

THE DOLL IN THE IMAGINARY OF THE LATE FRANCOIST PERIOD: AN ANALYSIS OF *NO ES BUENO QUE EL HOMBRE ESTÉ SOLO*

SILVIA GUILLAMÓN-CARRASCO

One of the most oft-recurring fantasies in the Western imaginary in relation to femininity is the idea of creating an artificial woman to replace real women, a doll¹ that finds its origins in the myth of Pygmalion, and that has returned again and again in the form of the ideal girlfriend, wife or lover. This article offers an analysis of the doll, which forms part of a long line of representations of the feminine associated (in an unsettlingly touching and perverse manner) with the dead lover (BRONFEN, 1992: 59-75; PEDRAZA, 1998: 125-163), through an analysis of Pedro Olea's film *No es bueno que el hombre esté solo* (It Is Not Good For Man to Be Alone, 1973). This study will take a gender-based approach and apply a methodology of textual analysis that takes into account both the construction of gender discourses and representations in film narration and the processes of signification derived formally from the audiovisual language of the filmic text.

My exploration of the film will also consider the connection between the historical context and the text analysed, understanding the latter as a symptom of the crisis that afflicted the patriarchal and family-centred system in the late Francoist period, a historical moment when the central issues of Spain's transitional period first began to be raised (MONLEÓN, 1995: 10-16), and when certain discursive fluctuations between progressivism and tradition, between the crisis of gender roles and their persistence, became explicitly perceptible. As noted by Folguera (1988: 111-131), the models that had homogenised the cultural imaginary of the dictatorship began to come undone in the last years of Francoism. These stereotypes, which were depicted in domestic melodramas through the images of the angel in the house and the *pater familias* (MARTÍN, 2005: 114-138), were proving obsolete in a society where there were increased calls for the integration of women into the workplace and an effec-

tive change in gender relations. The new gender discourses began to penetrate the social fabric as a result of the activity of feminists in the 1970s who began to raise serious questions about the patriarchy that highlighted the urgent need for real change at all levels of society. These discursive tensions appear in the texts of the period as symptoms of certain social issues that will be interpreted in this article in relation to the attitudes towards the dictatorship of a society that was already preparing for a transition to democracy. In this context, *No es bueno que el hombre esté solo* depicts the decline of Francoist gender discourse by linking the theme of the melancholic subject to the trope of the doll.

Olea's film narrates the story of Martín, a lonely and rather reclusive widower who lives out a conjugal relationship with a life-size doll. The doll is a reproduction of his wife Elena, who died in a tragic car accident on their wedding day. In his *relationship* with the doll, Martín has not only physically recreated his late wife, but has also designed a script for her behaviour (with the pertinent responses). The relationship that Martín establishes with the doll can be interpreted on the basis of the notion of melancholia and its particular connection with the processes of sublimation of the lost object. As suggested by Butler (2001: 149), melancholia represents a specific mode of identification whereby the subject denies his loss, attempts to preserve the lost object and internalizes it as a fundamental part of his identity, making it a *co-extension* of the ego. In this sense, it could be argued that Martín acts as a melancholic subject, since he denies the loss of his wife and incorporates her into his own ego, turning her into a primary part of his own identity. Butler suggests that «the melancholic refuses the loss of the object, and internalization becomes a strategy for magically resuscitating the lost object» (BUTLER, 2001: 95). In the film this process of reviving the lost object is symbolised in the doll, a fetish-object that «replaces the human



Figures 1 y 2. *No es bueno que el hombre esté solo* (Pedro Olea, 1973).

sex object with another object associated with it» (TUÑÓN, 2015: 46) and that allows Martín to establish a sublimation fantasy of his dead wife, or rather, a sublimation fantasy of the bourgeois ideal of marital bliss harmony.

In his relationship with the doll, Martín portrays (literally, as he himself is the subject in the performance) a marital relationship through the repetition of everyday events; however, this rep-

etition does not refer literally to the lost object, as he acts out idealised scenes which he never actually experienced. It should therefore be interpreted as an imaginary representation of something he longs for but never actually knew, given that he never had the experience of a marital relationship with Elena. In this context, the doll projects an exalted image of the wife, an image that symbolises the ideal of bourgeois femininity, becoming an imaginary projection of Martín's desire. The doll is a symptom of the protagonist's condition, a defensive process of the ego that transfers the grief of his loss onto a place inhabited by performance, by fantasy, a place that denies his loss and facilitates the realisation of his desire.

**IN THESE FORMS OF FANTASY,
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The notion of fantasy is introduced into the film's narrative on these terms and this, paradoxically, opens up a gap in the naturalised representation of gender, as I will argue below. But first, it is important to note that the hegemonic standards of narrative cinema are intended to convey a *naturalised* representation of the categories of femininity and masculinity through identifications whose purpose is to perpetuate the social and sexual roles defined by patriarchal society.

De Lauretis (1995: 37-64) explores the connections between gender, narration and spectator-subject, arguing that the notion of fantasy refers not so much to the presence of the object of desire as to the *stage*. In this sense, it is worth highlighting the importance of the acting out of the desire, of the place in which the subject (with his presence) can form part of his own fantasy,

or participate in it in another way: symbolically, through the syntax of film. On this point, De Lauretis (1995: 54-60) suggests that this description of the subject trapped in a series of images is revealing for film theory as it provides us with the key to the operation of spectator identification, pointing to the connection between the processes of private fantasy (articulated in relation to the psychoanalytical subject) and the public forms of fantasy that are articulated, especially, in narrative cinema.

In these forms of fantasy, desire is inscribed in the story in relation to culturally and socially constructed places that define the dichotomous categories of masculinity and femininity. But the operation of hegemonic gender roles requires a *naturalised* representation of gender, a performance that is not explicitly identified as a performance in the film. This is what Olea proposes by placing fantasy at the very heart of the filmic representation. The film suggests the idea that gender relationships are everyday *performances*, like those acted out by Martín with his doll when he recreates the fantasy of an ideal marriage which, furthermore, never really existed. Martín's fiction represents an attempt to transfer loss and channel desire through the ritualised performance of social conventions in which gender roles are symbolised in a bourgeois domestic imaginary associated with the ideology of the *angel in the house*. This imaginary, centred on the household universe and associated with private life, actively pursues the separation of sexual and political discourses in order to «introduce a new form of political power» (ARMSTRONG, 1991: 15), a model of subjectivity which, as a product of bourgeois society, is posited as desirable and within everyone's reach, a functional model for the hierarchical structuring of society based on gender division.

If it seems that the depiction of these everyday rituals in Olea's film posits a disruption in the *naturalised* representation of gender, it is because

the spectator's identification with the protagonist is mediated through the notions of performance and fantasy, which reminds us that both masculinity and femininity are constructs that refer not to a supposedly natural reality but to the terms of a discourse, of social rituals, of the representation of models or roles to be followed, of the repetition of a series of codes or norms that we are required to observe both in social contexts and in private spaces.

THE FUNCTION OF THE UNCANNY

As noted by Pedraza (1998), the film begins by situating us in a unique setting, a mixture of the baroque and the ugly, which she interprets to be an allegory for Francoism. Following the opening credits, which show a photograph of Martín's late wife (in her wedding dress) and a table clock symbolising the passage of time, in a clear allusion to melodrama, a privileged genre for the presentation of the ideology of domesticity (ARMSTRONG, 1991: 15-43), the first scene could not be more powerful. In this scene, the first shots of Martín contrast with the distance shots showing us the strange presence of the *wife*, who lies completely still on the bed, with her face covered by a long mane of hair that conceals her true nature. At the same time, the theme of the double is suggested symbolically in the constant presence of Martín in the mirrors of the house: in the bathroom and on the door of the wardrobe, which creates a kind of *mise en abyme* when we see his image reflected in another of the mirrors in the bedroom. This repetition and preponderance of the character's reflection in the mirror introduces the theme of the performance that Martín is playing out in his life.

At this point in the film, the spectator is still unaware that the protagonist is living with a doll, and our interpretation of the character of Elena will therefore change substantially about half-way through the film, when we realise that all of Martín's actions (locking away and con-

cealing Elena; the separation of his private and public lives) are the product of his peculiar relationship with the doll; i.e., they occur because the protagonist is aware that this relationship is socially abnormal. However, in the beginning, the performance serves to deceive the spectator, to make us believe that Martín's wife exists, that she is seriously ill and that he has her shut up in the house not out of sadism but to protect her from the outside world, a dangerous world from which she must be sheltered.

But returning to the question of representation, the peculiar *mise en abyme* of the mirrors is not the only way that the theme of performance and fantasy is introduced in the film. A particularly significant scene is the one in which Martín invites Paula (his wife's sister), another doll with whom he performs the role of the ideal husband. Seated facing one another at the table, the two dolls symbolise the two female stereotypes par excellence: the virginal woman and the carnal woman. The first represents the de-sexualised and sickly wife, who exhibits her slightly emaciated angelical beauty with long red hair and a white dress, symbolising the sublimated, pure love of the conjugal relationship. The second represents vitality and sensuality, dressed in black with a plunging neckline that Martín can't help but notice, and her face, enhanced by make-up, appears healthier and more cheerful. Between the two is Martín, who has arranged everything for a big celebration. After dinner, he dresses up as a master of ceremonies and entertains his *audience* by projecting a blank film on the wall which he *fills* with his presence as an actor in front of the dolls, for whom he dances and performs to sound of cabaret music. With this private show, Martín also identifies himself as the subject and object of the performance: as the subject who performs and acts with the others, and as the object of the performance, the spectacle intended to entertain, amuse and delight his audience (the dolls/the spectators).



Figures 3, 4 y 5. *No es bueno que el hombre esté solo* (Pedro Olea, 1973).

But the film poses another dilemma that brings the notion of the uncanny into play in relation to the doll. Over the course of the film, the narration serves first to confuse the spectator, making us believe that the doll is Martín's wife, and then, once we know the truth, raises a slight doubt as to the inert condition of the doll and her state of *longing* (a characteristically human condition). I refer here to the ambiguous depiction of the doll at certain moments of the film, which appear to evoke the notion of the uncanny which

Freud (1974: 2483-2491) referred to as the interpretation offered by Jentsch of the doll Olympia in E.T.A. Hoffmann's short story *The Sandman*. According to this interpretation, the doubt as to whether an inanimate object can come to life in some way evokes a sensation of the uncanny, as experienced by Nathaniel, the story's protagonist, who believes that the doll is alive.

Olea's film plays with the confusion over the inanimate state of Elena in a significant scene in which we bear witness to the reality that Martín is in fact living with a doll. In the scene, Martín is reinforcing the bolts on the windows to prevent the outside world from getting into his home. However, it is precisely at this moment when the first intrusion occurs, as his placid, monotonous daily matrimonial existence is invaded by the arrival of two of his neighbours: Lina (a prostitute who lives with her pimp in a nearby block of flats) and Cati, her young daughter, who discovers Martín's great secret. Taking advantage of the widower's absence, the girl manages to invade his territory and get inside the house, where she finds Elena. In this scene, we are given our first glimpse of the doll's face, so carefully concealed until that moment. But what provokes the sensation of the uncanny, more than the revelation of the secret, is the doubt as to her inanimate nature; the fact that the doll (as an allegorical representation of femininity) is positioned as a kind of hinge «between the organic and the inorganic» (COLAIZZI, 2007: 161).

Cati's intrusion into the mansion is presented as an unsolved mystery, as all the security systems installed around the house (bolts, blinds, padlocks...) fail to prevent her from entering. What the film posits is a problem related to the doll's loneliness, or rather, with the doll's maternal *desire* (if we accept, in keeping with the fantasy genre, that an inanimate being can in fact desire things). In effect, it is suggested that it was the doll herself who opened the doors of the mansion to the girl. This is at least the conclusion of Martín, who reproaches her gently for her attitude.

The doll's inability to have children, however, is presented as a threat for her husband. Her maternal *desire* is interpreted, with the entry of Cati, as a malign and unexpected intrusion into Martín's life. The girl's presence arouses the widower's jealousy, as it is revealed in his own words: «Elena, I can't be angry with you. How am I going to reproach you because you let her in and even brush your hair? Although that is something only I should do».

THE INVASION FROM THE OUTSIDE

The first part of the film clearly establishes the widower's obsession with keeping his secret under lock and key. In one of the first scenes, we see him leaving the mansion for work, but only after ensuring that he has locked it up safe and sound, as the camera shows us by zooming in on the huge bolts that prevent anyone from entering. The windows are also shut up completely to block out all outside light. The mansion is turned into another character of the story, symbolising the world in which the widower lives; a closed world, mired in the past but, at the same time, besieged by the present and the world outside. This separation between the inside and the outside underscores the principle of reality accepted by the protagonist, whose *delirium* is thus called into question, since he knows that he cannot present the doll to society, that he cannot go outside his territory with her because she is socially unacceptable. This reveals his resistance to blurring the boundaries between the public and the private, which would mean losing control over a world that he has (re-)created. However, while Martín establishes a radical dichotomy between the two worlds, he will soon find himself overwhelmed in his futile effort to keep them apart. The girl's discovery will have unexpected consequences for the widower. What at first appears a mere bit of childish mischief will turn into an invasion from the outside that ultimately

displaces the residents of the house when Cati tells her mother about Martín's peculiar form of entertainment, and Lina uses this knowledge to blackmail him into allowing her to move into his home. With the idea of becoming the lady of the mansion (and also of the widower's considerable fortune), she appears at his workplace posing as his wife to compromise him socially.

Lina represents the malignant and destructive dimension of the carnal woman. From the outset, the dangerous world from which Martín wishes to protect his doll is represented in the form of this woman linked to the underworld. She poses a threat to the widower's bourgeois world because she knows what he is hiding, because she could use the information and expose his secret publicly so that he would lose his job. Her first appearance in the film reveals the sexual violence to which she is subjected by Mauro, her pimp and lover, who, in a significant moment off-screen, rapes her after a heated discussion. This scene is cross-cut to place it in contrast with another scene depicting Martín's relationship with his doll.

Lina embodies the antithesis of the virginal, angelical doll, and represents the entry into his life of a world unknown to him and which he has always tried to avoid: the world of the marginalised and of criminal activity. The interaction with this world represents contact with the *Other* and, even more disturbingly, with a female *Other* who inspires Martín's repugnance and with whom he

Figure 6. *No es bueno que el hombre esté solo* (Pedro Olea, 1973).



feels defenceless and constantly threatened. Lina's invasion, to which Martín reacts with extreme bitterness, represents a certain feminisation of the male. While the prostitute is initially represented as the victim of a pimp who rapes her and exploits her, as a woman who is intimidated and frightened by the man she loves, it is clear that when she comes into Martín's life she threatens him, exploits his situation and in turn makes him her victim. The fact that she becomes a powerful character with the ability to intimidate and subjugate Martín, the bourgeois man who had everything under control, is highly significant because it reveals to us that power relations are never static or immobile, but rather depend on the position that each individual holds in the relationship.

Lina's intrusion into his life necessarily entails the appearance of change. In contrast with the opening scenes showing the peaceful and monotonous marital life of the couple, we now see Lina cleaning and decorating the house to her tastes, taking advantage of Martín's absence. On the banister of the stairway she places a white Venus, and, replacing one of the stale old paintings that decorate the house, she hangs a calendar with a picture of a naked woman. Both objects arouse the widower's rage when he sees his home invaded by elements that evoke sensuality and which, moreover, highlight the passage of time. Later, Lina tries to reconcile with him by offering herself to him sexually; playing the role of wife, she comes to him wearing a suggestive negligee and begins unbuttoning his pyjamas. Martín, hysterical and embarrassed, tries to get away from her and defend himself against her kisses, covering himself up and expelling her from his bedroom. Annoyed by his rejection, Lina gives him a slap and decides to go a step further by insisting that he gets rid of «that revolting puppet», referring to the doll.

After this unpleasant encounter, Martín immediately decides to lock himself in his room, but on turning around he finds Marilyn, Cati's cat, on

top of the doll: another sign of Lina's invasion. The reaction of Martín, who kills the cat off screen, foreshadows the tragedy that is about to unfold. Lina takes revenge for the death of the cat by killing Paula, breaking the doll's neck and leaving it lying on the floor of the garage. After this event, a series of scenes suggests that Martín, pressured by the situation, has been compelled to get rid of Elena, throwing her into the sea. Later we discover that in reality he had concealed her in the attic to prevent Lina from destroying her. Without the

THIS SCENE REAFFIRMS THE HYPOTHESIS THAT THE DOLL OPERATES AS A DEFENCE MECHANISM AGAINST THE LOSS, AS A WAY OF DENYING AND COVERING UP THE GRIEF THAT THREATENS THE SUBJECT

doll by his side, he is haunted once again by nightmares that remind him of his loss, of the death of his wife. In this respect, Martín's dream about the tragic accident that led to Elena's death on the day of his wedding is particularly significant. The scene is presented exclusively from the point of view of the protagonist. Through his eyes we see various close-ups of the newly wed Elena, looking constantly at the camera, addressing her husband and, at the same time, the audience. The extradiegetic music, played on a church organ, fills the scene up to the moment of the car accident in the tunnel. A resounding crash and a thud link into the next scene, where we see Elena in her coffin at the funeral parlour. The white of the walls, the candles, the dress and the coffin denote the purity of the deceased virgin, while a frenetic tracking shot brings the camera up to her face, framing it in a close-up. This scene reaffirms the hypothesis that the doll operates as a defence mechanism against the loss, as a way of denying and covering up the grief that threatens the subject.



Figures 7 y 8. *No es bueno que el hombre esté solo* (Pedro Olea, 1973).

Martín's situation very soon goes from bad to worse. With Lina's lover practically living in his house and a party being prepared to celebrate his promotion, he decides to get rid of the intruders once and for all. He has Cati admitted to a boarding school and plots to kill the others that very night. The scene of Paula's death is repeated near the end of the film, when Lina finds Mauro on the floor of the garage in the same position that the doll had occupied, and Martín takes advantage of the moment to run her down with his car.

The final scene takes us to a party being held for Martín, who has just been promoted at work. The guests exchange puzzled comments about the lateness of the guest of honour on such an important occasion. Finally he arrives, dressed to the nines and accompanied by his doll, which he has prepared expressly for the situation.

In the opening scenes we bore witness to Martín's obsession with keeping his secret safe, his need to control the situation, to hide away

from the gaze of others. A notable example of this is the scene in which he lingers in front of a shop window displaying women's underwear, eyeing the stockings² of the mannequins with fascination. His gaze, which he had thought had gone unnoticed, is returned by the knowing looks of the shop staff, who smile at each other as they watch him. The return of his gaze destroys the space created by the protagonist, a space that placed him in the privileged position of the *voyeur* who watches without being seen. While at the beginning of the film the doll could not appear in public because it had to be protected from the outside world where danger lurked, the final scene represents the recognition of his perversion by society, the overlapping of the private and public spaces, the difficulty of keeping the two spheres completely apart, and, in short, the impossible nature of keeping under cover, of avoiding exposure to the gaze of the other.

By way of conclusion, it is clear that Olea's film presents the loss of the model of domestic femininity from perspectives associated with trauma (the uncanny or the melancholic), which were symptomatic of the way in which Spanish society in the late Francoist period struggled with the incipient changes to gender models resulting from the resurgence of the feminist movement in the 1970s. ■

NOTES

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- 1 In a recent text, Julia Tuñón (2015: 41-43) analyses this concept in Olea's film from a psychoanalytical perspective, although she does not consider a specific reading of the film in relation to its context. My analysis in this article explores this connection, understanding the film as symptomatic of the socio-historical and cultural processes of the late Francoist period.
- 2 It is no mere coincidence that these stockings are the same ones worn by his secretary (whose legs catch Martín's eye in a previous scene, making his unsatisfied desire evident) and also the same ones we later see on the doll's legs.

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THE DOLL IN THE LATE-FRANCOIST IMAGINARY. ABOUT *NO ES BUENO QUE EL HOMBRE ESTÉ SOLO*

Abstract

This article deals with the issue of the doll as figure of the dead beloved by analysing Pedro Olea's film *No es bueno que el hombre esté solo*, a movie that presents an allegory of gender relationships under francoism. Throughout this analysis shall be reviewed the way in which the film articulates the sublimated fantasy of the melancholic protagonist, who does not resign himself to leave his object of desire and ends up fictionalising an everyday life with the doll in which recreates the normative and official values of the domestic ideology. The film shows the decline of the gender discourse under Franco through concepts such as uncanny or melancholy, both associated with trauma and characterized by revealing the capacity of the daily life to become strange and disturbing.

Key words

Fantasy; Doll; Melancholy; Uncanny; Spanish Cinema; Filmic Imaginary; Late-Francoism.

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LA MUÑECA EN EL IMAGINARIO TARDOFRANQUISTA. EN TORNO A *NO ES BUENO QUE EL HOMBRE ESTÉ SOLO*

Resumen

El artículo aborda el tema de la muñeca como figuración de la amada muerta a partir del análisis de la película de Pedro Olea *No es bueno que el hombre esté solo*, un film que presenta una parábola de las relaciones de género bajo el franquismo. A lo largo del análisis se revisará la forma en que la película representa la fantasía sublimada del protagonista melancólico quien, no resignándose a abandonar su objeto de deseo, acaba recreando una convivencia con la muñeca basada en la repetición de actos cotidianos que incorporan los valores normativos de la ideología de la domesticidad. La película plantea el declive del discurso de género bajo el franquismo, estableciendo su oposición desde lo siniestro o la melancolía, lugares que remiten al trauma y que se caracterizan por exponer la capacidad de lo cotidiano para convertirse en algo extraño e inquietante.

Palabras clave

Fantasia; muñeca; melancolía; siniestro; cine español; imaginario filmico; tardofranquismo.

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