

ON THIEVES AND HEARTTHROBS: VARIATIONS ON *FILM NOIR* IN THE BARCELONA TRILOGY BY ARTURO FERNÁNDEZ AND JULIO COLL (1956–1959)

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INTRODUCTION

As a homage to the late Arturo Fernández (1929–2019), we decided to carry out a study of his work and the impact that the *film noir* genre had on the beginning of his career. This research has two basic objectives. The first is to attempt to rescue from oblivion one of the most enriching moments in Spanish cinema: the period of Barcelona *film noir*. The second is to recall the man who became its most recognisable face (Fernández) and to celebrate one of the genre's greatest auteurs: Julio Coll.

In view of the lack of in-depth studies on the work that this pair did together, this research will consist of a cinematographic analysis that elucidates the thematic, narrative and formal features of Barcelona *film noir*, based on a study of the three films that resulted from their partnership back in the 1950s: *Nunca es demasiado tarde* [It's Never Too Late] (Julio Coll, 1956), *Distrito quinto* [Fifth District]

(Julio Coll, 1957), and *Un vaso de whisky* [A Glass of Whiskey] (Julio Coll, 1959).¹ In pursuit of our two stated objectives, the methodology applied will serve, firstly, to chart the exponential evolution of narrative responsibility that Fernández acquired from film to film, starting as a supporting character, then becoming a co-star, and culminating as the protagonist around whom the whole story revolves; and secondly, to reveal how Coll's directorial style has been characterised, among other aspects, by the proliferation of characters tormented by guilt, with complicated psychological conditions² and a complete inability to escape an urban environment that leads them down the path of crime.

BARCELONA, CINEMA AND SPAIN IN THE 1950S

"Cheese is rotten everywhere, and there is no way to eat it anymore without swallowing a maggot."

These are among the last words that Arturo Fernández blurts out at Alfredo Landa in *El crack dos* [The Crack II] (José Luis Garci, 1983), the sequel to the film that roused a genre that had been idle in Spain for years from its lethargy. In this tense sequence, which lasts about ten minutes, Germán Areta goes to the mansion of the despicable Don Gregorio to get information out of him about the murder of a colleague. The villain tells him that he is late, that they must settle the matter quickly. This insistence brings to mind the impatience and violent urgency that plagued Fernández's characters in his first important roles with Coll. This quality, and the obvious features of the archetypal figure of the swindler, seem to suggest that the character of Victor in *Un vaso de whisky* has taken his scams and thefts to the extreme.

Fernández's role in *El crack dos* was his last in a *film noir* picture, after many years away from the genre, and one of the few films he worked on in his later years. The famous Asturian actor would dedicate his last artistic period almost entirely to the stage; his heyday in the 1950s was now far behind him. This fleeting appearance, in the last moments of the film and with all the trappings of an easily identifiable profile, could be taken as a small tribute by Garci to Fernández's *noir* years under Coll's tutelage. As if that were not enough, the villain Don Gregorio completes the arc charted by the men the Asturian actor played in those years, in an ascending line in terms of narrative importance: the small-time criminal in *Nunca es demasiado tarde*; the suspicious thief locked up in his own home in *Distrito quinto*; and finally, the manipulative rogue in *Un vaso de whisky*.

It is worth pointing out the meaning that lies beneath the surface of Don Gregorio's metaphor. Taking into account both the intradiegetic context of the statement (the high-level conspiracy that Areta is trying to uncover) and the sociocultural context of Garci's film (shortly after Spain's attempted coup d'état in 1981 and with a rocky transition to democracy still in its fledgling stages), the

image of being gnawed at by parasites is at least familiar. Leaving other aspects of the film aside, the oppressive, inescapable environment of a society manipulated by politicians and businessmen in *El crack dos* evokes the death throes of early Francoist repression.

Although until the 1950s Spanish film production was oriented more towards entertainment than reflection, in the decade between 1951 and 1962, the Spanish dictatorship's furtive first steps towards social and economic openness allowed some filmmakers to broaden the spectrum of aesthetic and narrative possibilities. Furthermore, during these years there was a massive exodus from the countryside to the cities. Julio Coll's films dealt with this social issue with slight variations. Broadly speaking, his *noir* trilogy portrays the hardships of life in the concrete jungle and the impossibility (or difficulty) of escaping it; likewise, it illustrates the complicated nature of returning to the country, embodied in the multifaceted figure of the thief. All under the aegis of the genre in vogue at the time both in Europe and in the United States.

DEGREES OF BLACK: NOIR IN SPAIN

Although there are various studies that focus historiographically on the singular decade of the 1950s in Spanish filmmaking and the Spanish film industry, the figure of Julio Coll, and his inseparable partnership with Arturo Fernández, is another piece that must be added to the puzzle. While it is true that their films are interchangeable with others of similar characteristics, this does not reduce their relevance and value, as we will seek to show in this article. The Coll-Fernández *film noir* trilogy ties in with the work of a particular group of filmmakers who "gave the impression of pursuing a style or at least of seeking to uphold a respectable position within Spain's officially sanctioned cinema" (Monterde, 1995: 266). In this respect, Monterde points out that these

directors ultimately threw in the towel under the pressure of Francoist censorship. This, however, should not dissuade us from analysing their work, both in close-up (their individual films) and with a broader view (the *noir* genre).

In any case, it is an undeniable fact that “Spanish cinema of the Francoist era was influenced by Hollywood to a much greater extent than it was by Italian neorealism” (Talens et al., 2015: 78). The conditions discussed above would have made a Spanish neorealism impossible, with films of quiet protest like those being made in Italy. It is therefore curious that, faced with this obstacle, Spanish filmmakers turned to another movement that was difficult to adapt. How could characteristics of foreign filmmaking styles be integrated into the genetic material of Spanish cinema?

It is important to make clear that “certain filmmakers and films inherit, assimilate, transform and revitalise a whole range of unique aesthetic forms in which the Spanish community has historically expressed itself” (Zunzunegui, 2018: 22). This is what makes it particularly interesting to analyse the formula adopted by Julio Coll: *film noir* as a common denominator and Spanish censorship as a variable. Although there seem to be no traces of national popular traditions in these films (except perhaps for the flamenco in *Distrito quinto*), their Spanish character is imprinted on the extra-filmic surface. In other words, “the censoring obstacles related exclusively to the content extended into economic obstacles” (Arocena, 2006: 83), and these in turn conditioned the form the films took; it was Francoist Spain that influenced the material (and the work) of the film and not its customs and traditions that were represented.

Following this logic, if these films are considered *film noir*, we should take for granted the moral ambiguity, expressed in the lighting decisions and the use of black and white, that characterises the stories told in the *noir* genre. Such moral ambiguity clashes head-on with an inflexible regime that had an especially big interest in artistic expression.

In 1952, the Board of Classification and Censorship of Cinematographic Films was created, a body dependent on the General Directorate of Cinematography and Theatre (headed by José María García Escudero). Contradictions aside, “if the stylistic landscape is populated with elliptical resources, double meanings, indirect allusions, expressive ambivalences and subterranean tensions, then narrative ambiguity and the heavy turbulence of the atmosphere become the natural food and the immediate aesthetic consequence of these stories” (Heredero and Santamarina, 1998: 27).

CRIME FILMS WITHOUT OFFICERS OF THE LAW

Going one step further, it is worth noting here those specific directorial details of Julio Coll’s three films that represent a departure from *film noir* in general, and Spanish *film noir* in particular. In his study of the Spanish police cinema of the 1950s, Medina indicates the essential characteristics of the subgenre: “violence”, “crime always present”, “a strong influence of realism”, and “the increasing anxiety of the spectator” (Medina, 2000: 15-16). First and foremost, the *noir* or police film is characterised by a basic level of realism given that this type of film was generally shot in recognisable natural locations, portrayed characters closely linked to the corruption of the real world, and represented the harshness of everyday society, in an effort to respond to “how urban life infects and contaminates a theoretically pure world” (Sánchez, 2001: 1081).

Based on these elements, Coll would limit the story to highly localised and interchangeable settings, especially in *Distrito quinto*. This film could therefore be considered his boldest and, if you will, most *auteurial* film, and the one that departs most from the general line of his 1950s trilogy, since it is located at the opposite extreme of some of the stylistic and production decisions noted above, while at the same time its status as a cri-

me film is fully identifiable. But this idea should not be overstated: while the anxiety and suspense that mark the viewer's experience are palpable, the narrator of *Distrito quinto* does not show the robbery on which the story pivots. For this reason, critics have come to call it "the Spanish *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, 1992)" (Sánchez and Ocaña, 2016), although in fairness, Quentin Tarantino's film would be more aptly described as "the American *Distrito quinto*."

Secondly, "the figure of the private detective is absent (since) it would imply a questioning of the work of the police force" (Medina, 2017: 22). Except in *Un vaso de whisky*, police officers are practically omitted, accentuating the marginal and clandestine nature of the events. Coll contradicts this assertion: "our crime films in this decade are marked by the obligation to offer a heroic image of law enforcement officers and institutions of justice" (Medina, 2017: 29). This is evident in *Distrito quinto*, where the only officers who enter the scene are criminals posing as policemen.

Finally, although the crime film (or *film noir*) stories of the period were heavily moralising and had a clear tendency to "represent their problems thoughtlessly and blindly" (Arocena, 2006: 102), in Coll-Fernández's *noir* trilogy we can discern efforts to broaden the limited aesthetic and ideological vision of Spanish art that characterised the early years of the Franco regime. As will be shown below, the conclusions to these stories push past the limits of the officially endorsed ideal ending in various ways and leave the door open to multiple interpretations.

IMPOSSIBILITY OF ESCAPE

Classical *film noir* was not possible in 1950s Spain because the ambiguity of the boundary between right and wrong could not be played with in Francoist society, nor could extreme realism be used to explore thorny social and cultural issues (realistic in the sense of the reality of poverty and hardship

concealed behind the "official reality" that the regime sought to project to the world). These constraints resulted in stories that were little more than an uneven reflection of the reality to which they referred. Essentially, in Spain, the gloominess of these narratives and their mises-en-scene reflected one obvious, direct influence: the political environment.

Coll and Fernández's work documents that tentative step towards openness—or beyond the boundaries of genre and censorship—in an effort to take a more socially committed and critical approach to filmmaking. They also document the thwarted evolution of that effort: the excessive weight of bureaucracy, censorship, and Catholic morality led both Coll's film career, and Fernández's characters, into an open ending on a dead-end street.

NUNCA ES DEMASIADO TARDE

This film tells the story of Jorge, a criminal who flees to his birthplace after a robbery at a factory results in one of his partners in the crime needlessly killing a man. He seeks refuge outside the city to give himself time to decide whether to turn himself in to the police and return the money he has stolen. In the meantime, he must deal with the resentment and rejection of his brothers, and his responsibility towards Isabel, the mother of his (illegitimate) son, whom he abandoned years earlier. And added to these worries is the threat of imminent arrival of his vengeful henchmen. After reconciling with his family and regaining the love of Isabel and their son, he confronts the thieves. Finally, just before giving himself up, he decides to get married to secure himself a less tragic future; in other words, he seeks the protection and stability provided by the traditional Catholic family model, as a step away from the crime that has marked his life up to that time.

There are three themes that underpin the story in Coll's first feature film: repentance of a

crime committed, family rejection, and the weight of morality. These elements on the level of content will be reflected on the formal level. At the same time, in each of the three acts that make up the story there is a dilemma that Jorge will have to decide to (or not to) resolve. Pervading all this is an atmosphere of mistrust and apprehension that is highly typical of the *film noir* genre.

The first theme—the redemption of the criminal—is in turn conditioned by two basic factors: time and space. The time factor relates to the fact that Jorge cannot wait forever to admit his guilt: he has to make a decision urgently. This thematic principle is accompanied by various formal representations, the most obvious in Coll's films being the use of clocks. In fact, the story begins with a shot of a clock striking two o'clock in the morning. This idea is not restricted to visual expressions: sound and music also contribute to build this tension, with a constant ticking that is heard in the most suspenseful situations. The faint rhythm marked by the hands of the clock will evolve into the clamour of the bells of the local chapel announcing the moment of Jorge and Isabel's wedding and the end of the film.

In the same way, space exerts its influence on the development of the characters, because the story's setting quickly shifts to Jorge's town, where the rest of the dramatic events will take place. In this sense, the motif of the train, a means of transport used by various characters during the film, underscores the importance of the location and the urban-rural dichotomy. In the scene of Jorge's return, the camera initiates the idea of a pan shot, of a progression or a (supposed) forward movement, but it stops just beneath the train tracks, at a town halfway between here and there; Jorge can get no further away for the moment. The railway appears again when he is about to give himself up, but he doesn't get on the train because his son has disappeared and he stays to look for him. In short, just as his little brother tries to follow his lead, the thieves arrive at the station on

the same train he was about to board. The environment and his sense of powerlessness prevent José from realising his desire to leave town and seek his fortune like his brother, but the train that brings him back with more problems symbolises his irremediable confinement in the countryside. This is where Coll's treatment of a major issue in the Spain of his time is located: the return to the town from the city in the face of the rural exodus to the metropolis.

It should be noted that the train's movement in the first case is shown on screen from left to right, and in the second from right to left. This is another brief but significant expression of the city-country dialectic: a movement warns the viewer that Jorge's destiny will tip towards the traditional side of the balance, to the detriment of his modern life. In the scene where the thieves visit a friend of Jorge's in the city to get information out of her about his whereabouts, she is shown replacing a Miró-style canvas with a figurative, realistic and kitsch still life: a shift from new to old, from progress to backwardness, from the abstract to the straight; and ultimately, from escapism through art to the confinement imposed by censorship and tradition. This artistic decision suggests much more than a simple decorative choice could denote at first glance.

The rejection of rural society and family is worthy of a closer look here. Coll uses the narratological concept of the gift to establish Jorge's rapprochement with his son (who does not yet know that Jorge is his father). This challenge is aggravated by the relationship of convenience that his brother Antonio started with Isabel as a kind of consolation for Jorge's departure. When they first meet, the boy believes that Jorge is a thief (which in fact he is). From there, the narrative begins to hint at the terms on which their relationship can be forged: if Jorge recovers his son, it will be at the cost of falling into the hands of justice. This first dilemma is encapsulated in the image of Jorge Jr. pointing his toy gun at Jorge Sr. on the other side



Images 1 and 2. *Nunca es demasiado tarde*

of the gate of his farmhouse, as if they were the bars of the prison he is doomed to be sent to. In one of their many interactions before revealing the secret, young Jorge tells him that he wants to be a policeman and shows him the sheriff's badge he acts out his fantasy with. Thus, in the exchange of objects that marks his recognition of Jorge as his father, the son gives him this fake badge, foreshadowing his surrender to the law. Jorge, for his part, gives him his razor blade, a symbol of both the transfer of responsibility that the child must assume in the absence of the father figure, and of his abandonment of the criminal world at the end of the film.

In continuity with these two themes is the theme of religion as the only path to forgiveness. Our analysis of this theme focuses on two events: the search for a person to balance the worn foun-

datations of the institution of the family, and the hasty marriage as a provisional solution to Jorge's presumed imprisonment. In this respect, the protagonist must resolve a second dilemma: return the money and get a reduced sentence or keep it but serve a longer one. It is a choice between living humbly and with a clear conscience or having riches and its consequent spiritual decay. As if that were not enough, the shadow of the deceased father looms over the three brothers: his absence is underscored by the empty armchair that dominates the living room of the house. To his older brother, Antonio, Jorge is a dead man, as if the prodigal brother (the biblical resonances of this plot are obvious) were a ghost. Coll resolves this conflict by bringing the brothers together in the confrontation with the pair of thieves (one of whom is played by Arturo Fernández). This redemptive alliance crystallises in the shot where Jorge sits in his father's rocking chair, the true family throne. The fake pistol, which Jorge Jr. pointed at his father earlier, looks like the same one that is now aimed at Jorge Sr. The difference is that, in this case, the death threat is for real.

Coll closes the film with a more negative resolution, but he leaves the dramatic denouement of the story open. This fatalistic suspension is distinct from the closed endings that typify the genre: there is no hint of the death or arrest of the

Image 3. *Nunca es demasiado tarde*





Image 4. *Nunca es demasiado tarde*

antihero at the hands of the police to celebrate the efficacy of the law. At the same time, these variations, together with the usual symbolic charge of objects and the asphyxiating mise-en-scene, identify the film with that national strain of *film noir*, or “Iberian noir”, halfway between tradition and revision, as Martín (2018) suggests. Although the brothers may leave their real father behind on Jorge’s suggestion, on a higher level they remain under the yoke of another master: the Francoist State, with its stringently Catholic faith, the representative of God in Spain. The film ends at the doors of the village church, Jorge’s only moral way out. At least it is for the moment, because the narrator does not want it to be known which of the two paths the protagonist will take; in other words, whether the last dilemma, accepting the redemption offered by the religious solution, resolves or suspends the first two.

DISTRITO QUINTO

This is the second movie in Coll’s *film noir* trilogy and the first by Juro Films (Castro de Paz, 1997: 421), as announced in the first frame, and it also co-stars Arturo Fernández (in the role of Gerardo, the leader of a gang of amateur criminals) and Alberto Closas (Juan Alcover, a high-class thief). This feature film was effectively “the only corner

of Spanish production where outsiders can become the protagonists” (Heredero, 1993: 219). *Distrito quinto* reflects the increased importance and responsibility assumed by Fernández compared to the previous film, while Coll himself takes a qualitative leap by assuming responsibility for the film on three different levels, writing the screen adaptation of a comedy written for the stage by José María Espinas, while also directing and producing the film. This demonstration of professional versatility makes this film the most illustrative of his *auteurial* style.

The film tells the story of a gang of thieves who meet up at a dance academy owned by Miguel and Tina. They all want to leave their criminal lives behind, but they need one last big job before they do. Their leader, Gerardo, seems very confident. However, they need a thief of greater stature, Juan, who is the last to arrive. After the robbery, David, Andrés (an employee at the company and the one responsible for leaving the safe open) and Marta meet at the academy. Everyone is waiting for Juan, who is carrying the loot. However, his delay makes them suspect that he has run away with the money. They therefore alert the police that a certain Juan Alcover is going to try to cross the border. In response, Juan decides that if he cannot escape, they will not do so either, and he ensures they all suffer the same fate.

Distrito quinto presents a parallel narration of the events before and after the robbery (which is omitted). In this way, the narrative progresses as the characters reconstruct what happened—through shared recollections—up to the moment when Juan seems to have abandoned them. And it is around Juan that all the memories of the characters revolve. Like the structure of the story itself, Juan is divided, split between his sordid past and his upright present. This split, which is never fully reconciled, enables him, after his transformation into his present self, to morally regress so that he can take part in the job. A reflection of this internal division is the fact that the cha-

racter is given two names. Now he calls himself Juan, an honest citizen who wants the chance to start anew, but previously he was known as Mario, a favourite disciple of the infamous criminal “El Marquesito”.

A serious dilemma brings this character into confrontation with his alter ego. To escape from the criminal world, he must, at the same time, leave Spain. Ironically, his native country is like a prison for him in two different ways. On the one hand, the authorities are after him; on the other hand, the totalitarian regime under which the country lives would be enough to want to flee the country anyway. The dilemma is that going into exile will mean that Juan will have to commit another crime for the last time to obtain a false passport.

However, both sides of his personality have one trait in common: they detest the figure of the *femme fatale*, because she is capable of emotionally and physically destroying any man. In *Distrito quinto*, in fact, two such women interact with Juan: María and Marta. In the past, he himself was María’s victim, whom he protects and curses, chases and rejects, besieged by ambivalence. María came to the academy before him, fleeing from the police due to her involvement in the “El Marquesito” case, which is why he ends up there. Similarly, in the present, Juan also hates Marta, because he sees what María did to him reflected in her: she is only pretending to be in love with Andrés to involve him in the robbery. Thus, the *femme fatale* archetype does not vary in its content, only in its form.

Juan perceives what others are not able to see; he understands the rhythm of footsteps (a motif echoed in the affected sequence in which Miguel tap dances in private), senses the breathing of his victims and participates in their thoughts, as he confesses to Marta. In short, he possesses the gift of observation, which has allowed him to master the art of lying. For this reason, others fear him. The criminal destiny that stalks and ensnares

them makes an appearance when he tries to buy the false passport to get out of the country. This situation is cathartic for him: from that moment he ceases to be Juan and becomes the cold and ruthless Mario, who takes control of the gang. His past wins out over his present; as Gerardo remarks: “In our profession, like bullfighters, we never completely retire.”

At the same time, the story depicts a Barcelona where suspicion and lies dictate social (dis) harmony. All the members of the gang share with Juan his desperate quest for a better future, far away from the city. The materialistic Gerardo wants a sports car to escape in, while the cynical Marta dreams of starting a family in the countryside. Andrés, in love with the *femme fatale*, has been persuaded by her to believe that he wants to be her husband. On the other hand, the narrative also explores more metaphorical escape routes. Miguel and Tina share the goal of putting on a ballet show. David, who also seeks to escape from reality through art, wants to immerse himself in the world of literature and publish his absurd poems.

Despite their (futile) attempts, Coll’s characters have no way of escaping the concrete jungle. The dance academy symbolises the setting for a struggle for survival that Westerns placed out on the frontier and *film noir* moved to within city limits. On a formal level, the wildness of nature is expressed in the floral motifs that decorate the prints on the walls. Iconographically, these flowers resemble a tangled web which, combined with the formal strategies, add to the feeling of

THE DANCE ACADEMY SYMBOLISES THE SETTING FOR A STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL THAT WESTERNS PLACED OUT ON THE FRONTIER AND FILM NOIR MOVED TO WITHIN CITY LIMITS



Images 5, 6, 7 and 8. *Distrito quinto*

confinement and suffocation that Coll's Barcelona imposes on them.

Other images include the brick wall outside the only window in Juan's room, the wicker rocking chair that David gets trapped in, the banister on the landing that imprisons a naive Andrés when Marta gets closer to him, or the shadows cast by the moonlight on a window frame that look like prison bars. Even the stifling summer heat in the city, which makes them sweaty and desperate, draws out the time waiting for Juan, configuring a two-way metaphor in which the meaning of time takes two semantic directions.

In such a situation, it seems that freedom does not appear around any corner. It is, in fact, outside the academy, but without leaving it, where the only moment of relief in the oppressive Barcelona atmosphere takes place. David is fussing over a dovecote on the balcony. He has previously released all but one of the birds he was looking after. When he sees Andrés reporting Juan to the police

on the phone (their only means of contact with the outside world), he realises that he has no right to restrict the freedom of any (human) being. In the absence of a superior being to free them from their prison, David releases the last of the birds that he cared for but which, at the same time, he had been imprisoning. The moment of relief as he watches it disappear into the sky is interrupted by the appearance of Juan on his way to the academy.

As he climbs the spiral stairs (of crime) to the landing, the whole gang realises the fatal mistake they have made. Their fear of one another has ended up betraying them. Juan's delay was due to his efforts to shake the police off his trail. Andrés seems to realise at that moment that while a thief has his hand cut off (hence the poetic nature of the hand injury he suffered in the robbery), a traitor is punished even more severely. The second hand on the clock on the wall—which almost seems like another member of the gang—appears to tick fas-

ter now that they don't want Juan to reach his destination. The sweat that drenched them now seems to freeze them. However, it is worth remembering here that Coll will not allow the individual to escape the city. For Juan, the passport represented his access to freedom, but as a forged document, its meaning is also fake. For this reason, the freedom he aspired to was a mere mirage.

In the end, the *MacGuffin* of the loot serves Coll to present a story that brings together all the features of *film noir* in a dance academy where the limits of (dis)trust between partners (not friends) are explored. Gerardo and his gang do not seem to have any qualms about attacking innocent people, but they do about betraying the man they fear and admire. While they are all nursing their suspicions about Juan (in the second act), Marta suggests that "either he is a policeman or the total opposite," equating officers of the law at that time with the worst criminals. The film opens with a caption declaring that "the strongest barriers that God has placed between man and crime are Conscience and Religion"—exactly what this group of misfits lacks.

As usual with Coll, the ending is left open: the police do not appear to arrest the thieves, and there is no clear conclusion to their criminal activities or to the story that frames them. For this reason, as with the other films discussed here, describing *Distrito quinto* as a "crime film" (Medina, 2017: 20) may be a stretch. In any case, this film laid the foundations for the presence of Barcelona on the big screen, while preparing the springboard for the leap to consolidate that presence in *Un vaso de whisky*.

UN VASO DE WHISKY

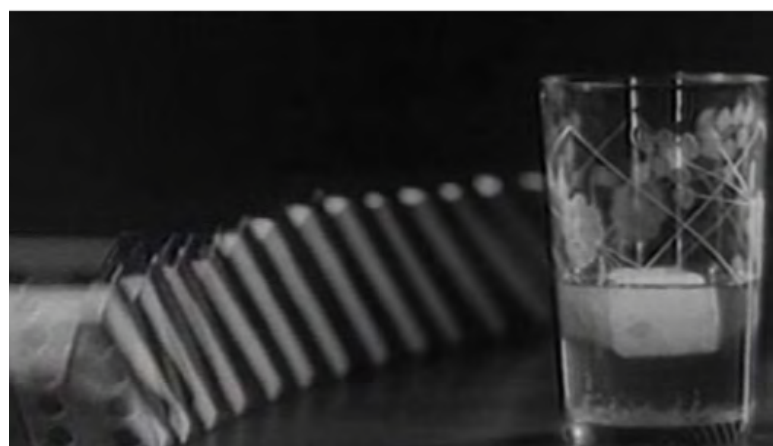
The last entry in the Spanish encyclopaedia of *film noir*, co-written by Julio Coll and Arturo Fernández, presents the latter, the face of the trilogy, in all his splendour as an actor, playing the archetype that he would perfect over the course of his

career. Meanwhile, Coll, the ideas man behind these productions, would culminate his *film noir* period before abandoning the genre and making the drama *Los Cuervos* [The Crows] (1961), also with Fernández as the protagonist.

Un vaso de whisky is the story of Victor, an out-of-work freeloader always looking for a good time. After suffering another of his many abuses, his lover, Laura, descends into a strong depression that drives her to drink. Meanwhile, he drags some friends to the beach, where they vandalise hotel property. María, the hotel owner, has them detained until they pay for the damages. Victor manages to avoid conflict by seducing her, only to abandon her immediately afterwards. On his return to the city, his own debauchery will prove his undoing: Laura, in a whirlwind of alcohol and desolation, is killed in an accident. Raúl, a boxer who was in love with Laura, places all the blame for her death on Victor, for which he gives him a beating that leaves him half dead. Fortunately, María finds him lying in the street, and takes pity on him. However, nobody responds to her cries for help.

Coll makes use of a number narrative and formal strategies to convey a basic idea: the irresponsible nature of vice and its correlation with disappointment or deception in love. The director shifts away from stories of thieves to focus on the

Image 9. *Un vaso de whisky*



consequences of a life of hedonism for the hedonist's loved ones. In this sense, Victor is considered here to be a "thief" of emotions. His only difference from the criminals of the previous two films is that his "thefts" are committed in full view of everyone and with a mocking smile on his lips, a trait of the rogue that characterise so many of Arturo Fernández's future roles. Right from the beginning of the film, with the rolling titles against a black background that follow the images of dominoes, Coll makes explicit his intention to critique, from the perspective of Christian morality, "the unexpected repercussions of human acts". To this end, he uses the concept of the domino effect to build the film's narrative structure. One by one, Victor lines up a long row of deceptions, abuses, and little scams. What he does not know is that he is the last piece, the one that will feel the full weight of all those that have been falling behind him.

Like *Distrito quinto*, this film is set in an atmosphere that wears down the individual: once again, an oppressive heat that is turned into a protagonist: for example, Víctor's stifling sensation during his soiree with a group of English girls, or the bonfire on the beach and their dip into the sea. In this sense, the location of the action in Barcelona is of great importance: Victor moves back and forth between the coast and inland, between the humid air and the cool breeze. He is in constant, exhausting movement, yet he is confined within a limited space. Another of the recurring themes mentioned in the previous sections is that of time. Coll's characters exist in the story in chronological terms: either a lack or an excess of time conditions the actions of the protagonists in this trilogy, thanks mainly to the narrative iteration of events, specifically Victor's flings and visits to the cabaret where many of the characters meet.

Based on the temporal logic we can conclude that Coll understands and represents time in a complementary relationship with the weather: while the latter is conveyed through the torpor that weighs down the characters, the chronologi-



Image 10. *Un vaso de whisky*

cal dimension of causes and consequences serves as a true driving force of the narrative. An eloquent image illustrates this argument: after the beating, we see a half-dead Victor, barely able to sit up, leaning on the frame of a clock-shaped window, thus suggesting the last moments of his life and of the story.

The final moments express the meaning of this shot in narrative form. Another feature common to all three films analysed here is that each one closes with an abrupt open ending that does not clear up the doubts raised over the course of the story. Formally, this image ties up the film with a bleak, empty depth of field, with María's head out of focus, as she props up a dying Victor. A street bereft of people extends towards a vanishing point that is nothing more than the black hole of an alley. The girl, still in love, finally tries to help him, but perhaps this time it is too late. The columns of the building on the left side of the frame are in view, arranged rather like the row of dominoes that opened the film. Lined up in a row, they look as if they are about to fall, one after the other, to collapse at last on top of a dying Victor.

To conclude our analysis of *Un vaso de whisky*, we will focus on the presence of the police, which is more prominent in this case than in the other two films, as here they are embodied in a specific character, while in the previous cases they exert



Images 11 and 12. *Un vaso de whisky*

pressure on the characters without the need to appear on screen. Specifically, a police inspector named Rigaud lurks around throughout the film, observing rather than intervening. He determines that Fernández's character "steals faith in life", meaning that "there is no crime, but there is a criminal." The agent's passive attitude implicitly suggests, more than anything else, the practically total absence of the police. All in all, this is the most tragic and mannerist film of the trilogy, expressed in the sordid settings, such as the cabaret or the boxing rings in the underworld. The mist that bathes the atmosphere of Coll's Barcelona allows the Catalan filmmaker to represent, through an overlapping of frames, the false love that will never be consummated by means of a lap dissolve that shows a resigned Laura together with the image that is causing her grief: María and Víctor embracing in an illusion.

CONCLUSIONS

In essence, in their Barcelona *film noir* trilogy Coll and Fernández tried to give cinematographic expression to various social concerns affecting Spain in the late 1950s. What is truly interesting in studying these three films together, apart from commemorating the collaboration between this director and performer, lies in the identification of a style—or trend—resulting from the context

of their production. Along these lines, each film in its own way clearly exhibits the same blend of respect and subversion of the stylistic features of *film noir*.

In *Nunca es demasiado tarde*, despite being his directorial debut, Coll delves deeply into the psychological dilemmas of the characters. Taking into account his variations on the basic features of the *film noir* genre, it can be argued that this debut fits in, more than any other work, to that particular brand of "Iberian *film noir*" that at the same time remains faithful to and modifies the sources on which it draws. In the case of *Distrito quinto*, this unique quality lies in the refinement of the tense crime story, the archetypal depictions of the characters and the failure of their crimes, and in its adaptation of the themes of the genre to the historical moment in Spain. *Un vaso de whisky*, which closes the series with the reflections on the opposition between country and city initiated in his first film, the sordid settings and rhetorical-narrative strategies associated with *film noir* are also visibly evident.

Coll's narrative approach for his Barcelona trilogy on the forces of justice is of great interest because, despite appearing on the screen for just a few minutes, the pressure that the law exerts on the characters in this troubled city is constant. Coll does not show what oppresses his characters, but he does show the mark it leaves on them, both

in thematic and formal ways. For example, in that menacing power that seems to be condensed (literally) in the sweat that stifles the characters in *Distrito quinto*, in the stress that pushes them to make hasty decisions, such as killing an innocent security guard in *Nunca es demasiado tarde*, or in the harm inflicted on a loved one in *Un vaso de whisky*.

Although *film noir* has been well-known in the cinematographic tradition for its incessant playing with light and shadow as a visual element that generates meaning, the trilogy studied here uses them to construct a dialectic between the visible and the invisible. The symbolic and literal presence of shadows draws attention to what is there, what cannot be shown, and what refers to the political and moral constraints of Francoism hidden outside the frame: the religious imperatives, the poverty, the urban violence, and the traditional way of life. These three films also make use of isolation and entrapment in a stressful Barcelona as a metaphor for the social reality of the 1950s and the stifling censorship that constrained filmmakers' artistic expression. Precisely for these reasons, the Coll-Fernández partnership clearly falls within the thematic and formal parameters of the so-called Iberian *noir*.

Arturo Fernández's presence in this trilogy is certainly not insignificant. The dramatic evolution of his image offers a snapshot of three of the cinematic archetypes of the Franco period: the petty criminal, the distrustful man, and the immoral freeloader. Indeed, thanks to Julio Coll, the fatal gunshot that his character fires at the beginning of *Nunca es demasiado tarde* could be interpreted as a starting gun for his race towards stardom in Spanish cinema. ■

NOTES

- 1 It should be pointed out that, after this *film noir* trilogy, Fernández worked under Coll's direction in three more films in the 1960s: *Los cuervos* [The Crows]

(1962), *Jandro* (1965), and *Las viudas* [The Widows] (1966), the last of which was co-directed by José María Forqué and Pedro Lazaga.

- 2 In fact, 1940s the director from Barcelona founded one of Spain's first centres for applied psychology (Comas Puente, 2018).

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ON THIEVES AND HEARTTHROBS: VARIATIONS ON FILM NOIR IN THE BARCELONA TRILOGY BY ARTURO FERNÁNDEZ AND JULIO COLL (1956-1959)

Abstract

Due to the recent death of Arturo Fernández, this work seeks to study the figure of filmmaker Julio Coll, through their collaboration in three pivotal films of the Spanish cinema of the 50s: *Nunca es demasiado tarde* (1956), *Distrito quinto* (1957) and *Un vaso de whisky* (1959). This «noir trilogy» sets two parallel lines of analysis: the first one traces the representation of social issues in Spain; the second one focuses on the dramatic evolution of Fernández's early roles. The aim is to identify the thematic, narrative and formal key points of an almost forgotten artist and remember that the beginnings of the famous actor went hand in hand with a very particular genre of our national cinematography. Thus, we will define the *collian* poetic and its correlation with both Franco censorship and morality and the codes of film noir.

Key words

Julio Coll; Arturo Fernández; Film noir; Crime drama; Censorship; Francoism.

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DE LADRONES Y GALANES. VARIACIONES DEL CINE NEGRO EN LA TRILOGÍA BARCELONESA DE ARTURO FERNÁNDEZ Y JULIO COLL (1956-1959)

Resumen

A causa del reciente fallecimiento del actor Arturo Fernández (1929-2019), este estudio recupera la figura del cineasta Julio Coll, a través de la colaboración de ambos en tres films decisivos del cine barcelonés de los años cincuenta: *Nunca es demasiado tarde* (1956), *Distrito quinto* (1957) y *Un vaso de whisky* (1959). Esta «trilogía negra» traza dos líneas para el análisis: una rastrea la representación de los problemas sociales en la España previa al aperturismo; la segunda se centra en la evolución dramática de los primeros personajes de Fernández. El objetivo es identificar las claves temáticas, narrativas y formales de un autor casi olvidado y, a la vez, recordar que los inicios del célebre intérprete estuvieron asociados a un género muy particular en la cinematografía nacional. En este sentido, definiremos la poética *colliana* y su correlación tanto con la censura y moral franquista como con los códigos del cine negro.

Palabras clave

Julio Coll; Arturo Fernández; Cine negro; Cine policiaco; Censura; Franquismo.

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