myth describes presuppose a reduction in the system of kinship that allows the rise of a dictator. The new system of filiation that he founds seems to proceed from the outside, when it really originates in the inside due to "the general irreducibility of alliance to filiation" (*Antioedipus* 195). The President could be described as a ruler who puts in place a process of State modernization that perpetuates old filiations engendered by the act of giving, but he secures his own regime by coercion and punishment, transforming his "I" into the only repository of power. Panopticism exists, but only in an exterior and apparent level, as a mechanism of transmission of sovereignty via discipline. The reconciliation of these two opposing systems becomes nightmarish: multiple divisions of State apparatus that cease to be anonymous and serve the paranoid despot without any kind of civil control.

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