

DIALOGUE

**FILM AND CHANCE.
A LIFE IN CINEMA
ON THE STREETS
OF MADRID**

Interview with

**FERNANDO
MÉNDEZ-LEITE**

FILM AND CHANCE

FERNANDO MÉNDEZ-LEITE, A LIFE IN CINEMA ON THE STREETS OF MADRID*

ELIOS MENDIETA

LUIS DELTELL ESCOLAR

Fernando Méndez-Leite (Madrid, 1944) is one of the most well-rounded cinematographers of the Spanish film world. Here, we use the word cinematographer in its broadest sense, since Méndez-Leite has not only directed and produced but is one of the few men to have held so diverse a selection of the official posts in the Spanish film industry. Méndez-Leite, current president of the Spanish Academy of Cinematographic Arts and Sciences [Academia de las Artes y las Ciencias Cinematográficas], has also worked as a university professor, and critic; he founded and directed the Community of Madrid School of Cinema and Audiovisual Arts [Escuela de Cine y del Audiovisual de la Comunidad de Madrid: ECAM]; he produced for TV creating a documentary series about Spanish cinema; was president of the Spanish Institute of Cinematographic Arts and Sciences [Instituto de la Cinematografía y de las Artes Audiovisuales: ICAA], and, yes, he is also a screenwriter and cinema director.

Méndez-Leite enrolled in Madrid's Official School of Cinematography [Escuela Oficial de Ci-

nematografía: EOC] in the academic year 1967-1968, although, like many others—among them Juan Antonio Bardem—he didn't graduate. In Méndez-Leite's case, it was his involvement in anti-Franco militant activity that took him away from his studies. He joined Spain's national TV broadcaster, Televisión Española (TVE) at the time when this station was a key testing ground for young cinematographers—Josefina Molina and Pilar Miró also spent parts of their careers with this public broadcaster—and worked on a number of programmes. Once Spain returned to democracy, he created and directed *La noche del cine español* [Spanish Cinema Night], a documentary series that was, without any doubt, the very first televisual space to properly contextualise Spanish cinema.

For almost twenty years, he taught in the department of Cinema at Valladolid University and, in addition, during the 1990's he opened the ECAM. He was, as we mentioned, the director general of ICAA, a post he held for three years



Image 1. Fernando Méndez-Leite at Café Gijón, Madrid

during which time the Spanish Cinema Academy instituted the Goya awards.

His first feature film, *El hombre de moda* [Man of Fashion] (1980), premiered to great acclaim at the San Sebastián festival. This film presented Madrid as a city in a process of evolution as Spain made its transition to democracy. Three years later, he brought to the screen what has been considered the most important television adaptation of Leopoldo Alas Clarín's *La regenta* [The Female Regent]. Starring Carmelo Gómez, Aitana Sánchez-Gijón, and Héctor Alterio among others. This ambitious TVE production was the last in a series of great classics adapted for TV in the cathode-ray era. A case of quitting whilst ahead.

Méndez-Leite has never stopped writing, particularly film criticism, but above all, he maintains a reputation as an excellent and enthusiastic filmgoer. Jorge Luis Borges once said he was not proud

of the books he had written, but rather of those he had read, and with Fernando Méndez-Leite we can speak not only of the films he has made, but also of those associated with him, and those he has helped produce or inspired through his vocation as a teacher, as a mentor, or as an academic.

For this interview we arranged to meet at the quintessentially Madrileño Café Gijón, a favourite haunt of cinematographers ever since it first opened. Located on Recoletos Boulevard, Café Gijón has hosted some of the most significant creative geniuses of the last and, indeed, this century: artists of various genres, from painters, to sculptors, to writers, and of course, cinema directors. We felt it to be a suitably iconic location for this appointment with our interviewee, the Spanish Cinema Academy's current director, and, as we mentioned, someone whose contributions to Spanish cinema would be hard to better. ■

We chose Café Gijón because we thought it would be a comfortable place to meet—close to the Spanish Cinema Academy—and, we have just realised, it's also not far from the old location of the Official School of Cinematography!

Yes, I love that it's only some three hundred meters from the door of the Cinema Academy, on Zurbano street, to the entrance of the old Official School of Cinematography, which used to be housed in one of the mansions on Monte Esquinza street. Who would've thought, six decades later, I'd still be working in the same place, on the very same block, here in Madrid. I'm continually struck by the thought that I'm here, where everything started, one step away from the Official School of Cinematography where I spent my first year. Then, of course, we left to go to a new location in Madrid's University City, when they inaugurated the building on [Dehesa de la] Villa street.

It has been said many times that the EOC was an important meeting place in seventies Francoist Madrid.

For sure, I remember well what it felt like to go to the EOC each afternoon, above all in that first year, at the same time as I was doing fifth year Law. In the mornings I'd go to University City, to the faculty, and in the afternoons, I'd go to the mansion where the Cinematographic school was based. I lived nearby, you see, I had a place next to the Palacio de los Deportes, and from there I'd walk down Goya street and then up Génova street, feeling an immense sense of fulfilment and happiness, thinking about how, at that moment, I was where I wanted to be, studying what I loved and having a great time. It was an intense feeling—of achievement. It was very related to the geographic space where it all took place, to Madrid, and that decadent old mansion, that perhaps wasn't the best place for a film school, but where we all certainly lived as if it were the best place.

Lucio Blanco has said that when the school moved from Monte Esquinza to its location in University City it improved technically but lost something emotionally.

The old location had masses of character. I recall the most complicated shoots were done in the school's main entranceway, you see, the mansion had many floors; there were classrooms on the upper floors and below there were several function rooms and offices. The great staircase in the entrance that gave access to the first floor was used as the backdrop for practical work, above all, for films set in past eras. Perhaps it wasn't very practical, but it was exciting to enter the building and find yourself right in the middle of a film shoot. It was another world; totally different to what you saw on the streets of Madrid. All that changed when the school moved to University City. There, the school started to fragment because of politics and administrative issues. But also, because of the people. I've always believed it's people who make projects, and I think it was never going to be the same, having someone like Carlos Fernández Cuenca—a man of the cinema—in charge of the school compared to when the school's administration was taken over by people with clearly political intentions.

One of the ideas you have put forward is that cinema schools are schools for friendship.

I don't think I framed it in exactly those terms, but, yes, without doubt, that's the idea. They are centres where students come together in class, in rehearsals, and other work, but also in bars, cinemas, and in an infinity of casual conversations. In all these contexts, shared interests flower, as do skills, and friendship is built on those foundations. I absolutely remember with total clarity the feeling that in school we all learned from other classmates, from everyone, I mean, from Antonio Drove, Ramón G. Redondo, Manolo Matji, and all the other students on the course. Someone might talk to you about a book you hadn't heard of, and

that's how you'd get into a new author; or they might mention some film or other that was very good but that you hadn't liked and then you'd go see it again with new eyes. The personal likes and styles of each student generated a flow of ideas. It was something very creative.

That creative feeling was something I also experienced constantly over the many years I spent as a teacher in the Cinema department in Valladolid, and also, interacting with the students at ECAM. The truth is, looking at the careers of students from ECAM or the Catalan Advanced School of Cinema and Audiovisual Arts [Escuela Superior de Cine y Audiovisuales de Cataluña: ESCAC] who've gone on to make films or series, you realise their teams are made up of people they met in film school. All of them have advanced in the profession together, creating two circles: one in Madrid with ECAM as its focus, and another in Barcelona around ESCAC. Circles that, for sure, sometimes cross and enrich one another.

The Official School of Cinematography was a product of Francoism set up to pursue a particular ideological necessity, but it failed, since so many of its students were radical—or at least determined—opponents of the regime.

It's commonplace to say the EOC was a nest of reds, and it's true [he laughs]. Above all, at the time I was at the school it was very politicised, you see, the social environment was very intense. It was 1968 and, from an ideological perspective, it was a time which left a significant mark on society. It was always the case, even before it was the EOC—when it was still the Institute of Cinematographic Research and Experiment [Instituto de Investigaciones y Experiencias Cinematográficas: IIEC], that is, in the era of Martín Patino, Saura, Borau, and Camus—the school was already very politicised and involved in several significant confrontations. One of the first graduates of the IIEC was Julio Diamante who was one of the leaders of the 1956 university movement and very influential in the youth politics of that

period. What happened was, it all went quiet for several years until, in the middle of the seventies, a visible germ of opposition to the regime began to grow again. And, of course, there I was, someone who'd already been a delegate at the Law Faculty, and so I was very involved in politics, I guess, leading opposition to the Francoist Spanish University Union [Sindicato Español Universitario: SEU].

Whatever film school they attended, students frequently have fond memories of the library and projection spaces.

Well, when I studied in Spain there was still very little published about cinema and what there was, was either in fairly unobtainable books or specialist journals. I don't remember the school's library being out of this world, instead, what I appreciated was that there were always so many different types of films being shown in class: double bills, and even films banned by the censors. You see, a good proportion of the teachers at the EOC were censors themselves: they banned the films and then brought them to show to us, their students, so we could learn. So, while some films couldn't be shown in Madrid's cinemas, in the EOC we analysed and admired many censored works. One memory that comes to mind following on from this story is that, in the seventies, a government minister, Sánchez Bella, called a meeting of Spanish filmmakers and as part of the meeting, he prepared a private showing of the film, *Z* (1969) by Costa-Gavras, for them. After viewing this feature—prohibited by the censors and so impossible to see in any Madrid film theatre—he told them: "This is the cinema I want you to make in Spain". It seems so ironic now.

Apart from the film showings in the school itself, the students' own love of cinema spurred them to seek out new works whether in the commercial cinemas on Gran Vía or in smaller independent community cinemas.

I remember, on the afternoons when we didn't have classes, we used to go to cinemas showing

a double bill, tracking down films we loved to see over and over again. Really, the choice was limited to films commercially distributed in Spain, there wasn't much else. There were also cinema clubs around in those days, but they had access to very little material and, also, it was in a dreadful state of preservation: rolls of 16 mm film with innumerable cuts. Of course, we went to lots of premieres, and we saw some films in commercial cinemas six or seven times.

During that period, one good thing for our generation was that, in the summer, commercial cinemas in Madrid, like the ones on Gran Vía or on Fuencarral street, would show not only new releases but also reruns. So, in the same week you could see *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, (John Huston, 1948) at Madrid's Lope de Vega and then, at Carlos III on Goya street, another film like *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942). So, we could suddenly catch up on all those forties films we'd been too young to see at the time. A high proportion of what we saw in those theatres was American cinema, important works by some of the great directors. Another important moment for the cinema-lovers of my generation happened in the early seventies, due to the work of TVE putting together film seasons for broadcast on its second channel. They showed films by Humphrey Bogart, Gary Cooper, and Robert Mitchum—whole seasons showcasing great actors, but also directors like Joseph Mankiewicz and George Cukor. We knew all these directors from television, but we also learned about others like Jean Renoir and Kenji Mizoguchi. There was an entire season dedicated to Mizoguchi on TVE! I think it was in 1971 or 1972. I remember they were broadcast every Tuesday and so, on our little, black and white TVs we were able to see films by some of cinema's greats. The incredible thing is how we would all get together, maybe more than ten people at a time, in our homes to see films by Mizoguchi or Renoir on those tiny televisions.

It's true, some things were easier than they are now, for example, getting to know living di-

rectors—they were more accessible somehow. So, at the San Sebastián festival or the one in Valladolid, we could see retrospectives of some of the most revered directors and the most incredible thing is, afterwards you could have a conversation with the people themselves. There was huge respect for cinema and a great community built around films.

Was it this respect for the cinema that prompted you to create and direct the series *La noche del cine español* [Spanish Cinema Night] (1983-1985)?

Really, like so many other things in my life, it happened by chance. When the PSOE came to power, I was at home thinking about what to do. I'd just finished filming a TV-movie about *Sonata de estío* [Summer Sonata] by Ramón Valle-Inclán. It was a mini-series and the production stage had been a disaster with an infinite number of cuts and changes at the last moment. Afterwards I'd returned to television to do an art programme, but then that finished too and, so, when the new government was elected, I was at a loose end but full of ideas and hope—like so many others. We thought that with a socialist party in power, a party where we had acquaintances and even good friends, change would happen, and Spanish television would produce new things. I told myself this was the moment when I'd finally be able to do what I wanted to do: direct fiction films. I'd already done several cultural programmes on television, and they were good work, but I wanted to do cinema. However, the telephone didn't ring. Time passed and the telephone still didn't ring.

Many weeks later, the people from TVE's channel two called me. At the time the channel director was Clara Francia whom I didn't know. They told me I might be able to help them with an issue they had but didn't know how to manage. Someone at TVE had bought the rights to a heap of films made during Franco's time—films from the forties and fifties—and they didn't know what to do with them. The majority of these works

were unknown to the general public and, of course, ideologically aligned to early Francoism. Clara asked me if I could think of a way they might be broadcast, since, under the first democratically elected socialist government, it might be considered crass to rehabilitate these films steeped in such a diametrically opposed ideology. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more it depressed me. I didn't like the project one bit; it seemed like a poisoned chalice. The easy options such as selecting and recutting the films for a news-documentary style programme to be followed by films like *Las chicas de la Cruz Roja* [Red Cross Girls] (Rafael J. Salvia, 1958), at that time in the eighties just seemed frightful to me. Without a doubt, proposing to re-release films from the forties was counter to what would be expected under a socialist government. Fortunately—by chance again—I accepted the challenge more because it meant a secure income than out of interest. After ten to twelve days shut up in a room with a Moviola machine watching all those films, I made a discovery: these films told the story of my life, my childhood, and my adolescence! And, as the next logical step, if this was the story of my life then it was also a narrative of the lives of every Spaniard, or, in a generic sense, of Spanish life under Franco. So, when I discovered these films from the forties I'd not yet seen, I felt as if I was regaining some part of that era.

Would it be right to imagine that many of the films from that decade, by young directors of the time such as Rafael Gil and Juan de Orduña, wouldn't have been well-known or had perhaps even had been lost?

The majority of the films were unknown or had been forgotten. And, of course, as they were from the forties, I hadn't seen them, since they were not part of the repertoire shown in commercial cinemas or in the cinema clubs. I hadn't seen—nor had practically anyone of my generation—films like *The Nail* (El clavo, Rafael Gil, 1944), *La pródiga*

[*The Prodigal Woman*] (Rafael Gil, 1946), or *El destino se disculpa* [Fate Apologises] (José Luis Sáenz de Heredia, 1945); that type of film was still unknown. At the time, I knew much more about Spanish cinema of the fifties: all those classic Madrid comedies like *Manolo, guardia urbano* [Manolo The Traffic Policeman] (Rafael J. Salvia, 1956), *Las chicas de la Cruz Roja* [Red Cross Girls] (Rafael J. Salvia, 1958), and *El tigre de Chamberí* [The Chamberí Tiger] (Pedro Luis Ramírez, 1957), since I'd seen them as a child, and knew them very well, and, also, they had been among those shown on double bills. I can't even remember how many times I saw *Manolo, guardia urbano* or *Historias de la radio* [Radio Stories] (José Luis Sáenz de Heredia, 1955)! But, seen one after the other, watching them on a Moviola machine from nine in the morning without a break until seven at night, I realised this type of cinema had barely been shown or analysed and that Spanish life under Franco was part of Spanish cinema. By design or default, whichever, it was undeniably there. From that point I started my project of telling the story of Francoism through Spanish cinema. Luckily, I was given a free reign. Fernando Lara helped me a great deal throughout the whole process. We divided up the interviews, he did the more political ones while I did the more cinematography-based ones.

The interviews you did for *La noche del cine español* comprise a very valuable body of material for researchers of the history of Spanish cinema, and those interested in Francoism in general, both because of the depth they go into as well as their length. Indeed, some of the EOC's students feature in the series.

Yes, the original recordings of those interviews have been preserved. I remember we recorded on Thursdays and Fridays—Fernando Lara on one day and me on the other. They were very long interviews encompassing the whole period from 1939 to 1975, with the idea of cutting them down later and presenting sections relevant to the

themes dealt with in each chapter of the series. And they weren't all strictly about cinematography. For example, we interviewed Marcelino Camacho, Alfredo Di Stéfano, Alfredo Mayo, Fray Justo Pérez de Urbel. I even managed to get an interview with Ramón Serrano Suñer! I had to work hard to convince him; before he agreed to do that long interview, I remember how much I had to persevere until he felt he could trust me. Without a doubt, like I said, Francoism was embedded in those films, and from there came the original concept for the whole series. Rummaging around a bit in the testimonies of those cinematographers, actors, and politicians—some open supporters of Franco, others dissidents—a living story came together about what those first decades of Francoism had been like. It was incredible to be able to interview those characters as living witnesses, although, well, they were already very old by then.

It grieves me to see how the memory of Spanish cinema is being lost. A year ago, when Mario Camus died, I felt a great loss, not just because of the sudden absence of a good friend, but also because with him died an important layer of memory about Spanish cinema—and, if you ask me, I'd say part of Italian and French cinema memory too. I believe, *La noche del cine español* helped immeasurably to ensure that the part of the memory of those decades—the forties, fifties, and sixties—hasn't been lost.

Not long after *La noche del cine español* you were named as the director general of the ICAA, what do you remember about that time?

They were three intense years. Neither my time as director in the ICAA in the eighties nor my involvement in the ECAM in the nineties were personal projects, rather they were both fruit, once again, of chance. Chance! I wouldn't have lifted a finger to enter politics, or to go into the Ministry of Culture, but, suddenly, I found myself being offered the director general-ship and further-

more, the offer came just at the moment a film project I was working on—something I'd invested with all the passion, time, and money possible—was about to go under. It was a film called *La mujer en la luna* [The Woman in the Moon], but unlike Fritz Lang's film of the thirties it wasn't about rockets and planets, but about a real woman. She was a counter figure to *El hombre de moda* [Man of Fashion] (Fernando Méndez-Leite, 1980). In fact, shortly after finishing that film, I met with Pilar Miró after a showing of *Gary Copper que estás en los cielos* [Gary Cooper Who is in Heaven] (Pilar Miró, 1980), and I asked her what she was going to do next to which she replied: a film about a man. She asked me the same and I told her: a film about a woman. That film became *La mujer en la luna*, but in the end I had to drop it for a variety of reasons both big and petty; it's one of my greatest professional regrets. I think it would have sent my career in totally different direction. After that excursion, returning to the question, it all began with a phone call from the minister, Javier Solana—just after Pilar Miró resigned—who offered me the job of director general of the Institute of Cinematography. I was taken aback. I talked to my then wife and my friends, and after debating it with my nearest and dearest, and thinking about it a great deal, I accepted. It was an exhilarating experience; I dedicated my heart and soul to the job and enjoyed myself doing it.

At the time, my biggest interest was in revitalising the Spanish film industry which was just then emerging from oblivion. While the Union of the Democratic Centre [Unión de Centro Democrático: UCD] had been in power during the transition to democracy, Spanish cinema was a disaster, but I liked the policies Pilar Miró had put in place and agreed with them. What's more, personally, it gave me the only good reason to abandon *La noche del cine español*, which didn't show any signs of ever finishing. Every day, I'd discover more things and so the show would carry on; there never seemed a way to put a final full stop to it.

Despite everything it wouldn't have been a bad idea to continue with the programme.

I left a lot of material already recorded, a team with two stupendous directors who did things really well. Furthermore, there were two good assistants working on *La noche del cine español* with Fernando Lara as advisor. I think it could have carried on for many years if I hadn't been given such a tempting offer with the ICAA, just at that moment.

The eighties were a period full of changes for Spanish cinema.

Yes, absolutely they were. And, you know, in my first year at the ICAA, I believe I had a great deal of luck. That was when they released films like *El viaje a ninguna parte* [Voyage to Nowhere] (Fernando Fernán Gómez, 1986), *La mitad del cielo* [Half of Heaven] (Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón, 1986), *27 horas* [27 Hours] (Montxo Armendáriz, 1986), *La guerra de los locos* [War of the Mad] (Manolo Matji, 1986), and *Tata mía* [Dear Nanny] (José Luis Borau, 1986). The appearance of those films made it very easy to be director general and support Spanish cinema.

That first year as director general, in addition, coincided with the first year of the Goya awards.

Yes, after a few months in post as director general, the first Goya awards were presented in the Lope de Vega theatre on Gran Vía and *El viaje a ninguna parte* was a big winner. Fernando Fernán Gómez swept the board winning Best Film, Director, Screenplay, and more. Unfortunately, the actor-director didn't come to the gala and the ceremony was born amidst controversy due to his absence. But well, the King and Queen were there, and we were treated to a showing of *La aldea maldita* [The Damned Village] (Florian Rey, 1930) which had been very finely restored by the Spanish Film Archive [Filmoteca Española].

Generally, it was a very lively time for Spanish cinema. Pedro Almodóvar became an international phenomenon almost overnight, and this

was very important, indeed key, for all of Spanish cinema. I had a small, but direct, role in all that as I explicitly supported the Almodóvar brothers in their endeavour to form their own production company. They'd made the film *Matador* [Killer] (Pedro Almodóvar, 1986) with Andrés Vicente Gómez and I really encouraged them to take the leap and form El deseo so they themselves could produce *Law of desire* (*La Ley del deseo*, Pedro Almodóvar, 1987). I remember, a short time after I'd joined the Ministry we took *Matador* to New York for a Spanish Cinema week, and while we were there, seeing the amazing response to the film—and to Carmen Maura—betting on Almodóvar became an obligation. I remember people would stop us on Fifth Avenue! At New York airport I told Agustín Almodóvar we needed another film from Pedro by October, and he replied saying they had a project, but the screenplay was at an early stage and because they were trying to get their production company off the ground everything would take time. They weren't ready to take anything to the commission. I insisted strongly that there had to be a new film from Pedro before Christmas, and I asked that they present whatever they had—in whatever state it was in—to the commission. And I promised I'd champion them. I knew, a new film from Almodóvar at that moment would help all of Spanish cinema. I've always been an advocate of this way of doing things; I favour a, let's say, proactive politics, one that prevents any good project being left by the wayside.

The ECAM is another of the institutions you've dedicated your time to over the last decades.

Genuinely, its foundation was also a matter of chance. At that time, I was finishing the soundtrack for *La regenta* and I was trying to get a film project off the ground—it was called *La mujer que ganó la guerra de España* [The Woman Who Won the Spanish Civil War]—and it was very close to my heart. The screenplay was set in San Sebastián during the three years of the Civil War, and it was

about a family of women—from the right of the political divide—who lived with the rear-guard. It was a story very loosely inspired by my mother's youth; the three main characters were my mother, my grandmother, and my great grandmother, who took refuge from the 'red terror' [terror rojo] among the rear-guard. The story begins with a prologue about Madrid under the Popular Front [Frente Popular] and ends with an epilogue after Madrid was taken by the Nationalists in 1939. It was a hugely ambitious project, and I was really keen to take it on, you see, I thought it was very interesting to explore the world of the rear-guard, of the women who became our mothers. But it was never to be. It was a difficult period.

And, in that disappointing context, I was offered the opportunity to found and direct the school. In fact, it was an idea Jesús Martínez León and I had talked about several years before at the request of—if I recall correctly—the General Society of Authors and Editors (Sociedad General de Autores y Editores: SGAE) and, the bank, Caja Madrid. We gave them a presentation of our plans and they accepted the draft proposal—and paid us—but then we heard nothing more. I then became involved in producing *La Regenta* and was shooting outside of Madrid for a long time; meanwhile, funding for ECAM was being negotiated with SGAE, the Autonomous Community of Madrid, and the Cinema Academy. And then, they made me a firm offer of the school's directorship. It was a fabulously exciting project; I couldn't refuse.

When the ECAM was set up, at its inception, did you have in mind something similar to the Official School of Cinematography?

Yes, but we realised quickly that times had changed. Some things, like the division into specialisms that, yes, we preserved from the old EOC. In addition, for example, we thought it wise to keep the course duration to three years. And, as it had been then, we felt practical work was of central importance to learning. We also kept the entrance exam

since the number of applications was immense. In the end, we felt things had changed, and neither the cinema nor the students of the sixties were the same as in our time. However, it's true, we had the model of the EOC in mind, if only as the seed.

Change would seem logical, after all, four decades had passed.

Yes, and we also had to deal with the whole process of technological transformation. For example, for the editing specialism, I remember talking to Pablo del Amo who was, at the time, indisputably the number one editor, respected throughout the industry for his filmography, and, one morning, I remember Del Amo told me his specialist course wouldn't cover the new Avid editing programme. I tried to explain to him that while I felt it was important for students to edit using Moviola, they had to have training for and be aware of Avid, since even then, digital editing was becoming the norm. For sure, Almodóvar, for example, still edited analogue film, and I too had used Moviola for *La regenta*, but, by this point, there were very few cinematographers using traditional methods. I insisted he take account of this processes of change from analogue to digital by teaching both methods, since although Moviola could give students the necessary background, in the future, they would have to work with Avid. Pablo roundly refused to listen and so I couldn't work with him. It was tough, but we needed to adapt to the technological change that was already in motion.

Even so, in general, we were very fortunate with our teachers. I would go as far as to say they were very good teachers. Did you know, in the directing specialism, we started out with none other than Montxo Armendaritz and Víctor Erice.

How do you see the future of cinema schools? Would you like to make a prediction?

I think these schools have been an all-round success. The other day, in San Sebastián, I was talking with some of the staff at ESCAC—friends of

mine—and they were telling me cinema and the shows being made nowadays can't be understood without ECAM and ESCAC. And I agree with them. These schools continue to have a future, and I believe the only problem is that the student body and what they want to do have changed so much. What people enjoy in cinema has changed radically. I remember an anecdote Santos Zunzunegui told me shortly after he'd given the first session of his History of Cinema course. He'd shown his students *Days of Hope* (*L'Espoir*) by André Malraux (1940) and after class, one of his students approached him and said that, if this was the type of film they were going to be shown, he wouldn't be coming again.

And after so many years, here you are, back in the same district and in another of Madrid's grand houses.

Curiously, the Academy's current headquarters is another mansion; they've been there since 2007. The building is extraordinary, and it enables us to carry out all sorts of activities. As you know, I've been with the Academy from its first moments: since its birth—around 1986-1987—when I was director general at ICAA. Before the project had been fully implemented, the members of the Academy's provisional council came to the Ministry and to the ICAA asking for funding to help get the Academy project going. I, as director general, was the one who was there to receive the council members and I remember clearly how I had to organise their first grant of ten million pesetas—no small sum in those days. Many years later, I preside over the institution I helped create. It's the reason behind my whole life [he laughs].

What is day-to-day life like at the Academy?

There's a lot of work to do! But luckily, I've inherited the Academy in a good state of repair; its well organised, with a brilliant technical team, and practically everyone working there does a good job, they have so much knowledge and skills. All that really helps and makes everything flow. Even so, there are many tasks to do, because we organise such an array of projects, and I have to take a fairly active role. Really, I'm very happy to pitch in as I think it's worth it, and the previous team who built the Academy, without a doubt, placed it in a very good position.

How are your current residency projects going? Are you happy?

Yes, I am. I believe everything is turning out well. They are the source of lots of interesting work. We've finished three residencies already; the film *La maternal* [Motherhood] by Pilar Palomero (2022) came out of one of them, and the reviews

Image 2. Fernando Méndez-Leite during the interview at Café Gijón



are good. I've been at meetings with our residents and, I feel, all the students are happy. It's a feeling I get when I'm at the Academy too, that everyone employed there is happy, they work well and are very competent. There's a very convivial atmosphere; it's a pleasant place to work.

We've talked about your training and love of cinema, but barely touched on your cinematographic work.

Like so many other things, my films have also been the fruits of chance [he laughs]. Even one of my most recent projects—a documentary about Carmen Maura—landed in my lap by chance after an unexpected phone call. I've tried to make films, but there I think I've often had bad luck and I haven't managed to pull it off. It's not something I dwell on, but, for sure, it's a note in the chapter about my life's frustrations.

Luckily, we've been able to enjoy some that came to fruition like *El hombre de moda*.

Yes, but the ones I've finished have come about only after major difficulties, and in general, I've not been able to do things as I would have wanted. Sincerely, I believe there are aspects of the figure of film director I just don't have, or I don't know how to perform. I don't seem to know how to move in that terrain, and I don't know why this is, because I've been able to acquit myself well in so many other, seemingly equally complex, roles. I'd say, it's much more difficult to be the director general of the ICAA, of a cinema school, or to stay on good terms with government ministers like Esperanza Aguirre or Miquel Iceta (to name some examples), than to be a film director; however, I've managed to do all those things well and have had good luck. Yet, when I have to sell my own artistic vision—and it's something that keeps happening to me—I don't do it well and I tend to be hit by bad luck. Perhaps it's something to do with my character or personality, or a guilt complex, or impostor syndrome. I have quite extreme cases of both.

I've always thought: "What am I doing here? He's so much cleverer than me!" I've always suffered from impostor syndrome. I remember how, when I first came to the School of Cinematography [EOC], listening to my fellow students made me think I should just head back to the Law Faculty.

But works like the *La Regenta* (1995) series, or the feature *El hombre de moda* (1980) speak for themselves about the fine work of the director behind them.

That shows I can do these things [he laughs]. But I believe they could have been done better with a little more luck. I'm very pleased with *La Regenta*, although it's always the case that, in a film, you have to make sacrifices and you regret not having gone with various suggestions as you might have wanted to in the beginning. Last winter I saw the show again and I thought there were many things that were well done. For sure, there are things I'd change, I'd cut some scenes, but, in general, I'm proud of the result.

There are some scenes in *La Regenta* that are really accomplished and well-constructed. I think a great deal about the excellent work of Gil Parrondo. With very little to work with, he managed to create all the atmosphere required to transform the novel into film. Of course, the most difficult aspect of the whole process was to condense Clarín's original work. I'm particularly fond of the second episode in the series where much of the main plot is developed.

On the other hand, *El hombre de moda* is a film that, seen today, I think reveals its humble production budget, but it's also a good representation of Madrid society in the sixties. So yes, the film was made under conditions of extreme poverty and hardship. I was working in television at the time, and I'd requested a special dispensation but they'd refused me and so we had to shoot in any gaps or down time the actors and the team had. It was a very complex shooting schedule. We had so few resources to work with I remember one

afternoon—it was right here at the Café Gijón—I was desperately searching for a new actor to replace someone who'd just quit. That was when Pep Munné walked in, and I went over to him, and I begged him to join us the following day to perform a small role in our film. He had to play the brother of Xabier Elorriaga's character and they didn't look remotely alike. Luckily, Pep said yes! Those were the conditions we were working under.

One of the greatest elements of *El hombre de moda* is the dialogue between this work and your other passions, such as literature.

Yes, the dialogue between cinema and literature is evident in much of the European cinema of the seventies. But the inclusion of literary references is difficult to accomplish in a feature film without it coming across as fake or pedantic. That was where my experience as a teacher was very handy. I'd been teaching for a while when I did that film, I'd done thirteen years at the department of cinema in Valladolid. I had a great deal of knowledge about the world of teaching, about how students respond, and the difficulty of placing literary references in film is all about how they fit into the framework of the whole film, and I think it came out well. Literary—or cinephile—references in feature films often feel out of place, but I don't think that's the case in *El hombre de moda*.

Your latest features are once again about cinema: cinema within cinema. The documentaries such as *El productor* [The Producer] (1990), a film about the producer Elías Querejeta, or those about the actresses Ana Belén (*La corte de Ana* [Ana's Cut] 2020), and Carmen Maura (*¡Ay, Carmen!* [Oh Carmen!] 2018) that we mentioned before.

Yes, as I said, some projects have come about by chance, and others through my friendships with the people around which they're based. I feel happier about some than others, but yes, all of them contain cinema within cinema.

You have so much experience as a cinema critic and writing for a range of publications, based on this, how do you see the state of cinema criticism today with respect to that of previous eras?

Dreadful. It's a touchy subject. I've always been and will continue to be a critic and write about cinema. I think the current lack of good criticism is to do with the crisis in publishing. Many titles will force you into a small niche and impose publicity and commercial conditions that are increasingly absurd. When I wrote for *La Guía del Ocio* and *Fotogramas* they'd often phone up with a job and they'd ask about the star rating you were going to give the film: if you said you might give it four stars they'd give you the job, but if you told them you were thinking of giving it only one star, they'd withdraw the offer. I believe there's no point in criticism that isn't free, wide-ranging, and deep. Despite my age and my back pain, I'm still hugely enthusiastic and, when its festival season—Cannes, San Sebastián, Valladolid, Venice—I read all the newspapers and other publications I can get my hands on. But sadly, I find many of the films that get awards—the ones that get talked about—aren't of much interest. So, I don't feel I can rely on the film criticism I read.

To finish, Fernando, have you always been passionate about Spanish cinema?

As a child, and growing up, I loved Spanish cinema. I adored going to movie theatres to see any film that was showing. I tell you; I have no idea how many times I saw *Manolo*, *guardia urbano* or *Historias de la radio* [Radio Stories]. Then, after my time at the EOC I felt a little alienated from Spanish cinema, but I still went to see all the films I could. Of course, some of the films produced in the sixties were pretty horrendous. That was a time when, if I went for dinner with friends, I used to be the only one who'd seen the majority of films produced in Spain, and, naturally, there was more than one occasion when I'd be ranting about one of other of those features because they most-

ly struck me as irritating and not simply from the political point of view but also from a social and moral perspective. No doubt about it, among my circle of friends, I was the one who'd seen most Spanish films and, I think, at the same time, I was the one who maintained the most critical discourse about them.

That's why, the one thing I'm not on board with is the mythologising trend apparent in much of the research on Spanish cinema. Spanish cinema is, undoubtedly, hugely interesting as a source of knowledge about, and as a reflection of the society that produced it. However, this doesn't imply that all Spanish filmmakers and all of their works were uniformly brilliant. It's a prickly topic, but I think, in some instances, the story constructed by certain young researchers and critics, is a misleading one. I don't think it should be a problem to say that one or other Spanish film is bad—or even terrible.

This said, contemporary Spanish cinema is in a magnificent position. For sure, there have always been excellent films, even in the most difficult periods of Franco's dictatorship, and many more since the transition to democracy. I am so lucky to be presiding over the Academy now, at the current time when there are so many marvellous films being produced like those of Rodrigo Sorogoyen and Carla Simón. I think the near future is very promising. I am in no doubt that Spanish cinema is in fine health.

We say our goodbyes at the door of Café Gijón on one of Madrid's few rainy afternoons. He walks off down Recoletos Boulevard towards Colón Plaza, in the direction of the Cinema Academy. We wait for a few seconds for the rain to stop in the restaurant's awning, just enough time for one of the Gijón's waiters to come out and ask us: "Was that the new director of the Cinema Academy?" Yes, it was Fernando Méndez-Leite a man whose fifty years in Spanish cinema were shaped by chance. ■

NOTES

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FILM AND CHANCE. FERNANDO MÉNDEZ-LEITE, A LIFE IN CINEMA ON THE STREETS OF MADRID

Abstract

Fernando Méndez-Leite is a cinema director, screenwriter, and teacher. He was a student at the Official School of Cinematography (EOC) in Madrid. He directed *El hombre de moda* (Man of Fashion, 1980) and the RTVE show *La regenta* [The Female Regent] (1995) based on the novel of the same name by Leopoldo Alas Clarín, among other works. In addition, he founded and was principal of the Community of Madrid's School of Cinema and Audio-visual Arts (ECAM) and, since 2022 has been director of the Spanish Academy of Cinematographic Arts and Sciences.

Key words

Madrid; Official School of Cinematography; ECAM; Academy of Cinematographic Arts and Sciences; Spanish Cinema; Fernando Méndez-Leite.

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PELÍCULAS Y AZAR. FERNANDO MÉNDEZ-LEITE, UNA VIDA DE CINE EN LAS CALLES DE MADRID

Resumen

Fernando Méndez-Leite es director de cine, guionista y profesor. Fue estudiante de la Escuela Oficial de Cinematografía de Madrid. Ha dirigido *El hombre de moda* (1980) y la serie de RTVE *La regenta* (1995) sobre la novela homónima de Leopoldo Alas Clarín, entre otros trabajos. Fue, además, fundador y director de la Escuela de Cine y del Audiovisual de la Comunidad de Madrid y es desde el año 2022 director de la Academia de las Artes y las Ciencias Cinematográficas de España.

Palabras clave

Madrid; Escuela Oficial de Cinematografía; ECAM; Academia de las Artes y las Ciencias Cinematográficas de España; Cine español; Fernando Méndez-Leite.

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