



THE POPE'S TOILET

Spring
Season
2012

From: *Sight and Sound* by Michael Brooke

El baño del Papa is set primarily in north-eastern Uruguay, in the town of Melo whose only real advantage is its proximity to the border. Beto and his friends Valvulina and Tica perform daily smuggling runs to and from the Brazilian town of Aceguá which is about 40 miles away - no small distance to travel on a rickety bicycle with a dodgy chain. To get back into Uruguay, the smugglers must either confront customs men Alvarez and Luna or avoid the border post entirely. The second course involves a perilously bouncy journey over rough terrain (both Beto's bike and his knee suffer at various points) and a possible encounter with mobile patrolman Meleyo.

If the plot sounds like a Latin-American version of *Whisky Galore*, it soon becomes clear that Beto and his friends are acting out of necessity rather than libertarian instinct. Given their lack of employable skills and the run-down state of the local economy, smuggling is their only realistic means of scraping a living. So when Pope John Paul II announces that Melo will be a stop on his South-American itinerary, the locals are fired up by the television announcer's prediction that vast numbers of wealthy Brazilians will flood into the town and spend lots of money. In a running gag the estimate of the anticipated crowd increases with each broadcast, rising from 30,000 to 200,000.

The Pope's visit is the opportunity of a lifetime for the citizens of Melo and leads to an outbreak of entrepreneurship among Beto's friends and neighbours, many of whom take out clearly unrepayable loans or sell vital assets in order to invest in barbecues, meat grinders and candy-floss machines. Apart from a sceptic on television who correctly predicts that the event will be a commercial flop, the sole voice of reason in the town is Beto's wife Carmen, a woman so devout that she crosses herself at the sound of church bells. However, although she believes that cashing in on the Pope's visit is sinful, she too is swept up in the town's euphoria as Beto's scheme takes hold.

Beto's big idea, which supplies the film with its title, is that while everyone else caters for one end of the feeding frenzy, he'll deal with the other by opening a public lavatory in his front yard and charging people for its use.



The broad comedy of Beto's scheme propels the film's narrative, but there are many subtler touches to admire as well. The town's numerous hierarchies are defined by material advantage (a smuggler with a motorcycle gets the best jobs) and racial identity (Valvulina, who is black, reflects that even if his food stall makes him rich, he'll still be low in status). Everyone is corruptible, including the authority figures who delight in humiliating Beto and his friends. In desperation, Beto ends up running errands for the widely loathed Meleyo and is so ashamed that he lies about it to his family. The film portrays religion as a mass-media construct that offers little practical assistance to the poor, but offsets the radicalism of this notion with a conservative affirmation of the deeper bonds between family and friends.