



NOTEBOOK

La sirena negra (Carlos Serrano de Osma, 1948)

Wounds, survivals, transformations

Styling models in postwar
Spanish cinema (1939-1962)

"[T]he supremacy of love over knowledge leads to the creation of a new delusional reality where the departed beloved returns in the form of a ghost."

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LOVE, LOSS, MELANCHOLY, DELUSION: AN OBSESSIVE-DELUSIONAL STYLISTIC MODEL IN SPANISH 1940S CINEMA*

Introduction

In a recent study (CASTRO DE PAZ, 2013)—and based on a detailed historical analysis of a large number of preserved films conducted over the course of more than two decades of research and publications (CASTRO DE PAZ, 2002 y 2012)—we proposed a theoretical and historiographic articulation of certain stylistic models for Spanish cinema in the period 1939-1950, resulting from the diverse and aesthetically productive intersections between the narrative and visual norms internationalised by that time by Hollywood and Spanish cultural traditions (in theatre, literature, art and music) that had constituted the most fertile material—transformed upon contact with the new medium—for Spanish cinema since the silent era, but which in this period came under the pressure

of a particularly gloomy and complex historical and political context. These models are merely methodological instruments that attempt to give a discursive order to elements that nearly always appear blended together in the films studied (Sánchez Biosca, 1991: 29), and to contribute to a deeper understanding of a wave of anguished cinema that is at once humorous and devastating, *Costumbrista* and melancholy, reflective and spectral.

There are four models that we have been able to identify and characterise in the Spanish cinema of the period, marked, as noted above, by the complex hybridisation after the Civil War of the international institutional mode of representation (to use the now clichéd and debatable term coined by Burch) with cultural traditions that had fed Spanish cinema since its origins: a

Sainete-Costumbrista Stylistic Model (SCSM), resulting from the influence on the filmmaker of some of the more deeply-rooted social traditions of Spanish stage and theatre shows (sainete, *género chico*, zarzuela, etc.), which are best represented by certain films of Edgar Neville's; a Parodic-Reflective Stylistic Model (PRSM), essentially based on a comic, absurd, eccentric and artificial style that parodies the apparently realistic authenticity of the classical model; a Formalist-Pictorial Stylistic Model (FPSM), associated with films whose diegesis is usually centred on great historic events and characterised, in particular, by its tendency towards a succession of live-action frames that draw on a visual tradition—chiefly pictorial, often referencing a painting quite literally—almost always well-known to the audience (*Locura de amor*, directed by Juan de Orduña in 1948, would be the emblematic example in this case); and, finally, the model that is the object of analysis in this article, an Obsessive-Delusional Stylistic Model (ODSM), tendentially linked to the genre of melodrama and comprising films dominated by the gaze of a male subject wounded by the loss of his love object and which, as the film unfolds, will present a basic formalisation of the delusional state of the subject.

Obsession and delusion

The Obsessive-Delusional Model is, without doubt, the model most clearly marked by the historical moment in which it arose, having been employed almost exclusively in the period studied and disappearing in the following decade, when—with the possible exception of the extremely interesting *¡Buen viaje, Pablo...!* (Ignacio F. Iquino, 1958)—it becomes extremely difficult to identify examples of any of its defining characteristics. Moreover, many of this model's most representa-

tive films—*Las inquietudes de Shanti Andía* (1946) and *Obsesión* (1947) by Arturo Ruíz-Castillo; *Embrujo* (1947) and *La sirena negra* (1948) by Carlos Serrano de Osmá; *Cuatro mujeres* (1947) and *El huésped de las tinieblas* (1948) by Antonio del Amo; *La fiesta sigue* (1948) by Enrique Gómez; *Vida en sombras* (1948) by Lorenzo Llobet-Gràcia; and *Ha entrado un ladrón* (1949) by Ricardo Gascón (Paz Otero, 2013)—also belong to the mythical

The films that would comprise the ODSM would be those formally structured around a gaze obsessed with and wounded by the loss of the love object, incapable of dealing with the grief, and depressed to the point of delusion

movement identified by Santos Zunzunegui (2005: 488-504), given that the reflections they posit—such is their aesthetic and semantic achievement on occasions—would fully capture, even beyond the significant degree to which they are historically anchored in the time of their production, the psychic wounds of male desire associated with the Oedipal conflict and castration complex described by Sigmund Freud and reformulated by Jacques Lacan.² It is also no accident that most of these films are works by directors who began their careers in the second half of the decade, forming part of generations (the "*Renovadores*") and groups (the "*Telúricos*") that were singularly concerned with the cinematic aesthetic and a long way from a cinematic approach inclined towards the interests of the Franco regime.

Without abandoning the use (or even predominance) of devices typical of the IMR, the films that would comprise the ODSM posited above would be those formally structured around a gaze obsessed with and wounded by the loss of the love object,³ incapable of dealing with the grief, and depressed to

the point of delusion. On occasions the loss is a clear and gloomy metaphor for the Civil War, as in the case of one of the most famous and complete examples of the Model, the aforementioned *Vida en sombras*. Llobet-Gràcia's film, through its cinematic (and cinematographic) techniques, actually offers a dramatic reflection on the impossible nature of the fulfilment of the desire, but profoundly and very subtly imbued with the trauma of the Civil War,

so that the film's structure convincingly links the loss of the love object (Ana) with (at another significant level) the death of that character during the first skirmishes of July 1936 in the streets of Barcelona, later directly identifying the bleak post-war period with the wound, the scar borne by the sub-

ject. A single shot, while at the same time serving as a transition between the two parts of the film (which itself is divided in two by the brutal conflict elided from the action), masterfully encapsulates what we are describing. In the midst of the war, and after resigning from his position as a film reporter on the conflict, a close-up of Carlos Durán captures—in Fernando Fernán-Gómez's meticulous performance—all of the pain that the simple reference to a camera causes him. Then, with the close-up of his face still superimposed, we see documentary fragments of the combat that give way to the appearance, in the lower right corner of the screen (while the clouds over the battlefield are still visible), of Ana's name etched on her gravestone. The music and the soundtrack accompanying the images of war continue, but are gradually transformed as the scene lights up and the camera pulls away. It is the soundtrack that informs us of the end of the war. Franco's *peace* (dramatic music mixed with the unmistakable sound of a few chords from the national anthem imposed by the new regime), a *peace* of graveyards, founded

upon the death of innocents, thus coincides with the final frame: Ana's grave, with the shadow of a cross violently looming over it. Then, Durán comes into the frame to place some flowers there. And it fades to black.

Almost always set in a heavily charged urban night-time, films associated with the ODSM are also notable for their search for extreme visual formulations of a space (and atmosphere) that is dense, unwholesome, stifling and painfully unbreathable, with clear psychoanalytical resonances. Complex sequence-shots and highly visible camera movements and/or positions, montage sequences, overlays and all kinds of attention-grabbing visual effects pushing beyond all classical constraints connect the Model—even if some of its admitted references are found in the work of the most “experimental” (and nearly always European) filmmakers in Hollywood, like Orson Welles, Alfred Hitchcock, Fritz Lang or Robert Siodmak—with the *visualist* traditions of the 1920s and '30s avant-garde (German expressionism, Soviet montage, or French “impressionism”). Indeed, the narrator appears to share with his wounded and deeply melodramatic character a certain passionate agitation so that, even while he attempts to disassociate himself from the character's emotional instability, he ends up irremediably caught up in it.

These films are generally associated with melodrama—although even comedies as important as *Huella de luz* (1942) or *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* (1943), both directed by Rafael Gil, or films with a historical setting like the extremely dark *Inés de Castro* (1944, two different Spanish and Portuguese versions, directed by Leitao de Barros and M. A. García Viñolas), with the madness of the king and his necrophiliac act of love for the woman's corpse, present its more serious constants in some of their scenes, and even anticipate formal solutions developed in the Model—and always present, in one or more moments of their development, the filmic formali-

sation of a male subject who experiences delusions of his lost love object, sometimes through photographic, cinematic or pictorial representations of the beloved. The first two cases occur, once again, in *Vida en sombras*, a film in which everything revolves around cinema, as a realm with which the desire of the subject (filmmaker, protagonist and spectator) is essentially concerned. Fascinated with a female

image, only through his amateur films (and after the ghostly shot-reverse shot with Mr. de Winter from *Rebecca* [Alfred Hitchcock, 1940], in which he fully recognises himself) will Carlos Durán, the film's protagonist, be able to understand, though no longer evade, the limits of his imaginary passions. Delusional after being directly confronted with the living face of his dead wife and *seeing* her smile in the photograph

Figures 1 and 2. *Vida en sombras* (Lorenzo Llobet-Gràcia, 1948)





Figures 3 and 4. *Obsesión* (Arturo Ruiz-Castillo, 1947)

(figures 1 and 2), he can then show his first *opus*, not because of the patient help of Clara (an inadequate substitute for the beloved, unrelated to the cinema; “What am I doing here?” she asks while Carlos and David talk about their project), but because it is the (only) *means* in his reach to achieve a precarious balance: to commit the absence to celluloid and thus to return, in a misshapen circle, to the beginning, to his own birth.

But even in the case of stories set in the 19th century—*El clavo* (Rafael Gil, 1945); *La sirena negra*, *El huésped de las tinieblas*, *Las inquietudes de Shanti Andía*—or set outside Spain and apparently unrelated to the armed conflict—*Cuatro mujeres*, *Obsesión*—the female presence/absence (as the ghost of the dead or vanished woman continues to be forged in fire on the subconscious of the subject) and, in short, the impossible nature of the fulfilment of the desire are inextricably linked, more or less explicitly, to the painful present of the post-war period when the film was shot, to speak to us, metaphorically and to varying degrees, of

the sexual misery of Francoism. Arturo Ruiz-Castillo’s extraordinarily unique *Obsesión*, for example, with radical virulence and beyond its colonial setting, narrates the progressive and irremediable mental degradation of the engineer Sánchez del Campo (Alfredo Mayo) from the moment of his soli-

anguish. His obsessive anxieties will grow more intense after he marries a woman he has known only by letter, but whom he confuses with the one who appears in the photograph accompanying the correspondence (Lidia, the stunning woman, an *imago pedes-*

tal) but who is not in fact the writer of the letters. A productive blend of melodrama and film noir, the story begins *in extremis* in the moments of the protagonist’s total psychological breakdown, so that from the beginning—his figure being initially constrained by the oppressive absence of deep focus, forced foreshortening and gloomy lighting—we witness the representation of his delusions, firstly through the viewing of the photograph of the Woman he loves—the unattainable object of desire—which ends up vanishing (figures 3 and 4), and immediately thereafter with the gloomy sounds of his wife’s ghost (we will later discover that

she drowned in a swamp and he failed to intervene to save her, in a potential act of homicide) drawing him powerfully towards death.

As can be seen, the *gap* or yawning abyss between desire and reality

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tary and forlorn arrival in Equatorial Guinea, oedipally disturbed after abandoning post-war Spain, which appears to be home to the origin of the *absence* that operates as a narrative *gap*—although clearly insinuated—of his real

can also affect the narrative structure, as tends to occur in the Model, often concealing (the diegetic presence of) the *primordial scene*, either situating it prior to the beginning of the plot (although it completely determines the plot's outcome), or eliding it brusquely through the use of ellipses that are both distressing and puzzling, and often cleared up by the apparent resolution and false healing of a flashback. Some good examples of this formula are the urban, dark and mournful *thrillers* written by Miguel Mihura and directed by his brother Jerónimo—*Siempre vuelven de madrugada* (1949)—or by Rafael Gil—*La calle sin sol* (1948), *Una mujer cualquiera* (1949)—which always include a brutal elliptical fracture (only explained in the final flashback), a growing narrative black hole that turns the film into a sickly and tangled web of evasive glances, tensions and fears between the characters.

Although optical subjectivity does not tend to occupy a notable quantitative role in the development of this melancholy and delusional gaze, the subjective point of view of the man is sometimes employed, often to be immediately cut off or subverted, thereby turning it into an exception of heavily marked intentionality (that even encapsulates the onset of the delusion itself). This is what happens in *Cuatro mujeres* and in *El huésped de las tinieblas*, the notable first two films of the republican Antonio del Amo, produced by Sagitario Films with screenplays by the Galician Manuel Mur Oti and meticulous cinematographic work by Manuel Berenguer, which seem to constitute (we would argue *consciously*) clear *mythical* renderings of the unresolvable conflict of desire posited by the Model. In the first, set in Tangier a few years before the Civil War, we meet four men—the eight hands playing a

shadowy game of poker in one of the opening shots, the eight eyes that think they see Her in the woman who enters the “El Ancla” dive where all four will narrate in flashbacks how they came to know *her*—as the camera sweeps through the packed bar in constant motion, pushing open the doors and the curtain at the entrance, in the style of a Western saloon. This invisible character, without stopping, focuses first on the woman on the right, who is singing a melancholy song (“you left, without looking back...”) and ends up *looking* towards the upper floor, on a

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raised wooden platform, where at one of the tables the poker game is taking place. The narrator then seems to introduce himself abruptly, as one of the various drunks hanging out in the bar in the fictional universe, and his gaze falls on a woman, before then framing the protagonists, interlinking *his* gaze with theirs. From this moment, the arrival of Her and the subjective gaze through which she is presented to us is at first dual (since the high Dutch angle POV shot of her already seated responds to a medium shot of the painter and musician looking at her) and then swiftly followed by the gaze of the soldier, captured in the final frame with the camera in motion from the previous POV shot (showing the point of view of the other two characters) and

continues it with a delirious dolly shot towards Her, bringing the gaze up to the female body in a significantly similar way to that which—as discussed below—will be used by Serrano de Osma in certain scenes of *La sirena negra* (and *revived* by Buñuel in *Él* [1952] and Hitchcock in *Vertigo* [1958], each in his own way, in the following decade). A gaze that is “composed” and spliced, obsessive and delusional, multiplied and expanded from one eye to another, as a kind of metastasis of the longing search for a phantasmal figure which the sailor will identify directly with the “prostitute-mother”. On the other hand, in *El huésped de las tinieblas* (“The Guest of Darkness”, whose title is taken from an expression used by Rafael Alberti to refer to Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, the great poet of Seville whom the film portrays), Bécquer sees his lost Dora (who reproduces *another* earlier, *eternal* loss, represented symbolically in an extinguished oil-lamp that can only be lit intermittently) reflected in the water, and will then imagine her in a beautiful central frag-

ment, festive and sinister, the fruit of his anguished mind, until the narrator finally gives up his arms to the lovers so that they can melt together in an impossible double close-up of unprecedented beauty.

In any case, partly continuing the openly demonstrative tendency of Spanish cinema since the silent era, partly to avoid resemblances to the Hitchcockian subjectivity of *Rebecca*, harshly judged to be morbid, materialist and heretical by the most powerful official film criticism of the day, the most restrained and least radical filmmakers would seek alternatives to the “dangerous” orthodoxy of the POV shot through a treatment of the space of the shot (size, “pictorial” composition, lighting, highly stylised sets, etc.) that

imbued it with a metaphorical charge associated with the character's melancholy, without actually being from his perspective. Strictly speaking, this peculiar *atmospheric subjectivity*—which the triumvirate made up of the director Rafael Gil, cinematographer Alfredo Fraile and set designer Enrique Alarcón would take to its most sublime expression in the “dance” scene of the Judge (hallucinating) with Gabriela in *El clavo* (1945)—was characterised more by a focus on the character and an indirect free point of view than by the (very restricted) use of the POV shot and, at the same, interacted with the notable and constant presence of a narrator who participates in and comments on the narrative events, sometimes giving the sensation—as noted above—of a torment equal to or greater than that of the protagonists.

La sirena negra

Finally, we will turn our attention, as an outstanding example of the Model analysed here, to *La sirena negra*, directed in 1948 by Carlos Serrano de Osma, the godfather of the group that called themselves the “*Telúricos*”, whose work today is well-known thanks to the research of Asier Aranzubía (2007). A filmmaker of exposition—as defined by José Luis Téllez, to whom we also owe some brilliant analyses of his work—and of point of view, his films of the period “integrate the inheritance of Eisenstein or Pabst into a dense corpus of native literary or iconic references, creating an essentially poetic narrative style of exacerbated Romanticism with a strong psychoanalytical quality” (Téllez, 1998: 814-815), which, however, have another of their main external points of reference in the (no less passionate and innovative) films of Orson Welles. Dense and masterful, *La sirena negra*, which would suffer the repression of censorship and would not be shown

in Madrid until 1950, is an adaptation of one of the last novellas (of the same title) of Emilia Pardo Bazán—a writer who was certainly not favoured by Franco's regime, but whose literary prestige would have made it seem ludicrous and counterproductive to ban her—that sets to images the passionate and melancholy wanderings of Gaspar de Montenegro (magnificently portrayed by Fernando Fernán-Gómez in a register very close to the no less exemplary *Vida en sombras*), marked like many other protagonists in the ODSM by the wound of lost and essentially irretrievable love that would lead to an obsessive and vain search in which the



Figure 5. *La sirena negra* (Carlos Serrano de Osma, 1948)

gaze, incapable of giving into the pain of the absence, would turn repeatedly to delusional visions of the vanished love (figure 5) and believe fleetingly to have found other *bodies* onto which the ghost may be projected.

It is, in my view, in connection with this intention of the filmmaker that we should interpret the decisive inclusion of the flashback that narrates the tragic suicide of the Woman (the beloved, the departed, the *sirena negra* or black mermaid) whose loss, the lucid confirmation of the real absence of the object of desire, turns Montenegro into a castrated character, incomplete and empty, melancholy; a character thus ultimately incapable of closing the wound caused by the loss of the mater-

nal object (the first loss), making the film itself a clear metaphor for unconscious male desire and the impossible nature of its fulfilment, as analysed in psychoanalytic theory.

Thus, the choice of the beloved (the dead young woman and Rita) depends less on the beloved herself than on the *ghost* that Gaspar projects onto her, a *pedestal image* constructed out of psychological images associated with that *first figure*. The expectations placed upon the person of the beloved are so excessive, and the consummation of the desire is so impossible, structured over this original absence or emptiness, that the *disillusion* and pain of living

is always the final result of this vain enterprise of wandering *from one representation to another*. In the same sense, the elimination from the story of the rape of Miss Annie, present in the novel, not only responds to the censor's ban, but also coincides *essentially*—thus indicating the highly personal transformation that Serrano de Osma's film text constituted in relation with the source material—with the absolute impossibility that the girl would be desired by Gaspar in spite of

her beauty (portrayed by the gorgeous Isabel de Pomés). This impossibility is perfectly understandable in the textual logic of the film given that she was completely unsuitable to become an object of Gaspar de Montenegro's desire. Active and enterprising, flirting with him constantly, her positive attitude towards life blocks the desire of the male protagonist. In short (and we will return to this shortly), *she does not need to be saved*. It is thus clear that it is not because he does not rape her, but because he will ignore each and every one of her attempts to approach him.

In fact, Montenegro's journey seems to be marked by the conditions for that essential type of object on the part of the male analysed by Freud in

his “Contributions to the Psychology of Erotic Life” (Freud, 1967). Here, the “prejudice of the third party” would be embodied—fully clarifying the oedipal origin of the choice—by the paternal prohibition of the consummation of the relationship with the young Galician girlfriend, as well as Rita’s condition as a mother. Otherwise, she is not only “sexually suspect” and of doubtful “purity and fidelity” (a single mother), but also *needs to be saved* and, as she is identified with the lost “mermaid”, she must be rescued from the water (and, Freud tells us, “when a man dreams of rescuing a woman from water, it means he makes her a mother, *his* mother”). Rescue and birth would thus be joined in this appearance of water, whose presence in the film it does not appear necessary to overstate, given the obsessive repetition of the *Imago* in which the delusional Gaspar sees the *black mermaid* reflected in the water from which “he could not save her.”

But in spite of the obvious interest of the extremely unique *reading* that the filmic text *La sirena negra* gives of its literary source, drawing it towards the heartrending and moving “reflection on the jurisdictions of desire projected onto an object with no features other than those conferred upon it by the delusions of passion” which, in the words of Pérez Perucha (1995: 90), had given his previous film *Embrujo* its extraordinary filmic density and historical transcendence, had to come from the extreme meaningful brilliance of its visual resolutions, from a *structure* of gloom and asphyxiating opaqueness, constructed through a portentous exposition unmistakably influenced by the films of Orson Welles, but also by Alfred Hitchcock or even Robert Siodmak.

Serrano de Osma himself, many years later, would confirm these sty-

listic influences with respect to Welles (“...[in *La sirena negra*] I tried to create camera experiences, to play Welles in *The Magnificent Ambersons*, to shoot the film in 175 shots and things like that; there were a series of technical issues that I brought up as we worked: the third dimension, the infinite shot; subjective composition...” [CASTRO DE PAZ, 1974: 406]), but just as eloquent were his passionate words at the time of making the film, at a conference in which, in addition to pointing to the topic of the Civil War as one of the core themes of the cinema of the period, he asserted that the sequence shot, depth

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of field, and the dramatic use of light and shadow were the formal codes of cinematic modernity.⁴ And just as well-known is his fervent admiration for the films of Alfred Hitchcock, whom, long before the as-yet non-existent *Cahiers du cinéma*, he would acclaim as “probably the compass for a whole generation of filmmakers of all nationalities.” Such a predilection is far from surprising, because in both cases (Welles and Hitchcock) they are filmmakers, like him, with an obsessive expository authority.

It is thus interesting to observe how Serrano de Osma, exploring Antonio del Amo’s intuition in *Cuatro mujeres*, is able to anticipate by a decade the

formal solution that Hitchcock came up with for *Vertigo* in giving shape to the male gaze which, *recognising* the body that he cannot help but be drawn to, pounces upon it, attracted and fearful. Both Serrano and Hitchcock make use of a semi-subjective shot from the POV of the protagonists in order to pan over the face of the woman; then, leaving the eyes behind, a dolly shot signals the beginning of that irreversible process of assembly between the chosen body and the fragments of primordial images that weave together our unconscious desire to give new (and no less fleeting) life to the ghost.

Only then is her face (con)fused with that of the *black mermaid*. And although, unlike Hitchcock, Serrano de Osma never tries to construct the rigid process of protagonist-spectator identification developed in *Vertigo* through the hypertrophic use of the POV of James Stewart’s character, this does not stop him from resorting repeatedly to the POV of Gaspar de Montenegro, thus drawing us closer to the protagonist’s anxiety by forcing us to share his gaze. However, unlike the Hitchcockian resolutions, Serrano

always anticipates (whether through camera movements or through *ad hoc* shorts) the centre of dramatic attention of each scene, even before turning to the delusional gaze of the protagonist.

By dissolving the sole point of view in this way, the tension and density of the text is taken to unprecedented extremes. Romantic(s) to the point of exhaustion, protagonist and expositor constantly interweave gazes which, however, never converge. Both pass through the diegesis, sometimes brushing past each other, other times diverging, always in search of that longed-for *infinite shot*. It is not surprising when Gaspar, *forced* by the censors to marry the bland Trini (for whom of course

he feels no desire), that the narrator should use his camera and his power to escape in a painful, and metaphorically fatal, drop to the rocks.

Final coda

In short, as we have observed above, the Obsessive-Delusional Stylistic Model owes its singular specificity to the conjunction of certain universally melodramatic themes with concrete solutions of *mise-en-scène* through which certain filmmakers after the war addressed the formal problems that such themes entailed in the context of the Spain of their day. Its formal unorthodoxy, the influence of the avant-garde (and of the latest Hollywood cinema) and its consequent eccentricity in relation to the IMR, shaped the strange network of a fabric on which the wound of the Spanish Civil War achieved what was perhaps its most relevant, striking and sublime stylisation. ■

Notes

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1 Cf. NASIO (2004: 39).

2 Although we are aware that delusion is closely associated with psychosis and is extremely rare in obsessive neurosis, the terms are not used here in their strictly psychoanalytical senses. Nevertheless, there are many cases of non-psychotic hallucinations and acute delusions also due to symbolic castration anxiety which, therefore, could be clarified by the hypothesis of foreclosure. In our Model, the recurring representation is

still a representation of the ego, symbolic in nature, while in psychosis denied and recurrent representations are profoundly heterogeneous (NASIO, 1996).

3 A universally melodramatic thematic core but also significantly present in many other films of the decade that are only partly "affected" by the Model, such as the remarkable and very different *El frente de los suspiros* (Juan de Orduña, 1941), *La casa de la lluvia* (Antonio Román, 1943, based on a story by Wenceslao Fernández Flórez) or the first film by Manuel Mur Oti, *Un hombre va por el camino*, shot in 1949.

4 Conference given at the Cúpula Coliseum in Barcelona, January 1947.

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