

# FROM RIDICULE TO OBJECTIFICATION: DEPICTIONS OF WOMEN'S FOOTBALL IN SPANISH NO-DO NEWSREELS AND COMEDY FILMS OF THE 1970S\*,\*\*

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## INTRODUCTION

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On 4 September 2021, the Spanish daily sports newspaper *As* published a column titled “*Una liga que no para de crecer*” [“A League that Keeps on Growing”], celebrating the rise of women’s football in the country and the fact that Spanish girls can now grow up with role models like Alexia Putellas or Nahikari García. The world witnessed the culmination of this growth on the 20th of August of last year, when the Spanish women’s team won the World Cup championship in Sydney. However, subsequent events, most notably the kiss that the Spanish Football Association’s president, Luis Rubiales, gave the player Jenni Hermoso without her consent, made it clear that there are still obstacles to be overcome, on both the institutional and social levels. As will be explored in this study, these are obstacles that were already evident in the early days of Spanish women’s football during the final years of the Franco regime. Some

of the ongoing challenges are related to a lack of media visibility (Román-San Miguel, Giraldes & Sánchez-Gey, 2022) or the prevalence of negative stereotypes and an objectifying gaze (Mayoral Sánchez & Mera Fernández, 2017). The aforementioned column also looked back on all the work of the “pioneers [who] fought not only against the lack of financial supports but also against society” (Gil, 2021). Women’s football in Spain has evolved in parallel with the evolution of women’s rights, and it has been marked by a constant struggle to gain space, recognition and autonomy, as documented in the film *Algo más que una pasión* [Something More than a Passion] (Carlos Troncoso Grao, 2014), which features interviews with many of those pioneers who paved the way for women’s football from the 1960s to the 1980s.

This article focuses on the depiction of women footballers on the big screen in Spain during the late Francoist period (1959-1975). Taking a gender perspective, it offers an analysis of the most preva-

lent discourses in the NO-DO newsreels and fiction films that complemented one another to convey the collective anxiety of a society that felt threatened by the presence of women on the football pitch. It thus identifies the most common discourses in NO-DO news coverage<sup>1</sup> and how they were replicated and reconstructed in the only two feature fiction films of the late Francoist period that portray women's football: *Las Ibéricas F.C.* (Pedro Masó, 1971) and *La liga no es cosa de hombres* [The League/Garter Is Not for Men] (Ignacio F. Iquino, 1972). The aim is to demonstrate how humour was used as a key mechanism for alleviating the ideological tensions caused by the involvement of women in sport. While comedy functioned as a safe space for giving visibility to the progress of women's rights, the images in these films were articulated through a male gaze that was complicit with the forms of biopower imposed by the Franco regime, which penalised women footballers by means of mockery, ridicule and the objectification of their bodies.

For the purpose of contextualising the phenomenon of women's football in Spanish history, it is worth noting here that one of the first women's matches documented in newspaper records dates back to 1914, when a charity match was organised at the Real Club Deportivo Español stadium in Barcelona. In the early years of the 20th century, women's football would begin carving out a place in Spanish society amidst public rejection and ridicule (Torrebadella-Flix, 2016), two constants that would continue to hound the women's game for decades. These first milestones, which formed part of a series of advances for women in sport, took place in a context of the suffragette and emancipation movements that challenged traditional models of domestic femininity. The intersections between sport and the fight for gender equality came to be consolidated through feminist projects during the Second Spanish Republic in the early 1930s (Torrebadella-Flix, 2011).

However, with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), the Francoist faction pro-

moted clearly differentiated spheres of activity for men and women in its project for the nation, through legislation that demanded the subordination of women and reduced their field of action to the home. In the first years of the Franco regime, official discourse upheld an image of womanhood as the "eternal, passive, pious, pure, submissive women-as-mother for whom self-denial was the only road to real fulfilment" (Graham, 1995). The women's branch of the Falange, the Sección Femenina (SF), was the main organisation responsible for promoting and controlling activities for women and one of its constants was the encouragement of physical education in line with Falangist and Catholic values (Viuda-Serrano, 2022). The SF conceived of women's sport in eugenic terms as a form of physical and spiritual exercise whose main function was to serve the nation by cultivating disciplined, healthy and hygienic bodies that would produce strong offspring (Ramírez-Macías, 2018).

The ministerial changes of 1957 and the consolidation of Opus Dei technocrats in Franco's government led to the promotion of a strategy of neo-capitalist development that would bring an end to the policy of autarky pursued in the early Francoist period. As Pavolovic (2011) suggests, these economic changes gave rise to disruptions to the social order and the discourses of the regime, whose philosophy of *bendito atraso* ("blessed backwardness") was gradually replaced with a materialist rhetoric of progress. Women emerged as key figures in this new social fabric, which was characterised by a redefinition of womanhood in accordance with their new roles as producer/consumers (Romo Parra, 2006). The gradual entry of women into the public sphere gave rise to ideological tensions in the biopolitics of the regime, with the emergence of a conflict between the new policy of openness that sought to bring Spain into line with Western liberal democracies and the traditional structures and values of National Catholicism.

In this context, the SF continued to be one of the key exponents of Falangist ideology through a gradual adaptation to the new historical circumstances, although this reorganisation was not without its contradictions. At the same time, the Physical Education Act of 1961, which set forth the new Catholic principles in relation to physical exercise, consolidated the SF's new direction on the question of women's sport. This new direction included the professionalisation of female coaches, which as of 1956 were trained at Escuela Julio Ruiz de Alza, and the creation in 1962 of the "Medina Clubs" for the organisation of sporting competitions. These milestones exemplify the ideological tensions latent in the development of women's sport, which was institutionalised as a vehicle for controlling women's bodies, but at the same time offered alternatives to the household ideal (Ofer, 2006).

Some of the resulting obstacles were related to the need to clarify the scope of this agency offered by sport, as it could not have the effect of diverting women from traditional feminine behaviours or be used as a pretext for claiming an independence that would allow them to shirk their reproductive obligations (Morcillo Gómez, 2015). For this reason, the regime's official manuals took the utmost care to stress modesty and instruct young women in how to care for their bodies. These texts highlight the need for prudence in the choice of clothing and the avoidance of more violent exercises such as football or bullfighting, which could undermine the female values of passiveness, gentleness and decorum (Ramírez-Macías, 2018: 340).

The early 1970s would be a watershed moment for women's football in Spain. While until that time, the women's game might have been dismissed as a harmless eccentricity, this decade would



Image 1. Match between Sizam Paloma and Mercacredit in 1970

be marked by the first attempt to create a women's football team, an effort that would attract unprecedented media attention. One of the milestones in the consolidation of women's football in Spain took place on 8 December 1970, when a match was held between the teams Sizam Paloma and Mercacredit in Villaverde on the outskirts of Madrid. Although this was not the first women's match held in the country, it was significant for attracting considerable attention from both the public and the media, as reflected by the front-page feature story dedicated to the match in the daily sports newspaper *Marca* (Edelmira, 1970). One year later, unofficial championships and competitions began being held all over Spain, in a move towards institutionalisation of the women's game (Ribalta Alcalde, 2011). Women's football thus began being considered a real event and even a potentially profitable spectacle. However, these developments sparked a negative reaction from institutions affiliated with the Franco regime (*"La sección femenina condena,"* 1967), which resorted to "scientific" and "medical" arguments to condemn them (*"Un equipo de sociólogos,"* 1970).

## WOMEN FOOTBALLERS IN THE NO-DO NEWSREELS

In contrast to fiction films, which were produced by private companies (although they were also constrained by the regime's official censors), Spain's official newsreels (popularly known as "Noticiarios y Documentales" or "NO-DO" for short) became the Franco regime's main form of audiovisual propaganda. From 1943 to 1975, it was a legal requirement for all Spanish cinemas to screen these weekly newsreels prior to their feature presentations, thereby allowing the regime to filter all reporting of national and international events through its ideological prism. Francoist discourse markers are also evident in NO-DO's "soft" news, i.e., apparently less significant news stories (mass culture, sports, fashion, etc.), where the aim was to offer "tendentious entertainment, low on information and [...] loaded with clichés" (Tranche & Sánchez-Biosca, 2002: 215). As is evident in certain stories on women's sport, many reports would make use of footage taken from foreign news programs, subsequently re-edited and given a new soundtrack. María Rosón (2016: 218) analyses how, although the voice-over "domesticated and sometimes 'dumbed down' the visual content" from other countries, these international news stories offered alternative models of womanhood to the hegemonic model in Spain. As a result, the (very few) reports on women's football presented after 1949 combined the presentation of a phenomenon largely unheard of in Spain with an "official" voice that tried to mitigate its transgressive potential by means of ridicule.

Thus, in most of the stories on women's sport, the voice-over commentary tends to adopt a condescending tone that reinforces the idea of women's inferiority to men. Infantilising terminology is used to refer to the players (such as *señoritas* or the addition of diminutive suffixes to their names), and the commentary often focuses on the elegance of their outfits or their role as homemakers.

The reports are always dominated by a perspective that minimises the idea of transgression and reframes the event in accordance with the official view of femininity. Specific references to football itself generally reflect more fervent attention to the women's bodies, presenting the match as "a prank performed [...] by pretty young girls" (Gil Gascón & Cabezas Deogracias, 2012: 205).

From 1949 to 1974, the NO-DO newsreels featured a total of six stories related to women's football.<sup>2</sup> The first of these was in 1949, about a match played in Belgium, initiating a tendency in the coverage of women's football to focus on events outside Spain, including a report from Austria (1961), presented with the subheading *incidencias humorísticas* ("humorous incidents") in the program guide, and two reports from Germany (both in 1974). The insistence on the foreign origins of the phenomenon serves to underscore its alien nature, depicting transgressions of gender roles to articulate an argument for describing Spain as the last spiritual safe haven of the West. This strategy can also be observed in the press; for example, in 1945 *El Correo de Mallorca* reported on the existence of women's football clubs in London, associating them with the unprecedented level of agency that British women enjoyed during the Second World War, and adding: "it is genuinely panic-inducing to think that this fad might expand its tyranny to our shores" (Avespa, 1945). Short news stories loaded with negative judgements about women's football matches in countries such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Italy thus began to appear in the late 1940s.<sup>3</sup>

The first documentary footage of women's football matches in Spain were presented in the context of the country's incipient modernity, the entry of women into the workforce and the defence of the social work of Franco's *Movimiento Nacional*. A report from 1964 presents a group of saleswomen in a department store, who are subsequently shown facing off on the football pitch at Parque Sindical in Madrid. The commentator, who

**WOMEN IN FOOTBALL, MEDIATED BY THE REMARKS OF THE NO-DO COMMENTATOR, ARE THUS REPEATEDLY CONVEYED AS INEPT AND INADEQUATE**

notes that bullfighting and football are banned for women, describes the event as a somewhat exceptional leisure activity. To mitigate the tension the footage might otherwise provoke, the report focuses on the players' hesitation and lack of skill. These news stories serve the purpose of presenting the work of the Franco regime's Educación y Descanso office, which promoted sports and leisure activities for the working class. During the 1950s and 1960s, news stories also appeared in the press about women's football matches held all over Spain.<sup>4</sup> These articles invariably highlight the status of the matches as recreational or charity events, suggesting a planned, domesticated deviation from the women's regular activities.

These constants are evident in the coverage in a NO-DO newsreel from 1971 of a charity match played by various film stars and singers at the Rayo Vallecano pitch that year in Madrid. With the aim of stressing the comical nature of the

event, the trendy pop stars (the *Finolis*, or "Fancy" team) were grouped together to play against the folk artists (the *Folklóricas*), echoing the modernity/tradition binary of so many films of the period. The success of an event that brought together Spanish celebrities such as Encarnita Polo, Rocío Jurado, Marujita Díaz, Luciana Wolff and Lola Flores led to the organisation of a second encounter, held on 19 March of the same year at the Sánchez-Pizjuán Stadium in Seville ("Mañana a beneficio," 1971). The tongue-in-cheek comments on the celebrities' appearance or peculiar behaviour on the pitch (such as Lola Flores's "flamenco steps and olé") reinforce the farcical nature of these matches, which had more of the quality of a charity show than a sporting competition. Real women players who were struggling under precarious conditions and the limitations of having to train outside working hours at their poorly paid jobs saw these celebrity matches as yet another insult, with their depiction of women's football as frivolous, laughable and inconsequential (Troncoso Grao, 2014).

Women in football, mediated by the remarks of the NO-DO commentator, are thus repeatedly conveyed as inept and inadequate. Their physicality, tactics, position and technique are all simply wrong according to the announcer. Even when

Image 2. Match between the Folclóricas and the Finolis in 1971



the footage filmed conveys a different message, the voice-over's interpretation of the images wins out with its inexorable verdict: women do not belong on the football pitch. For example, the newsreel from 1961 is rife with jokes and features circus-style background music to add to the comical effect. All the players' hard work and effort is thus reduced to farce: when they fall down it is not because they are playing the game but because they are clumsy; cries of pain are merely "whingeing"; the coach's directions are not tactical instructions but *consejillos* ("little tips") from a woman who says simply whatever comes to her mind; and the arguments with the referee are symptomatic of the players' lack of discipline and tendency to play dirty.

More than ten years later, the report from July 1974 resorts to similar strategies in its coverage of the German women's league, accompanying the footage of the match with a children's song that trivialises the event. The commentator remarks that "every once in a while, the women like to play some football," vesting the images with the quality of an unusual whim, and concluding that "they are matches that generally end rather poorly." Just as Iquino does with the title to his film, the narrator of this newsreel plays with the two meanings of the word *liga* ("league" and "garter") to suggest that the players are actually wearing stockings. The narrator continues to question the professionalism of the players at the moment of a foul, when he explains that in women's football "anything or almost anything goes" and the referee might as well put away his whistle because "nobody pays him any attention or if they do it isn't much."<sup>5</sup> In December of that same year, an excerpt of a women's football match in Germany was shown again, this time explaining the events of the match without the tongue-in-cheek attitude. However, in the first few seconds of the footage the commentator takes the opportunity to assert that football contributes to a destabilising of the traditional gender roles with the remark that "it isn't easy to tell whether

these are men or women" and that "it is necessary to focus the camera considerably to be able to recognise that these are young girls," thus evoking the trope that activities traditionally associated with males can make women look less feminine.

Just like audiovisual constructions of women in the bullring, women's football in the NO-DO newsreels was depicted "by way of visual gags" (Gascón & Cabeza Deogracias 2012: 208). It would not be until 1974 that a NO-DO newsreel would contain a genuine sports commentary on the action of the footballers, seriously assessing the plays and goals of the different teams. It was the coverage of Germany's first Women's Football Championship, reflecting the serious attention that this phenomenon was receiving internationally, although the commentary still includes a humorous reflection on the possible confusion of genders that this new reality might cause.<sup>6</sup>

## WOMEN, SPORT AND COMEDY IN THE LATE FRANCOIST PERIOD

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The appearance of sportswomen in Spanish fiction films occurred in the context of a new form of the comedy of manners that began redefining the habits and customs of Spain's new developmentalist society through a constant dialogue between the country's traditional values and its incipient modernity. A new generation of female stars—including Concha Velasco, Sonia Bruno and Laura Valenzuela—embodied the image of the "happy, independent girl with attitude, but prudent and respectful of the rules of the game imposed upon her by society" (Ibáñez Fernández, 2017: 45). Taking moderately conservative positions, various films use women's work or gender relations as a central theme in their stories. At the same time, several of these productions would acquire more explicitly erotic dimensions, whereby the liberation of the body and the loosening of sexual mores would be depicted through an objectifying male gaze (Fernández-Labayen & Melero, 2022).

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**HUMOUR WOULD BE ONE OF THE MOST COMMON WAYS OF RESPONDING TO THE ADVANCES MADE BY WOMEN IN SPORT, IN AN EFFORT TO INSTITUTIONALISE A DERISIVE VIEW OF AN EMERGING REALITY**

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It is worth noting that the financial crisis that the Spanish film industry was plunged into by the Matesa scandal and the resulting debt that forced the closure of Spain's Banco de Crédito Industrial, which until then had provided the funding for Spanish films, had the effect of accelerating the liberalisation of a sector that depended more than ever on commercial supply and demand in the absence of government subsidies (Torreiro, 2010). As a result, a number of studios embraced an opportunistic vision with films that exploited successful formulas, such as comedies relying on popular celebrities and visual gags references to topical news or events (such as women's football), and above all, an incipient eroticism that was becoming increasingly accepted by the censors.

With the exception of certain forms like satire, comedy had been able to prosper even in the totalitarian conditions of the Franco regime due to its nature as light, harmless entertainment (King, 2002). One of the key features of this genre is its focus on the unexpected, the inappropriate or the transgressive to play with deviations from socio-cultural norms and conventions (Neale & Krutnik, 2006: 3). Its suspension of logic and common sense enables depictions of womanhood marked by less normative characterisations or behaviours. With mix-ups, masquerades and carnivalesque inversions, the comedy of late Francoism depicted the social advances being made by women through a "battle of the sexes" theme, where women would take on positions traditionally reserved for men and enjoy greater freedom in the public sphere and in personal relationships. Despite the conservative moralising of their endings, often invol-

ving romance and the recovery of the patriarchal status quo, these films offered new perspectives that portrayed women who behaved more liberally than the majority of their female spectators, constituting new archetypes of modern women, young working women, or sportswomen.

However, this potential freedom was often limited by the conditions under which these characters were depicted. The comicality relied on certain clear power relations that established a distance between the active agent of the joke and its object (Horlacher, 2009). In this way, the mechanisms of enunciation could articulate a form of ridicule complicit with biopower, eliciting a response of punitive laughter directed at the characters who transgress gender norms. The very portrayal of alternative forms of womanhood could pose a danger of "making a spectacle out of oneself", exposing oneself to ridicule or derision due to a disciplinary scrutiny that has controlled women's behaviour throughout history (Russo, 1995).

Descartes pointed out long ago that the use of comedy "corrects the vices in a useful way by making us look ridiculous, but without one laughing directly at or displaying hatred towards people" (1997: 252). This idea of the corrective function of humour from a perspective that is depersonalised and free of hatred, and therefore "non-violent", was subsequently expanded on by Henri Bergson in *Laughter* (2016 [1900]), a key text on the uses and functions of comedy that sheds light on the social, collective and popular imagination (2016: 36) as a necessary cultural and referential element. This is why the analysis of the comedies *Las Ibéricas F.C.* and *La liga no es cosa de hombres* constitutes an effective way of exploring the perception that society had of the reality of women's football, which these film's spectators portrayed and punished with their laughter.

In this way, late Francoist comedy operated in an ambiguous discursive space that celebrated the new modernity by portraying new realities, such as the entry of women into the public sphere,

including the world of sport. However, the autonomy of these female characters would constitute the very deviation or transgression on which the comedy is sustained. The mechanisms of filmic enunciation would limit the agency of the characters by turning them into objects of a derision that would extend beyond the film screen and the caricatures in the press (Corcuera, 2015, 2018a, 2018b). This attitude would have its equivalent in the matches where women footballers could be ridiculed in person. According to Carme Nieto, one of Spain's first Spanish female footballers, the humourist Pedro Ruiz was hired as a commentator at her first match and made numerous degrading comments disguised as harmless jokes about the players over the stadium loudspeakers, such as: "There is a substitution. Perhaps she has broken

a bra strap?"<sup>7</sup> Humour would thus be one of the most common ways of responding to the advances made by women in sport, in an effort to institutionalise a derisive view of an emerging reality.

### LAS IBÉRICAS F.C.

The film *Las Ibéricas F.C.*, a comedy co-written, directed and produced by Pedro Masó that enjoyed box office admissions of nearly 1.5 million in Spain, premiered in Madrid on 7 October 1971. This film reflects one of the preferred styles of Masó's productions: comedies of manners with touches of romance, telling intersecting stories of young women in a modern Madrid. Other examples include *Las chicas de la cruz roja* [Red Cross Girls] (Rafael J. Salvia, 1958) and the later films *La chica de los anuncios* [Ad Girl] (1968), *Las secretarias* [The Secretaries] (1969) and *Las amigas* [Girlfriends] (1969), all directed by Pedro Lazaga. *Las Ibéricas F.C.* contains the same stylistic features as these films, such as an ensemble cast and the modernisation of gender roles, although it is distinguished by a more explicit eroticism. This distinction is evident in the replacement of the stars of the earlier films, such as Sonia Bruno or Teresa Gimpera, with the faces of Spain's "sexy comedies", whose physical appearance was a bigger box office draw than their acting skills, such as Claudia Gravy, Rosanna Yanni or Ingrid Garbo.

Although the use of illustrations and caricatures in the posters for Spanish comedies was not unusual for the period, the promotional poster for *Las Ibéricas F.C.* reinforced the objectifying gaze on women footballers. In the first sequence, a voice-over imitating the style of a NO-DO commentator offers a historical recounting of the heroes of Spanish football, with a frenetic montage of photographs showing them in action. The montage ends with a group shot of the female protagonists dressed in tight-fitting football shirts and mini-shorts, while the commentator concludes: "and now come Chelo, Menchu, Luisa, Piluca, Ju-

Image 3. Poster for *Las Ibéricas F.C.*







Image 4. Menchu doing her lipstick before a penalty shot

lita.” Here, the emphatic tone used while reciting the names of the male footballers is replaced with a bewildered air that reinforces the double entendre in the commentator’s description of the women as “*una delantera de primera división*”, playing with the two meanings of *delantera* (“forwards” and “breasts”). This sequence is followed by the title credits to the sound of the song “Once corazones” [Eleven Hearts], whose lyrics hint at the film’s other constants of romance and the agency of the women footballers: these women “jump on the pitch with grit and determination”, but their only real goal is to “put the ball in the back of the net in the world of love.”<sup>8</sup>

The storyline of each protagonist serves to convey a discourse on women’s football. Menchu (Claudia Gravy) exhibits a flirtatiousness and frivolousness out of keeping with professional football, as her only real objective is to look stylish and cute. The objectification of this character is obvious in various scenes, such as the first one after the title credits, where she appears in her underwear, or when the male goalkeepers use another girl’s goal as an excuse to lift Menchu up in their arms because “she is the hottest”, a remark she responds to with a complaisant smile. In the end, her status as an object will be somewhat subverted when she meets a Swedish male football player. In a manner analogous to the “sexy comedies” of this period in

which sexually repressed protagonists, played by stars such as Alfredo Landa and José Luis López Vázquez, fantasised about Nordic girls, here it is a female protagonist who falls for a Scandinavian, reversing the gender order while turning football into a pretext for morally looser romantic behaviour.

The sexualisation of women’s bodies extends to the other players, although it acquires a different meaning in each character’s storyline. When the teams are being formed, Luisa (Ingrid Garbo) and Piluca (La Contrahe-

cha) are reluctant to join because they know their men will object to the skimpy uniforms. In this way, the eroticisation proposed and celebrated in the film comes into conflict with a prevailing morality that penalises the same bodies it sexualises. Playing football constitutes a transgression of the boundaries of the home and turns a submissive body into an active one. As football players, Luisa and Piluca transcend their roles as wife and girlfriend, respectively, and run the risk of becoming “public women”. Piluca describes her boyfriend as an “*Ibericus hispanicus*”, a violent and sexist species. Their fights over her career in sports, which he argues is incompatible with her duties as a girlfriend, serve as a vehicle for a debate on the limits of female autonomy.

The limits on Luisa’s freedom are defined by the family unit, as she is married with children to Federico (Fernando Fernán Gómez), who disapproves of his wife’s decision to play football. Their marital quarrels once again place the man’s traditional mentality in opposition to the woman’s independence, although here the woman’s position is expressed by Luisa’s mother. The film thus resorts to the typical, comical confrontation between a man and his mother-in-law, such as when they argue about whether being a mother is compatible with playing football. While Federico insists that she is engaging in a perversion with

deleterious consequences (“have you thought about what future awaits our little angels with a footballer for a mother?”), his mother-in-law brings an end to the discussion with a pragmatic conclusion (“well, playing forward for Madrid; does that not seem like much of a future to you?”). Luisa will ultimately be vindicated, as Federico will end up supporting her and bringing their children to the team’s last match.

Women’s football is not only presented as a force with the potential to destabilise the domestic ideal for women, but also as a threat to their physical and mental health. To this end, two storylines resort to a medical/psychiatric discourse that opposes women’s participation in the sport. Julita (Puri Villa) is dating a medical student who warns her about the physiological harm that football can do to the female body, especially to its reproductive capacity. The future doctor’s fears are made visible in a scene where he imagines Julita giving birth to a baby with a ball-shaped head. In this way, the film ridicules women who play football while at the same time farcically exaggerating popular beliefs about its unhealthy nature. On the other hand, Chelo (Rosanna Yanni) is depicted as being masculinised by her skill with the ball. After scoring a goal, she begins to imagine she is Pirri, Argoitia, or one of Spain’s other football legends, and she feels an irrepressible urge to start smoking cigars, drinking cognac or shaving. This prompts her to go see a psychoanalyst to determine whether she is a man or a woman. The film thus takes up the discourse of the loss of femininity and sexual ambiguity that would subsequently be expressed in the NO-DO newsreel of December 1974. Chelo’s identity crisis is placated when the analyst kisses her, positing heterosexual romance as the cure for gender dysphoria.

The only storyline in which women’s football is not a source of conflict is that of Loli (Tina Sáinz), a single working-class girl who is less overtly at-



Image 5. Tere gives birth to a baby-ball

tractive than the others. This allows her to avoid being sexualised, and her body is not subject to the kind of ideological confrontations affecting the others. However, the many fouls she is accused of for playing dirty hints at a lack of feminine softness. Ultimately, although football offers a possibility for her to climb the social ladder, as her mother (Rafaela Aparicio) suggests when she encourages Loli to seek fame to avoid ending up in a dead-end job like the rest of her family, she finds an alternative way out when a wealthy young man takes an interest in her. Her chance at upward mobility thus shifts to the realm of romance, indirectly suggesting that her talent lies in being a wife rather than a football star.

As hinted at in the lyrics to the opening song, which describes the “eleven hearts” of Las Ibéricas F.C. scoring “their greatest goal” (meaning marriage), the synopsis submitted to the Censorship Board suggests that “the girls play with their boyfriends more than with the ball, and the match ends up being a resounding victory as they take their opponents to the altar.”<sup>9</sup> In accordance with the “Masó formula”, all the disruptions to the gender norms ultimately lead to a wedding, and thus to the recovery of the status quo. In the final scene, the players all emerge from the church in bride’s dresses, albeit still kicking a football, hinting at a conciliatory view that even the most conser-

vative idea of romance is not incompatible with a love for the beautiful game.

This film's storylines unfold in an ideologically ambiguous space in which ridicule of women coexists with ridicule of those who oppose the advances they were making. Indeed, the Franco regime's Censorship Board itself raised questions about the supposed "comicality" of the film, which it authorised with a few edits, offering the opinion that the script "is not merely bad but terrible. With it, the Spanish film industry hits a new low. [...] There is a lot of crudeness, but there is even more vulgarity."<sup>10</sup> The censors also warned against "excesses of exhibitionism" and "unacceptable erotic details", and required that care be taken with "the depiction of the effeminate man so that he doesn't seem homosexual." They also demanded changes to dialogues with "tasteless" double entendres, such as replacing the phrase *tocar el pito* (which means blowing a whistle but can also refer to touching a part of the male anatomy) with the less ambiguous *tocar el silbato*. The film's less monolithic view of the issue than the perspective offered in official media sources like NO-DO is reinforced by the variety of opinions provided by supporting characters. In the stands, streets or homes, every character offers a point of view, resulting in a film that functions as a cultural forum for a diversity of perspectives similar to diversity of the film's audience itself.

But the film's predominant feature is its eroticising of the women's bodies, which in 1971 constituted one of the main attractions of Spanish mainstream cinema. Some scenes exist exclusively for this purpose, such as when some mice invade the pitch and the story is suspended momentarily to present a series of different shots showing the animals scuttling over the players' legs or hiding in their cleavages, at the sight of which one fan exclaims: "If only I were a mouse!" This sexualising gaze is reinforced by

some of the supporting male characters, such as the masseur (José Sacristán), who ponders that he will *ponerse morado* (another double entendre, literally meaning "to turn purple", but also suggesting overindulgence) from constantly massaging the players' bodies. Some of the male fans at the matches—such as the peeping Tom who hides in the changing rooms or the men who try to make a peep-hole in the dressing-room wall—serve to express the scopophilic drive, with POV shots that frame the legs and other parts of the young women's bodies, thereby turning the spectator into an accomplice to the voyeurism. Through its commercial cinematic strategies, *Las Ibéricas F.C.* uses football as a manifestation of the social tensions provoked by the modernisation of gender roles, a narrative pretext for a romantic comedy with an ensemble cast, but above all, a spectacle in which women's bodies exist to be gazed at.

### LA LIGA NO ES COSA DE HOMBRES

Produced, co-written and directed by Ignacio F. Iquino, *La liga no es cosa de hombres* premiered in Barcelona on 3 April 1972, and would go onto surpass 1 million in box office admissions. The film is set in Rome and tells the story of Julián (Cassen), a clumsy footballer and womaniser who is forced to flee when the club president discovers he has been

Image 6. Julián dressed as Coqui



having an affair with his wife. To make his escape he is forced to disguise himself as a woman and ends up getting into Italy's national women's team thanks to a former lover who is now the team's coach. Iquino's long and successful career reflects his commercial vision of filmmaking and his ability to produce what were generally low-budget films adapted to the context of the time and the tastes of the general public. In the late 1960s, he began to capitalise on the success of Cassen, one of Spain's top comedians at the time, with a series of star vehicles designed to showcase his skills as a performer.

Cassen had already constructed an image parodying the lady's man in *El mujeriego* [The Womaniser] (Francisco Pérez-Dolz, 1963) and *El castigador* [The Lady Killer] (Juan Bosch, 1965). Iquino made use of Cassen in *07 con el 2 delante* [07 with 2 in Front] (Iquino, 1966), *La tía de Carlos en minifalda*

[Carlos' Aunt in a Mini-Skirt] (Augusto Fenollar, 1967) and *El terrible de Chicago* (Juan Bosch, 1967), all of which contain markedly erotic elements and employ storylines that involve the protagonist assuming a false identity. *La liga no es cosa de hombres* continues with this formula by combining comical mix-ups (including cross-dressing like *La tía de Carlos en minifalda*) with the attraction of sexualised female bodies.

In this film, the narrative focus is not on the women players but on the man who has infiltrated the team dressed as a woman. Indeed, football here is a mere pretext for the development of an erotic, picaresque story. The first half hour of the film contains no mention of women's football, focusing instead on the protagonist's romantic conquests and his clumsiness on the pitch. In this way, the contrast between his failure as an athlete and his success with women is established from the outset.

Julián's cross-dressing will give him access to private spaces reserved for women, such as lavatories and changing rooms. The disguise serves as a device to make the spectator, who is aware of the deceit, an accomplice in the sexualisation of the players through the protagonist's gaze and touch. The scenes of the training sessions allow Coqui (Julián's female alter ego) to get close to his teammates when they celebrate a goal or to bump into them "accidentally" on the pitch. The players themselves, who barely have any lines in the film, are mere background figures on which the camera lingers to display their bodies, positioning the spectator in the same scopophilic space as the protagonist.

The only sportswoman depicted with any substance is the coach, Colette (Silvia Soler). The first time she appears is in the club office, explaining on the phone that "[women's] football is not a burlesque show; you can have short and shapely legs that can still be strong and muscular." This assertion contrasts with the visual treatment of the women's legs, the most fetishised part of their anatomy. At the same time, Colette's career as an athlete suggests a masculinisation similar to Chelo's in *Las Ibéricas*

Image 7. Poster for *La liga no es cosa de hombres*



F.C., as she is depicted as a woman who is attractive, but who engages in behaviour that constitutes a deviation from domestic femininity. Her husband is a timid, complaisant man who looks after their baby because, as Colette remarks quite unromantically, “in Rome it’s cheaper to have a husband than a nanny.” Her lack of maternal instinct also recalls the moral dangers that threatened Luisa in Masó’s film, although in this case it serves merely as a joke based on an inversion of gender roles.

The sexual ambiguity alluded to in so many media texts on women’s football is explicit in the case of Coqui/Julián, as his transformation depends entirely on his use of a wig and mascara, yet his obviously male appearance never seems to arouse the suspicions of the girls on the team. The disguise serves two purposes in the scenes of the training sessions and matches, as in addition to the aforementioned pretext for physical closeness, it also allows Coqui/Julián to go from being the most inept player on the men’s team to being the most skilful player on the women’s team. This contrast underscores the lack of skill of the women, who on several occasions are depicted playing poorly or committing fouls. The message appears to be that even the worst male footballer is better than any professional women player. This depiction contradicts the message conveyed in the theme song—performed by Cassen himself—that plays in the opening credits and at other moments in the film, with lyrics that suggest that “a lot of guys who think they’re football stars could learn a lesson from the women,” and that football “is for women, brave and bold, who in only two passes score a goal.”<sup>11</sup> Yet the women’s dedication to football is never treated as a subject of the film, and their skills on the pitch are never displayed.

Football is thus used in this film more as a commercial strategy, typical of the opportunistic approach of Iquino, who evidently sought to capitalise on a topical issue. This intention is made clear when Colette points out that there is money in women’s football now. Yet in reality it serves

merely as another setting in which the “racy” plot direction of Cassen’s previous films can be repeated once again. It is thus used to reinforce the objectification of women, as reflected in the bedroom and pool scenes (where the female characters are very scantily clad), and on the football pitch. Indeed, the combination of comedy star and eroticism was understood to be the film’s main box office draw, as is evident in the promotional poster for the film, where a caricature of Cassen appears beside the curvaceous figure of a female footballer, similar to the aforementioned caricatures in the press and the poster for *Las Ibéricas F.C.*

## CONCLUSIONS

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In the contemporary context of debates about humour, political correctness and cancel culture, the films and NO-DO newsreels analysed here might seem outrageously outdated, yet some of the prejudices they reinforced about women’s football, although in decline, are still evident today. Humour in 1970s Spain operated in collusion with a widespread attitude of derision and ridicule of women’s football. Through a mirror effect, fiction films, NO-DO newsreels, cartoons and the press all repeated patterns of humour that operated on two levels: a medical discourse warning that women’s football is unnatural and may directly undermine female reproductive functions and the biological differences between the genders; and a technical-cultural discourse that viewed the intrusion of women onto the football pitch as a perversion of the history and rules of the sport, as the women footballers’ frivolousness, flirtatiousness and lack of tactical skills hindered their ability to play the game correctly.

The comedic response, complicit with these expressions of biopower, would serve as an instructive and corrective measure, while trivialising the players’ performance on the pitch and thus defusing their disruptive potential and liberating influence. This coercive force is especially evident in the NO-DO newsreels, an official vehicle of the

Franco regime, in which the voice-over narration interprets the phenomenon through a prism of ridicule tinted by National Catholic ideology. *Las Ibéricas F.C.* and *La liga no es cosa de hombres* resort to similar tropes, although their commercial objective places them in a different orbit. These are comedy films with an optimism that clashed with the reality of women's football in the early 1970s. Masó's film encourages debate over whether women should be playing football and each of its multiple storylines conveys a different attitude towards the issue. The depiction of the female body (sexual, active, domestic, maternal, womanly) conveys the tensions provoked by the presence of women in sports, and by gender roles in general in the context of Spain's entry into the modern age. Although it reinforces a discourse on the inadequacy of the players, who are presented as sexual objects, frivolous and inept, and at risk of losing their femininity or reproductive ability, the film also introduces alternative discourses that support women's football and ridicule the arguments criticising it. Iquino's film simplifies this debate, seizing on the topic merely as an excuse to show scantily clad bodies on screen. Women's football is thus used in these films as a way of attracting an audience, with the depiction of the advances of women in sport framed in conservative humour and, above all, undermined by an objectifying eroticism that was becoming increasingly common in Spanish mainstream cinema at the time. ■

## NOTES

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- 1 Although the entire NO-DO archives have been analysed to identify depictions of women's football, this article makes reference mostly to those of the late Francoist period (1959-1975).
- 2 NO-DO 348A (5 September 1949); NO-DO 975B (11 September 1961); NO-DO 1136B (12 October 1964); NO-DO 142B (11 January 1971); NO-DO 1642 (1 July 1974); NO-DO 1664A (2 December 1974).
- 3 See *Noticias al sprint* (1950); *Prospera en el undo* (1958); *Deren* (1960); *El fútbol femenino ignorado* (1965); *Primer campeonato mundial* (1970).
- 4 See *Encuentro de fútbol femenino* (1950); *Fútbol modesto* (1955); *Fútbol femenino en el Luis Sitjar* (1960) *En Elviña (La Coruña) se juega* (1962); *Fútbol femenino* (1964); *Fútbol femenino en Bilbao* (1967).
- 5 See NO-DO 975B (11 September 1961) and NO-DO 1642A (1 July 1974).
- 6 See NO-DO 1664A (2 December 1974).
- 7 See tweet by Islàndia RAC1 [@islandiarac1] (24 May 2019).
- 8 Original lyrics: "Once corazones que al terreno saltan con moral y decisión [...] Once chicas decididas al llegar con el balón hasta el fondo de las mallas en el marco del amor."
- 9 Archivo General de la Administración, box 36.04219, file 64950.
- 10 Archivo General de la Administración, box 36.04219, file 36.05080.
- 11 Original lyrics: "así juega la mujer y que aprendan la lección muchos tipos que se creen unos ases del balón [...] el fútbol es cosa de chicas, valientes y audaces que en solo dos pases consiguen el gol."

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## FROM RIDICULE TO OBJECTIFICATION: DEPICTIONS OF WOMEN'S FOOTBALL IN SPANISH NO-DO NEWSREELS AND COMEDY FILMS OF THE 1970S

### Abstract

After decades of control over women's sports by the Franco regime's Sección Femenina, Spain's first women's football teams were founded in 1970 with the aim of institutionalising the women's game and establishing the first unofficial championships. However, the entrance of women into such a male-dominated sphere of activity was out of keeping with the heteropatriarchal ideological norms of Francoist society. Exploiting the novelty and controversy of the issue at this time, a number of mainstream cultural products depicted female footballers in deliberately negative ways characterised by ridicule and sexualisation. This article takes a perspective informed by gender studies and humour studies to analyse the circulation of different biological and technical-cultural discourses in Francoist Spain's official newsreels and the comedy films *Las Ibéricas F.C.* (Pedro Masó, 1971) and *La liga no es cosa de hombres* (Ignacio F. Iquino, 1972). The comical discourses of these audiovisual products complemented each other to convey the collective anxiety of a society that felt threatened by teams of women who were advancing relentlessly with a ball at their feet.

### Key words

Women's football; *Las Ibéricas F.C.*; *La liga no es cosa de hombres*; NO-DO; Comedy; Gender Studies; Humour Studies; Francoism.

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## ENTRE LA MOFA Y LA COSIFICACIÓN: REPRESENTACIONES DEL FÚTBOL FEMENINO EN EL NO-DO Y LAS COMEDIAS DE LOS AÑOS SETENTA

### Resumen

Tras décadas de control del deporte femenino bajo la tutela de la Sección Femenina, en 1970, el fútbol femenino se abrió paso en España, y se fundaban los primeros equipos formados exclusivamente por mujeres con ánimo de institucionalización y reconocimiento, así como los primeros campeonatos oficiales. Sin embargo, este salto de las mujeres a un ámbito de clara dominación masculina, no cuadraba con los estándares heteropatriarcales de la sociedad franquista. Por ese motivo, y aprovechando la novedad y controversia del tema en el momento, surgieron varios eventos y productos culturales/comerciales que representaban a las futbolistas de forma nada inocente, mediante la burla y la sexualización. En este artículo vamos a analizar desde los estudios de género y los estudios de humor cómo diferentes discursos biológicos y técnico-culturales circulaban entre los noticiarios NO-DO y las comedias *Las Ibéricas F.C.* (Pedro Masó, 1971) y *La liga no es cosa de hombres* (Ignacio F. Iquino, 1972). De esta forma, los discursos cómicos audio-visuales se complementaron para condensar la ansiedad colectiva de un imaginario social que se veía amenazado por unas mujeres que avanzaban imparables con un balón en sus pies.

### Palabras clave

Fútbol femenino; *Las Ibéricas F.C.*; *La liga no es cosa de hombres*; NO-DO; Comedia; Estudios de género; Estudios de humor; Franquismo.

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