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REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS CINEMATográfICOS

NOTEBOOK

**Constructing a Voice:
Spanish Women
Filmmakers of the
21st Century**

DIALOGUE

Belén Funes

(DIS)AGREEMENTS

Woman, Spanish Cinema, 2022



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A RADICAL INTIMATE REALISM: AN OTHER NEW SPANISH CINEMA MADE BY WOMEN*

SHAILA GARCÍA CATALÁN

AARÓN RODRÍGUEZ SERRANO

MARTA MARTÍN NÚÑEZ

I. REWRITING HERSELF AS SOMEBODY ELSE

Let's begin with what the gaze cuts out. A short-haired woman in pyjama pants and a grey sweater lights a cigarette under the shelter of a tree in the garden that almost seems to be embracing her. We cannot see her face, as it is hidden behind the branches (Image 1), so we watch her crossed arms and listen to her rapid breathing: with each drag of the cigarette she is trying to quell her anxiety. From outside the frame, a man calls her: "María!" She waves away the smoke, puts out the cigarette on the ground, and hurriedly obeys the call, leaving the frame. Over the now empty—or emptied—scene, the film title appears. First we see "MARÍA" all in upper case, recalling other films with women's names as titles, such as *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944), *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946), *Tristana* (Luis Buñuel, 1970), or *Veronica* (Paco Plaza, 2017). But it is quickly punctuated with a subtitle, in lower case between parentheses: "(y los demás)" ["and

everybody else"]. *MARÍA* (y los demás), written in serif typeface, rather like the measured, centred titles typed on the cover page of a script (Images 2 and 3).

María (Bárbara Lennie) is framed in a medium-long shot from what seems to be a fixed position, but in fact betrays a pulse: looking upon María's body is a gaze hidden behind the camera that also quivers. The camera is there, like those leaves that flutter *naturally*, and it covertly allows us to enter the film, with this plain and solitary María, to whom the enunciation is anchored through a point of view that will remain unchanged throughout the film. This is decisive for the process of identification. With María, we will experience the encounters with *everybody else*, those with whom she never connects, because everyone seems to be moving on. Since her mother's death more than twenty years ago, María has always tried to take care of everybody else, but her father no longer seems to need her because he is



Images 1-3. Smoking under the father's arms in *María (y los demás)* (Nely Reguera, 2016)

going to marry his nurse. Her brother is about to become a father, and her other brother is going to move out and reopen the family restaurant. María also never expected her friend to get pregnant, or that the man who plays the guitar for her would not want to introduce her to his daughters. Nor did she ever imagine that she would be selling books yet still unable to finish writing her own. Indeed, the film could be understood as an accompaniment to María through her writing process. When she has finally finished the novel and still does not dare to give it to others to read, in one sadly poignant scene, she sits down in front of a

teddy bear and fantasises about presenting it in public (Images 4 and 5):

María: Well, that's a good question... The thing is, I... I never really wanted to write about my family. It was like... I don't know, something natural that I imagine has to do with my way of writing or how I understand the creative process, that ultimately has to do with something (laughs nervously) kind of cathartic, that ultimately you need to write and that... what? No, no, no, the novel isn't autobiographical. There are things that are, you know? That are about me or my family, my surroundings, my friends, a heap of things that you pick up and that turn into something else that isn't just your life. Ultimately, the protagonist isn't me... it's a... err... Well, I don't know, ultimately, writing helps you to overcome, to..., to..., err, to overcome, er, er, to try... (her voice falters. Cries).

This monologue could be taken as paradigmatic of a certain trend in contemporary Spanish cinema—mostly in films made by women—that has been labelled autofiction. These are films in

Images 4 and 5. Sitting down before what she has written in *María (y los demás)*



which lived experience, memories and free invention are combined in the writing process. While some viewers, critics and scholars have branded such films as narcissistic, hastily and narrow-mindedly dismissing them as films that veer towards autobiography or *narratives of the self*, María's speech is clumsy and faltering yet eloquent: she never wanted to write about herself and her family, but she ended up doing just that purely out of a simple need to write, to turn her pain into something else. Writing enables María, whose care for others is her weakness, to *rewrite herself as somebody else* and discover that looking after everyone else was perhaps simply a front or a mask to keep herself from writing. Something in her servile attitude towards others extinguished her desire. But when nobody seems to need her care anymore, she is faced with the hardest step of her life: to rewrite herself as somebody else. In fact, the character uses a pen name, María Funes, which is probably a tribute by the director, Nely Reguera, to fellow director and scriptwriter Belén Funes, who worked on the screenplay to *María (y los demás)*. When it is positioned as art, cinema facilitates a process of estrangement, an operation of distancing—like those final tracking shots pulling away from the actors in *Life in Shadows* (*Vida en sombras*, Llorenç Llobet Gràcia, 1949) and in *Pain and Glory* (*Dolor y gloria*, Pedro Almodóvar, 2018)—that makes it possible to construct a distance from the trauma or from some element of mystery, resistance or repetition. As we have observed elsewhere, “the filmmaker can only direct her scene on the condition that, thanks to the art, she can get out of it” (García-Catalán & Rodríguez Serrano, 2021: 12).

Herein lies our first assertion: the new generation of emerging female directors in Spanish cinema should not be reduced simplistically to narcissists who only talk about themselves. These women understand filmmaking as a means of addressing what cannot be said and even of talking about the malaise of a generation, because what

cannot be understood in the body, the marks left by the past or the dread of a future that one has mapped out for oneself, may not be expressible in words, but sometimes it may be possible to show it in some veiled way. With this in mind, we consider it essential to approach these films with attention to the details of the writing, the subtleties of the screenplay, and especially the filmic forms related to the body that invite interpretation. However, film analysis is a poetic exercise—stripping down the processes of language is intrinsic to any poetic exercise—that is not considered very fashionable.

2. COMING BACK TO LIFE

For some time now, it might have seemed that film studies—especially when they take a semiotic, psychoanalytic or post-structuralist approach—are not valued very highly in academic circles, in terms of funding from R&D&I projects and the number of articles published in high-impact journals. Although they still account for a significant percentage of studies published in the so-called “social sciences” (Rodríguez Serrano, Palao Errando & Marzal Felici, 2019), many of our colleagues have accepted the epitaph that Bordwell (1995) and other scholars—in fields such as neo-formalism, analytic philosophy and neuroscience¹—have boasted of writing for our disciplines.

However, it is advisable to be cautious about things that are presumed dead, especially those that have supposedly been *exorcised* in a performative way—i.e., by denying them a *voice*, *scientific validity*, or *academic status*. There is of course nothing more suspicious than the apparent *debunking* of a *non-knowledge*:

It is in fact a matter of a performative that seeks to reassure, but first of all to reassure itself by assuring itself, for nothing is less certain, that what one would like to see dead is indeed dead [...]. What is going on here is a way of not wanting to know what everyone alive knows without learning and without

knowing, namely, that the dead can often be more powerful than the living. (Derrida, 1994: 48)

Indeed, dead non-knowledges have a bad habit of coming back to life, returning in the most unexpected ways: sometimes as a malaise, sometimes as an unfathomable event, or a creak, slip, or screech in the mechanisms of meaning. A surplus. The denial of a voice for post-structuralist disciplines while, on the other side of the walls of academia, questions about sexuality, identities and the uses of the body become ever more pressing is certainly another of the inevitable contradictions arising from our society's hierarchy of knowledge. That Bordwell and his disciples (Bordwell & Carroll, 1996) should deny the validity of -isms (post-structuralism, feminism, Indigenism) precisely *before* the film industry as a whole begins to openly question its own defects, abuses, and injustices, or to posit the need to redirect the focus of audiovisual production is not merely yet another symptom of a regrettable myopia, but also further evidence of the obvious disconnect between the interests of the academic world and the upheavals of that inscrutable, throbbing phenomenon known as *reality*.

Because *reality*, or more precisely, the *moment* in which these words are written (December 2021), points in a very different direction from the placid, aseptic comfort of film forms, mind-numbing security of quantitative data, and the sacrosanct status of science. Indeed, in the last two years our bodies have become veritable fields of desire (in a *Deleuzian* sense) (Meloni, 2021b), open questions that have yet to find their cinematic expression or that are finding it in strange, complex and exciting ways, in films as apparently diverse as *Titane* (Julia Ducournau, 2021), *Zeros and Ones* (Abel Ferrara, 2021), *Mighty Flash* (Destello bravio, Ainhoa Rodríguez, 2021), and *Piggy* (Cerdita, Carlota Martínez Pereda, 2022).

This lengthy introduction may be deemed to serve as a disclaimer: in what follows, we cannot offer a settled historiography of our object

of study—the rise of a new generation of female directors in contemporary Spanish cinema—because we are compelled to view it from inside the lightning flash, the instant, the specific moment in which we can glimpse a kind of cinematic avalanche that presents us with problems, hopes and challenges, as it does for so many female creators and spectators.

3. HISTORIOGRAPHY IMPOSSIBLE

In the now canonical introduction to *Historia General del Cine* written some years ago by Santos Zunzunegui and Jenaro Talens (Various Authors, 1998), these two scholars established a kind of baseline, a humble and coherent approach that invited us to abandon projects conceiving of historiography as a totalising discipline and allow in multidisciplinary influences, alterities and confusions. In keeping with this perspective, we must not succumb to the temptation of offering a hasty account of what we have tentatively labelled the Other New Spanish Women's Cinema, or ONSWC (the rationale for this choice will be discussed below). Without doubt, as the literature in this field demonstrates (Núñez Domínguez, Silva Ortega & Vera Balanza, 2012), there are obviously a number of precursors—Josefina Molina, Cecilia Bartolomé, Pilar Miró, to name a few—and apparently foundational events, such as the release of *Three Days with the Family* (*Tres días amb la família*, Mar Coll, 2009), although it had been preceded by significant works like the short documentary *Mi hermana y yo* [My Sister and I] (Virginia García del Pino, 2008) and a notable list of experimental shorts and installations by María Cañas (Álvarez, 2015), to offer just two examples.

At the same time, history has also given us warning signs. There was already a generation of female directors in the 1990s, many of whom are barely remembered today, who only managed to make as many as two or three feature films. As

long ago as 1997, for example, Carlos F. Heredero was celebrating the existence of

28 female directors, who in fact had directed a total of 25 début films, as five of them co-directed a single feature film and only one of those five went on to direct her first solo feature film. Some of them have also now won themselves a place of their own in the industry (Heredero, 1997: 10-11).

Many of the 28 names mentioned by Heredero have now been erased not just from popular memory but also, more seriously, from the specific historiography of the field. Once again, at the beginning of the 21st century there seemed to be a new wave of films directed by Spanish women. However, this would end up being dismissed as a “false boom” (Zurián, 2017). As time passed, most of these directors shifted into the more profitable field of television and/or only managed to make one feature film. To recover all those names, we need to turn to the valuable research of scholars like Zurián (2015 and 2017) and María Castejón Leorza (2015), or the work of Azucena Merino (1999), which, among many other contributions, drew attention to the work of auteurs like Marta Balletbò-Coll, Mónica Laguna and Mireia Ros, in addition to demonstrating an unusual interest in and empathy for female Latin American directors, a group that has tended to be altogether forgotten, apart from a handful of studies (Guillot, 2020).

The (improbable) historiographic account of this movement might also make reference to training institutions, competitions, associations and collectives, critical publications, workshops, festivals, etc. These occurred simultaneously all over Spain, at times with exasperating sluggishness, at times dismissed as a mere fad, at times pigeon-holed in a label (“women’s cinema”) that did not always conceal a pejorative tone, and at times with overwhelming force. But they occurred. Taking up Walter Benjamin’s metaphor, the fire could be glimpsed.

When we prepared the call for papers for this issue, our initial point of reference was the well-

known list published by *Caimán Cuadernos de Cine* in 2013, which suggested the rise of a heterogeneous and promising “Other New Spanish Cinema”. The various directors identified included barely ten women. Similarly, in one of the most acclaimed and invaluable critical anthologies of Spanish cinema, *Antología crítica del cine español 1906-1995* (Pérez Perucha, 1997), a mere five women were identified as historically significant (Margarita Aleixandre, Isabel Coixet, Ana Mariscal, Pilar Miró and Rosario Pi). Since then, thanks to the extensive, painstaking, slow and rigorous work referred to above, the panorama has been changing. In 2010, when Mar Coll won the Goya Award for Best New Director with *Three Days with the Family*, the award was presented to her by four female directors: Iciar Bollain, Patricia Ferreira, Gracia Querejeta and Chus Gutiérrez. This choice of presenters seemed to be the Spanish film academy’s way of recognising a female filmmaking tradition in the year after the Hollywood academy awarded its first Best Director’s Oscar to a woman, Kathryn Bigelow, for *The Hurt Locker* (2008), even if the recognition in Spain went only as far as the “best new director” category. It would not be until almost a decade later, in 2018, that both Goya Awards for directing would be taken home by women, when Best Director went to Isabel Coixet for *The Bookshop* (2018) and Best New Director to Carla Simón for *Summer 1993* (Estiu 1993, 2018). Without detracting from the recognition of these two directors, Carla Simón’s closing remark in her acceptance speech (“more women making movies, please”) highlights the possibility that the academies may also have been rushing to make amends, given that this was also the year of the rise of the #MeToo movement, following the allegations of sexual assault that ended the career of Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein in October 2017.

The global figures, however, are far from encouraging. A recent study by Raúl Cornejo (2021)—in his brilliant book *Las cortinas son invencibles*:

Cine español desde las trincheras (2010-2020)—included a sample of around 30 titles either directed or co-directed by women out of the more than 100 films analysed. According to the 2020 report from CIMA (Spain's Association of Women Filmmakers and Audiovisual Media) prepared by Sara Cuenca, the proportion of women working on the creation of fiction feature films in Spain is around the 33% mark. Only 19% of directors are women, a percentage that has not changed significantly in five years. On the other hand, the areas with the largest proportion of women are costume design (88%), make-up and hairstyling (75%), production management (59%, compared to 40% in 2019) and artistic direction (55%). Moreover, the cost of films directed by women has been estimated to be 51% lower than films directed by men. If we break films down by type, we find that there are more titles directed by women among film categories that have lower average costs: 19% of fiction films are directed by women, compared to 29% of documentaries. Overall, the report concludes that "the average growth in the proportion of women in the sector is slow but steady, estimated at around 5% per year" Cuenca, 2020: 42). Although quantitative analysis always needs to be put in perspective to avoid confusing the parts with the whole, there is clearly a severe gender gap that points to the need to question workflows in the industry.

4. WHAT WE MEAN BY OTHER NEW SPANISH WOMEN'S CINEMA

Of course, the analysis of this movement should not be limited to the strictly quantitative variables of the question. On the contrary, its emergence can only be understood in the context of a series of little political, economic and sociological upheavals that have led to a reassessment of the themes and forms of Spanish cinema in the first decades of the 21st century. What is of interest to us here is what is being written in ONSWC, in relation to voice, to uniquely cinematic processes

of signification. These processes have often been relegated to a merely incidental question even by those authors who have sought to tackle the issues of "women's cinema" (Aguilar Carrasco, 2017: 21), inevitably sliding into essentialist manifestations in the process. However, before turning to this question associated with the *writing styles of women*, it is worth considering some strictly contextual issues.

The panorama of the film industry in 2021 is of course the product of a combination of apparently disparate factors that are not always easy to connect. These include the economic collapse following the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy in September 2008 (Marzal-Felici & Soler-Campillo, 2018), the #MeToo movement, the rise of streaming platforms, the widespread questioning of the mechanisms of cultural creation (Zafra, 2017), the establishment of new cinephile communities since the September 11 attacks (Rosenbaum, 2010) and, of course, cinema's fall from the top of the list of the most widely consumed cultural products of our time. This last point, as described in Vicente Monroy's happily polemical book *Contra la cinefilia: historia de un romance exagerado* (Monroy, 2020), is of special interest here, given how little it has been explored.

In the final section of his book, Monroy points matter-of-factly and convincingly to the displacement of cinema as the preferred cultural product of the masses. Eclipsed by video games and television series, cinema has suddenly been reformulated, transformed, and turned into a peripheral product that needs to face up to its own marginal status. Rather than the panic that this fact might arouse in the mind of any apparently film-loving reader (empty theatres, budget cuts to the umpteenth instalment of the latest epic saga or superhero series), what it should inspire is pure celebration: if cinema is becoming a reasonably marginal art form, it is obviously because it has reached its historical moment for embracing *marginal voices*, i.e., *voices not usually heard*—and it goes without

saying that the female voice is the most usual of voices not usually heard.

By embracing alterity, cinema gains a strange kind of freedom, a sort of sinister, unruly nature that is happily Other. This is something that was already occurring in the traditional dialectic between male and female in other perpetually suspect cultural fields, such as literature (Molines Galarza, 2021) and philosophy (Meloni, 2021a). To put it more clearly, ONSWC did not arise as a traditional cinematic—or even *cinophilic*—product. Marginal spaces, limited budgets, minimal distribution, and modest but fascinated audiences have served as the topsoil out of which the corpus studied here would have to grow and bloom. It is hardly surprising, for example, that many of the films analysed here are the first, or at most the second or third works of their directors. This is due not just to the youth of the creators concerned, but also, and especially, to the severe constraints associated with the marginal nature of many of their projects.

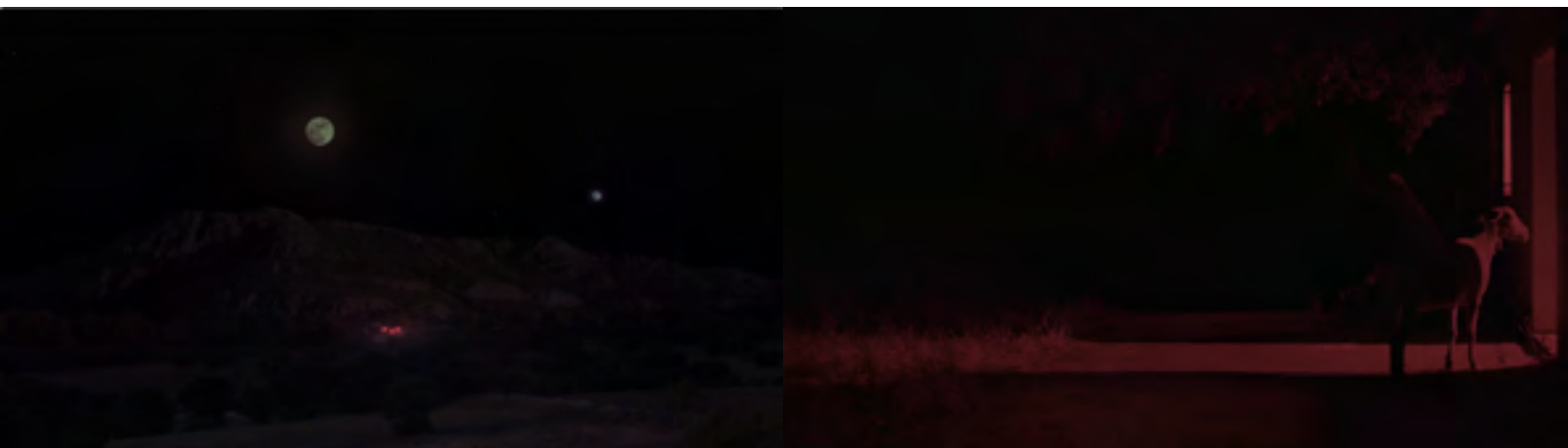
And yet, it is on this same discursive line that our first conundrum arises. The estranged, *Other-nature* of these film projects have little or nothing to do with the kind of experimental works—often lumped together under the “underground” heading (Mendik & Jay Schneider, 2002)—that were apparently demanded by the high-brow codes of reception. They are in no way related, at least in their formal essence, to the seminal works of Maya Deren or Laura Mulvey. On the contrary, what is extraordinary about many ONSWC films is precisely their capacity to draw on the most intimate elements—a recollection, memory, childhood—to emotionally engage spectators. Their commitment to what can be described as a *radical intimate realism* falls somewhere between confession, diary, riddle, childhood song, caresses, bites and howls. All this is brought together in an extraordinary formal cacophony that always returns to something of what was repressed in modernist cin-

ema (Font, 2002), in an open dialogue with the mechanisms of gender and genre.

It is true that autobiography—or, as it has all too often been labelled, *autofiction*—is a key element in many of these first films, although this is never to the exclusion of aspects inherited from genres such as experimental film, fantasy, melodrama, or comedy. To offer just a few examples, *Arima* (Jaione Camborda, 2019) is presented as a rural ghost story straddling the borders between folk horror, Gothic nightmare and children’s fairytale. *Most Beautiful Island* (Ana Asensio, 2017) is at once a social drama about immigration, an unhinged take on grief and, ultimately, a horrific cinematic game of global biopolitics. In a completely different register, the fantasy film *Paradise Hills* (Alice Waddington, 2019) plunges us into a futuristic dystopia about a group of girls locked up in a colourful reformatory, while the previously mentioned *Mighty Flash* offers a documentary-style portrait beneath a sky with two moons (Images 6 and 7). In the comedy genre, Neús Ballús explores the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of masculinity by following around three plumbers who portray themselves in *The Odd-Job Men* (Sis dies corrents, 2021).

Meanwhile, the field of documentary film steers between the most intimate of portraits, the question of roots and our connection to the land, and a concern with social issues in an era that

BY EMBRACING ALTERITY, CINEMA GAINS A STRANGE KIND OF FREEDOM, A SORT OF SINISTER, UNRULY NATURE THAT IS HAPPILY OTHER. THIS IS SOMETHING THAT WAS ALREADY OCCURRING IN THE TRADITIONAL DIALECTIC BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE IN OTHER PERPETUALLY SUSPECT CULTURAL FIELDS, SUCH AS LITERATURE AND PHILOSOPHY



Images 6 and 7. Two moons shine at night in *Mighty Flash* (Destello bravio, Ainhoa Rodríguez, 2021)

has been especially tumultuous for Spanish society. While Mercedes Álvarez introduced these three dimensions in *The Sky Turns* (*El cielo gira*, 2004), and again with *Mercado de futuros* [*Futures Market*] (2011), giving a voice to the village of Aldealseñor in the first and offering a devastating portrait of the dialectic between speculative discourses and the plight of the underprivileged in the second, the new generation of female filmmakers have continued to explore them. For example, in *The Silence that Remains* (*El silencio que queda*, 2019), the first documentary by the artist Amparo Garrido, the filmmaker draws on a personal experience to tell the story of a blind person's relationship with birds, depicting her own relationship with animals in the process. Dreaming and grieving over the landscape are present in Maddi Barber's gaze in *Above 592 Metres* (*592 metroz goiti*, 2018) and *Urpean Lurra* (2019), while a profound connection with rural traditions is evident in Elena López Riera's *Los que desean* [*Those Who Desire*] (2018), and Diana Toucedo explores the magic and mystery of a village near Lugo in *Thirty Souls* (*Trinta Lumes*, 2017). The subjective gaze, privileging the diary form, based on found material, is constructed in discourses of the unspeakable, about suicide in films like *Ainhoa: yo no soy esa* [*Ainhoa: That's Not Me*] (Carolina Astudillo,² 2018), or desire in *My Mexican Bretzel* (Núria

Giménez, 2020). On the other hand, films like *El gran vuelo* [*The Great Flight*] (2015), also by Carolina Astudillo, seek to recover forgotten stories—in this case, the disappearance of Clara Pueyo Jornet in the early years of the Franco regime—in an effort to construct an *Other* memory, a non-hegemonic memory.

Herein lies the conundrum: a certain type of film—one that doesn't earn much at the box office—is suddenly pushed into a marginal position, and in response, the work of a new generation of female filmmakers takes a turn towards the most intimate, the realest, even though each new film explores new territories, avenues and nuances. What is referred to here as the Other New Spanish Women's Cinema has fortunately become simply an Other New Cinema—but one made by women who exhibit a degree of collective consciousness (Image 8).

5. NOT ONLY, NOT ENTIRELY, GENDER

It is worth making a few final clarifications. Our vindication of cinema made by women is based on a need to hear these filmmakers in all their heterogeneity, their otherness, never as a category or flawed label. We argue that cinema made by women is neither essentially feminine—because there is no ontology of the feminine—nor direct-



Image 8. Despite differences, the Other New Cinema made by women is characterised by a degree of collective consciousness: *Les amigues de l'Àgata* [Àgata's Friends] ((Marta Verheyen, Laia Alabart, Alba Cros, Laura Rius Arán, 2015)

ly or necessarily feminist. Women and sexual difference emerge as an enigma to be interpreted in the singular rather than to be understood as a predefined assertion. Probably nobody puts it better than the pioneer filmmaker Josefina Molina: "As people, and not as women, we dedicate ourselves to the audiovisual; we are filmmakers and therefore we have in our hands an essential tool for disseminating our ideas and changing all those clichés about women who work in cinema: for example, the worn-out notion of sensitivity" (Zurián, 2015: 13-14). Along these lines, we argue that ONSWC also understands cinema as a device for ideas and an artistic device that works on the subconscious, testing out a certain kind of writing of an intimacy presented as obstinate and strange.

It also troubles us, as male and female researchers, that when we analyse or critique a film made by women we are invariably asked (in fact, reviewers for academic journals require it) to include a reading from a gender studies perspective and a consideration of how the female protagonist has been represented in the text. And yet, surprisingly, we are never asked to include (and we are even sometimes penalised if we do) an analysis of

the enunciation of the voice that articulates the discourse, who is compromised in her own act of speaking. We believe it important to give some attention to this question, if only in an effort to broaden the discussion.

Of course, it is clear that cultural studies—and specifically the concept of *gender*—introduced many of the questions we want to ask here, although it would not cover them all completely. In this respect, the concept of the gaze developed by authors such as Laura Mulvey, for example, has been crucial. Noting that in contemporary feminist theory the psychoanalytical concepts "sexual difference", "desire" and "lack" are being replaced with sociological concepts such as "gender", "ethnicity", and "class", as well as the sociological constructions "man = masculine = active / woman = feminine = passive", Eva Parrondo Coppel and Tecla González-Hortigüela reconsidered the iconic status of Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Film", considered the cornerstone of film studies based on psychoanalysis and feminism. The two authors find that Mulvey's essay proposes a position that is not necessarily feminist-psychoanalytical, but

sociological, in which feminism is assumed with acritical fascination:

Although feminist film theory was initially established with the aim of “inventing strategies of social transformation”, it has been reduced to a discourse that condemns the male perspective on us (woman = object, woman = spectacle, woman = mother, etc.) while reproducing the idea that somewhere out there is another omnipotent male who inevitably oppresses us (with his gaze, with his language), thereby reinforcing the naturalisation of undesirable media equations such as woman = archetypal victim of our culture (Parrondo Coppel & González-Hortigüela, 2016: 20).

This trend in certain feminist discourses also poses many other challenges and risks for our approach to this cinema made by women. The first is the risk of getting bogged down in the identification of women as victims, which may promote discourses informed by a whistleblowing ethic that precludes any possibility of discussing responsibility or analysing violence as a subjective problem inherent in anybody capable of speech, rather than something exclusive to heterosexual males. Because violence, like madness, is not something limited to a single group. It cannot be alien to us because it speaks to—and even inhabits—our most radical subjectivity. The risk of relegating women to the place of victims can also lead to discourses of hostility, if not outright hatred, towards the masculine. *Promising Young Woman* (Emerald Fennell, 2020), winner of last year’s Oscar for Best Screenplay, is an example of a certain kind of feminist film that denounces misogynist violence while assuming that all men are violent (except the father). This is a point worthy of attention.

We believe, however that it could be much more interesting to encourage a conversation between the sexes, whatever gender they may identify with. It is therefore essential to consider the ambivalences of desire, violence, and the malaise of each individual’s modes of pleasure. Failing to

address these questions could have devastating consequences, and, by extension, could also have some inadvertent effects: we should not lose sight of the fact that many discourses established by men from that questionable and now widely caricatured position of “women’s ally” end up being no more than a kind of acritical acceptance of the role of executioner, of an innate guilt, essential to their masculinity, without in any way facilitating the stated objective of *listening to and conversing with women*.

Another of the dangers to consider is already well known in the field of film studies: prioritising content over form. As noted above, most approaches to research from a cultural studies perspective focus on content, demanding the representation of women based on a theory of the gaze, but in this process, they overlook the study of the filmic forms that are in fact responsible for constructing that content. Anyone who has taken the slightest interest in film historiography will know that even the clearest and most transparent enunciative position does not view cinema as a reflection of reality. Indeed, sometimes even the films that get closest to a naked gaze on the real require the most crafting and complex decisions in the creation process. This is why the documentary form cannot be explained without the imagination, or the truth without the device. Another hazard associated with analysing the content and intentions of male or female filmmakers is the danger of equating the subject of the enunciation with the subject of the statement, drawing equivalences between the subject in the act of speaking and what the subject says, pinning down the meaning and shutting out the subconscious. To do so would be to ignore the fact, postulated in Lacanian psychoanalysis, that there is always a distance between what we mean and what we say, and between what we say and what others understand. We always say more than what we say, we confess more than we can or say less than we know. This is even more pronounced in the

case of cinematic writing, where, however authorial the voice may be, a film is the result of a polyphony of voices that emerge from a collective creative process.

Moreover, it is through such filmic forms—the duration of a shot, the pulse of the camera, the composition or choice of a particular perspective that conceals a face—that the subject of the interpretation is also presented. It is therefore crucial to bear in mind that the spectator-subject does not decipher the intentions of the enunciation—or is not limited to this—as the film text touches the spectator's body, resounding in it and demanding its unconscious knowledge. The spectator actualises and gives meaning to what the film conveys. Just as the woman should not be victimised, the spectator should not be relegated to a passive position, as spectators are also responsible for what they conjure with their gaze. With this in mind, José Antonio Palao suggests:

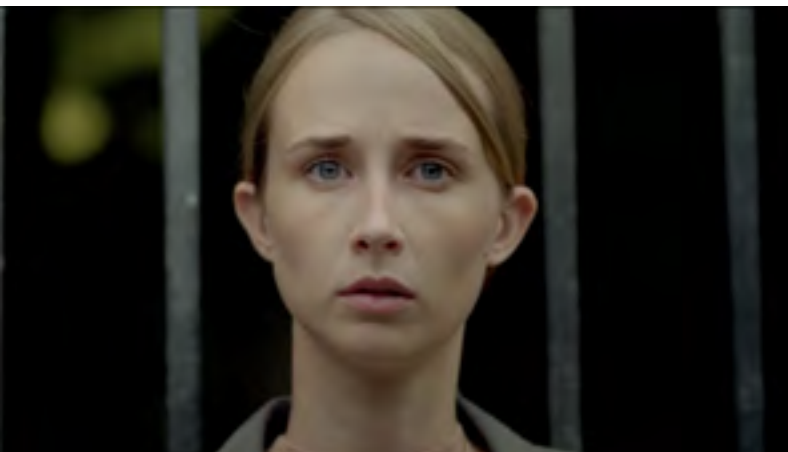
It is undeniable that there is an element of modelling (of ideological reproduction) in this audiovisual design. However, the critical tradition has given it so much importance that I feel compelled to play devil's advocate. I believe that what we look at is more important than what we see; what we have learned is more important than what we have been taught, and by destroying (or deconstructing, or analysing, or denouncing) the visible as Laura Mulvey once proposed, attacking what has been shown, we do not always hit upon what has been shown or deny its libidinal investment in what we have looked at (Palao, 2003: 70).

The salvational and living quality of art lies precisely in the fact that it speaks to the spectator's individuality, transcending the creator's intentions. However, Eva Parrondo Coppel & Tecla González-Hortigüela (2016: 62) point out a fundamental political problem: "Is it possible to stop feminist filmmakers from focusing, like Mulvey, on 'men's fantasies about women', from reproducing in their discourses the *mythical-masculine* perspective of 'the woman', and turn instead to-

MOREOVER, IT IS THROUGH SUCH FILMIC FORMS—THE DURATION OF A SHOT, THE PULSE OF THE CAMERA, THE COMPOSITION OR CHOICE OF A PARTICULAR PERSPECTIVE THAT CONCEALS A FACE—THAT THE SUBJECT OF THE INTERPRETATION IS ALSO PRESENTED

wards their own fantasies and 'the elaboration of desire' that inhabits them as women?" And they also suggest that "the debate should not revolve around identity; it should revolve around desire, given that it is desire, because it breaks with historical determinations and questions the successful consolidation of social identities, that always represents 'a problem' for and in patriarchal culture" (Parrondo Coppel & González-Hortigüela, 2016: 68). This is because desire is precisely the non-normative, the uncivilised. However, the hegemonic tone of our era demands self-knowledge, self-affirmation, the urgent need to affirm a sexual identity and even agency or empowerment. All these things have become imperatives founded on the notion of an excessively stable identity, that self that underpins the postulates of pragmatism, functionalism, the cognitive-behavioural paradigm, self-help and leadership, these last two being fields that feminist literature is becoming increasingly tied up with, as Maria Medina-Vicent (2021) warns. Yet the self knows nothing of the subject of desire, which is the split subject, the unconscious subject. Moreover, self-affirmation is an act that is as painful as it is impossible, as the ultimate signifier that would assert our identity and grant us a certain sense of existence is always missing.

Authors such as Katherine Angel (2021), acknowledging the *Foucauldian* tradition, are already pointing out the tyranny of self-knowledge as an imperative or positive expression—loud,



Images 9 and 10. *Ana by Day* (*Ana de día*, Andrea Jaurrieta, 2018) or liberation from the self in a shot/reverse shot.

clear and confident—of female desires, as these do not tend to be transparent; on the contrary, they are elusive, as psychoanalysis has also demonstrated. Angel calls for the discourse of desire to incorporate the notion of vulnerability, not just of women, but of men, deconstructing the supposedly powerful male gaze. Why can the male gaze not be vulnerable?

[T]he idea that men are not vulnerable in sex is absurd. They can be easily wounded, physically and psychologically. Their desire and pleasure are either terribly visible, or visibly absent. They have very clear measures by which they can be seen to fail: erection and ejaculation. And like everyo-

ne else, they have hopes, wishes, fears, fantasies, shames—all of which risk humiliation. To be a man is to be tremendously exposed. I don't say this to mock or humiliate men; on the contrary, I say it to welcome them to vulnerability. (Angel, 2021: 107)

With the above in mind, our hypothesis is that what underpins this Other New Spanish Women's Cinema is not identity—losing your identity ultimately proves to be a fantastical liberation in *Ana by Day* (Andrea Jaurrieta, 2018) (Images 9 and 10), for example—but the strangeness of desire. In many films of this movement, identities are blown apart, while symbolic positions are mobilised. This is where the experience of soli-

Images 11 and 12. Connections between classes in *Libertad* (Clara Roquet, 2021) and generation gaps in *Three Days with the Family* (*Tres días con la familia*, Mar Coll, 2009)



tude appears, together with an intense anxiety that claims responsibility for a desire, in a subjective process that nobody else can accompany you through—not even your friends (Image 11), as important as they are in many of these films.

There are also generation gaps and rifts with parents—exemplified in the composition of the scene of a conversation between mother and daughter on the swing in *Three Days with the Family* (Image 12) or the street festival march in *The Innocence* (*La innocència*, Lucía Alemany, 2019). Leaving the home is liberating, but it divides—*Journey to a Mother's Room* (*Viaje al cuarto de una madre*, Celia Rico, 2018)—and when you return, you may even be ashamed of your roots—*Girlfriends* (Chavalas, Carol Rodríguez, 2021)—or feel like a total stranger—*Facing the Wind* (*Con el viento*, Meritxell Colell, 2018). In any case, we find

ourselves compromised by those family members who are ageing, or even forgetting—*Libertad* (Clara Roquet, 2021)—and perhaps taking responsibility for those bodies and performing an act of memory is needed to be able to face the future.

Travelling abroad seems to allow us to untangle the family ties, but just when we think we are following our desire we find that we are writing a kind of repetition. In *Júlia ist* (Elena Martín, 2017), when the protagonist, who is on an Erasmus scholarship in Berlin, is told by other students in her architecture program that she is incapable of creating flexible structures and that she only thinks about families in her designs, her bewilderment speaks volumes (Images 13 and 14). Perhaps a certain constant in all these films is the desire to flee that fails to mitigate the feeling of alienation experienced by the subject faced with

her radical intimacy. It is a similar desire to flee written in Antoine Doinel's run at the end of *The 400 Blows* (*Les quatre cents coups*, François Truffaut, 1959) (Images 15-17), which continues being written at the end of *Ojos negros* [*Dark Eyes*] (Marta Lallana, Ivet Castelo, Iván Alarcón, Sandra García, 2019), despite the fact that the town where the latter film is set is not by the sea (Images 18-20)

Arnau Vilaró, who has dedicated an article to some of these films (specifically concerned with what he refers to as the *Nova Escola de Barcelona*, or *New Barcelona School*), suggests that the “female directors clearly understand that point of view is not just a question of the relationship between the camera and the character, but of understanding the film as a space for exploring their character's psychology. In this sense, the film is viewed as a journey that begins with the actor's body and ends by offering a way out which, in most cases, takes the form of tears” (Vilaró, 2021: 109). Others

Images 13 and 14. *Júlia ist* (Elena Martín, 2017), or how to develop an architecture for people who live alone





Images 15-20. The desire to flee: encounters with anxiety. End of *The 400 Blows* (*Les quatre cents coups*, François Truffaut, 1959) and *Ojos negros* [*Dark Eyes*] (Marta Lallana, Ivét Castelo, Iván Alarcón, Sandra García, 2019).

end with the moving articulation of a voice, as in *Schoolgirls* (*Las niñas*, Pilar Palomero, 2020), or with a lighter body, with another step. In *María (y los demás)*, after the poignant monologue with the teddy bear in the reverse shot, María falls asleep—another victory for the subconscious—on the day that her father is getting married. When she wakes up with a start, she heads off to the wedding. But first, she leaves her first novel with the publisher. The final run has all the liveliness of those leaping strides in *Frances Ha* (Noah Baumbach, 2012) (Image 21); María is now awake (Image 22) and knows that she cannot

keep standing around smoking in the shade of her father's tree (Image 1).

In view of the above, it is clear that this Other New Spanish Cinema made by women is not generally aligned with that style of contemporary feminist fiction that insists on calling things by their name—as suggested, conversely, in series like *Fleabag* (Phoebe Waller-Bridge, 2016) or *Perfect Life* (*Vida perfecta*, Leticia Dolera, 2019-). Instead, they point to what cannot be easily expressed in a word, because it is unspeakable or because it is one's own direct private experience. As Arnau Vilaró (2021: 111) suggests, “the gesture,



Images 21 and 22. Sometimes, the narrative trajectory leads to a change of pace: *Frances Ha* (Noah Baumbach, 2012) and *María (y los demás)* (Nely Reguera, 2016)

the gaze, silence and listening are tools that these characters use to posit a relationship with the world and to deal with loss or separation, subjects that all these filmmakers explore.” And in all of these journeys, opaqueness is a central focus. In agreement with Arnau Vilaró, we take note and celebrate the fact that opaqueness is the calling card of desire. ■

NOTES

- * This study has been conducted as part of the research project: *Emerging Female Voices in 21st Century Spanish Cinema: Writings of Intimacy* [VOZ-ES-FEMME] (Code UJI-A2021-12), under the direction of Dr. Shaila García Catalán, funded by Universitat Jaume I for the period 2022-2024.
- 1 On this point, it is worth mentioning two positions that are complementary rather than contradictory: the *best practice* in relations between the sciences and film studies proposed by Roberto Amaba (2019), and the brutal but highly lucid criticism of neuroscience applied to textual analysis put forward by Català Domènech (2017: 25).
- 2 Carolina Astudillo is a Chilean filmmaker who works between her native country and Barcelona, which is why we have included her among this generation of Spanish filmmakers.

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A RADICAL INTIMATE REALISM: AN OTHER NEW SPANISH CINEMA MADE BY WOMEN

Abstract

This article reflects on the rise of a new generation of female directors in contemporary Spanish cinema, in which we can glimpse a kind of cinematic avalanche that presents us with problems, hopes and challenges, as it does for so many female creators and spectators. What we refer to here as the *Other New Spanish Women's Cinema* has fortunately become simply an *Other New Cinema*, but one made by women who exhibit a degree of collective consciousness. Our vindication of cinema made by women is based on a need to hear these filmmakers in all their heterogeneity, their otherness, never as a category or flawed label. We argue that cinema made by women is neither essentially feminine—because there is no ontology of the feminine—nor directly or necessarily feminist. Along these lines, we argue that ON-SWC also understands cinema as a device for ideas and an artistic device that works on the subconscious, testing out a certain kind of writing of an intimacy presented as obstinate and strange. We consider it essential to approach these films with attention to the details of the writing, the subtleties of the screenplay, and especially the filmic forms related to the body that invite interpretation.

Key words

Female director; Other New Spanish Cinema; Film analysis; Writing; Voice.

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DE UN RADICAL REALISMO ÍNTIMO: UN OTRO NUEVO CINE ESPAÑOL FIRMADO POR MUJERES

Resumen

El artículo reflexiona sobre el auge de nuevas directoras en el cine español contemporáneo en el que intuimos que se produce un corrimiento de tierras cinematográfico y que, como a tantas creadoras y espectadoras, nos problematiza, nos ilusiona y nos confronta. Eso que aquí llamamos el *Otro Nuevo Cine Español Femenino* deviene, afortunadamente, un *Otro Nuevo Cine* a secas, firmado, eso sí, por mujeres entre las que se traza cierta consciencia de colectivo. Nuestra reivindicación del cine firmado por mujeres parte de la necesidad de escucharlas en su heterogeneidad, en su otredad, nunca como una categoría o etiqueta fallida. Defendemos que el cine firmado por mujeres no es un cine esencialmente femenino—porque no hay una ontología de lo femenino—, ni directa u obligatoriamente feminista. En esta dirección, consideramos que el ONCEF también entiende el cine como dispositivo de pensamiento y como dispositivo artístico que trabaja con el inconsciente, ensayando cierta escritura de esa intimidad que se presenta tozuda y extraña. Consideramos fundamental una aproximación a estas películas desde los detalles de la escritura, las sutilezas de guion y, muy especialmente, desde las formas filmicas que tocan el cuerpo invitando a la interpretación.

Palabras clave

Directora; Otro Nuevo Cine Español; Análisis fílmico; Escritura; Voz.

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NOTEBOOK

CONSTRUCTING A VOICE: SPANISH WOMEN FILMMAKERS OF THE 21ST CENTURY

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FILMIC VOICES IN PILAR PALOMERO'S *SCHOOLGIRLS*: BEHIND THE SCENES OF THE GENERATION OF 1992

PIETSIE FEENSTRA

This issue of *L'Atalante* explores how a new generation of Spanish female filmmakers have constructed a voice in film in the 21st century. Pilar Palomero's first feature film, *Schoolgirls* (Las niñas, 2020) offers a good example of how to create a voice for a generation of girls who came of age in the 1990s. The film won four Goya Awards (Best Film, Best New Director, Best Original Screenplay, and Best Cinematography), and was nominated for five others, including Best Original Song.¹ The studio Inicia Films depicts the story of *Schoolgirls* as a journey: "Celia, an 11-year-old girl, is studying at a school run by nuns in Zaragoza and lives with her mother. Brisa, a new student who recently arrived from Barcelona, propels her into a new stage of her life: adolescence. On this journey, in the Spain of the 1992 Olympics, Celia discovers that life is made up of a lot of truths, and a number of lies." The film offers a young person's perspective on the transition from childhood to adolescence, representing it as a journey of discovery. The stag-

ing of the voice is highly significant right from the beginning of the film, as the director effectively creates a voice for Celia's generation. So how does Palomero create a gaze on silence while telling the story of what happens behind the scenes at a school in 1992?

CONSTRUCTING A VOICE THROUGH FILM

Cinema can create original voices through its way of combining them with the image. In the 1980s, in his book *The Voice in Cinema*, Michel Chion explained that analysing the voice was a new and important question, stressing that this does not mean studying the words spoken, but exploring how the presence of the voice is filmed in relation to the story told in the filmic image. Chion notes that in the 1970s, feminist publishers were the first to produce women's stories on audiobook cassettes, resulting in the first archives of the voice of women's oral history (Chion, 1982: 13). It

is important to recognise that the voice can sometimes offer more freedom than writing: the voice is personal, because of its timbre, and it is often easier to speak than to write. Chion also mentions the work of Marguerite Duras as a creator who has marked literature and film through her way of imposing her voice in her work from an artistic point of view (Chion, 1982: 14). In a subsequent essay titled “*Les nouveaux masques de la voix*” (1998), Chion points out that the way of filming the voice has evolved since he published his book. Once, it was essential to combine a natural voice with a face, but in the 1980s and 1990s filmmakers began creating new filmic forms, as the realistic image could be adapted with national or regional accents or intonations.²

The 1990s also saw an increased presence of female filmmakers in Spanish cinema. Voice is a key element of their work, as suggested in the title of the collection I co-edited with Esther Gimeno Ugalde and Kathrin Saringen, titled *Directoras de cine en España y América Latina: nuevas voces y miradas* [Female Film Directors in Spain and Latin America: New Voices and Gazes] (2014).³ The collection includes several articles that make reference to the innovative use of the voice by these filmmakers, such as *Take My Eyes* (Te doy mis ojos, Icíar Bollain, 2003) or *The Secret Life of Words* (Isabel Coixet, 2005), and is informed by two trends that particularly struck our attention: the directors studied film the voice explicitly, creating new filmic forms; and those who explore social realities, historical memory or other contemporary political issues give special attention to the voice. The work of female directors has created new voices, new presences, as explored in my chapter, titled “¿Cómo leer los nuevos enfoques sobre mujeres directoras? Archivar, visibilizar, escenificar” [How to Read New Approaches to Female Directors: Archiving, Visibilising, Staging] (Feenstra, 2014). In the chapter I propose three terms to describe the research on the work of female directors in film history: “archiving”, “giving

visibility” and “staging”. *Archiving* is a term used by the researcher Esther Gimeno Ugalde, who has constructed an important archive with her chapter titled “*Presencias (in)visibles: directoras en el cine español y latinoamericano*” [(In)visible Presences: Female Directors in Spanish and Latin American Cinema] (2014), bringing together important information on the presence of female filmmakers from the birth of cinema right up to 2012.⁴ The term *staging* proposed in this article refers to a way of giving a presence to the work of women directors, or how they can create points of view in their films through the staging of the voice within certain locations.⁵

Schoolgirls offers a good example of establishing a new point of view through the construction of the voice. Pilar Palomero’s film proposes a staging of memory in 2020, giving visibility to the voice of a new generation.⁶ The director sets her story in Zaragoza in 1992, the year that Spain was chosen as the European Capital of Culture and the Olympic Games were held in Barcelona, as well as being the year of the Seville Expo and the opening of Museo Reina Sofia.⁷ 1992 was also an important year for the European Community, as it marked the opening of borders resulting from the Schengen Agreement, signed in 1985 and confirmed by the 1992 Maastricht Treaty establishing the European Union. Spain had become an EC member in 1986 and the Socialist government (1982-1996), led by Felipe González, was preparing for European integration. The organisation of such important events in Seville and Barcelona, two cities steeped in legend, drew a lot of attention from other European nations and served as an appealing way to showcase Spanish culture. This is the cultural context that frames this story about a group of girls at a school in Zaragoza.

1992: NARRATIVES OF MEMORY

In contrast with the film’s original Spanish title, *Las niñas* [The Girls], the English title, *Schoolgirls*,

refers explicitly to the place of transmission of education to a generation. The girls share this experience, which could be described as a “collective” memory. It was the French philosopher Maurice Halbwachs who defined collective memory as the lived experience of a group over a particular period of time. Halbwachs defined various social frameworks for the transmission of collective memory: the family, religion, and school (Halbwachs, 1925; 1950). These frameworks are reflected in Pilar Palomero’s film, but the characters also react against these institutions. Cinema offers the possibility of questioning the transmission of a collective memory, a concept that itself is worth questioning.

The theorists Jan and Aleida Assmann propose other definitions for the transmission of memory, while recognising the importance of Halbwachs’s concept of frameworks. These scholars suggest a redefinition of the conception of collective memory that makes a distinction between “cultural memory” and “communicative memory” (Assmann, 2008). Cultural memory is institutionalised memory, while communicative memory is individual, personal memory passed on from one generation to the next. Cinema can transmit this type of memory through an oral history. New generations can offer their own visions of history, and cinema constitutes an ideal art form for the construction of these new voices. Aleida Assmann suggests that each new generation can offer its version of history, which she defines as “social memory”, and that this version is normally consolidated after a period of around thirty years. After this period, a new generation emerges and takes over the public responsibility for memory construction. The new generation will create its own vision of history, which is essential for revitalising cultural creativity (Assmann, 2010). *Schoolgirls* presents the transmission of a narrative of memory about 1992 in 2021: nearly thirty years later.

TITLE SEQUENCE

It is important to analyse the mise-en-scène in order to understand how new voices are constructed in cinema. Two scenes in *Schoolgirls* stand out from the outset: the title sequence and the mise-en-scène of a rehearsal for a show. The title sequence shows a choir rehearsing. The first voice we hear is that of the nun who is conducting the choir, and the first images shown are close-ups of some of the choirgirls. The nun is telling them to mouth the words but not sing: they must express themselves by pretending to sing, but without projecting their voices. The girls imitate the gestures, moving their mouths without making any sound. The shots cut quickly from one close-up to another, while we hear the nun forbidding certain girls from singing aloud. In this group is Celia, the protagonist. She must show her face and mouth the words of the song, but her voice must not be heard. The shot immediately before the credits is a group shot of the girls, who breathe in before we cut suddenly to a black screen with the title of the film (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The girls breathe before we cut to the main title shot in the prologue to *Schoolgirls* (Pilar Palomero, 2020)

Breathing is very important for the voice, as David Le Breton observes: “If we lose our breath, we lose the ability to speak. The voice is the product of exhaling and not of inhaling”⁸ (Le Breton, 2011: 13). According to Le Breton, we have no voice when we breathe in. The film opens with this act, showing the orchestration of a silence for certain girls who are told not to sing aloud; an act that I define as a *performative act*. From a linguistic perspective, performativity refers to John Austin’s famous speech act theory (1962), which subsequently inspired John Searle to develop certain key ideas in his book *Speech Acts*, published in 1969. Austin developed a theory on how words can be used to perform certain social rites, the best-known examples being marriage and baptism. In reality, this operation occurs through the utterance of a speech, where the words also contain a legal or other type of value. Speech acts can also evoke silences or recover a voice. The film begins significantly with this performative act of the silence of a group of girls.

And the film ends with the girls performing in front of an audience. Celia is in the choir and she will recover her voice. She looks to either side, and slowly begins to sing aloud: we can hear her. Once again, the close-up is highly significant, because we see other girls in their white shirts in the background, but rendered anonymous, as their faces are not visible. The shot of Celia shows that she is part of the group: singing in a choir is a collective act, and Celia is presented at the end of the film as supported by the other girls. The presence of the group is very important for singing, as David Le Breton explains, because singing is a collective act that creates an echo, offering support for the individual to continue on her path in life (Le Breton, 2011: 197; Leiris, 1992: 106). Le Breton also discusses the importance of the voice in religious discourse referring to the creation of the world (Le Breton, 2011: 23). The voice has the power to vest a thing, an event, or an attitude with a presence. We are in a school full of young people, and

they have voices. Celia will create her voice; she has expressed her point of view on her family life and she will sing the song with her own voice.

Nominated for a Goya Award, the song “*Lunas de papel*” (“Paper Moons”) is very important to the story. As its Zaragozan composer, Carlos Naya, explains (Aragón Cultura, 2021), the universe of the song represents a particular context:

Well, “*Lunas de papel*” is a song that appears at a moment in the film with a lot of emotional weight. I don’t want to give the story away, but I can say that the song is sung at a moment when the character of Celia, who is performed brilliantly by Andrea Fandos, comes to the end of the film’s emotional journey. We knew that it was an important moment and we wanted to create a musical context that would somehow accompany this complex inner world of the character. The intention was to evoke the emotional depth of the character of Celia through the simplicity of a school choir song. I think the hardest part was working out how to reflect so much with so few musical elements.

The song has no explicitly religious meaning, despite being performed by a choir in a Catholic school, as the composer explains. It is interesting to note his description of the instructions given directly by Pilar Palomero about the universe of the song:

Afterwards we got together in my studio and Pilar explained to me what she didn’t want the song to be. She told me she didn’t want a “naive” Sunday school song. She said that although the context is a choir in a school run by nuns, she didn’t want the song to have religious connotations. It also couldn’t suggest any kind of spirituality outside the Christian context. In the scene we were going to see a piano and a choir of around twenty girls. These were the elements I was given to write the song (Aragón Cultura, 2021).

The atmosphere the song creates is highly significant, but so is the title, as it alludes to the film *Paper Moon* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1973), also adapt-

ed into a television series with the same name (ABC, 1974-1975). In the series, Jodie Foster plays a rebellious young girl who travels around with a Bible-selling con man, and who makes sure she gets her part of the earnings (or sometimes sabotages his deals in highly original ways). The song's title thus hints at the strength of the girls in the film, their rebellion against their religious environment, proposing new reinterpretations.

FILMIC PROLOGUES

Beginning a film with this title sequence is highly significant: it serves as a kind of "filmic prologue" (Tylski, 2008: 43-44) that makes an important contribution to the tone of the narrative.⁹ I define this type of sequence as a *snapshot of a moment* for the way it begins to tell the story (Feenstra, 2021)¹⁰ and introduces the film's central theme. Orchestrating the silence of certain girls' voices is the central theme throughout the film, which begins and ends with the choir. The title sequence is thus directly related to the end of the film.

A second narrative effect of this opening is related to the way it establishes *Schoolgirls* as a story about what happens "backstage". The film concludes with the public performance of the show being rehearsed at the beginning. The whole story explores life in the hallways of a school, in the homes, or in the encounters between the girls as a journey of discovery that reveals new truths about the protagonist's family. This is the world behind the scenes. Looking back in film history, the original conception of the musical in the 1930s was the creation of a spectacle (Altman, 1987).¹¹ In his study of the American film musical, Rick Altman explains that the backstage was perceived as referring to the real world. Being able to successfully perform the show is an important narrative element, like a triumph after overcoming the obstacles that life poses. In *Schoolgirls*, the behind-the-scenes world is very important: the school is always present, as are the family homes,

the church, and Zaragoza or the wider community. These are sites of everyday life that suggest a realist reading of this fictional universe. Performing the show at the end, with Celia's voice, is a triumph. Her voice represents the breaking of the silence surrounding her family's taboo topic: the fact that she never knew her father and that her mother is unmarried. She is thus able to create her own original voice.

A VOICE FOR HER MOTHER

Celia's gaze and the way her face is filmed are reminiscent of other films in the history of Spanish cinema. Numerous critics have compared her to Ana Torrent in *The Spirit of the Beehive* (*El espíritu de la colmena*, Víctor Erice, 1973) because her gaze recalls Torrent's quiet observation of the world through awestruck eyes. Moreover, Celia's relationship with her mother could be compared to the mother-daughter relationship in another film starring Torrent, *Cría cuervos* (Carlos Saura, 1975). This film includes a scene where Ana (Torrent), in a complex arrangement of voices and faces, as will be discussed below, talks about the fate of her mother (Geraldine Chaplin) while she is looking around the basement for the poison she used to try to kill different characters. The diegesis suggests that we are hearing Ana's voice in the future, although the voice actually belongs to Geraldine Chaplin. The mother is thus made present with her body and voice, as if she were Ana twenty years later, in 1995 (Figure 2). By projecting herself into the future, with this interchange of voice and body, she is able to express her mother's desires in 1975. Ana explains that her mother had abandoned her career as a pianist in order to devote her life to her daughters. *Cría cuervos* depicts a mother who suffers and dies. Ana speaks for her mother, and also represents her body, giving her desires a voice and hoping for a different future.



Figure 2. In *Cría cuervos* (Carlos Saura, 1976), a tracking shot traces a continuous line between Ana the child and Ana the adult. In the latter, the voice and face of the mother (Gerardine Chaplin) are used to allow the daughter to speak from the future, so that she can express her mother's silenced desires

A mother's silence is also a key theme in *School-girls*. Various scenes reveal that Celia's mother is not accepted by her family because she had a child out of wedlock. The other girls also treat Celia as if she were an orphan, with no family, fatherless. Celia tries to work out who her father is and wants to know where he lives. This is why she will create a voice for her mother, to be able to pass on the memory of her father. It is worth taking a theoretical approach to analyse exactly how this memory is passed on. Returning to Halbwachs's conceptualisation of the transmission of collective memory, the family, school and religion are all crucial: at school, the nun dictates the rules for sex and marriage and the girls write them down in their notebooks. When Celia goes to confession, she asks the priest why people say it is a sin for an unmarried woman to have children. The religious institutions communicate the institutionalised norm, but social repression takes place in other contexts, such as the family or in party games. Since Brisa comes from Barcelona and her parents had her out of wedlock, the other girls treat both Celia and Brisa as orphans. The girls get together to play a game of imagined realities called "Never have I ever...", which leads them to make serious statements about what they would never want. Overstepping the bounds of politeness also seems to form part of the game. Games like this have some challenging rules that make Celia especially uncomfortable, as she has a lot of questions about her father, questions that her mother never answers because she doesn't like to discuss the subject. Celia tries to create a voice for this taboo topic, for what people are whispering in the hallways, in children's games, and also for what is left unsaid. Her mother tells her that her father died of a heart attack before she was born and that he was an orphan, making it impossible to contact his family. They also have no contact with her mother's family because her relations with them are strained. For Celia, it will be extremely difficult to find any evidence of her father's existence.

POLYPHONY OF FACES

Filming silence is important to tell this story, as is made abundantly clear in the faces, including Celia's. In frontal close-ups of her face, her expression becomes a portrait of her soul. Jacques Aumont begins his book *Du visage au cinéma* with a prologue in which he raises the question of whether the soul has a face: the mystics, he explains, claim that it does, and they describe it as the "inner man" who lives on after death (Aumont, 1998: 14). Aumont thus introduces his foundational book with questions about the soul, the emotions and ways of filming the face, the seat of the gaze (1998: 18).

The face, the gaze, the eyes, the voice: the expression renders visible a series of emotions. When Celia is looking, we watch her, but she also looks at her mother, who we see from behind. This focus on the face plays an important role in giving a voice to her mother. Aumont describes the photogeneity of children in terms of the face (1998: 93), which is evident in the way Celia is filmed. Two dark eyes, long hair... an 11-year-old girl approaching puberty, but still a child. There are contradictions, questions, unsolved mysteries: her gaze bears witness to the many emotions she is experiencing (Figure 3). As the theorist Bela Balász describes it in his foundational text on the spirit of cinema (Aumont, 1998: 86), the close-up can be interpreted as a polyphony. Celia's relationship with her mother exhibits this polyphony of a "social silence" between the two characters.

JOURNEYS OF DISCOVERY BEHIND THE SCENES

From the perspective of 2020, *Schoolgirls* takes us behind the scenes of Spain's showcase year of 1992. In a religious school preparing girls for a very specific kind of future, the topic of sexuality is addressed by nuns who dictate rules on the importance of marriage that the girls are required



Figure 3. Celia's gaze bears witness to contradictions, silences and desires

to copy. Although many scenes are set in Celia's home, the school, or the church, there are a few scenes involving travelling that draw out different *truths* revealing other realities. The scene at the bus stop (Figure 4), for example, depicts the generation gap. Modern buildings loom in the background, while the girls giggle over an erotic article in a teen magazine. When Mother Consuelo arrives, the girls hide the magazine. They greet her politely. Silence. The nun looks disapprovingly at a poster on the bus shelter containing a famous AIDS awareness campaign that is still well-remembered in Spain today: "*Pónselo, Póntelo.*" "She was looking more at the poster than at us," says one of the girls.

The first time Celia rides on a motorbike with a boy she is seen by Mother Consuelo, who scolds her: it is a sin to go out at night with a boy on a motorcycle. Because her mother had been very young and unmarried when she had her, there is a danger that Celia may choose to explore new horizons and discover different kinds of lives. Her mother, who is incapable of talking to her, is very worried but furious as she waits for her at home while vacuuming the floor: she doesn't want her daughter to be an outcast like she was for having a child without a husband and at such a young age. The noise of the vacuum cleaner is the sound of her own impotent rage.



Figure 4. “She was looking more at the poster than at us,” says one of the girls

In another sequence involving travelling, when Celia and her mother are on their way to school, her mother tries to talk to her, but their conversation stalls. Inside the car, filmed from behind, mother and daughter are physically close and yet very far apart. Celia insists that she wants to go out to the country with her mother to see their family. At first her mother refuses, but the next day she comes to pick her up early in the morning and takes her in the car. Rugged landscapes loom in the distance on their journey until they reach a deserted town, where her mother introduces her to her family for the first time. On the way home, we see a wide shot of a distant horizon over an empty landscape (Figure 5). Celia is with her mother in the car, in a shot depicting the solitude and vast distance between their lives and the town where her family lives, although the image of the horizon could also suggest hope, openness, and new beginnings (Flécheux, 2014: 20-21).¹² It is a sublime long shot of a remote horizon that also represents the distance between her mother and their family.

ZARAGOZA: REBEL SONGS FOR REBEL VOICES

Behind the scenes we discover other voices too. Although official institutions communicate some repressive rules, there are rebel voices that ex-

press very different messages of freedom. Some of the songs featured in the film allude to this freedom, with the use of rock music to create a particular atmosphere. How should these voices, these songs, be read?

A song can sometimes represent an important moment in the narrative, like the song “*Lunas de papel*”, which bookends the story like a “crystal-song”, as this concept is defined by the British scholar Phil Powrie (2016: 67-77), as a song that connects important moments in the story, linking past, present and future. Powrie draws on Gilles Deleuze’s theory of the “crystal-image”, an image that represents several timeframes simultaneously. In this sense, we can see how the end of the



Figure 5. Filming the horizon in *Schoolgirls*: solitude, distance and openness



Figure 6. Music in *Cría cuervos* and in *Schoolgirls*.

film alludes to different points in time: Celia has recovered the voice she needs to speak about her past, and at the same time to project into the future. The act of singing the song is a *performative* act involving past, present and future. The song has this dialectical value between multiple moments of Celia's life and creates a resonance with the past in places where she could not express herself freely, such as school. Singing the song is an example of communicative memory, lived memory, defined by Assmann (2008) as a reaction against institutionalised memories. Music in films makes it possible to tell this story of a memory: a communicative, lived memory.¹³

However, there are other songs that reveal other issues. The allusion to *Cría cuervos*, for example, serves as a kind of resonance with the

past of Spanish film history. In Saura's film, the song "¿Por qué te vas?" ("Why Are You Leaving?") is heard in closed spaces, inside the house; only at the end of the film do we hear the song outside the house (Feenstra, 2018: 328). Similarly, we see Celia inside her home listening to her tapes (Figure 6), in what represents a moment of refuge with the music she has discovered thanks to her friend Brisa, who recorded some mixtapes for her.

Celia sings along to the tune, just as Ana has her song in *Cría cuervos*. The allusion to Saura's film is dialectical: Ana refers to the future, and the film ends with the song "¿Por qué te vas?" while Ana and her sisters walk to school through the streets of Madrid (Figure 7).

In *Schoolgirls*, we return to the 1990s with Celia, who takes us behind the scenes at a school. Celia is reminiscent of Ana, but she is living on the cusp of adolescence with rock music and new experiences that take her outside her home.



Figure 7. The song "¿Por qué te vas?" plays at the end of *Cría cuervos*

There are several important artists featured on the soundtrack. A famous song from 1993 by the Spanish Gothic rock band Niños del Brasil seems like a slogan for the lives of these young girls: “Lunes, no, martes no, viernes, sí...” (“Monday, no, Tuesday, no, Friday, yes...”). The girls don’t want to go to school; they want to have fun, go to parties, smoke cigarettes, discover new experiences, and dance gleefully to songs like this. In the disco they dance to Patti Smith and Bruce Springsteen’s “Because the Night”, “Héroe de leyenda” (“Hero of Legend”) by the Spanish band Héroes del Silencio (1978) and “Sed de venganza” (“Thirst for Vengeance”) by Niños del Brasil (1991). After showing Celia recover her voice by singing “Lunas de papel”, the film ends with Manolo Kabezabolo’s “El aborto de Gallina”, a rebel song, over the final credits. The credits at the end of the film also include all the lyrics and groups featured on the soundtrack.

The film thus depicts a journey of discovery through songs, locations and new horizons. Celia has recovered her voice (Figure 8) as she sings “Lunas de papel”, a “crystal-song” about several different stages of her life, interweaving past, present and future. She has heard her echo song inside the closed spaces she wants to free herself from, and she has danced and sung songs by Zaragozan rock groups and songs in English from the 1970s, while making journeys of discovery on a motorcycle, in the discotheque, and with her friends.

CONCLUSION: NARRATIVES OF MEMORY, BREAKING THE SILENCE

This issue of *L’Atalante* explores the construction of female voices in the 21st century, and *Schoolgirls* offers a narrative of memory that places the focus on the lives of girls: singing, making noise, breaking the rules out of curiosity, etc. These girls get together and sing, drink alcohol, express themselves freely, put on lipstick and smoke cigarettes, get dressed up before going out together: all activities typical of adolescence. The choice to set the story



Figure 8. Celia recovers her voice. Singing “Lunas de papel” at the end of *Schoolgirls*

in 1992 is revealing. The mise-en-scène uncovers a behind-the-scenes story when we see a choir of girls and a nun gesticulating at a rehearsal for a show. As Rick Altman suggests in his discussion of show musicals and musical comedy in the 1930s, the audience feels involved, as if they were observing a possible reality in these backstage spaces (Altman, 1987: 207-208). As viewers, we have also discovered the mother’s silence and her daughter’s desire to understand the taboo subject.

Although he formulated it in the 1930s and 1940s, Maurice Halbwachs’s theory on the transmission of cultural memory is still relevant today, as Jan and Aleida Assmann have shown. The institutions of society—religion, school, and the family—are the frames of reference for the transmission of collective memory, but cinema can create

other voices, other narratives of memory. Pilar Palomero's film about 1992 reveals the contrasts between the weight of tradition and the showcasing of the major events of the modern world, contrasts that are still present today. The filmmaker delves inside the institutions of religious education and families that uphold these traditional norms. Celia gives a voice to a new generation. Palomero has directed a moving film about attitudes, convictions, repressive games, girls' faces and a voice for its protagonist. Cinema can create this voice, which I define here as a *filmic voice*, to break the silence for this generation, by capturing its "photogenic" faces (Aumont, 1998: 94), while creating a direct resonance with Spanish film history. ■

NOTES

- 1 The five 2021 Goya nominations that *Schoolgirls* did not win were: Best Original Song, Best Editing, Best Supporting Actress, Best Art Direction, and Best Costume Design.
- 2 In this essay, which was published in English in 1998 as a preface to the translation of *The Voice of Cinema*, Chion discusses reactions to his book, originally published in the 1980s, and points to the new filmic forms being created and how the interaction between the character's body and voice has changed since his book was first published.
- 3 This book was the result of a conference organised in Germany in 2011 about the work of female Spanish and Latin American filmmakers. The theme of the female voice has also been explored in the Spanish context: in 2018, Filmoteca de Gerona organised a conference about the representation of women in silent film, and in 2019, María Luisa Ortega and Minerva Campus organised a conference with the title *Modos de hacer. Directoras de America Latina* ["Ways of Doing: Female Directors of Latin America].
- 4 Esther Gimeno Ugalde's chapter also offers a general bibliography on this research topic. This archive helps give visibility to the work of female directors in Spain and Latin America.
- 5 In my chapter, I propose the term "staging" as an important act. I draw on Homi Bhabha's theory of the "third space" or "interstice" (Bhabha, 1994: 2) as new sites in the filmic space where female directors reveal new voices. Bhabha cites concepts such as Bakhtin's "polyphony" and "dialogism" to discuss the interaction with culture that embraces new identities: for female filmmakers polyphony is also evident in the integration of new voices into filmic storytelling (Bhabha, 1994: 44).
- 6 A children's choir is also depicted in a French context in the film *The Chorus* (*Les choristes*, Christophe Barratier, 2004). This film tells a story set in 1948 in a school as a kind of "behind-the-scenes" look at French history. The film was a box office hit in France.
- 7 This museum exhibits Picasso's 1937 painting *Guernica*, which was brought to Spain in 1981 and kept at the Prado's Casón del Buen Retiro before being moved to Museo Reina Sofía in 1992.
- 8 In the original: "*En perdant sa respiration, l'individu perd sa parole. La voix se donne sur l'expiration et non sur l'inspiration.*"
- 9 In his book, Tyłski offers an overview of the use of credits, proposing terms such as preface, prelude and opening to explain how credits function in a film.
- 10 In my chapter "*La foto-memoria de los títulos de crédito en la obra de Carlos Saura: El séptimo día (2003), un ejemplo paradigmático*", I offer an analysis of the title sequence as a snapshot of an important moment both in film history and in Spanish history. It is like a snapshot of a moment, a "memory-photo". In *Schoolgirls*, the staging of an orchestrated silence at the beginning of the film constitutes an important focus for the story.
- 11 Rick Altman defines three categories of film musical: the fairy tale musical, the show musical, and the folk musical. These three categories establish certain characteristics to facilitate the analysis of the story.
- 12 Céline Flécheux suggests that the horizon can depict openness but also the limitation of our gaze in a specific and symbolic way.
- 13 Citing Jan Assmann's definition, communicative memory can create reactions against institutionalised memories.

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FILMIC VOICES IN PILAR PALOMERO'S SCHOOLGIRLS: BEHIND THE SCENES OF THE GENERATION OF 1992

Abstract

Pilar Palomero's first feature film, *Schoolgirls* (*Las niñas*, 2020), offers a good example of how to create a voice for a generation of girls who came of age in the 1990s. The film offers a young person's perspective on the transition from childhood to adolescence, representing it as a journey of discovery. This article explores the staging of the voice, which is highly significant right from the beginning of the film, and the way that the director effectively creates a voice for Celia's generation. So how does Palomero create a gaze on silence while telling the story of what happens behind the scenes at a school in 1992?

Key words

Filmic voice; Memory; *Schoolgirls*; Pilar Palomero.

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VOCES FÍLMICAS DE LAS NIÑAS DE PILAR PALOMERO: LAS BAMBALINAS DE LA GENERACIÓN DE 1992

Resumen

La ópera prima de Pilar Palomero *Las niñas* (2020) es un buen ejemplo de la creación de una voz para una generación de niñas de los años noventa. La película propone un ambiente juvenil sobre el tránsito de la niñez hacia la adolescencia, como un viaje iniciático. Este artículo explora la puesta en escena de la voz, muy significativa desde el principio de la película y el modo en que la directora ha creado una voz para la generación de la protagonista. ¿Cómo se crea una mirada sobre el silencio narrando lo que sucede entre las bambalinas de un colegio en 1992?

Palabras clave

Voz fílmica; Memoria; *Las niñas*; Pilar Palomero.

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THE FAILURE OF THE ROMANTIC EXPERIENCE IN *DISTANCES*

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MANUEL CANGA SOSA

INTRODUCTION

Distances (Les distàncies, Elena Trapé, 2018) is a drama that invites us to share the experience of a romantic disappointment, a breakdown foreshadowed from the very beginning of the film that will also affect the friendships of its young protagonists, whose conflicts worsen as the story unfolds, betraying the frailty of the ties that once bound them. The title of the film refers to both the geographical distance that separates the protagonists (from Barcelona to Berlin) and the emotional distances that become apparent within the group, ultimately fracturing the relationships between its members.¹

The film begins with a prologue in which Olivia (Alexandra Jiménez), Eloi (Bruno Sevilla), Guille (Isak Ferriz) and his girlfriend Anna (María Ribera) arrive in Berlin at the home of Álex Comas (Miki Esparbé). This is followed by three segments introduced by intertitles signalling each of the

three days on which the story takes place: “Friday”, showing the first night the friends spend together and Comas’s departure; “Saturday”, when Olivia waits at home for Comas to return while Eloi, Guille, and Anna spend the day wandering the streets of Berlin; and “Sunday”, when Comas returns to the now empty house and listens to the messages left on his voicemail service.

The trip to Berlin is of decisive importance for the film’s protagonists: they have travelled north, but they are lacking direction, disoriented, without a compass. None of their expectations are met, and as their fantasies unravel, they must confront the pain of loneliness, an incurable solitude that reflects the basic condition of existence. Trapé’s film depicts a “series of disappointments, of truths that are successively negated” (Miller, 2002: 181), of masks that are stripped off one after another to reveal the harshest side of reality. Berlin is the perfect backdrop for the drama, as it is depicted as a strange, cold and hostile place apparently undis-

posed to satisfy desire. In fact, there is not a single love scene in the whole film, either between Olivia and Comas, or between Anna and her boyfriend, Guille, who had embarked on the adventure with the intention of asking his girlfriend to marry him. The fantasy of this trip to Germany, which meant something different to each character, seems to come to an end as quickly as the weekend on which the story takes place, revealing that the relationships between the characters are paper thin and that they are deeply unhappy in their lives.

SCRIPT AND STORY

Distances bears some striking similarities in terms of form and content with Elena Trapé's first film, *Blog* (2010). A direct line can be traced between the two films, running from the exaltation of friendship associated with adolescence to the deterioration of relationships with the entry into adult life, as found in other recent films directed by women, such as *Coward Love* (*Los amores cobardes*, Carmen Blanco, 2017), *A Thief's Daughter* (*La hija de un ladrón*, Belén Funes, 2019), and *Schoolgirls* (*Las niñas*, Pilar Palomero, 2020).

In formal terms, all these films stand out in particular for their slow-paced editing and the use of a handheld camera, a composition that conveys an impression of spontaneity and low-contrast lighting designed to reinforce the sense of realism, together with the sound, although on closer analysis a meticulous compositional organisation and internal editing betray their apparent naturalism. In *Distances*, the aim for verisimilitude, which reflects its adherence to the classical mode of representation (Burch, 1987),² takes on the appearance of a realism reminiscent of Italian post-war filmmakers (Rosellini, De Sica, Zamponi, Germi, Lattuada, Bolognini, Olmi, etc.), filtered through the influence of the early work of Lars Von Trier, with bleak, drab settings that serve to explore the harsher side of life.

In terms of content, the films named above are notable for the dramatic tone of their stories, the presence of female protagonists, and their interest in highlighting the bleaker aspects of day-to-day existence: disillusionment with society, relationship breakdowns, communication problems and feelings of failure, along with the absence of consistent parental figures, broken families and the exploitation of loneliness. It could be argued that these films portray the effects of a society subjected to a de-constructive process that contrasts with the tone of classical Hollywood films starring assertive leading women like Barbara Stanwyck, Katherine Hepburn, Bette Davis, Maureen O'Hara, Joan Crawford, or Lana Turner.³

Elena Trapé's script progresses chronologically in accordance with the well-known three-act structure of set-up, confrontation, and resolution. In temporal terms it thus conforms to a traditional narrative model, ordered according to a conventional pattern, beginning on Friday and ending on Sunday. The narrative time advances quickly, although some scenes are drawn out to create an effect of anxiety or unease, implicitly evoking the films of Antonioni, who, although aesthetically very different from Trapé, was also interested in exploring impossible loves, emptiness, silence, and

THE FILMS NAMED ABOVE ARE NOTABLE FOR THE DRAMATIC TONE OF THEIR STORIES, THE PRESENCE OF FEMALE PROTAGONISTS, AND THEIR INTEREST IN HIGHLIGHTING THE BLEAKER ASPECTS OF DAY-TO-DAY EXISTENCE: DISILLUSIONMENT WITH SOCIETY, RELATIONSHIP BREAKDOWNS, COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS AND FEELINGS OF FAILURE, ALONG WITH THE ABSENCE OF CONSISTENT PARENTAL FIGURES, BROKEN FAMILIES AND THE EXPLOITATION OF LONELINESS

alienation in a world that is falling apart. The motif of the note that Olivia finds in Comas's house, containing the message of a promise, evokes the letter that Lidia (Jeanne Moreau) reads aloud in the final sequence of *The Night* (La Notte, 1961), sealing the conclusion to a story that exposes the shallowness of its male protagonist.

The action in *Distances* develops in the usual settings of everyday life: stations, buses, streets, bars, and a messy house that conveys no sense of homely warmth, as it is nothing more than a stop, a dark and lonely hovel. The dim lighting used throughout the film contributes purposefully to underscore this feeling of sadness and disillusionment that slowly reveals an atmosphere seemingly conceived to defuse desire. The director has chosen to forgo the sensuality of stimulating colours, minimising the expressive potential of an image that is not designed to satisfy the gaze. Indeed, although the film has been shot in colour it is dominated by gloomy settings, with dull grey tones with no brightness or intensity to underscore the emotional tone of the drama.

This article proposes a psychoanalytic reading⁴ with the objective of interrogating the feeling—in the sense of that which is *felt*—of the aesthetic experience offered by the film text. The praxis of psychoanalysis, as a method of film analysis, involves an interpretation of the text based on detailed description (Freud, 1987d: 1883; Lacan, 2014: 265) and the examination of the relationships between its different elements. What is important for this type of analysis is not the content of the different parts that make up the text, but—as Lacan suggests in relation to Hamlet—the “comparison”, the “correlation” of the different parts of the “structure viewed as an articulated whole” (Lacan, 2014: 268). It thus involves reviewing the whole text,

deciphering it, trying to approach the conflicts and fantasies coming from the “other scene” (Barthes, 1990: 350; Freud, 1987a: 377; 1987c: 2173), which are written and configured in the text's signifying material, and which revolve around what Freud called a “pathogenic core” (1987a: 158) and Lacan referred to as “the real”: that kind of “bud around which thought weaves stories” (2006: 121).

THE ARRIVAL

The film begins with a shot of Olivia dragging her suitcase along with difficulty, a suitcase with which she literally “can't go on,” while she asks the question: “Is this the stop? No?” The first line spoken in the film proves to be revealing, as it is a question alluding to the goal of a journey that the characters are already taking. The words are combined with her movements to signify a journey that acquires the symbolic value of travel and of a possible transformation: it is about not missing the bus, not missing the meaning of the journey or the moment of surprise.

When she boards the bus, Anna asks the driver to wait until everybody gets there, because they are travelling with a “pregnant woman” (Figure 1). Clearly, Olivia must have a good reason for leaving the father, Gari, in Barcelona, and taking a plane to Berlin when she is seven months pregnant: she wants to see Comas, the great love of her

Figure 1. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)





Figure 2. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)

youth, and the man she still loves. While on the bus, the characters discover that their old friend, Álex Comas, is featured on a poster that seems to be everywhere on the streets of Berlin. They all laugh, and when they get off the bus, they take a group selfie with the poster in the background. Now they are all together: together and happy (Figure 2).

The poster shows Comas beside the advertising slogan “My future is secure” (“*Meine Zukunft ist sicher!*”) while he runs smiling towards that supposedly assured future. This is the one image we are given of Comas from the beginning of the film up until the character himself appears: an image directly associated with an advertising model, emblematic of the imaginary object of desire in the capitalist world. However, when Comas finally does appear, we discover a sad, defeated, depressed character, nothing like the happy figure in the advertisement (Figure 3). The disorder in his house, with clothing strewn across the floor, unwashed dishes, the cardboard box, etc., reflect the disorder within.

The reunion of the group begins to falter from the moment that Comas comes into the picture, as this character is shown at all times to be reserved, and clearly displeased with the unexpected visit of his old friends (Figure 4). Shortly after they enter his home, Comas asks them how long they plan to stay, making his desire to see them disappear all too obvious. And later, when they tell him excitedly that their present for him is not the birthday

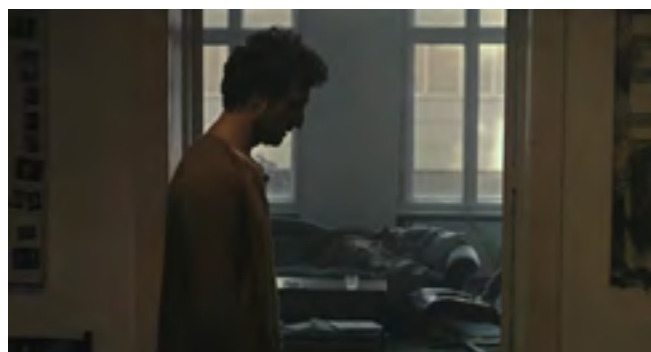
card they have just given him but their presence, Comas replies, half joking and half serious: “Can I return it?”

Comas’s mysterious attitude towards his friends, an attitude that seems to hide a *secret* that will never be revealed (although a few clues invite us to speculate about his aloof manner, his silence and opaqueness), raises a question that could be placed in parallel with the unsettling attitude of Olivia, who has embarked on an *outrageous* journey, given the advanced state of her pregnancy (as various characters point out), with obvious dramatic implications.

THE BREAKDOWN

From the beginning of the segment titled “Friday”, Olivia goes to great lengths to try to sleep with Comas, because, as she puts it, she prefers “a hard mattress”. The hard mattress could be viewed as a metonymic reference to another type of hardness, given the context of the remark and her explicit expression of her desire to share the bed. While not

Figures 3 and 4. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)



daring to tell her no, Comas nevertheless appears aloof, and makes no effort to conceal his alarm at Olivia's pregnant belly (in fact, Olivia herself "can hardly believe" her own pregnant condition).

Olivia's boldness—the trip was her idea, as she dragged the others to Berlin to celebrate her former lover's birthday and share his bed with him—is placed in direct relation to both her "madness" and a questioning of the role and place of the father (Figure 5).

Comas: *Hey, Olivia... this whole thing... Whose idea was it?*

Olivia: *What do you think?*

Comas: *I think you're mad. That's what I think. I can't understand why Gari let you come.*

Olivia: *Well, because Gari doesn't have to give me permission for anything.*

What can bring the father—who is not necessarily the sperm carrier—onto the scene, what can enable him to act as the father, is the mother's desire for him. Thus, as much as Comas may try to accord a place to Gari, Olivia rejects his efforts ("Gari doesn't have to give me permission for anything"), as it is not the biological father of her unborn child that she desires, but Comas. In other words, it is not the real father she wants, but the imaginary father she has placed at the centre of her fantasy, and whose real presence, incidentally, leaves much to be desired.

Olivia: *I really wanted to see you.*

After casting Gari aside, Olivia makes Comas a demand for love that reverberates on the bed

where the two of them are sitting. He looks at her with a serious expression, and at that moment Eloi passes by the bedroom door and burps loudly (Figure 6). The first—and last—time Olivia and Comas are alone together, which looked like turning into a romantic encounter, now falls apart at once and Comas takes advantage of the moment to escape from the room, and shortly thereafter, from the house as well. It is no accident that Trapé chose the sound of a burp, a scatological sound, to mark distances and undermine the romantic moment. Indeed, as will be explored below, disgust will play a decisive role in several dialogues, while oral activity will feature in certain implied actions—implicating both Eloi and Comas—that will underscore the association of the mouth and the tongue with sexual pleasure.

The scene ends with Olivia alone, hugging Comas's pillow and smelling it, while imagining that she is hugging and smelling Comas himself (Figure 7). Smells—synaesthesia—mark distances of meaning and position in the context of the sequence.

Olivia's desire as a woman, as depicted in this scene, is the trigger for the drama. The story places very particular emphasis on *the distance* between *the woman* and *the mother*, between Olivia as a woman (characterised by her desire, by what she lacks) and Olivia as a mother (defined by what she has),⁵ while at the same time underscoring the dual absence of the *man* and the *father*, as Comas, the desired man, does not desire Olivia, or if he does, he cannot be at her side, or maintain

Figures 5 and 6. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)



his presence as either a *man* or a *father*.

The dialectic between having and not having, which is reflected and refracted in the dialectic between desire and power, also comes into play in the conversation between the friends on the first and last night they spend together. The events that unfold on the Friday night effectively group the characters according to two different logics. In one group are Olivia and Guille, in a clearly dominant position: both are supposedly strong, both are arrogant, both brag about their (always phallic) achievements, both have success, work, money, etc., and both raise their voice to shout down their opponents. In the other group are Comas, the mystery man who promptly disappears without saying a word, Eloi, the young man with a childlike quality referred to by Olivia as “the apple of her eye,” and Anna, Guille’s girlfriend, who effectively represents the so-called *weaker* sex because—like Eloi—she is economically dependent, a “kept” woman (Figure 8). The traditional dialectic between the independent woman and the “kept woman” will lead to a confrontation between Olivia and Guille, which will mark the beginning of the end.



Figure 7. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)

Olivia: You’re talking as if you like the fact that Anna is a kept woman. [...] Anyway, and I’m sorry to say this, Guille, but your attitude gives me the impression that you’re a typical clueless person.

Guille: Okay, Olivia, tell me something. Do you have any idea how frustrating it is for her not to be able to find work [...]?

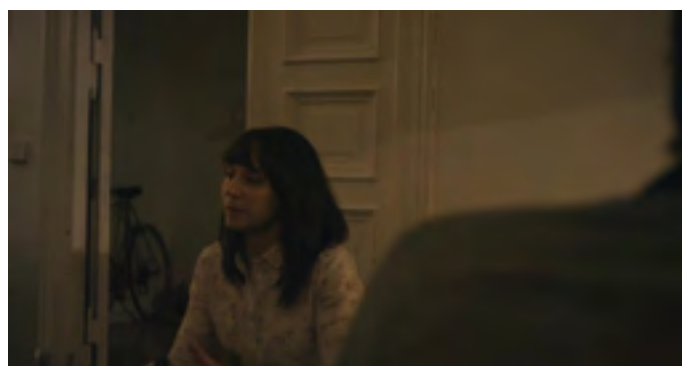
Olivia: I’m telling you, you know, because I at least live in the real world.

Olivia’s arrogance, her feigned self-sufficiency, the idea that she lives “in the real world”—triggering aversion in both Anna and Comas, who are unable even to look at her (Figure 9)—reaches its climax when she announces that she is pregnant (Figure 10) (Figure 11).

Olivia: I’m seven months’ pregnant.

Guille: You are not even slightly coherent.

Figures 8 and 9. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)





Figures 10 and 11. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)

Olivia: [...] *Say it, I dare you. Say it. Say it. That nobody forced me to get pregnant. Oh! You disgust me, kid! You really disgust me.*

Guille: *You really disgust me too!*

This is not the first time that Olivia uses her pregnancy to overpower the others, exploiting, as Eloi puts it, the “pregnant belly pretext” as if it were a right she can exercise over them. The story here mobilises one of the central themes of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s, related to the “appropriation” by women of “their own bodies” and of “the possibility of having or not having children in a non-authoritarian way” (Brousse, 2020: 39). However, this is not a key theme of feminism today. In the new millennium, the feminist struggle no longer revolves around women’s bodies, or the control of fertility and reproduction; instead, the focus is on the fight against the so-called *male domination* that points towards a “total separation of men and women” (Brousse, 2020: 40) and ultimately affects the very possibility of sexuality itself, as Milner (2020) suggests. This context may explain the reference the characters make in the dialogue to the “disgust” they feel, a disgust that will ultimately distance them permanently, and that resonates with disturbing force in the power struggle between the sexes that has increasingly come to characterise our society.

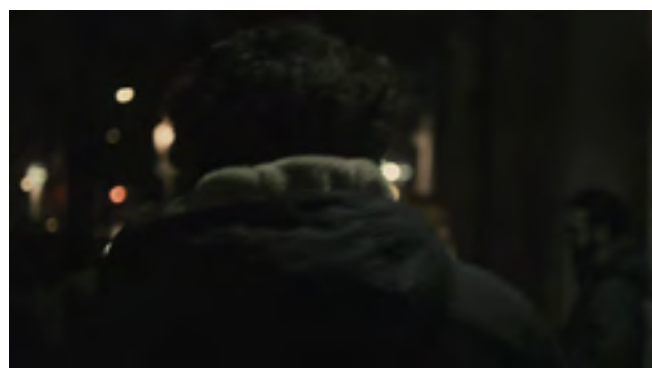
After this first night on “Friday”, following the clash between Olivia and Guille, the fragile bonds holding the group together will be broken. Indeed,

they will never be together as a group again. One after another they leave and split apart. A chasm also begins to open up between men and women. While Olivia and Anna remain in the house, each alone in her own space, the three men head for the bar, where they are also alone and isolated. Comas goes outside for a smoke, and then simply disappears without a trace. He is erased, leaving the scene, fleeing from the social connection and exiting the stage. But what is he running away from? (Figure 12)

TWO WOMEN AND ONE DRESS

After a lingering shot of Comas anxiously fleeing the scene, we cut directly to the third segment of the film, “Saturday”, which begins with an image of Olivia waking up alone in his room. She looks

Figure 12. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)



at the other side of the bed and caresses the sheet and the pillow (Figure 13).

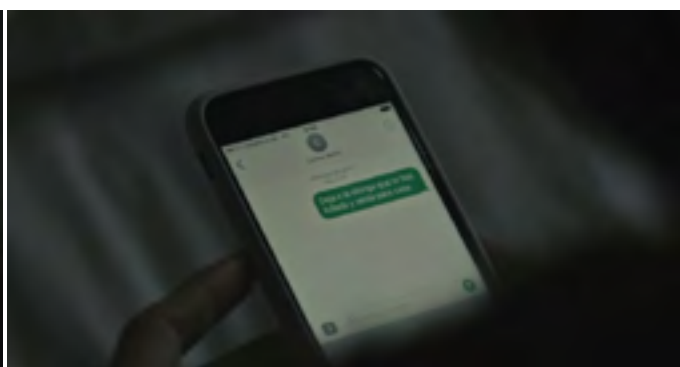
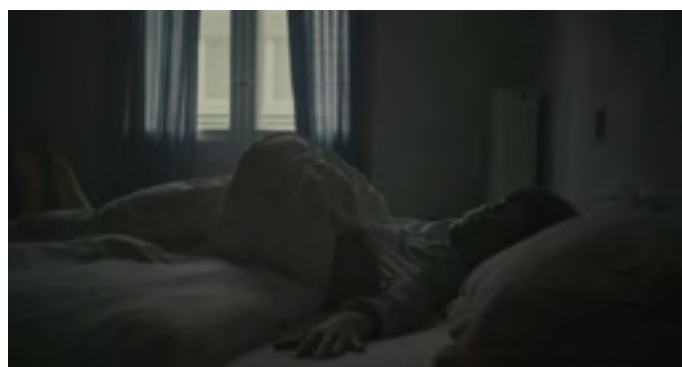
Comas's departure resonates in this empty space on the bed. For Olivia, the empty space is an enigma related to the desire of the man she loves: why is he not at home? What does he want? She will respond to this mystery by constructing a fantasy. The daydream that invades this scene, triggered by Eloi's remark that "he left with some chick," is contained in the text message Olivia sends to Comas: "Leave the Viking girl you've been fucking and come home" (Figure 14). In other words, leave the Other Woman and come home to me, because I am your woman.

In light of Comas's mysterious absence, Olivia decides to stay in the house, while Guille, Anna, and Eloi head out onto the streets of Berlin to do some sightseeing. From this moment on, throughout the "Saturday" segment, we will be watching what is happening in and outside the house through parallel editing. Olivia's position is associated with the home and with waiting, as she be-

gins making a birthday cake for Comas while she anxiously awaits his return. However, it won't be Comas who comes through the door, but Marion, his former partner (Figure 15) (Figure 16). Marion's presence may already have been hinted at in the film, not just at the beginning with the moving box and Comas's despondent mood, but also in Olivia's fantasy of the "Viking girl" that she identifies from the outset as the Other Woman, a younger, more beautiful, and, of course, thinner woman who has become the object of Comas's desire.

The two women begin bustling around the kitchen in synch with one another, thereby outlining the imaginary mirrored meaning of a relationship that transcends the level of their movements through space: the two women are allies (as both are affected by Comas's departure) and rivals. Thus, both deploy their weapons as they try to take control of the kitchen space, in a conquest operation that will quickly be redirected to the territory of the bedroom: Who has more

Figures 13, 14, 15 and 16. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)





Figures 17 and 18. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)

experience in Comas's bed, and more specifically, with the *hardness* of the mattress? (Figure 17)

Marion: *The bed is comfortable. The mattress is hard. I'm Marion, by the way.*

Olivia: *Olivia.*

Having introduced themselves, the women begin exploring, each observing the drama of the other, until at one point Olivia asks whether Comas has ever talked about them (or more specifically, about her), to which Marion replies that she thought they "weren't so close" (Figure 18).

Marion: *He's mentioned his university friends, but I thought you weren't so close anymore.*

Olivia: *No, no, no, no, no, no.*

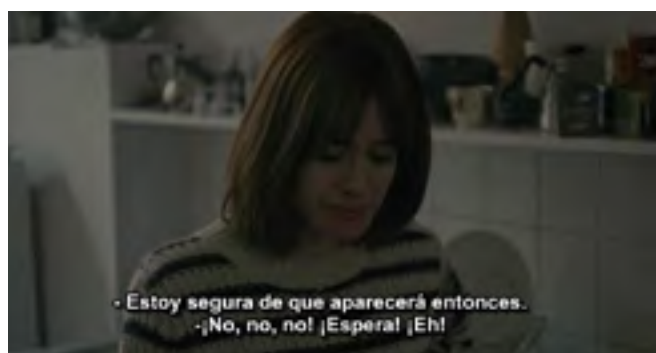
What becomes clear in this duel between the two women, which takes place exactly at the film's half-way point, is that if there is anything that characterises Olivia, it is her reluctance to know—or her desire not to know—anything about Comas. She thus refuses to accept that they

are no longer "so close" ("May Berlin and Barcelona never be far apart" she writes in Comas's birthday card), that they are no longer twenty years old, that the days when they used to listen to the 90s indie band Los Fresones Rebeldes and make typically youthful promises ("Olivia and Comas promise that if they're still single at 35 they will give each other another chance") are long gone. But if there is anything that she really desires not to know, it is that if Comas isn't there, it isn't because something has happened to him, or because he doesn't want to see Marion, but because he wants to get away from her, to keep his *distance*.

Marion, who has a clearer understanding of her situation—she knows that she doesn't want "to be with someone who doesn't know what to do with his life"—and isn't intimidated by her competitor's attacks, upsets Olivia's fragile stability when she tells her—rubbing salt into the wound—that she is sure that as soon as Olivia leaves, Comas "will turn up" (Figure 19). The *mise-en-scène* underscores an opposition between presences and absences expressed through the on-camera/off-camera relationship, which will affect the development of the resolution: to be there or not to be there, to stay or to go.

Olivia reacts desperately and once again refusing to accept the truth, she constructs a brilliant fantasy, telling Marion between sobs that her "baby" is Comas's (Figure 20) (Figure 21).

Figure 19. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)





Figures 20 and 21. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)

Olivia: No, no, no! Wait! Hey! You see... It's Alex's. The baby, I mean. It happened when he was in Barcelona in August.

Marion: That's not true!

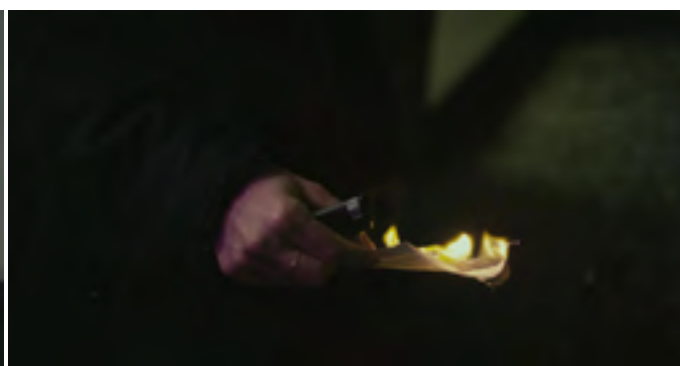
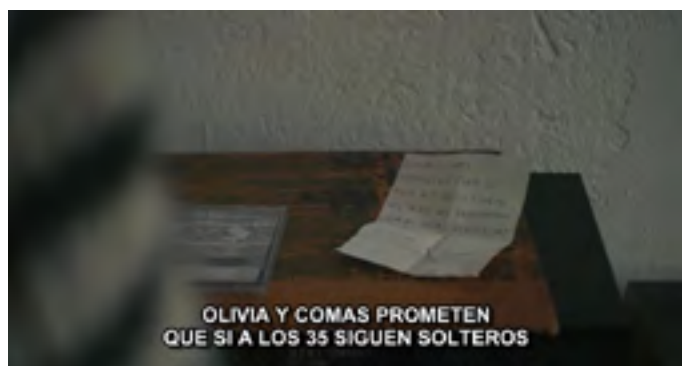
This is in fact a fantasy implicit from the beginning of the film, which is finally expressed in this sequence; the fantasy that compelled her to embark on this long journey. It is a fantasy that can be summed up as follows: from Olivia's point of view, the *baby* she is expecting is the only thing that could make her worthy of being desired by Comas, something other than herself, the object—the living thing—that she can offer him. She has not been so bold as to embark on a long trip out of the simple desire to see him and celebrate his birthday, *despite* being pregnant; she has embarked on the journey precisely *because* she is pregnant. The desire expressed in her fantasy attempts to solve the mystery of Comas's desire, and

that solution is the baby she is expecting. For the very real foetus in her womb Olivia invents an imaginary father, modelled on the man she loved years ago, in a time that no longer exists. This is in fact the very essence of fantasy, which uses “an occasion in the present to construct, on the pattern of the past, a picture of the future” (Freud, 1987b: 720; 1987c: 1345).

Importantly, moreover, this response is coupled with the demand for a commitment that would complete her fantasy, but that will end up being fuel for fire: a real fire that destroys the written word, due to the absence of a flame of desire (Figures 22 and 23).

In the fantasy scenario represented by Olivia, in the imagined sexual encounter between Comas and her in Barcelona, constructed for and aimed at Marion, there is of course something more: the hope of vanquishing the Other

Figures 22 and 23. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)





Figures 24, 25, 26 and 27. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)

Woman, the Viking girl, by snatching away the man they both desire and turning him into an unsuspecting father. The fantasy thus conceals the horror of the void of the father, the denial of the father, simultaneously producing what it attempts to hide.

Olivia, who appeared to be so self-assured, who made a show of “living in the real world”, loses the plot, and even loses her mind, as once Marion has left the scene, she goes directly to the moving box, takes out a dress and puts it on (Figure 24).

The combination of the previous scene with the decisive moment in this scene results in the typical female fantasy of being the Other Woman, in this case Marion, in the sexual encounter with Álex Comas in Barcelona. It is thus a dual displacement as a means of regulating desire. Of course, Olivia will never be Marion and will never have Álex Comas’s child. The desire therefore remains unquenched.

The scene that reveals Olivia’s desire to be the Other Woman reaches its climax when she tries

to take the dress off but cannot (Figure 25). This seems to underscore the point that it is as ridiculous to think that she could fit into the dress of the Other Woman as it is to make a birthday cake for someone with no desire to eat it (Figure 26). The cake also reveals the motherly side of the woman that Olivia represents: feeding her children and her husband,⁶ even though love, of course, cannot be bought with food. We might also expect that Olivia will end up eating the whole birthday cake by herself. What could be sadder and more disappointing than sitting alone eating the cake you made for your beloved? More than the cake, she will have to swallow her own dissatisfaction.

In the end, Olivia’s journey will take an unexpected turn, as after leaving the house and burning the promise of love she had made with Comas all those years ago, she cuts Marion’s dress up with a pair of scissors (Figure 27), an act that involves *dis-covering* her swollen belly, and thus perhaps finally “believing” in her own pregnancy, marking a change or point of no return in her journey.

SEXUAL PRETENSIONS

While Olivia is wrangling with the phantasmatic idea of the Other Woman—an idea at the very heart of her sexual fantasy—we are also taken out to the streets of Berlin, where Eloi, Guille, and Anna reveal a similar focus on the sexual, in this case by bringing into play the prevalence of the phallus as a metaphorical signifier: first, with the tiny banana wielded by a laughing Anna (Figure 28); then, with the frankfurter that Eloi and Anna want to eat to “play the tourist a bit”; and finally, with an app—Tinder—that positions the problem of the phallus as its central focus.

Guille, jealous of the mutual understanding between Anna and Eloi (the weak ones, the kept partners), brings up the subject of Tinder to poke fun at his friend, suggesting that it is an app for “desperate” people, for people who aren’t normal, who “are a bit oversexed or have a little one.” Eloi tries to defend himself by saying that he hasn’t slept with anyone since he broke up with his girlfriend, a revelation that Guille then seizes on to attack him and question his manhood, stating bluntly that he doesn’t know how to make love⁷ (Figure 29).

Guille: Man, it would do you good to get some practice in, because if you’d had a few good shags with Marta maybe she wouldn’t have left you.

Failure on the sexual level clearly occupies a prominent place in the story. And its importance increasingly revolves around the phallogocentric dialectic of having or not having. Eloi is a have-not: he has no house, no girlfriend, and no sex. He is a symbol of precarity. In contrast, Guille considers himself a “normal person” because he, in keeping with social expectations, does have things: a house, a girlfriend, and sex. But at this very moment the situation takes an unexpected turn when Guille, who makes a show of the fact



Figures 28, 29 and 30. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)

that he *knows how to fuck*, that he “knows how to have a good shag”, shifts from having (a girlfriend and sex) to not having (Figure 30).

The trio breaks up. Guille and Anna walk on without a word and, as we will later learn, Guille asks Anna to marry him (in an omitted scene) despite the fact that it is clear that they no longer love each other: “You don’t love me anymore,” he admits, “and I don’t love you either.” As is made clear in the confrontation between Olivia and Guille in the last scene of the “Saturday” segment (which replays the confrontation they had on “Friday” night), Olivia’s decision to drag her friends to Germany (like a pack



Figures 31 and 32. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)

of “lap dogs”) to win back Comas is no less outrageous than Guille’s use of this “trip with friends” to propose to a woman he no longer loves (Figure 31).

Olivia: What have you come for, Guille? To ask your girlfriend to marry you. For that you could have worked out your own plan instead of using a trip with friends.

Guille: Come on, Oli [...]. Each of us has come here for our own reasons, haven't we? You've spent the whole day shut up in here, making a fucking cake!

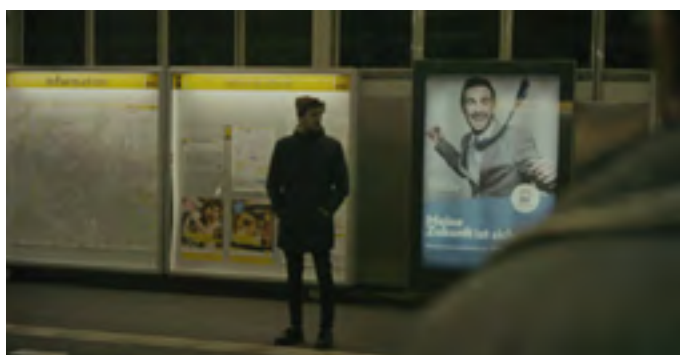
It would thus seem that both Olivia and Guille are trying to use their supposed friends as shields to protect themselves from the danger of the inevitably hazardous encounter with the other sex, revealing that behind their façades of strength and self-assurance, both are in reality cowardly and afraid. They have been unable to deal with the circumstances, to confront reality without using their friends as a crutch, or to take responsibility for their own desire. They have not had the courage to face matters of love on their own,

and so they have used a group of friends that is falling apart to cushion their encounter with failure—because under such circumstances failure is of course inevitable.

While it becomes obvious that both Guille’s and Olivia’s plans have failed, Eloi, who has ended up alone, happens to catch sight of Comas coming out a door, and he trails him like a bloodhound through the streets of Berlin until Comas enters the Kino Babylon, a famous independent film theatre located in Kreuzberg (Figure 32).

The name of the cinema might allude to the myth of the Tower of Babylon, in which God, to punish the arrogance of humankind, decides to split them up by making them speak different languages. The same confusion that lies at the heart of this myth not only hovers over Guille and Anna at this point in the film, but also informs the scene of the face-to-face encounter between Comas and Eloi at the underground, after Comas leaves the cinema (Figures 33 and 34).

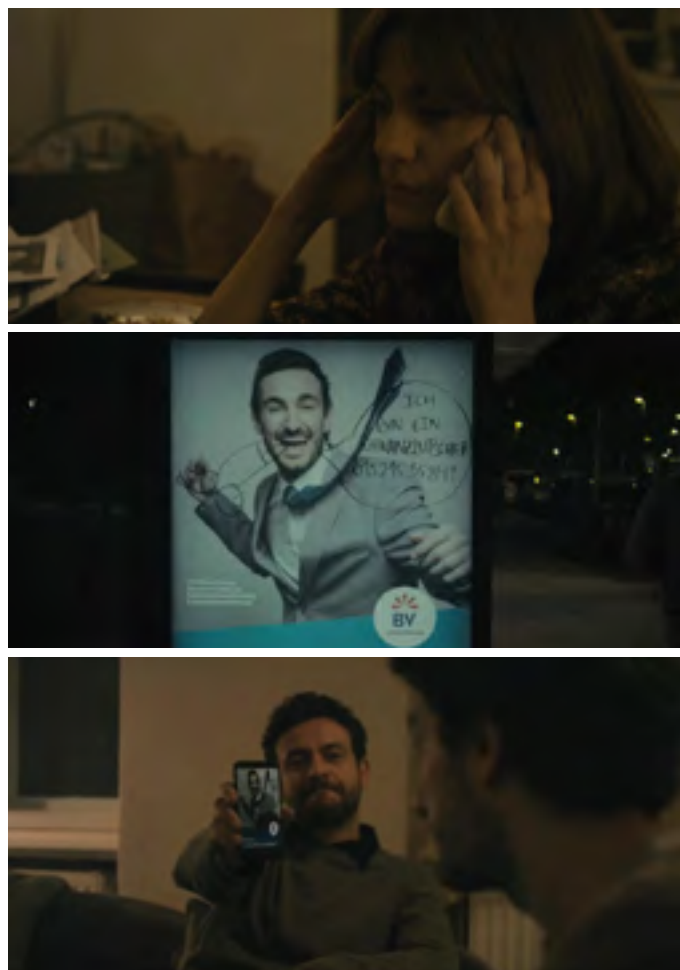
Figures 33 and 34. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)



A *secretive* Comas, the one who fled the scene—and who appears here beside his own image in the advertising poster plastered all over the city—gives Eloi an embarrassed glance. Nothing more. Not even a word. Then, he simply disappears, and nothing more is heard from him until the final segment of the film, titled “Sunday”, when he returns to his empty home and listens to the seven messages left on his mobile phone: the voices of a machine that he doesn’t want to talk to.

In response to Comas’s radical silence and radical absence, Eloi, like Olivia, will construct a fantasy which, again like Olivia, will end up making him look ridiculous and placing him in a situation of confinement: while Olivia was trapped in Marión’s dress, Eloi is detained at a police station.

Figures 35, 36 and 37. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)



Olivia: *Don't you know how ridiculous I feel sitting right now in your kitchen, wondering where you are and who the fuck you are?*

The question that Olivia asks herself at this point in the film about Comas’s identity (“who the fuck you are”) (Figure 35) will be answered by Eloi, with the graffiti he scrawls on nine of the ubiquitous advertising posters: a penis pointing at Comas’s mouth, and the words “*Ich bin ein Schwanzzucker*” (“I am a cocksucker”) along with his phone number inside a comic strip-style speech balloon (Figure 36).

The image seems to suggest that Comas’s mysterious disappearance is not due merely to his desire to escape his former university friends, but also to the fact that he may be earning a living by providing indecent services, like a kind of midnight cowboy, perhaps in an effort to hide a professional failure that even his move to Germany has not been able to free him from.⁸ This point is important, because Comas’s status as a “cocksucker” was already established early in the film, when Guille takes out his phone to show Comas an image very similar to the one drawn by Eloi, and tells him “it’s already been done” (Figure 37). Statement is confused with enunciation to highlight the ambiguity of a sentence that could refer equally to graffiti or to fellatio:

Guille: *Look, tomorrow we can take another photo, but under this poster.*

Comas: *It's come out really nice.*

Guille: *No, no, no; it's already been done.*

Comas: *Well, in a way it's really flattering, you know? Coming from an expert in cocks, I mean.*

As is made clear in this scene, the three men, Guille, Comas, and Eloi, all participate in different ways in the fantasy of *being a cocksucker*: Comas, when looking at the picture on Guille’s phone, tells him it’s “flattering” coming from an “expert in cocks.” What makes Guille an “expert” is the fact that he slept with “a chick” who in fact turned out to be “a guy who was totally hot.” And then, after making it clear that the guy he slept with was not a

“transsexual woman” (or at least, “not yet”), Guille then tells Eloi: “And don’t you laugh so much; it’s been so long since you’ve had sex with anyone that you’d love to get it on with her,” to which Eloi replies, laughing: “Bloody hell! You’re right!” (Figure 38)

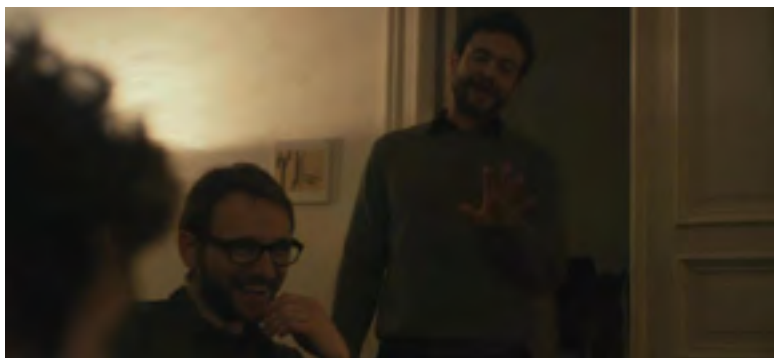


Figure 38. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)

For Eloi, Comas’s entry into the Kino Babylon could thus be understood as confirming a *dark secret* that they already suspected—a secret hinted at from the beginning of the film with the image of the famous kiss between Erich Honecker and Leonid Brezhnev (Figure 39)—and that cannot be spoken of in the underground or anywhere else.

Eloi’s act of vandalism, both infantile and moralising, not only betrays a *repressed* truth, but also suggests an unmasking of Comas to publicly humiliate him, to turn him not into an object of desire but into an object of disdain, although this act appears to have no effect, except perhaps on Olivia, who when she sees the poster remarks simply that it is a “joke” (Figure 40).

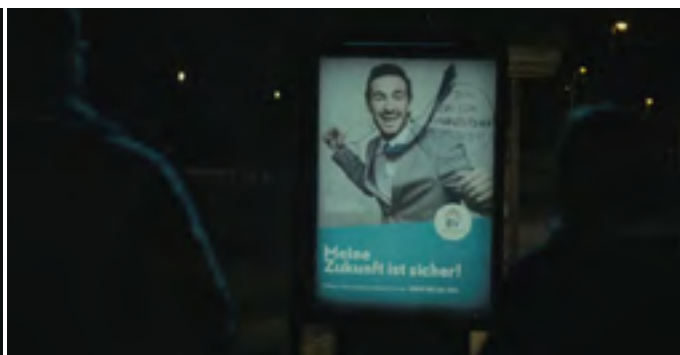
The vandalised poster of Comas is thus presented as a kind of still frame, a static image that displays and reproduces the crux of the problem afflicting the men in the film. The image exposes the ridiculous nature of the phallus, which is revealed in classical comedy as a secret signifier of desire (Lacan, 2014: 332; 1999: 270; 1992: 373), marking a contrast with the smiling image of the ad, which is repeated like a hollow refrain in conventional advertising campaigns. What is at stake

is the very presence of the phallus, a misplaced phallus which, because of its misplacement, cannot be enjoyed by Olivia, despite the fact she had it within her reach.

In essence, what the character of Comas does is open up a void, a hole in the very heart of the story, which each character will try to fill with his or her own fantasy: Eloi and Guille by triggering a homosexual fantasy that links Comas’s absence to his status as a male prostitute, a *cocksucker*; and Olivia by creating a fantasy around the love triangle that she has constructed, whereby Comas’s absence is due to the presence of the Other Woman.

Whatever its cause may be, the void opened up by Comas operates as a revolving platform that will trigger different imaginary productions related to what could be described as the so-called *pleasure of the Other*, a pleasure placed outside the frame, about which nothing can be known, which serves only to underscore the yawning chasm that separates the film’s characters.

Figures 39 and 40. *Distances* (Elena Trapé, 2018)



CONCLUSIONS

The analysis presented in this article has confirmed that the text of *Distances* speaks for itself, and that simply deciphering its content can uncover unexpected elements, the mechanisms of a desire that is constantly seeking expression through omissions, verbal displacements, juxtapositions of shots, or the movements of its characters through the space. It has also helped to shed light on the intimate relationship between the narrative development of the story and the dimensions of a series of unconscious fantasies that are triggered over the course of the film, ultimately unravelling in the final moments, like the advertising slogan that tried to convince us of the existence of an assured future, free of anxiety and uncertainty. Nothing could be further from that illusion than the reality the film offers us: a reality where nothing goes as expected and everything ends up falling apart.

A future study might explore the factors that lead certain filmmakers to devote so much energy to representing situations of failure and powerlessness, building on the sense of malaise that has marked a decisive proportion of contemporary art, rejecting even the possibility of establishing loving relationships with others. Indeed, Trapé's film seems to be conceived for the purpose of opening an immense chasm, an insurmountable distance between men and women, where each individual ends up speaking their own language, highlighting the "fragmentation of social ties" that has come to characterise so-called capitalist discourse (Soler, 2007: 136), rendering it impossible to maintain strong relationships of friendship and love. In short, this is a film that exposes both the breakdown of the symbolic order evoked throughout the story—reflected most powerfully in the collapse of the father role—and the deterioration of romance and of the experience of sex in general.

NOTES

- 1 A song by the 80s band Décima Víctima titled "*Detrás de la mirada*" ["Behind the Gaze"] (Grabaciones Accidentales, 1982) offers a perfect summary of the kinds of situations that arise between former friends as represented in this film: "Once as naive as their friendship, time has turned them into enemies. / Words are hard when they see each other again, lying, pretending not to understand. / In the same goal a single interest, claws prepared like fangs. / They look for weakness in the other, stalking, pretending not to understand."
- 2 To demonstrate its adherence to the formal (if not symbolic) structure of the classical narrative model, Trapé's film could be compared to *Week-end* (Godard, 1967), which also takes place on a weekend but displays the full repertoire of the aesthetics of deconstruction, with spatio-temporal distortions, direct appeals to the spectator, breaking of the fourth wall, exposure of the device, etc. Godard's film is completely unrelated to the film of the same name directed by Pedro Lazaga three years earlier, also titled *Weekend* (Fin de semana, 1964).
- 3 Numerous examples of such films could be cited, from *Stage Door* (Gregory La Cava, 1937) to *Love Has Many Faces* (Alexander Singer, 1965), and including *Lady Scarface* (Frank Woodruff, 1941), *Now, Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942), and *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945).
- 4 Within the field of film theory, authors such as Metz (2001, 2002), Burch (1987) and Aumont (1992), as well as González Requena (1996, 2006) and Martín Arias (1997) in Spain, have treated psychoanalytic theory as the "*Via Regia*", as Freud would say, for exploring the emotional experience triggered by a film. Although he would criticise some of the approaches taken in different studies, warning that they are open to "serious objections", Rudolf Arnheim acknowledged as early as 1952 that "the only specific theory of artistic motivation presented with consistency and vigor is the psychoanalytic one" (1966: 21).

- 5 On the divergence between the *mother* and the *woman*, Soler notes: "Both certainly refer to phallic lack, but in different ways. Her being as mother resolves this lack by having, in the form of the child, a substitute for the phallic object that is missing in her. [...] [H] owever, the mother's being as woman is not entirely resolved in this substitute for having the phallus. Precisely inasmuch as her desire diverges toward man, it is rather to being or receiving the phallus that a woman aspires: to being it, by the love that phallicizes her; to receiving it, by means of the organ from which she gets off. The price of both aspirations is that of not having the phallus. Feminine poverty indeed!" (2006: 128).
- 6 In relation to Olivia's motherly attitude, it is worth noting that the film ends with a message from Comas's mother, praising Olivia for going to visit him for his birthday.
- 7 The trouble arises, as Lacan would suggest, when the "pegs" don't fit into the "holes" (1995: 166).
- 8 The fact that he has to resort to these kinds of services in the heart of Germany, Europe's economic powerhouse, like a failed immigrant, is open to other interpretations of a more political and economic nature: the idea of moving to Germany to suck it dry.

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THE FAILURE OF THE ROMANTIC EXPERIENCE IN DISTANCES

Abstract

This article presents a textual analysis of the film *Distances* (Les distàncies, Elena Trapé 2018), a dramatic story that revolves around lack and loss, the passage of time, false hopes, and everything that breaks the human heart, dividing it and tearing it apart. Trapé's film brings together a group of old university friends in Berlin to depict both the fragmentation of the social ties that once bound them and the failure of the romantic experience, a failure that may serve as evidence of the deterioration of the "matters of love" that characterises the contemporary era.

Key words

Distances; Spanish Cinema; Fantasy; Love; Sexuality.

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EL FRACASO DE LA EXPERIENCIA AMOROSA EN LAS DISTANCIAS

Resumen

En el presente artículo proponemos un análisis textual de *Las distancias* (Elena Trapé, 2018): un relato melodramático que, como tal, pivota en torno a la falta y la pérdida, el paso del tiempo, las falsas ilusiones, todo lo que parte el corazón, que lo divide y fractura. La película de Trapé reúne a un grupo de viejos amigos de la universidad en Berlín para poner en escena tanto la fragmentación de los lazos sociales que les unían como el fracaso de la experiencia amorosa; un fracaso que podría servir para evidenciar el declive de las 'cosas del amor' característico de nuestra contemporaneidad.

Palabras clave

Las distancias; Cine español; Fantasía; Amor; Sexualidad.

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A DESCENT INTO THE ATAVISTIC FEMININE: THE DANCES IN *FACING THE WIND*

JOSEP LAMBIES BARJAU

LOST SYMBOLS

In his essay *Note sul gesto*, Giorgio Agamben describes cinema as a place where “a society that has lost its gestures tries at once to reclaim what it has lost and to record its loss” (Agamben, 2000: 52). This idea is an underlying theme of the film *Facing the Wind* (Con el viento, Meritxell Colell, 2018), a family drama set in the vestiges of a world on the verge of extinction. Colell’s film tells the story of Mónica (played by Mónica García), a dancer who, after having lived for many years in Buenos Aires, returns to Spain upon the death of her father. When she arrives at her childhood home, a rustic, run-down farmhouse in the Castilian countryside, she is reunited with her mother (Concha Canal), her sister (Ana Fernández), and

her niece (Elena Martín). From the vegetable garden to the barn, from the farming tools to the fire stoves of a primitive kitchen, the movements of the four characters awaken the dormant memory of multiple generations of women who lived on that same land.

In recent years, Spain has seen a proliferation of diverse discourses that all reflect an interest in restoring a connection with the country’s rural spaces, in repopulating the empty or deserted land with ancient whispers, or at least in being there to document their disappearance. These discourses have provided a forum for the first voices of a specifically rural feminism, articulated in the works of various women creators in different artistic fields. Many of them share a common objective: to reclaim the gestures of the rural woman,

the woman of the countryside, and to identify in those gestures the signs of a silent, atavistic intimacy, even when in most cases those signs only amount to an iconography of the absent form. A good example of this can be found in the book *Land of Women* by the Cordoban writer and field veterinarian María Sánchez, in a passage where the author looks at her hands and recognises her female ancestors in them, a long line of nameless women:

I too form part of that lineage of women of the land, their hands overflowing with corn to feed their chickens, their hands in the hands of those who trapped hares, who know about lime and the places where the poachers hide, who rise up, despite it all, like the knees of all women, covered in dirt and pebbles from endless olive picking (Sánchez, 2019: 109).

The poetics of gesture suggested in *Land of Women* involves an effort to gaze on the empty spaces and to seek in them the mirror in which the spectres of the past are reflected. *Facing the Wind* has a very similar premise. The character of Mónica represents a generation which, as Agamben argues, must reconnect with what is no longer there, with something that has vanished, through a reactivation of the space that its disappearance has left behind. This idea is tied in with the notion of anachronism as Georges Didi-Huberman explains it in many of his writings, as a “phantasmal reappearance” and as “what survives of an anthropological dynamic and sedimentation that have become partial, virtual, because they have been largely destroyed by time” (Didi-Huberman, 2018: 36). In *Facing the Wind*, Meritxell Colell tries to find a way of expressing the anachronistic, i.e., a language that can integrate the past into the present, even when that past has been almost entirely erased. The character of Mónica finds that language in dance.

In a more recent text, Agamben describes gestures as suspended movements, acts emancipated from any purpose (2018). Dance is in many ways a

MANY OF THESE WORKS SHARE A COMMON OBJECTIVE: TO RECLAIM THE GESTURES OF THE RURAL WOMAN, AND TO IDENTIFY IN THOSE GESTURES THE SIGNS OF A SILENT, ATAVISTIC INTIMACY

stylisation of these movements. According to Agamben, dance could be understood as the essence of the gesture taken to its ultimate abstraction. The structure of *Facing the Wind* is framed by two dance scenes at the beginning and the end of the film. In the opening scene, Mónica is dancing in a rehearsal room. Her body, moving in and out of a beam of white light, appears to be coming to life, unfolding its limbs. In the final scene, Mónica dances in the light of a blazing dawn sun, on a Castilian hillside battered by a high wind that hollows out the landscape as if to make room there for the voices of the dead. As will be explored below, this final dance is an attempt to embrace absence, to enter the void and perhaps also to reclaim all the lost gestures it holds. The scene conveys the idea of a historical transmission that is necessarily residual, incomplete, in a way that is reminiscent of the legend recounted by Godard in a voice-over at the beginning of *Oh, Woe Is Me* (*Hélas pour moi*, Jean-Luc Godard, 1993):

When my great-grandfather had a difficult task to do, he would go to a place in the forest, light a fire and lose himself in silent prayer. And his task would be done. When my grandfather had to face the same task, he would go the same place and say: “We don’t know how to light the fire anymore, but we still know the prayer.” And his task would be done. Later, my father also went to the forest and said: “We don’t know how to light the fire anymore, nor do we know the mystery of the prayer, but we do know the exact place in the forest where it would occur. That should be enough.” And it was enough. But when I had to face the same task, I stayed at home and said: “We don’t know how to

light the fire anymore. We don't know the prayers anymore. We don't even know where the place in the forest is. But we still know how to tell the story."

And what are we left with when we can't even tell the story? That is when dance comes into play. Various authors have seen in dance the ideal means of evoking a kind of hazy image of the past in the present. "In our ignorance of the art of dance, we imagine its birth," suggests Jean-Luc Nancy (2005: 138) in an essay which, incidentally, compares the body's awakening in dance with the expansive development of the foetus as it creates itself inside the uterus. In this article, I propose to analyse the dances in *Facing the Wind* as cinematic forms of memory, no longer able to imitate those lost atavistic gestures, but still capable of establishing a dialogue with them. My objective is to consider the strategies used in Meritxell Colell's film to construct a visual representation of memory, an approach that could potentially be associated with other contemporary Spanish films exploring rural themes, most of which have been directed by women, in a tradition that began with films like *The Sky Turns* (*El cielo gira*, Mercedes Álvarez, 2004).

CHOREOGRAPHING GESTURES

What does dance represent for the memory of a community? The field of anthropology has explored this question. In 1974, as part of the Choreometrics Project, the ethnologist and musicologist Alan Lomax made a documentary titled *Dance and Human History: Movement Style and Culture #1* (Alan Lomax & Forrestine Paulay, 1974), which identifies a series of geometric patterns in popular dances in different regions around the world, and then relates these movements to the main activities performed in each region. Lomax concludes that all folk dancing is associated with the gestures that each society has developed through the use of its axes, hoes or pitchforks, its crafting implements, its fishing and hunting tools; these gestures are therefore anchored in the very roots

of each society's economy. Lomax points out, for example, that the curving motion of the Aragonese jota dance is the same movement made with the sickle to reap the wheat harvest. Even with the evolution and modernisation of each society gradually consigning these archaic gestures to oblivion, we can still find vestiges of them in traditional dances (Lomax, 2005).

Choreographing gestures means inscribing them in time, an idea that informs the work of the art historian Aby Warburg, who established the nameless science that only after his death was baptised by Erwin Panofsky with the name "iconology". Warburg's project culminated in the monumental construction of the nearly 80 panels that comprise the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, which might well be described as an interminable choreography of gestures. This is particularly evident in one of the most famous and widely studied panels, panel number 46, the Nymph. At the very bottom of the panel is a photograph of a Tuscan peasant woman taken by Warburg with his own camera during a visit to the village of Settignano. In the photograph, the woman appears to be in a hurry, her body leaning forward as if rushing past the camera and out of the frame. In this pose, Warburg identified a gesture found repeatedly in art history since ancient times. It is the gesture of the dancing nymph, which combines different female figures depicted in motion, swift-footed, on the run. The speed of her steps is apparent in details like her draping clothes, her flowing hair, and feet that barely touch the ground.

In an article published some years ago now, Iván Pintor argues that Warburg's work, and especially the *Atlas*, offers an ideal methodological

CHOREOGRAPHING GESTURES MEANS INSCRIBING THEM IN TIME, AN IDEA THAT INFORMS THE WORK OF THE ART HISTORIAN ABY WARBURG

framework for studying the gesture in contemporary cinema (Pintor, 2012). This framework is informed by a phantasmal vocabulary filled with dynamic concepts, of which one of the most important is the concept of afterlife (*Nachleben*), referring to the collection of timeless energies that have returned again and again over the course of history. As Agamben suggests, in the *Atlas*, “images of the past that have lost their meaning live on as nightmares or spectres” (2010: 53). Warburg himself refers to the *Atlas* in his notes as a ghost story for adults. The figure of the nymph appearing on panel 46 perfectly reflects this idea of afterlife. In his book *The Surviving Image*, Didi-Huberman describes the nymph as “a kind of transversal, mythical personification,” an “impersonal heroine” who “combines a considerable number of incarnations of possible characters” (2018: 231). In this way, Warburg is able to transform the peasant woman of Settignano’s everyday gestures into a phantasmagorical movement.

Like Warburg’s nymph, the dances in *Facing the Wind* resurrect the symbols of an ancient world buried in the dust of ages. The whole film constitutes an exploration of vestiges and ruins. There are two sequences, each one showing two women—the first, a mother (Fernández) and a daughter (Martín); the second, a grandmother (Canal) and her granddaughter (Martín)—cleaning out a hayloft filled with long-forgotten family heirlooms. Among these are a pair of clogs for walking in the mud, a machine for making chorizo sausage and a set of manufactured wooden parts of some kind of toy. All these obsolete objects retain the silenced voices of tradition, the mnemonic footprint of working the land, of the way of life of the people who came before them. “Things come to an end, and we all come to an end,” remarks the old woman resignedly. Beneath the straw, the hayloft preserves the fossilised memory of the dead. When the loft is emptied, the dead are stripped of their objects of worship,

their hierophanies. Now not only have they disappeared, but their relics are gone as well.

Agamben suggests that this loss of gestures described in his *Note sul gesto* began occurring discreetly in 19th-century bourgeois societies; since then, the process has accelerated in modern societies with the culmination of the rural exodus. The hayloft in *Facing the Wind* is the tiny theatre in which this desertion is depicted. Once dismantled, it becomes what Walter Benjamin identified as a “place of facts” (2003: 58), a crime scene, a space where the human element has been completely removed. All that remains of it are the signs of absence and the ghosts that challenge us through the abstraction of emptiness. This is why it is so significant that it is within the crumbling walls of the hayloft that Mónica should take the first steps of the dance that ends the film, a dance that seems to be inspired by the experience of that emptiness. When the family has sold the house and disposed of their memories, it is the fleeting nature of the dance that offers the possibility of a reconciliation with the gestures that have been lost.

In his observations about the sanctification of the home in traditional societies, Mircea Eliade suggests that “the experience of sacred space makes possible the ‘founding of the world’” (Eliade, 1959: 63). The final sequence of *Facing the Wind* suggests the idea of a reencounter with the world as it was in the beginning. Thus, during the dance, Mónica comes out of the hayloft and embraces the freedom of the outdoors, where the mountains gleam red in the dawn sun and the wind blows with a deafening silence. The dance dishevels her hair and gives her the appearance of a quivering figure, vibrant and ethereal (Figure 1). The whole scene thus takes on a mythical dimension, where myth is defined as a narrative that attempts to explain something of our prehistory, before writing, before all records, where the first memory of humankind lies dormant (Benjamin, 1969). Moreover, Mónica, like the peasant woman of Settigna-

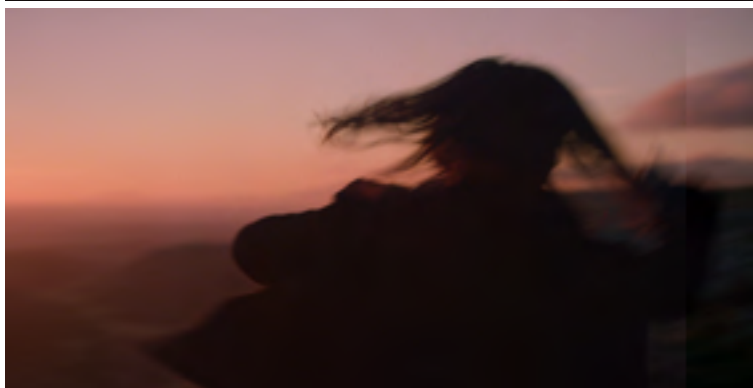
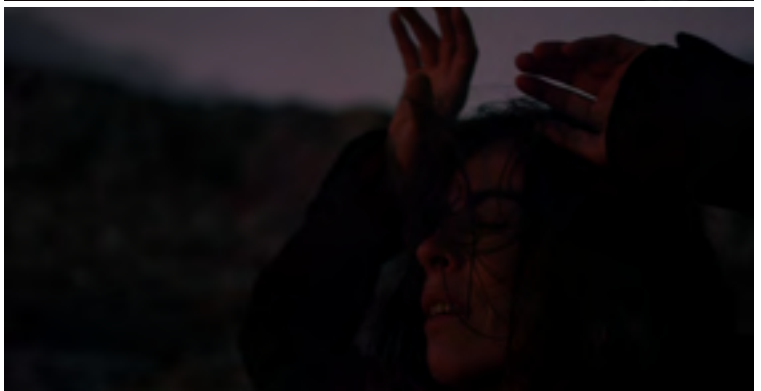
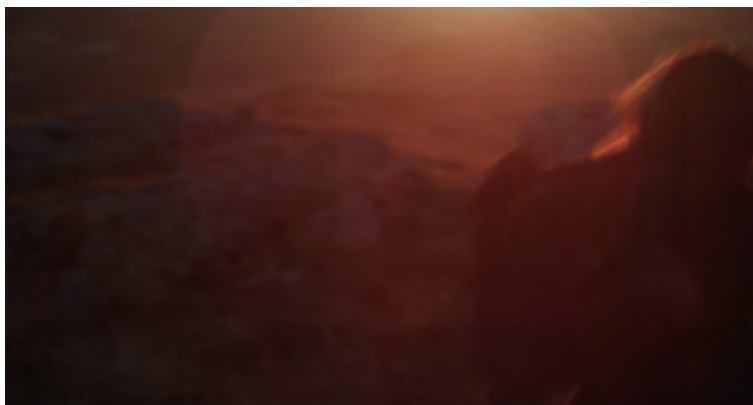
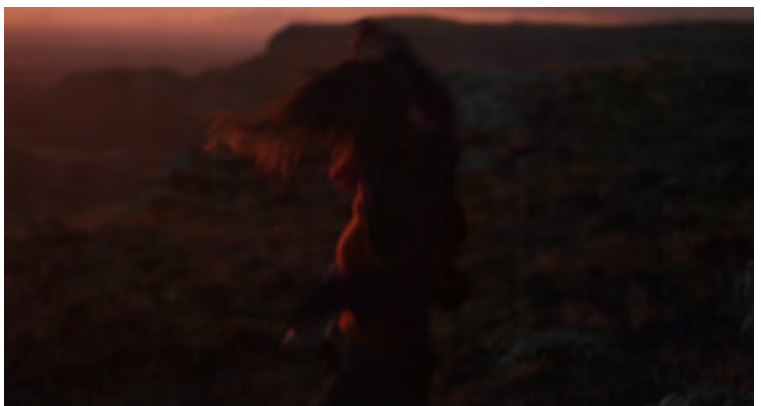


Figure I. Mónica dancing at the end of *Facing the Wind*, with the rugged landscape in the background and the reddening dawn sky above. *Facing the Wind* (Meritxell Colell, 2018)

no transformed into a nymph, has the appearance of a mythical heroine. Her body is a channel for dialogue with the lost gesture, invoking, absorbing and even encapsulating it, while balancing on the slipstream of time.

As this final dance reveals, *Facing the Wind* is from beginning to end a film about learning gestures. In this learning process, the point of view of the film's protagonist is important: the prodigal daughter, the stranger who returns one night to her hometown, crossing back over the threshold of her family home after so many years. From that moment, the film begins composing a frieze of ritual gestures that form the very foundations of tradition. From the barely moving lips of women reciting the Lord's Prayer around a table covered with an oilcloth, to the arms of the bell ringer pulling at the bell rope; from the hands like roots planting onions in the furrows of the vegetable garden, to the youthful hands sanding down the bars of a bicycle. All these moments weave together a web of buried meanings, internal dialectics and lines of kinship that keep expanding until they find their form of survival in the final dance. Throughout the learning process, the spectator is drawn into a subtle universe of gestures that does not belong to Euclidian space or causal time, a universe that has developed rhythms of its own.

THE ELOQUENCE OF HANDS

Between the first and last dance in *Facing the Wind* there is a series of internal echoes, rhymes and counterpoints. The film begins with a bright light that floods the whole screen. This is followed by the sound of factory machinery. The screen goes dark, and then suddenly two amorphous flashing lights appear, which after a few seconds transform into the parts of a swiftly dancing body. All at once the body stops, and we see two feet, barely moving, their shape carved out by the shaft of white light. Then the body resumes its movement,

and once again it is unrecognisable. After a moment, it comes to another halt. The image takes shape to reveal a sinewy back, leaning forwards, carved out by the shadows of muscles and vertebrae. The body starts moving once more and then stops again. In the darkness of the shot we see a detail of two trembling hands, their fingertips reaching into the light (Figure 2). Thus ends the first dance. This image of hands, infused with all kinds of meanings, has a corresponding image in the last shot of the final dance: the camera moves up from Mónica's face to her hands, which are raised as if trying to comb the air. Then there is a cut to black and the film ends.

How can an image be charged with time? Agamben asks this question in his essay "Nymphs", in relation to a visit to the exhibition titled *Pasions* by the video artist Bill Viola. In Viola's work, human figures are shown in slow motion; bodies surrender to the trance of what Agamben describes as a "moving pause", a moment of delay when "all images virtually anticipate their future development and any of them recalls the gestures that preceded it" (Agamben, 2010: 11). Drawing on Agamben's ideas, the two shots of hands that bookend *Facing the Wind* could be understood as two images that find their moving pause and become charged with time and memory. If there is any part of the human body that is especially inclined to engage with memory, it is surely the hand. This is how Henri Focillon explains it in his book *In Praise of Hands*, when he writes: "In the active life of the hand, it can tense and harden as well as mould itself around an object. All this work leaves marks on a palm in which we can read, if not the linear symbols of past and present, at least its trace and, like the memories of a life elsewhere faded away, maybe even its distant legacy" (Focillon, 2018: 55).

The close-ups of hands suggest that the dances in *Facing the Wind* have an archaeological meaning; they are, as noted above, fleeting visions of atavistic memory that find a place in the filmic



Figure 2. Mónica's body first appears in a shaft of white light in the opening sequence. *Facing the Wind* (Meritxell Colell, 2018)

space. Very close to this idea are some of the notions developed by Didi-Huberman in *Le Danseur des Solitudes*, a short book dedicated to Israel Galván's revitalisation of the *jondo* variety of flamenco. Before each performance, Galván performs a flexibility exercise that Didi-Huberman describes as a caress of the ground, a haptic manoeuvre whereby the performer activates a representation of absence and brings it onto the *tablao*. In this way, after this exercise Galván leaves the stage and "dances with his solitude, as if for him that solitude were a partner, that is, a complex solitude filled with images, dreams, ghosts and memory" (Didi-Huberman, 2008: 19). Didi-Huberman explains that in his dances Galván generally positions himself on the edge of darkness, on the boundary of the spotlight, using his movements to construct the shape of a void that cannot be filled, as if, in the caress of the ground, in the primordial contact with the earth, the performer were aligning himself with the dead.

Often, the iconography of hands is associated with an expression of time. In the hands of Auguste Rodin's *The Cathedral*, drawn together in a spiral movement, and its reinterpretation in M. C. Escher's famous hands drawing one another, there is an idea of eternal return and circular time. These two works help explain the interaction between the shots of hands at the end of the two dances in *Facing the Wind*. They are hands that seem interconnected in the film, as if one image were answering the other, or better still, as if both were part of a single question that finds its answer outside the film, in the endlessness of the pink clouds or of the blackness of the final cut (Figure 3). In the first dance, the fingers point forward, as if probing the shadows. In the second, the fingers point upward, towards the open sky at dawn. Of course, this correlation lends itself to all kinds of interpretations, but what I am interested in highlighting here is that the two static positions of the hands are actually two stages of an invisible

movement, brief albeit delayed; a movement during which the film's story takes place.

Between the first and last dances, a few other detail shots of hands appear over the course of the film, to the point of becoming a recurring visual motif. According to Meritxell Colell, in the preparatory exercises that she did with Mónica García to develop her character, the first thing they worked on was how her hands needed to interact with the environment. Evidence of this can be found in the fact that, apart from their significance in the dances, her hands play a decisive role in at least four other moments in the film. The first is in the scene of the *verbena* celebration, which begins with a sequence of shots of hands lighting sparklers and waving them in the silence of the night; then, the camera finds the hands of four women who are holding a paper lantern representing the soul of a dead man, and they accompany it carefully until it blows up and flies away, its light disappearing into the blackness of the night. The second is the series of images of hands planting onions in the garden. The third is the moment when Mónica raises her arm to touch the snowflakes swirling around her like wisps of light. And the fourth is when Mónica's hands search through the dust of the hayloft to feel the texture of a wooden beam (Figure 4).

These four moments of the film make up a harmonious series rife with meaning. The representation of the four primordial elements are recognisable here: the fire of the sparklers, the earth of the vegetable garden, the water of the snow, and the dust-filled air of the hayloft, combined to invoke a distant memory reaching back to the dawn of time. The contact with the elements imposes a time on the characters that is regulated not by the clock but by the cycles of nature, the transformation of the landscape through the seasons, the calendar of the harvest, and also the inexorable nature of death; it is a time observed by some of Colell's

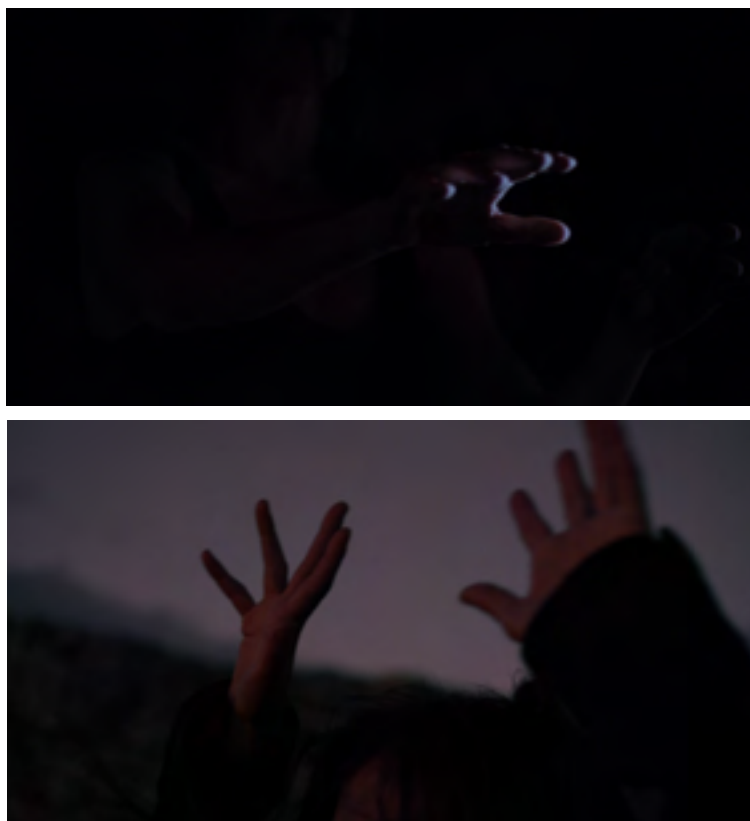


Figure 3. Mónica's hands at the end of each dance create a dialogue that runs through the whole film. *Facing the Wind* (Meritxell Colell, 2018)

biggest influences, perhaps the most obvious of which can be found in the gestures of the actors and actresses in Rossellini's films. In visual terms, Mónica's last dance is prefigured in the ending to *Stromboli* (Terra di Dio, Roberto Rossellini, 1950), in Ingrid Bergman's ascent to the smoking volcano, her face turned toward the stars, in a manner similar to Nazario Gerardi's characteristic gesture in *The Flowers of St. Francis* (Francesco, giullare di Dio, Roberto Rossellini, 1950), when he covers his face with his hands and turns his eyes to the sky.

Facing the Wind represents a desire to return to the primitivism of the rugged landscape, and at the same time a recognition that this return cannot happen without invoking cinema's capacity to recover lost gestures and ancestral emotions. The choreography of time traced by the hands is complemented by the expressions on the women's faces. They are faces that say little or nothing, as



Figure 4. Hands are associated with the elements to invoke a distant, primeval memory. *Facing the Wind* (Meritxell Colell, 2018)

the dialogues are nearly always spoken off-camera. They are faces that move in the ambiguity of silence, that exchange puzzled gazes or turn to the horizon and cry primal tears. What is it that looks at us in the faces we see? And whatever it is, where does it look at us from? These are the two questions that Didi-Huberman asks at the beginning of *What We See Looks Back at Us* (1997: 13-18), a book based on the idea that concealed behind every face is the emptiness of the gaze of a dead person. At the same time, in *Facing the Wind*, the female face is a mirror filled with the ghosts of a lineage, with the memory of the faceless women who slept in those same bedrooms, who lit the fire in the same kitchen and who knelt to gather the harvest in the same field.

PHYSIOGNOMIC PRIMITIVISM AND INTIMACY

Outside Spain, various European films of recent years have invented strategies to repopulate the

deserted landscapes with the faces of those who inhabit them or who did so in some bygone era. Films like *Faces Places* (Visages, villages, Agnès Varda, 2017) from France and *Happy as Lazzaro* (Lazzaro felice, Alice Rohrwacher, 2018) from Italy, both directed by women, draw on the intimacy of the human face to tell a story about those forgotten in the rural exodus. In *Faces Places*, we see it in the huge portraits used that the photographer JR plasters on town walls, building façades and other surfaces; giant faces, as rough as tree bark, rising like spectres over the fields. In the anachronistic farming community in *Happy as Lazzaro*, we are struck by the luminous face of the young peasant who appears among the leaves of a tobacco plantation, like a saint awaiting the blessing of eternal life. *Facing the Wind* could be described as the Spanish contribution to this trend. These are three films very different in technique and form, but similar in sensibility, in their way of asking how to represent the survivors of a world that no longer exists.

Colell's film belongs to the category of physiognomic studies. The camera scours the topography of naked faces, the darkness of their lines and wrinkles, the weight of their eyelids and the tremor of their sighs. In each of these details, the aim is to find an emotional revelation in its pure state. Hence the importance of the physiognomy, an ambivalent term that refers both to the primitivism of the cinematic form and to a cultural, non-verbal primitivism associated with the emotions. In an article published in 1924, at the height of the silent film era, the filmmaker and theorist Béla Balázs argued that "expressive movements are the origin of speech" and that "the language of gestures is the true mother tongue of mankind" (Balázs, 2010: 20). Keeping the sense of these words alive, in many of the scenes in *Facing the Wind* great care is taken not to film the face of the character speaking, but only of the person listening, who responds to the external stimuli with the eyes and hands. An emblematic example of this is a scene with a static shot showing Mónica crying wordlessly in the foreground, staring into space, while Elena Martín's character speaks to her from the blurred background of the frame.

However, it would be misleading to suggest that the compositions in *Facing the Wind* all conform to a single pattern. The challenge for the camera is that throughout the film it must reinvent its presence over and over in relation to the bodies, gestures and faces. Thus, in the discussion between the two sisters in the shed, the camera shifts swiftly along a horizontal axis between one character and the other, in time with the rapid fire of their rebukes. When the daughter washes her mother's hair, on the other hand, the camera seeks out the two heads in a curved, enveloping movement that resembles an embrace. The camera's treatment of the faces is especially eloquent in one moment that could be described as the very heart of the film. Mother and daughter are playing a game of cards after dinner, at one corner of the kitchen table. The camera swings between the

Figure 5. The faces of mother and daughter draw together as the card game progresses and an intimacy develops. *Facing the Wind* (Meritxell Colell, 2018)



two characters and slowly hovers around the two faces, which move closer and closer together (Figure 5). The shot closes in slowly, as if the camera were breaking into the intimacy of their private den. Within the frame, a mutual understanding develops between the two characters, as if playing the game, exchanging the cards, constituted a meeting point between two generations, connecting two different eras.

There are various elements that mark the importance of this scene. The kitchen, a ritual space of caring, offers an opportunity to repair the bonds that were broken, while the attitude adopted by the two women suggests a familiarity regained. On one side, the daughter hesitates, makes a mistake, forgetting the rules of the game. On the other, the mother instructs her, guides her, corrects her plays. The mother is signified in her reactions, marked by a wry familiarity, while her eyes shine with a childlike tenderness. The most revealing elements are the facial expressions, the intensity of the gazes, and the shifting movements of the four hands that hold the cards. A communicative context is created between them that is also choreographic, raising the possibility of re-establishing a connection that was cut off years before. The cards serve as a metaphor for this connection, linking it to tradition, to ancestral knowledge and folk wisdom. The cards are like ancient proverbs, like that oral literature whose authorship belongs to the voices of the people, living and dead, who have preserved their memory over the course of time. The card game is the bridge to a lost past, or at least to the empty plain where that past once existed.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO A RURAL FILM GENRE

In 1990, in the final chapter to *The Woman at the Keyhole*, Judith Mayne concluded that “contemporary feminism has been obsessed with the excavation of a space, an area, somehow prior to and therefore potentially resistant to the realm of the

patriarchal symbolic” (Mayne, 1990: 202). More than thirty years have passed since Mayne wrote those words, yet the archaeology of landscapes continues to constitute the keynote of a particular kind of films made by women which, in the Spanish context, converges with a rural film genre. It is a trend that was first consolidated with *The Sky Turns*, the 2004 documentary that follows Mercedes Álvarez’s return to the village of her ancestors, a place with only fourteen inhabitants lost on the mists of the Castilian high plains. This personal journey introduces a film that digs into the past and exhumes the dead buried beneath the landscape. It speaks to us of the ghosts who light up the windows of an abandoned mansion and of the bones of the peasants crowded into a weed-infested cemetery; it is a descent in time that takes us all the way back to the fossils of the dinosaur graves of a paleontological excavation.

The obsession with a prior world described by Judith Mayne is articulated in *The Sky Turns* around the signs of what has vanished. The film begins with a painting hanging in the studio of the painter Pello Azketa, showing two children looking along a lakeshore for something that has been swallowed up by the water or that is perhaps about to rise up to the surface. Azketa’s painting connects with other images from recent Spanish films, such as the beginning of *Fire Will Come* (O que arde, Oliver Laxe, 2019), where a camera moves mysteriously along the ground, showing the trunks of a forest of eucalyptus trees that seems to be disappearing into the night as a bulldozer cuts a fire-break through the woods. What do the films *The Sky Turns* and *Fire Will Come*, made fifteen years apart, have in common? Among other things, both are the products of a similar impulse of two filmmakers who decided to go and film the villages where their grandparents had lived, in one case in the Castilian province of Soria and in the other in the Galician region of Los Ancares. Both films are set in a deserted space with a family history that is brought back to life on the screen.

The theme of the return to the place of one's origins heralds a trend that has characterised several Spanish films of the past few years. Most of these films have been directed by women, and most are notable for their visions of the rural feminine, which could be described as shaped by the characteristics of each region. In some cases, this return gives rise to fantastical encounters, as in *Thirty Souls* (Trinta lumes, 2018), where Diana Toucedo takes us into the lower woodlands of Galicia, filled with ferns and moss, invoking myths of the feminine associated with nature, such as the enchanted *moura*. In other cases, a more realist approach is taken, such as in the domestic portrait of the seamstress played by Lola Dueñas in *Journey to a Mother's Room* (Viaje al cuarto de una madre, 2018), the first work by Sevillian filmmaker Celia Rico Clavellino, shot in her hometown of Constantina. "It is no mere coincidence that the protagonist is a dressmaker like my mother. For me there will always be a relationship between motherhood and sewing, which is something I see as a task of dressing and protecting absent bodies," explains Rico Clavellino in an interview with the newspaper *El Cultural* (Sardá, 2018). In this context, she takes a delicate approach to capture the everyday movements of her protagonist, associated with the act of sewing, but also with motherly care; gestures, in short, that are infused with the tradition of multiple generations of women who have passed the baton from one to the next in the heart of the family home.

All of these ideas resonate in *Facing the Wind*, a film that follows this same trend, taking a position at an intermediate point between the evocation of ancient myths in *Thirty Souls* and the domesticity of *Journey to a Mother's Room*. Like Álvarez, Toucedo, Rico Clavellino and Laxe, Meritxell Colell returns to the land of her ancestors, to a house that is filled with autobiographical echoes, thanks to the cinema. There she finds a formula in dance that enables her to descend into that excavated space described by Mayne, a world prior to the patriarchal

symbolic: a realm of the feminine atavistic. *Facing the Wind* meets all the criteria of Didi-Huberman's concept of anachronism, locating the past in the present in order to enter the orbit of certain feminist discourses. It is, after all, a film without men, in which four women in a family must learn how to relate to one another again; to find, in the memory of a space and the caress of the earth, the tools they need to strengthen their bonds. ■

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A DESCENT INTO THE ATAVISTIC FEMININE: THE DANCES IN FACING THE WIND

Abstract

In the context of the discourse related to the Empty Spain, there is a clear trend in the so-called New Spanish Cinema of exploring the idea of a return to the deserted rural landscape, to repopulate it through images and, in this way, resurrect an ancestral memory that has all but disappeared. It seems more than a mere coincidence that since the release of Mercedes Álvarez's *The Sky Turns* (*El cielo gira*, 2004), this movement has been led mainly by female filmmakers. In the early 1990s, Judith Mayne argued that contemporary feminism had become obsessed with the idea of excavating a space to uncover a world that existed prior to the realm of the patriarchal symbolic. This article is articulated around the analysis of a recent film, Meritxell Colell's *Facing the Wind* (2018), which, through the director's way of filming gestures, and specifically, dances, is able to evoke an atavistic time of the rural feminine.

Key words

Gesture; Atavistic; Rural; Survival; Anachronism; Dance; Choreography.

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UN DESCENSO A LO ATÁVICO FEMENINO: LAS DANZAS DE CON EL VIENTO

Resumen

Existe una tendencia evidente dentro del llamado Nuevo Cine Español alineada con los discursos sobre la España vacía o vaciada que propone regresar al medio rural, repoblarlo a través de las imágenes y, de este modo, reactivar una memoria ancestral ya casi desaparecida. No parece casual que, desde que Mercedes Álvarez hizo *El cielo gira* (2004), hayan sido sobre todo mujeres cineastas las que han liderado este movimiento. Judith Mayne (1990) escribe que el feminismo contemporáneo se ha obsesionado con la idea de excavar el espacio para encontrar un mundo anterior al reino de lo simbólico patriarcal. Este artículo se articula alrededor del estudio de una película reciente, *Con el viento* (2018), de Meritxell Colell, que, en su manera de filmar los gestos y, específicamente, las danzas, logra evocar un tiempo atávico de lo femenino rural.

Palabras clave

Gesto; Atávico; Rural; Supervivencia; Anacronismo; Danza; Coreografía

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“REMAIN CALM AND ELEGANT”: DARK GAMES, VULNERABILITY, AND THE FEMALE BODY AS A PLAYTHING IN *MOST BEAUTIFUL ISLAND*

BEATRIZ PÉREZ ZAPATA

VÍCTOR NAVARRO REMESAL

“WE ALL WISH YOU GOOD LUCK”: INTRODUCTION

Two girls, Luciana and Olga, will alternate. The guests have already made their bets. Two rounds, one for each girl. Two minutes each round. Ladies, what will be fun and different for us tonight is that while one of you is in the coffin, the other will be standing by, also sharing the risk. The guests and I already agreed earlier that the spider on the girl in the coffin must maintain skin contact for the full round. If it wanders off the skin it will be the second girl's task to be brave enough to guide it back with the help of a stick. But your presence might affect the spider's reactions. You must work well together. We all wish you good luck. At least some of us do. Walk to the coffin and remove your clothes. Remain calm and elegant as you lay inside face down. Our guests are here to look at you.

Most Beautiful Island (Ana Asensio, 2017) narrates the story of Luciana, an illegal immigrant

from Spain, and a small group of other illegal female immigrants in New York. The film portrays their struggle as undocumented women, their acceptance of menial jobs and ultimately of a well-paid and more dangerous job: accepting to work at a mysterious party, they become the objects of a dark game and put their lives at risk. Some of these women accept the offer aware of the potential consequences, others (like Luciana) are tricked by Olga, one of the immigrants and Luciana's only friend, with the promise of a generous wage for an easy and innocent job. At the party, located in a hidden basement of an industrial area, these women are numbered and guests place bets on them. It is only with Luciana's and Olga's turn to go into the game room that the game is revealed: they are placed naked in open glass coffins where they must keep skin contact for two full minutes with two venomous spiders. The hostess, Vanessa, does not specify what would happen should they lose, but the outcomes are limited: perform as ex-

pected and get paid, break under the pressure and possibly be replaced (as happens to Olga), or die (as happens to Alina, who goes into the game room before Luciana and Olga).

This article analyses how *Most Beautiful Island* uses the conventions of horror films, and in particular of “death games” and dark play fictions, to expose the vulnerability of these migrant women, their (in)visibility, and how easily disposable they are. For this purpose, the article will draw from theories of vulnerability, seeing and looking, and play theory, in particular the tropes of “the most dangerous game”, a type of narrative that plays with the polysemy of the word “game”, as an activity related to fun and as wild animals to be hunted, to present a scenario where powerful people prey on others for sport and fun. Through these theoretical frameworks and detailed filmic analysis, this article argues that *Most Beautiful Island* is filled with nuances and ambiguities in the implication of some of these women in the game and their sense of agency, and thus plays with the aesthetics and narratives of denunciation and enunciation: it shows how contemporary societies use and abuse illegal immigrants, the paradoxes of the latter’s invisibility and hypervisibility, and the ways in which these women may take action within their limited chances. For this purpose, this article starts with the exploration of vulnerability and exposure of illegal immigrants in a cosmopolitan setting, to then move on to the study of the power dynamics in the acts of looking and playing, and lastly study the theoretical aspects of dark play and their discourses in the film.

“SOMETIMES I THINK I COULD END UP HOMELESS ON THE STREET”: VULNERABILITY AND PRECARIY IN THE BIG APPLE

The opening sequence of *Most Beautiful Island* follows seven women, the last of whom is Luciana, its protagonist. Some of these women will appear



Failed cosmopolitan dreams.
Most Beautiful Island (Ana Asensio, 2017)

at the party, others will not. Asensio explains that she shot this scene at the end, as “an introduction to the city and these invisible women” (Zorrilla, 2018). Indeed, these women appear in transit alongside other inhabitants of New York, but the diegetic sound of the daily rhythms and voices of the city merges with a non-diegetic disturbing noise: these women are drowned by the multitude and anonymity that the city provides. Yet, the film provides an uncanny visibilisation: the close-ups are almost invasive and seem to replicate a monitoring process, thus unveiling how these subjects are simultaneously invisibilised and subjected to persecution.

The film does not explicitly comment on illegal migration and it does not include immigrants from Central and South America. Similarly, it does not inform viewers of the reasons why these women are staying illegally in the US, except for brief excerpts of Luciana’s and Olga’s stories. Luciana has run away from her traumatic memories: a phone call with her mother back in Spain implies the accidental death of Luciana’s daughter and she belatedly displays symptoms of trauma such as nightmares, shortness of breath, and panic attacks. Unable to cope with such loss, Luciana stays away. Olga came from Russia to fulfil her aspirations of a modelling career. Stranded without families and connections, these women form a strange transnational community that deals with loss, both in terms of Luciana’s grief for her



Invasive gaze and power. *Most Beautiful Island* (Ana Asensio, 2017)

daughter and of the overall tragic displacement that their migratory status implies. The latter is recurrently portrayed in transnational cinema (Ezra and Rowden, 2006: 7), alongside other key aspects of cosmopolitan cinema, namely questions of dignity and displacement (Rovisco, 2012: 154).

Most Beautiful Island plays with cosmopolitan aspirations but does not focus on the journey or backstory of the characters, which is common in stories of migrancy and refuge and instead addresses survival through dark play and constructs a narrative around chance that is opposed to the nefarious discourse of endless opportunities and building one's own luck in New York. At one point in the film, Luciana claims to be, in fact, "tired of the possibilities" and her precariousness. It is then that Olga offers Luciana to cover for her working at a party, for which she will be paid \$2,000—although as we soon discover this is a ruse to force women to play in the game at the party, with Olga most likely earning more for her role as supplier.

Luciana and Olga, alongside the other women that knowingly or unknowingly accept to work at the party, are depicted as subjects with nothing to lose: they accept the risk of losing their lives in order to survive within the circuits of precarity and invisibility and make themselves easily disposable and untraceable. The film directly deals then with

vulnerability, precarity, and grievability as theorised by Butler (2004, 2009): these women, these *others*, are not acknowledged by the society they inhabit and it does not matter whether they live or die. The film's denunciatory discourse on illegal migration is thus constructed around precariousness and how "one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other" (Butler, 2009: 14), and discloses it in a rather literal form by depicting how privileged subjects play with destitute others and how precarity becomes a spectacle, an entertainment of the rich. Therefore,

the following sections study how the film plays with looking, being looked at and recognition, and with dark games, laying bare the reification and dehumanisation of immigrants.

"OUR GUESTS ARE HERE TO LOOK AT YOU": THE POWER TO LOOK AND DENIED RECOGNITION

Asensio states that her authorial intention in *Most Beautiful Island* was to widen the way people look at—and think about—migration in the US (Zorrilla, 2018) to move beyond systemic and stereotyped assumptions. She acknowledges the shared dislocation and isolation of immigrants, who she sees as lacking familial and cultural referents to navigate a hostile environment (Zorrilla, 2018), and through specific genre conventions and poignant use of framing, close-ups, and extreme close-ups, the film (re)directs the gaze inside and outside the screen.

The beginning of the film shows unfocused, almost indistinguishable body parts to then reveal, in different levels of proximity, seven women who seem to be monitored. The first half of the film then focuses on Luciana and Olga, who at this time maintain conversations in close up, with a hand-held camera and eyeline matching

THE GAME ROOM IN *MOST BEAUTIFUL ISLAND* IS A SPACE FOR TORTURE. CAN TORTURE AND GAMES COEXIST?

that parallel their attempt and sometimes resistance at revealing their stories and vulnerabilities. This use of camera work and emphasis on looking and being looked at is emphasised once at the party, where the women are placed in fixed spots in a semicircle. At first, these women do not seem to meet each other's gaze, which could be interpreted as the mutual recognition of being in a vulnerable situation. In addition, the other women cannot stand Luciana's inquisitive gaze and discourse, which heightens an increasing anxiety about being looked at.

When the guests arrive, the look turns voyeuristic. Men and women move into the room where they are asked to choose and bet on the women and their survival or demise. The film places these women as objects to be looked at and played with, who must remain silent and thus are not able to enunciate their selves. They must follow a dress code and maintain a normative appearance, turning themselves "into an object of vision: a sight", as Berger (1972: 47) would put it. Looking is an act of intimacy, meeting, and power, and Asensio conveys this by showing how privileged subjects play with the vulnerability and precariousness of *others* and bring to the fore questions of morality.

The moral implications of looking have been explored in fiction films like *Tesis* (Alejandro Amenábar, 1996) or *Funny Games* (Michael Haneke, 1997) and in documentaries like the duology *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012) / *The Look of Silence* (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2014). Discussing his own remake of *Funny Games*, director

Michael Haneke argued: "A film can do nothing, but in the best case it can provoke so that some viewer makes his own thoughts about his own part in this international game of consuming violence, because it's a big business" (Ebiri, 2019). But is consuming violence (particularly in fiction) the same as producing violence? François Truffaut famously argued that "violence is very ambiguous in movies" and that "[e]very film about war ends up being pro-war" (Siskel, 1973). Yet, portrayal is not approval. Enunciation and focalisation strategies are key to the act of watching a film, as well as the abstract delineation of an intended audience and the framing of genre.

The genre conventions of horror and thrillers, which *Most Beautiful Island* builds on, demand that the protagonists are put through an ordeal before fighting back. The trope of the "final girl" is a heroine and a responding aggressor (Staiger, 2015: 225) that finally defeats evil. But slashers also usually end with a rebuke of closure, which Staiger sees as an interplay between masochism and sadism: "It may be a *mise-en-scène* of desire, but it also must be defended against. [...] Closure provides sadistic gratification, but it also implies aggression and the end of the pleasures of masochism" (Staiger, 2015: 225-226). Asensio's film keeps us close to Luciana and make us feel her pain, caused



Women as playthings? *Most Beautiful Island* (Ana Asensio, 2017)

by the weight of the sight of the powerful that see her as a plaything, which contrasts with how she has been virtually invisible to everyone in the city before arriving at the party.

Most Beautiful Island portrays women as playthings and, therefore, draws attention to the correlation of toys and acts of looking. Meredith Bak (2020) studies the uses of optical toys in the 18th and 19th centuries and how these were used to train the sight in relation to a developing “right to look”, heavily based on class and race dynamics. Asensio’s film illustrates how those economically and socially in power buy their “right to look” at unprivileged subjects. The ideologies of capitalism are inevitably tied to colonialism and migration and with today’s large scale displacements, Western discourses train the sight to look at migrant others as subjects of pity, abuse, and hate within the schizophrenic narratives of “hospitality and hostility” (Behdad, 2016: 294).

One of the most uncomfortable scenes in the film occurs when the guests at the party assess the women: first, because the camera is situated behind Luciana thus showing the consuming, invasive gaze of the guests and Luciana’s inability to sustain their look; second, because neither spectators nor some of the women know what is about to happen; lastly, because this moment connects through sound to the introductory scene of the film in which the women are being monitored, as well as with a previous scene in which Luciana is having a bath and she lifts some duct tape on the wall and an intrusion of cockroaches comes out into the water—the vermin alluding to a common trope used to describe immigrants (Anderson, 2017). This scene merges together those indicators in the film that signal the dehumanisation, animalisation, and objectification of immigrants.

Moreover, the gaze of the guests, as contextualised in the game at the party and in opposition to the women looking away, confirm that looking always has an undercurrent of power, as Cousins observes when discussing the 19th century

human zoos, where “the unequal power relationship between looker and looked at was most obvious” and “questions of the right, privilege, advantage or misconduct of searching have been in play” thus “highlighting the relationship between looking and advantage” (Cousins, 2017: 465). *Most Beautiful Island* establishes a simile between the female immigrants at the party and that of the human zoo: the women have been gathered in a place from which they cannot escape if they do not go through with the games privileged people play and where “the looker ha[s] the right to look [and] the looker ha[s] no right to deny the look” (Cousins, 2017: 473). Centuries after the creation of human zoos, contemporary discourses replay the colonisation and containment of the bodies of those considered as *others*.

THIS DARK PLAY IS NOT CRUEL BECAUSE IT DECEIVES, BUT BECAUSE IT DEMANDS VICTIMS. THE WOMEN’S CONTRIBUTION IS THEIR SUFFERING. THE FILM CONFRONTS US WITH A MANIFESTATION OF THE IMPULSE FOR THE CRUELTY OF THOSE WITH POWER THROUGH A SPECIFIC DARK GAME

The lookers at the party remain voyeurs that draw pleasure from the bodies and the suffering of the female immigrants. The morality of looking in *Most Beautiful Island* arises from the failed acts of witnessing. Witnessing conveys responsibility (Felman, 1992: 3) but the extent of our responsibility towards others is difficult to delineate (Butler, 2009: 35) and, for Margalit, moral witnesses should “be at personal risk” and share the suffering they witness (Margalit, 2004: 150). Asensio’s film may not put us at such a risk but it draws the viewers’ attention to how little we see or know of the lives of illegal immigrants and the darkest undercurrents of power that play with those who

are practically invisible and easily disposable. These subjects may be seen, but not recognised, to use Butler's arguments on vulnerability and precarity and how "certain lives are perceived as lives while others, though apparently living, fail to assume perceptual form as such" (2009: 24). The women in the film are denied recognition and are only perceived by those looking at them as objects to be played with. The following section explores how *Most Beautiful Island* further constructs this criticism through dark play and games and how play may offer some potential for resistance.

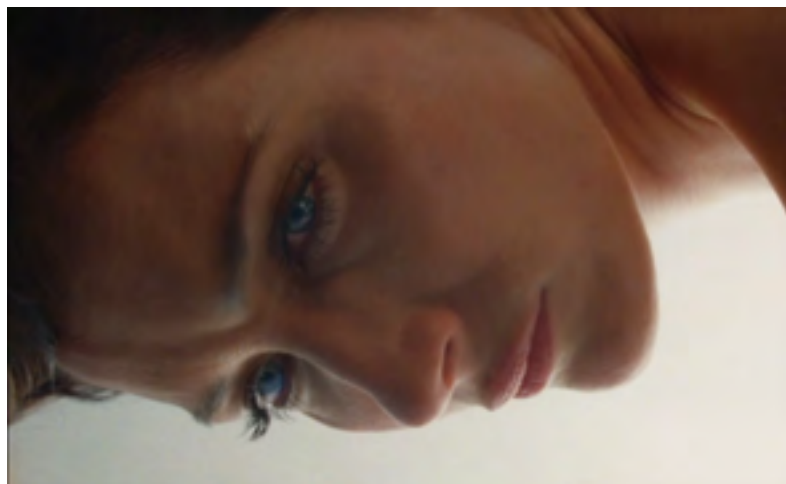
"REMAIN CALM AND ELEGANT": DARK PLAY AND TORTURE

In *Most Beautiful Island*, we see vulnerable women being put through torture and the enablers of that torture enjoying it as a game. To unpack the implications of that scenario, we must look precisely at its structure as a game. First of all, we must keep in mind that *Most Beautiful Island* presents us with a "fictional game", that is, a game not meant to be played but to be put within the story to stoke conflict. Stefano Gualeni defines fictional games as "playful activities and ludic artefacts that were conceptualised to be part of fictional worlds". These games "were created as part of fictional worlds and that are not possible—or at least were not originally possible—to play in the actual world" (Gualeni, 2021: 188). Quidditch in Harry Potter, Holochess in Star Wars, or the game in *Quintet* (Robert Altman, 1979) are examples of this. Fictional games do not require a complete ruleset but need to be clear and interesting enough to structure a story that presents conflict and hard choices. In this, they are akin to philosophical thought experiments. At the same time, they are still portrayed as games, and as such, they have to fit within the nature of play and games. We might not want to play them, but we need to understand how they work to invest in the drama they articulate. Analysing them requires, then, a combina-

tion of methodologies from both film studies and play and game studies, as well as the philosophy of play.

Bernard Suits, perhaps the first philosopher to tackle the issue, described the act of playing a game as "the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (Suits, 1978: 10), which he called the "lusory attitude". If we are forced to play then play is not play anymore, games are not games anymore. Sicart describes play as a wider phenomenon, "a mode of being human" (Sicart, 2014: 1). Bateman (2011) also links games and play with mental modes and writes about *imaginary games*. Following this, we can see games and play as ways of reframing and reimagining our modes of thinking, of isolating and reinterpreting our predicaments. In *Most Beautiful Island*, Luciana goes to the party and is forced to play while others return voluntarily, but they do so out of desperation and knowing that their lives might be at stake. They are socially and economically forced to take part in the game, which would stop it from being a game and make it be its opposite, work.

The traditional conceptualisations of play leave out forms of the phenomenon like gambling, which has consequences outside of itself, and "dark play", which can be played against one or more players' will. The bets placed on the women in *Most Beautiful Island* can be read through this idea of dark play, intimately connected to questions of power. Aaron Trammell affirms that "play itself is a power relationship" and "games are not always safe and consensual" (Trammell, 2020: n.p.), which is an important nuance that is often left out of game and play studies, perhaps to set play and games apart from more dangerous practices such as gambling. Trammell remarks how "Huizinga [a founding reference in the study of games] neglects gambling in the entirety of *Homo Ludens* because of its associations with the amoral connotations that were associated with the activity at the time" and "how Caillois [another key author in the field] uses the term 'corruption' to discuss forms of play



Luciana tortured by nightmares and Luciana tortured as object and plaything. *Most Beautiful Island* (Ana Asensio, 2017)

that he finds troubling or unpalatable" (Tramell, 2020: n.p.). *Most Beautiful Island* outlines these darker aspects of play by establishing narratively and aesthetically clear power relations and portraying the game in the film as undoubtedly troubling and indeed corrupted.

Most Beautiful Island is part of the long tradition of dark play in cinema. Dark play is a common narrative device in films based around games and play activities, chiefly because it adds stakes to the story. If games can be abandoned at any moment there is no conflict. Fictional games such as *Jumanji*, *Zathura*, or the VHS game in *Beyond the Gates* (Jackson Stewart, 2016) force their players to keep on playing. Other movies present a more extreme strategy with the trope of "death games", where participants are forced to play to save their own lives. These gladiatorial imaginary games were popularized by *Battle Royale* (Kinji Fukasaku, 2000) and are at the centre of *The Hunger Games* saga (*The Hunger Games* [Gary Ross, 2012], *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* [Francis Lawrence, 2013], *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay, Part 1* [Francis Lawrence, 2014], and *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay, Part 2* [Francis Lawrence, 2015]), *Gamer* (Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor, 2009), *Gantz* (Shinsuke Sato, 2010), or *Guns Akimbo* (Jason Howden, 2019), to name a few. Howev-

er, they date back to the early 20th century: the aforementioned "The Most Dangerous Game", a short story published by Richard Connell in 1924, deals with an aristocrat hunting humans for sport. It has been adapted more or less flexibly numerous times, from *The Most Dangerous Game* (Irving Pichel and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1932) to *The Running Man* (Paul Michael Glaser, 1987). Lastly, a more direct approach to dark play and torture is pictured in movies where characters are kidnapped and made to play macabre games for the pleasure of others who might or might not have a stake, financial or otherwise, in their result. It is the case of *Funny Games*, the game-prisons of *Saw* (James Wan, 2004), or *Escape Room* (Adam Robitel, 2019).

If, as Shamir (2016) defends, cinema can do philosophy not by illustrating philosophical thought but by manifesting philosophical problems as experiences, we can argue that dark play fictions are comparable to lived experiences of abstract thought experiments. In this way, fictional games are a perfect vehicle to explore dark play in and beyond its structures. First, dark play requires an imbalance in communication and information. Linderoth and Mortensen summarize the discussion of dark play through Richard Schechner's theories about performance studies, for whom dark

play is “a concept for situations in which not all players are aware of the fact they are taking part in an activity that for others is playful—in other words, actions and utterances are not literal or true” (Linderroth and Mortensen, 2015: 108). These authors continue to discuss Schechner alongside “Bateson’s (1972) concept of metacommunicative cues [...] to understand something is play” to end with Schechner’s definition of dark play as “the subversion of these meta-cues that tell us actions and utterances are supposed to be understood as playful” (Linderroth and Mortensen, 2015: 108). Dark play is, thus, “a form of deception closely related to what Sutton-Smith labelled as “cruel play” (Sutton-Smith, 1997: 108). Until Luciana enters the game room, she is kept in the dark, and even then the rules are explained to the gamblers, and not for her sake.

The game room in *Most Beautiful Island* is a space for torture. Can torture and games coexist? Vertigo and suffering are constitutive elements of play (Mortensen and Navarro-Remesal, 2018), and dark variants of play should not be excluded for the sake of defending our object. Trammell goes even further and adds that “even in the most innocent and pleasurable acts of play, we subtly discipline those around us to engage in unspoken rules” (2020). In fact, Trammell argues that “torture is play, and it reveals a good deal about how play works to subjugate and discipline people” (Trammell, 2020: n.p.). To illustrate his argument, he focuses on BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and

People of Colour) experiences and torture-based games such as *Hide the Switch* and criticizes the focus on voluntariness as a “White European tradition”. Trammell thus claims that “by defining play only through its pleasurable connotations, the term holds an epistemic bias towards people with access to the conditions of leisure. Indeed, torture helps to paint a more complete picture where the most heinous potentials of play are addressed alongside the most pleasant, yet in so doing the trauma of slavery is remembered”. Therefore, Trammell concludes, it is necessary to analyse “the more insidious ways that play functions as a tool of subjugation”. This subjugation is visible in the fictional game of *Most Beautiful Island*: the women being used might not be granted recognition and be used as objects, but their suffering is key to the gamblers’ enjoyment. There would be no game without their subjugation.

Torture and discipline are potential parts of play, but thinking of them as constitutive elements of it shifts the analysis from potential to ontology. Play and games should not be seen as a single phenomenon or object, but a set of interconnected phenomena, activities, and conceptual objects. Mary Midgley argues against Wittgenstein’s use of “family resemblance” to tie all games together: “to form a family is quite a different thing from having a family resemblance. [...] A family is a functional group with a concentric structure, a centre, and well understood rules governing the claims of outlying member” (Midgley, 1974: 232). For Midgley, there’s an “underlying unity” in games linked to motivations: “Until we understand the reasons for playing, I do not think we understand the bindingness of the rules” (Midgley, 1974: 236). Understanding play and games is a matter of understanding the needs at play. Bateman follows from Midgley: “It is because games meet human needs [...] that we can identify what constitutes a game. Those needs that a game meets are precisely what is in-

THE WHOLE DISCOURSE OF THE MOVIE HINGES ON THIS AMBIGUOUS ACT OF BRAVERY: BY TOYING WITH THE RULES AND “GAMING THE GAME”, LUCIANA BECOMES MORE THAN A PLAYTHING. SHE IS STILL A FORCED PLAYER AND A VICTIM OF TORTURE, BUT NOW SHE IS ALSO AN ACTIVE AGENT

volved in understanding what the concept ‘game’ must mean” (2011: 19).

If we take this back to Trammell’s arguments, it follows that play, or at least dark play, aims to fulfil a human impulse for cruelty. Trammell writes that “[p]lay reduces humans to objects because play is violent” (2020). We do not need to fully agree with his premises to see the latent darkness at the heart of play and its potential for transgressive experiences and aesthetics (Mortensen and Jørgensen, 2020). Not that these power plays have been completely ignored historically: even before Schechner, Sutton-Smith, and Goffman (1974), who wrote about “fabrications”, or activities where not all participants are aware of what is going on, Plutarch referenced in his *Moralia* (100 AD) an aphorism of philosopher Bion of Borysthenes: “Though boys throw stones at frogs in sport, the frogs do not die in sport but in earnest” (Plutarch, 1898). Play can and *does* turn people into objects, into playthings. The fact that the women in *Most Beautiful Island* must remain naked and still emphasizes their social transformation into playthings, more specifically of their bodies. The film presents the female body as a plaything for the rich and powerful. It is not as much about deceiving participants, as in traditional definitions of dark play. Some forms of dark play, as the one imagined in this film, do not even consider participants to be agents. This dark play is not cruel because it deceives, but because it demands victims. The women’s contribution is their suffering. The film confronts us with a manifestation of the impulse for the cruelty of those with power through a specific dark game.

“THE GUESTS HAVE ALREADY MADE THEIR BETS”: GAMBLING ON VULNERABLE LIVES

Like many dark fictional games, *Most Beautiful Island* presents spectators betting on the result of the game. A conceptual separation has been traditionally established between games and gambling,

perhaps to protect games from questionable social phenomena. In his “game diagram”, Juul (2003) proposes an inner circle of “games”, an outer circle of “borderline cases”, and an outside part of both circles of “not games”. It is in the second one where we can find “skill-based gambling”, “chance-based gambling”, and “games of pure chance”. We argue that the distinctions are not as clear-cut as they are normally presented to be. The study of games, as the study of any complex object or field, has demanded conceptual clarity, sometimes sacrificing the ambiguity and nuances that a philosophical analysis always reveals. Moreover, the distinction is also problematic from a legal point of view, as the debates on the regulation of in-game loot boxes have shown. Derevensky and Griffiths (2019: 634) argue that there “has been concern that the structural boundaries between gaming and gambling have in some cases become blurred”, citing lottery products, social casino games, loot boxes, and esports are examples of convergence. They compare gaming and gambling like this:

The terms “gambling” and “gaming” are frequently used synonymously—particularly by those working in the gambling industry—. *Gambling* involves wagering money or something of value on an event with an uncertain outcome. Gambling typically comprises three elements: consideration (an amount of money or something of financial value wagered), risk (in the form of chance events), and a prize (typically money but may simply be something of financial value). [...] In the context of gambling games, *agon* [competition] and *alea* [chance] are crucial in that they offer a combination of skill, chance, and luck (Derevensky and Griffiths, 2019: 633).

The game played in *Most Beautiful Island* involves consideration and prizes, therefore it is gambling, but who exactly is in control and what is the risk exactly? This is not a game of pure chance, since the women in the coffin need to perform a task—in this case, to remain motionless, to *not do* anything—. Vanessa seems to frame the game as a

struggle with fate: “we make our own luck”. Controlling one’s panic and flight mechanisms may be the main skill at play. This is a dark and extreme variant of sports betting, where gamblers predict the results of a game and wager money on them. Following this scenario, the girls would be *performers*. Even more, *paid performers*. Gamblers are betting on their outcomes and could be argued to have a base on which to place their bets (i. e., the girl’s perceived emotional state). However, the actions of the spider remain outside of the control of both the gamblers and the girls, and even the type of spider is kept a secret until the girls’ purses are open. It is a game of great uncertainty and great risk, and thus of great spectator vertigo. As the gamemaster tells her audience, “our lives hang by a delicate thread and sometimes we can pull on that thread. It is so exciting, isn’t it?”

The women are being forced to play by their captors, with whom they established an agreement based on incomplete information and thus, deception, but we can consider them players of a dark game nonetheless. We have a gamemaster, a set of gamblers that are at the same time vertigo-seeking spectators, and a perverse version of players. The girls do not meet the basic requirement of voluntariness, but would the activity’s consideration as a game be any different if they did? And what, then, of the repeaters and the enablers, as Olga? Given that they are paid for their performance, and that at least Luciana badly needs the money, there is a clear reflection on class and financial power in this game. As in other variants of *The Most Dangerous Game*, those in control of society play with the dispossessed as their own toys. What those in power play for the thrills is risky labour for the poor.

Up to this point, the film lays bare the complexities and nuances of play and games in situations of extreme inequality, which are further muddled by Luciana’s performance in the game room. After she survives her round and sees Olga struggling in hers, Luciana steps in and takes Ol-

ga’s spider in her hand, keeping skin contact. The whole discourse of the movie hinges on this ambiguous act of bravery: by toying with the rules and “gaming the game”, Luciana becomes more than a plaything. She is still a forced player and a victim of torture, but now she is also an active agent. She goes beyond what the rules demand of her and *wins* the game. Does she do it to rebel against the game organisers and gamblers? Does she do it out of compassion for Olga? Is she motivated by money? The movie remains ambiguous, but the result is clear: the gamemaster announces that they have found a replacement for Olga and gives Luciana her contact. The final scene is also ambiguous, but it shows Luciana perhaps enjoying her first moment of control in the whole movie: she orders ice cream from an ice cream cart and eats it slowly, to walk off moments later into the city, with a sign in the frame showing an apple that reads “Big Big Dreams”. New York has strangely become a land of dark and cruel possibilities.

“IT IS SO EXCITING, ISN’T IT?”: CONCLUSION

Our mediatic and mediated world continuously brings to the fore images of precarity and migrancy, often to a point of exhaustion that leaves no room for reflection. Films such as *Most Beautiful Island*, in its carefully crafted use of dark play and conventions of masochistic horror and its metaphorical readings of the use and abuse of others, may prompt a more complex consideration of the frightful situations that illegal migrants face. Placing us as uncomfortable spectators, Asensio’s film does not make us complicit but rather compels us to evaluate the lack of recognition of otherness within the tortuous circuits of precarity and invisibility. As spectators, we watch the whole process that brings Luciana to the game room in excruciating detail, almost in real time. Our knowledge is limited to what she knows since hers is the only

point of view available to us. During the game, the gamblers/spectators remain mysterious and out of our reach, nameless faces enjoying the women's suffering. But it could be argued that we are as invested in the outcome as much, or even more. Thus, the film's centrality on the interrelatedness of dark games and looking highlights how, in Cousins' words, "[t]he response to the power of looking should not be to reject it. The alternative to rejection is evaluation" (Cousins, 2017: 393).

Evaluating looking, then, may help us explore questions of privilege, power, and morality. The film denounces unequal relationships of power in contemporary times and the fictional game allows for the inquiry into the possibilities for action and enunciation, with Luciana turning herself from object into subject. Luciana's behaviour in the game room, her implication and defiance in her act of survival and ambiguous solidarity with Olga, makes her an active subject that seems ready to accept the fiendish rules that would allow her to continue to take her chances and exhaust the limited possibilities of a truncated American dream. As is the case with slashers, *Most Beautiful Island* lacks clear closure: Luciana does not destroy the system that operates the game room, but wins power within it, enough to keep on surviving. As "cinematic philosophy" (Shamir, 2016), *Most Beautiful Island* makes us experience inequality, powerlessness, subjugation, and appropriation of the game rules. The script, camerawork, and editing of *Most Beautiful Island* makes strong use of focalisation to make us feel the power of look while keeping us close to those with no right to exert it. Its fictional dark game is not only an abstract commentary on the way the rich and powerful play with vulnerable lives, but also an exercise of cinematic philosophy on being put through a cruel and disorienting transformation into a plaything that fights back for the control of their very existence.

Asensio, as a Spanish creator operating in the US, exhibits the potential of a transnational cine-

ma of the immigrant that tackles the difficulties of female subjectivity and illegal migrants in dangerous cosmopolitan settings. It makes us watch the ordeal of its protagonist to invite us to reflect on the right of these subjects to look and to be seen. The owners of the world might look at their pain in sport, but we experience their suffering in earnest. ■

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“REMAIN CALM AND ELEGANT”: DARK GAMES, VULNERABILITY, AND THE FEMALE BODY AS A PLAYTHING IN *MOST BEAUTIFUL ISLAND*

Abstract

Most Beautiful Island (Ana Asensio, 2017) portrays the struggle of Luciana, a Spanish illegal immigrant in New York. The film centres on Luciana's acceptance of a suspicious yet well-paid job working at a party in place of her friend Olga, another illegal immigrant. At the party, she will become the object of bets and the plaything of a dark game. This article explores how *Most Beautiful Island*, a film made by a Spanish filmmaker in the US, uses narrative and aesthetic devices and discourses to explain the migratory experience of a particular group of women whose lives end up rather literally in the hands of the powerful. For this purpose, the article first studies vulnerability and precarity and the power of looking and the failures of witnessing, to then examine the discourses and conventions of dark play, particularly in fictional dark games in film, and how the film lays bare the torture and sadism of power relations. Thus, the aim is to lay bare the strategies of denunciation, enunciation, and resistance that *Most Beautiful Island* constructs around the invisibility and powerlessness of precarious subjects.

Key words

Dark games; Illegal immigrants; Vulnerability; Looking.

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«PERMANECED TRANQUILAS Y ELEGANTES»: JUEGOS OSCUROS, VULNERABILIDAD Y EL CUERPO FEMENINO COMO OBJETO DE JUEGO EN *MOST BEAUTIFUL ISLAND*

Resumen

Most Beautiful Island (Ana Asensio, 2017) muestra las dificultades a las que se enfrenta Luciana, un inmigrante ilegal de origen español en Nueva York. La película se centra en cómo Luciana acepta una oferta de un trabajo bien pagado, aunque un tanto sospechoso, para una fiesta sustituyendo a su amiga Olga, otra inmigrante ilegal. En dicha fiesta, Luciana se convertirá en el objeto de apuestas y en el juguete de un juego oscuro. Este artículo explora cómo *Most Beautiful Island*, el filme de una directora española residente en Estados Unidos, utiliza recursos y discursos narrativos y estéticos para explicar la experiencia migratoria de un grupo específico de mujeres cuyas vidas acaban estando, de manera casi literal, en las manos de personas con poder. Para ello, este artículo estudia primero los conceptos de vulnerabilidad y precariedad, el poder de la mirada y cómo ser testigos de ciertos actos resulta insuficiente para continuar con el análisis de los discursos y convenciones de el juego oscuro, en especial los juegos oscuros ficcionales en el cine, y cómo la película hace evidentes la tortura y el sadismo implícitos en las relaciones de poder. Así pues, el propósito es demostrar las estrategias de denuncia, enunciación y resistencia que *Most Beautiful Island* construye en torno a la invisibilidad e indefensión de aquellos sujetos precarios.

Palabras clave

Juegos oscuros; Inmigración ilegal; Vulnerabilidad; Mirada

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DISCOURSE AND STYLE: ICÍAR BOLLAÍN'S GAZE IN *EVEN THE RAIN*

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INTRODUCTION

Images of the street, in an arid and barren place, a man looks with interest out a car window at a long line of Indigenous people. As he gets out of the car, he tries to make out the end of the line, but he cannot see it. A lot of applicants have come in response to the casting call. The crowd of people is huge. Costa approaches Sebastián, the man who just arrived in the car, and tells him off for making it an open casting call with no audition limit. So begins *Even the Rain* (También la lluvia, 2010), Icíar Bollaín's fifth film and the first with male protagonists. Her ten feature films to date have one thing in common: regardless of the gender of the main characters, they all deal with problems of inequality and social injustice.

Her second film begins in a similar way, with a desolate road in the middle of a desert, where someone watches from a car, only this time it is at a group of women of different ages and nationalities, most of them Latin American, who are wal-

king towards a village deep in Spain's rural heartland, with the aim of meeting single men. *Flowers from Another World* (Flores de otro mundo, 1999) tells a story already told many times before, about immigration in rural Spain and the complicated nature of relationships, with the distinction that on this occasion the director does it with her own gaze, which is fresh, powerful, even-handed, and complex, breaking with the stereotypes of female characters and the role they have traditionally been given in Spanish films. The story is told from the point of view of the four female protagonists: a Dominican, a Cuban and a Spaniard who are looking for a partner in a village in rural Spain, and the mother of one of the men in the village, who is wary of the *mestizo* Dominican, fearing that she will take advantage of her son.

In the film *Hello, Are You Alone?* (¿Hola, estás sola?, 1995), Bollaín tells the story of two young women looking for their place in the world. The female protagonists of this film are independent: they are not the girlfriends, lovers or friends of

male protagonists; in other words, they carry their own dramatic weight. As the director remarks, the story revolves around the desires, frustrations, sorrows and camaraderie of these women:

To my surprise and joy, because I wasn't looking for it, the adventures of Trini and Nina were praised by women scholars who study the image of women in film, or better still, of the voice of women in film. I had made a "women's" film (Bollaín, 2003a: 84).

This gaze, which she began to develop in her first two films, was consolidated in *Take My Eyes* (*Te doy mis ojos*, 2003), where violence perpetrated by men in couples is portrayed in a straight and open way, without laying blame, but showing the victims and their points of view and trying to humanise the circumstances. As a result of this perspective, the night of 31 January 2004 was a milestone in the history of Spanish cinema, as for the first time a film made by a woman swept the Goya Awards, winning Best Director, Best Film and Best Original Screenplay. The film won a total of seven awards out of nine nominations. Bollaín's innovative approach to filmmaking earned her these awards over other directors of the stature of Cesc Gay and Isabel Coixet, who were in running with the acclaimed films *In the City* (*En la ciudad*, 2003) and *My Life Without Me* (*Mi vida sin mí*, 2003), respectively. It is worth noting that two years later, Coixet had the privilege of winning the same trio of awards as Icíar with her film *The Secret Life of Words* (*La vida secreta de las palabras*, 2005). This recognition clearly reflected a highly original and unquestionably positive approach that is still evident in Spanish filmmaking today.

Bollaín's filmography eludes the emblematic labels that have become so necessary but are often unfair. She herself has pointed out that nobody describes directors with reference to their gender, social status, religious affiliation, sexual preference or personality, so why label her films and those made by other women directors as "women's cinema"? In filmmaking, a director's particular gaze is reflected in the fact that they are people and ar-

tists who have things to say about their point of view, their perspective, their idea of the world and of life, and that is what distinguishes their work. It is not women's cinema, or female cinema; it is necessary, unique cinema, which is just as important (or even more important these days), because it is a gaze that we have regrettably forgotten.

The director herself offers a reflection that underscores this idea:

It is the need to speak, in front, behind, above and below, to speak with our voice, not only about women, but about men, about children, about history, about the present and about the future. To speak with our voice, whatever it may be, because otherwise we are not there. To speak with humour, with drama, with irony, with rage, but to speak, to be there, to be, because a film's story, plot or action is not determined without female characters as it so often was before: it is the story of societies, it is our story that must be told with every voice possible (Bollaín, 2003a: 86).

Díaz suggests that the term "women's cinema" has a pejorative connotation, as it means differentiating between films made by men and films made by women and discriminating against the work of the latter (Díaz, 2016: 4). She concludes, quoting Castejón (2010), that "men's cinema" has never existed, and therefore the differentiation is unnecessary and erroneous.

Even the Rain explores the conflict represented by the European invasion of the Americas, reflected in a contemporary dispute over water and a public battle to prevent the privatisation of the utility, expressed through the structural device of a film within a film (metacinema). The film tells the story of a film crew made up of Spaniards and Latin Americans who arrive in Bolivia in the year 2000 to shoot a film about Columbus and the Spanish colonisation of the Americas. In that year, Bolivia was facing a severe economic crisis that led the government to attempt to privatise the country's water supply. The intense public outcry against this measure brought the country to

a standstill and the government imposed martial law to prevent further unrest. In *Even the Rain*, the film crew suffers the consequences of this situation, because Daniel (the Indigenous actor cast in the lead role in the film within the film) and the extras are all involved in a conflict that holds up production and ultimately forces the crew to leave. The purpose of this article is to analyse Icíar Bollaín's discourse in order to identify how her gaze and her style are expressed in this film, which is a rarity in her filmography because it is her first picture with male rather than female protagonists. The article also explores whether this distinction has a significant impact on her auteurial discourse and her filmmaking style.

A FOCUSED GAZE

The references in Icíar Bollaín's films are very clear, beginning with the influence of Ken Loach and the social realist filmmaking cultivated by both the British director and Bollaín's screenwriter husband, Paul Laverty, who has contributed as a writer on around ten of Loach's films and four of his wife's. It is the brand of realism as a movement for which Sánchez Noriega coined the term "realism of authenticity" (Sánchez Noriega, 2021: 154), focusing on how people operate, how they think and feel, with the virtue of tackling very different stories in terms of subject matter with a recognisable perspective and style. All these qualities, among many others, define Bollaín's skill as an auteur. As she herself describes it, "I like to understand what I know and to know what others think and feel... to be told a story I don't know as if I had lived it myself or from a new point of view" (Bollaín, 2003b: 91).

The gaze and the point of view are two of the basic principles available to the filmmaker, as Castellani (1996) suggests. The gaze is specific to the director and is comprises the basic characteristics of her personality, background, references, etc. The point of view, on the other hand, is establi-

THE IMPORTANCE OF BOLLAÍN'S STYLE IS DUE NOT TO HER GENDER BUT TO HER TALENT, BECAUSE SHE APPROACHES THE WORLD FROM HER OWN PERSONAL, UNIQUE POINT OF VIEW, AND BECAUSE SHE HAS A DIVERSE RANGE OF STORIES TO TELL, IN HER ROLE AS BOTH A SCREENWRITER AND A DIRECTOR, AS WELL AS IN HER COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO HER FILMS, WHEREBY SHE OVERSEES EVERY SINGLE STAGE OF PRODUCTION

shed through one or more characters, or it is external, acting as a direct observer (Aumont and Marie, 1990).

The question of the director's gender is not especially decisive provided that the professionals behind the camera can tell a story from within, seeking to express certain ideas that invite the spectator to reflect on aspects that go far beyond what we see on screen. The gaze of each director is fundamental because it can be studied to dissect the gender bias of the professional in question. However, point of view is also decisive, as the perspective that each one offers is presented in a different way.

Bollaín's gaze has become recognisable over the course of her filmography because "the social theme and female point of view is an element that stands out" (Barrenetxea Marañón, 2014: 454), although Díaz (2016: 6) once again emphasises that female and male directors organise their work from their own subjective experience as individuals and as filmmakers, rendering it impossible to speak of a female or male gaze. In Bollaín's first films, it is interesting to see the development of the stories from the point of view of the protagonists, not in a world of women, but in the real world where women have to struggle to find their place. The women in her first four films command

the action, deciding what to do and speaking up when those decisions are not respected. The point of view of her stories defines her gaze and makes her films recognisable, but it would be unfair to categorise her films based on this single quality, classifying them as films by women and for women, as a distinguishing feature. The importance of Bollaín's style is due not to her gender but to her talent, because she approaches the world from her own personal, unique point of view, and because she has a diverse range of stories to tell, in her role as both a screenwriter and a director, as well as in her comprehensive approach to her films, whereby she oversees every single stage of production. She happens to be a woman and, although this fact is critically important, her filmmaking and her films are not valuable for that reason; they are valuable because the language and techniques she uses are able to open a new window through which spectators are able to see themselves from a different perspective. As the filmmaker's own words suggest, her filmmaking reflects a skill that goes beyond a stereotypical direction: "I have always given much more importance to the word, to interpretation, to emotion, and in reality you can construct your story from the other side as well. And I never ignore that possibility; as long as you are aware of what your elements are and you make good use of them" (quoted in Hernández Miñano, Castellote Herranz and Martín Núñez, 2015: 71).

The release of *Even the Rain* represented a turning point in Iciar Bollaín's filmmaking career. She herself acknowledges that the film "is different, because it has more narration and more action, as well as my view of the characters" (quoted in Caballero Wangüemert, 2011: 366). Firstly, it is clear that the director is telling a story through her own eyes, and she does so in a recognisable, personal and cinematographically interesting way. Secondly, for the first time in her entire filmography, the main characters in her story are male while the female characters are relegated to the background.

Thirdly, whereas until now she had only written her own screenplays, this time she directed a story written and scripted entirely by her husband, Paul Laverty. And fourthly, this is the first time in her film career that she makes use of metacinema, which makes it possible for the duo of director and scriptwriter to intersperse the discourse with different moments in Bolivia's history: on the one hand, the Cochabamba Water War, and on the other, the Spanish colonisation of the Americas, which is represented by the production of the film within the film. The parallels between these two events is represented through metacinema, the film they are making, the film already made, the transitions between one and the other interspersed with the unfolding battle of the people for water rights, and by María, Sebastián's assistant director and one of the film's few female characters, who is filming a "making-of" for the film within the film. Although her role is a small one, she acts as a voice that criticises the situation the characters are facing. Moreover, this device serves the director as a reflection on Spanish colonisation and as a condemnation of the social injustice and widespread inequalities that the people are struggling against, as Barrenetxea Marañón (2014) suggests.

In the same interview cited above, Bollaín also argues that this film represents not just a change but a leap in her career and in her filmography, although an in-depth analysis would reveal that it is actually not so different, and she explains her discourse and style in the film and how it reflects her gaze.

FROM HISTORICAL TO CINEMATIC REPRESENTATION

From the outset, Iciar Bollaín and her screenwriter Paul Laverty outline the conflicts they intend to explore through three completely different themes: the making of a film, the Spanish colonisation of the Americas, and the Water War in Bolivia. This trio of asynchronous situations has not

been chosen merely at whim, as they are brought together in a way that invites viewer to reflect on them.

Vargas-Machuca points out the strategies present in the film:

Although, as noted above, this is a film within a film that can be approached from different angles, its greatest richness and appeal lies precisely in the fact that it is also a social drama with multiple critiques based on the parallel plots that are very successfully interwoven into one. (Vargas-Machuca, 2017: 175)

The device of metacinema has been used many times in film history by directors of different nationalities and in different genres, in films such as *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen, Gene Kelly, 1952) *8 ½* (Federico Fellini, 1963) *Day for Night* (La nuit américaine, François Truffaut, 1973) *Ed Wood* (Tim Burton, 1994) *Bowfinger* (Frank Oz, 1999), *Adaptation* (Spike Jonze, 2002), or more recently *Hail Caesar!* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 2015), *The Disaster Artist* (James Franco, 2017) and *Pain and Glory* (Dolor y gloria, Pedro Almodóvar, 2019).

The use of the film within a film device is not merely incidental to the diegetic universe of *Even the Rain*. It operates on two different levels: the first involves the character of María and the “making-of” the film, while the second involves moments from the film being made about the colonisation of the Americas, together with sequences showing that film being shot and edited. Both levels are established and positioned with a specific point of view, that of the native population at two different moments of historical significance: the present of the film’s story, and a historical past based on real events.

In the case of *Even the Rain*, the use of a film within a film device facilitates an exploration of conflict between nations and/or ethnic groups, an idea that is foregrounded throughout the film. A clear example of this is the scene where the three members of the film crew travel to the filming lo-

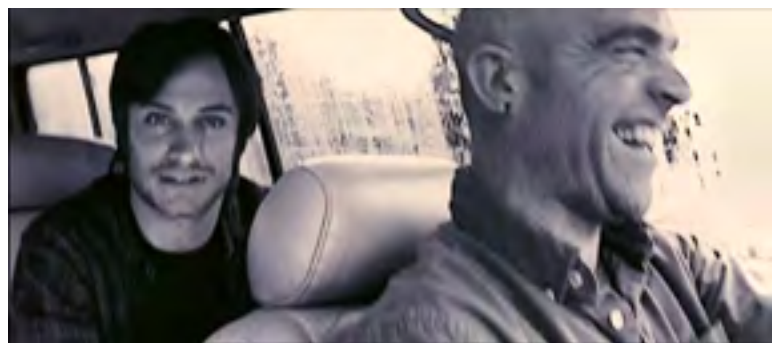


Image 1. *Even the Rain* (2010) Icíar Bollaín. Screenshot

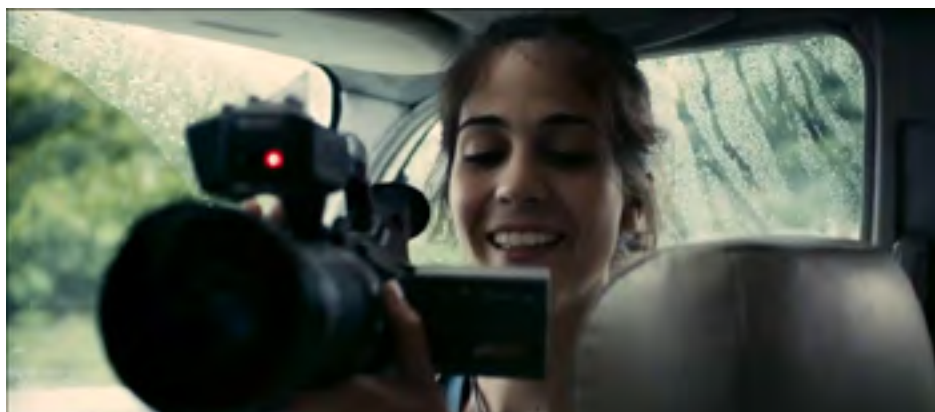
cation. María begins recording the opinions of the film’s director (Sebastián) and producer (Costa), opinions that clearly reflect the cultural conflict between Europe and the Americas: Costa wants Indigenous people for extras but does not care where they come from; Sebastián complains that the indigenous Bolivian cast will not be faithful to his film’s Caribbean setting. Costa is also adamant that they need to cut costs, and Indigenous people are easier to convince when it comes to financial agreements. This makes it clear that exploitation is still going on, an idea that is reinforced in the following sequence, the first one showing a scene from the film within the film, where Columbus demands that the Indians pay tribute by filling a small bag with gold.

The “making-of” acts as a support and historical testimony to the events of the filming. This device is used to present the characters in the film within the film, such as Bartolomé de las Casas and Antonio Montesinos, played by Carlos Santos and Raúl Arévalo, respectively. These two characters were Dominican friars who were pioneers in the fight for the rights of Indigenous peoples. After the presentation of these two characters by their actors, which will be shown again in María’s recordings, the focus shifts to a contemporary conflict: the privatisation of water. This is no random historical transition, but a deliberate strategy that reveals a connection: the struggle for rights at two completely different historical moments, five centuries apart.

Another moment worth highlighting is the scene showing the rehearsal of one of Montesinos' sermons, which is clearly intended as an appeal by a voice of conscience from the past. In the scene, Bollaín focuses on both the friar's speech and a group of Bolivian labourers who are building a stage. The workers watch Montesinos' speech as silent spectators, inviting us to make an important comparison: again, the conflicts of the past are very much alive in the film's present, as the workers are paid poorly or are being exploited. Moreover, the scene that follows is once again related to the water conflict. In this case, Daniel, the actor playing the indigenous chief, is leading the fight against water privatisation, which he decries to a group of protesters. This makes him a moral point of reference, both in the story of the film being made and in the external story. Once again, the film within the film serves to connect the two moments in history.

The last time that this device is used and is linked again to the historical present is the scene in the film within the film where thirteen Indigenous people, including Hatuey (Daniel), are sacrificed. When they finish filming the scene, the police arrive to arrest Daniel. In fact, he has been arrested before, but Costa and Sebastián bribed the police to release him on the condition that he would be arrested again when they finished work on the film. Here, the director seeks to show another connection between past and present: no matter how hard the people fight, they are helpless against those who hold the power.

On the subject of the Water War, the film invites us to ponder the different events depicted, such as when security forces try to take over a well being dug by the locals (invoking the political discourse that defines water as a public good), the popular uprising against the government in res-



Images 2 and 3. *Even the Rain* (2010) Icíar Bollaín. Screenshot

ponse to the state of emergency decree, Costa helping to find Daniel's daughter, Belén, in the middle of the protests and, finally, the highly symbolic gift that Costa receives from Daniel: a small bottle of water. Virtually all of these events can be related to various scenes of the film within the film, facilitating comparison with the historical events it recounts: the present-day security forces constitute the equivalent of the Spanish conquistadors; the water conflict is comparable to the battle over gold; the conquistadors demand tribute from the natives, just as the Bolivian government demands taxes from the people for such a common and essential commodity as water. The demands of the natives both present and past give rise to armed conflict, between the villagers and the security forces in one case and between the natives and the conquistadors in the other. Both confrontations escalate to the point of violence. In the case of the historical narrative, thirteen natives are

burned at the stake, while in the case of the Water War, Belén is wounded. A major difference is that in the contemporary story, the water is ultimately returned to the people, as hinted at by the appearance of a priest who declares “the water belongs to you.” This character is a clear reference to the two figures of de las Casas and Montesinos mentioned above, which once again connects past and present through these three clerics who rail against the social injustices towards the needy.

THE CHARACTERS: CONFLICTING DISCOURSES

The development of Costa’s character in *Even the Rain* is one of the most significant in Icíar Bollaín’s filmography, with a character arc marked by a radical transformation. His personality is very different and much more unstable than the types of characters usually portrayed by the director in her stories, in addition to being the first lone male protagonist in her filmography, as mentioned above.

Every character has to spark the audience’s interest, as otherwise they will fail to connect with the audience and with the discourse. Narrative personalities need to be contradictory, and to have goals, conflicts and changes as the story unfolds. They need to evolve of the course of the story or they will be flat characters. In cinema, we tend to speak of a transformation between the first and the last time the character appears on screen, but we must bear in mind that characters usually change more than once; in fact, they usually undergo three changes, one for each corresponding act of the story, according to the Aristotelian division of Greek tragedy that has had such a big influence on the history of narrative theory in theatre, literature and film. But the most radical change can usually be identified by comparing the character’s different attitudes at the beginning and the end of the film. As McKee (2011: 447) argues, the real personality can only be expressed through the choices made in the face of dilemmas.

HER GAZE AND HER STYLE COMBINE TO PRODUCE HER EXPRESSION, WHICH IS REFLECTED IN THE WAY SHE TELLS HER STORIES, HOW SHE CONSTRUCTS THEM THROUGH LANGUAGE, AND THE CONCEPTUAL DEPTH OF HER DISCOURSE

In *Even the Rain*, Costa is a producer who makes his main motivation very clear from the first time he appears on screen: to save time and money, to make a film with a limited budget, in a location that is completely new to him (Bolivia). From the opening sequence we get a sense of his uncompromising attitude when he tries to send away the crowds of peasants who had come in response to the open casting call.

Sebastián, the director, is an apparently more flexible character, with a clear objective: to make a film about the colonisation of America. As he comes from a country with certain similarities to Bolivia, he has much more empathy for the locals. Indeed, he is the antithesis of Costa, and thus the two of them often come into conflict. Sebastián agrees to audition everyone who has come for the casting, despite the producer’s opinion. He also argues that they should use machinery to erect a large cross for the film, while Costa insists on saving money and getting the natives to do it. The viewer is thus confronted with a pair of personalities that are completely different but necessary for the successful completion of the film project.

Although he initially comes to the audition merely to accompany his daughter, Daniel ends up playing the main indigenous role in the film about the Spanish conquest and he is also one of the most important characters in the historical present. He is chosen for the role by Sebastián, contrary to the initial objections of Costa, who is aware that he could cause trouble for the production due to his hot temper.

Sánchez-Escalonilla (2008: 279) offers a definition of the hot-tempered character who tends to be led by their passions that best explains Daniel's character. Proof of this is his reaction when they try to send him away at the casting call, his opposition to the attempt to privatise the water, and his confrontations with the police. His attitude is a problem for the film within the film, as he gets himself punched in the face a few times and even ends up in prison. The character's motivation goes beyond playing his role in the film, as he wants to prevent the privatisation of the water, and to do so he leads the popular uprising against the government. The conflict is seemingly unrelated to the production of the film, but the two gradually intertwine as the characters and the plot develop.

The three characters mentioned above have a completely different character arc, but the one who changes the most is Costa, which unfolds slowly over the course of the story's three acts.

Images 4 and 5. *Even the Rain* (2010) Icíar Bollaín. Screenshot



At the beginning he is portrayed as a person who only cares about himself and his own goal, but gradually he becomes more involved with the locals. For example, we see him pondering thoughtfully while he watches Daniel speaking to the protesters in front of the water company, although this does not change his attitude; later, he has a conversation in English about the exploitative wages they are paying the natives, mistakenly believing that Costa does not understand the language. But finally, when Daniel's wife asks him to help their wounded daughter in the midst of the village uprising. Costa, after much hesitation, decides to go to her aid and saves her, an act that signifies a radical transformation.

Sebastián makes his priorities perfectly clear when he tells Costa that "the film comes first." They both know that Daniel is problematic for the filming, but this phrase describes the character perfectly. There are three dramatic moments

in particular that make his obsession clear. The first is when he wants to shoot a scene where the Indigenous women have to drown their children, which they refuse to do. Sebastián tries to convince them that nothing will happen to their children, and he is bewildered as to why he is unable to change their minds. The second is when Daniel is arrested by the police; Sebastián panics, believing his film is in jeopardy, until Costa calms him down by agreeing to bribe the authorities so that Daniel can finish the film, provided he can be arrested again when the filming is done. But what makes this character truly paradoxical is that although he positions himself as a champion of social justice, he does nothing to fight for a wage increase for the natives, he is surprised when they refuse to take part in dangerous scenes, and, when the uprising begins, he is not concer-

ned about the natives or the film crew; he wants to continue shooting the film in an area outside the conflict so that he can achieve his goal.

The supporting characters also shift between the historical present and the history they are filming, and although they do not have the importance of the main characters, they also undergo changes. Alberto (de las Casas), both in the present story and in the film they are making, positions himself with the Indigenous people. Juan (Montesinos), however, exhibits this inclination only when he is in character. As the conflict between the government and the people grows, both actors are keen to abandon the project, revealing that their claims of solidarity in either context were mere words. Alberto ends up forgetting his support for the natives and both abandon the film. The development of these characters, although not as important as Costa's, invites viewers to reflect on the contrast between the actors and the characters they play.

Finally, Antón (Columbus), who has drinking and family problems, is there "for the gold." However, he is very much a professional and gives no trouble on set. He seems to take no position in the conflict. If we equate him with Columbus as portrayed in the film within the film, he would not be on the natives' side. However, throughout the story he always appears resolute, and when the film crew express desires to abandon the production, he is the one who convinces them to stay. When he can no longer change the minds of those who want to leave, he nevertheless remains faithful to the project, and is thus an interesting character even though the changes he undergoes are almost imperceptible: despite his personal limitations, his motivations remain unwavering.

THE DISCURSIVE STYLE OF EVEN THE RAIN/ THE DISCURSIVE STYLE OF ICÍAR BOLAÍN

Bollaín's gaze is constructed out of a common discourse present in all her films. Her style is embedded in the limits of her gaze (her voice) as an au-

teur. Her gaze and her style combine to produce her expression, which is reflected in the way she tells her stories, how she constructs them through language, and the conceptual depth of her discourse.

When talking about discourse, it is worth referring to Chatman's classic book, originally published in 1980, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Chatman, 2021). Any discussion of expression invariably requires a discussion of voice, a concept often confused with point of view, which, as Chatman suggests, is always within the story (2021: 165), when it belongs to the character or accompanies the character as the limited third person "who is without personality or even presence, hence without motivation other than the purely theoretical one of constructing the narrative itself" (Chatman, 2021: 169). The narrative voice is always in the discourse, as it is the contribution that shapes the style from two perspectives, language and discourse. This last aspect is very distinctive in the film analysed, with respect to its form and content.

To tell the story, the screenwriter employs a set of dramatic devices that the director sets out and expresses in a cinematically valuable way, such as the aforementioned device of the film within the film, which Paszkiewicz (2012) defines as the intersection between social and epic cinema, and which operates here on three levels. The first is posited within the film, the one we watch as spectators (Bollaín's film), in the film they shoot about Spanish colonisation (Sebastián and Costa's film) and in the documentary that María is filming about the making of the film. Together, they form an articulation of the past with the present and a relationship between the historical struggle against the Spanish invasion and the contemporary battle against the privatisation of water. A social conflict is depicted in both the present of the film and the historical event represented in the film about the Spanish conquest, and these

two conflicts are interconnected on several occasions (Llorente, 2019).

During the script reading at the hotel, when Antón gets into the character of Columbus and constructs a scene and the other actors all follow him, some of the shots of him talking to the captain are treated visually like parts of a finished sequence. The visual form is that of Sebastián's film in terms of language, as a device within Bollaín's film. Columbus goes up to some of the hotel employees (who are Indigenous) and continues in role, in search of gold. A clash occurs here between the discourses of Sebastián's film and Bollaín's film, but also between the historical events of the Spanish invasion and the contemporary Water War. The director's gaze intersects with Sebastián's and with the gaze of history and imposes itself formally, appropriating it as a discourse.

The scene following this clash is when Sebastián decides to cast Daniel as Hatuey, and it is no coincidence that the device of metacinema is used for the first time immediately after this because it suggests a historical comparison between the past and the present of the film. This is the moment when Columbus explains to the natives the importance of the tribute they must pay to the Spanish crown. After this, we see María filming her "making-of" for the third time, but this time what we are shown is an interview with two of the actors in the film who express their commitment to social justice, although this will ultimately be revealed to be nothing more than words because at the moment of truth, when the Water War turns violent and they fear their lives are in danger, they will demand a ticket back home.

The second time this device is used follows Costa's confrontation with Daniel over the wages for extras. A group of natives are shown sifting the river for gold. Belén, Daniel's daughter, appears a second time here, when the Spaniards punish the native for not paying sufficient tribute. This scene is being shown at the screening of the first week of filming. Antón (Columbus) is watching the shots



Image 6. *Even the Rain* (2010) Iciar Bollaín. Screenshot

and Belén, accompanied by Costa, smiles when they look at each other. Daniel has come for his daughter and he exchanges a glance with Costa, who will subsequently seek him out to apologise to him. After a few transition shots of cars on a country road, we see Sebastián reading the script on the way to the film shoot; we then cut to the sequence he is reading, about an elderly Indigenous woman who is chased, captured and killed by a guard dog. Finally we cut back to Sebastián, who, affected by what he has read, closes the script.

A similar sequence is that of the crucifixion of Hatuey and his allies, who curses the invaders as he faces death. It is the same wooden cross that we see carried by a helicopter at the beginning of the film, when the film's title appears on screen. Just before they choose extras out of the long line of applicants at the casting, a parallel is drawn between the conquistadors of the past (Columbus forcing Hatuey to search for gold to pay in tribute) and the modern conquistadors (Sebastián and Costa).

A third device, mentioned above, is the use of black-and-white images seen through the viewfinder of María's camera, especially the first time she appears, in the car with Sebastián and Costa at the beginning of the film, because it is a scene that constitutes a statement of intent, as it shows them debating the veracity of their adaptation and the historical facts. This device makes María important as the character who realises the consequences of the water issue, when she discovers that Daniel's motivation is to dig a seven-kilo-



Images 7 and 8. *Even the Rain* (2010) Icíar Bollaín. Screenshot



metre ditch to bring water to the community, in the sequence containing the first reference to the Water War in the film. The conflicts of the characters are always present, such as when Sebastián worries about sending Daniel back to prison fearing that he might be killed, a fear he promptly forgets as soon as filming of the sequence of the execution is completed. Similarly, Alberto and Juan (the Dominican friars) do not hesitate to sacrifice their solidarity with the Indigenous people in order to ensure their safety and get out of the country as soon as possible. Meanwhile, Antón, who begins as the most disgraceful character, ultimately proves to be the most supportive of the locals and the most aware of the truth. Finally, Costa gradually develops a conscience, albeit with stops and starts, until Belén's accident, the climax of the film, when he risks his own life and goes to rescue her. This is the moment of greatest tension in the story. Costa initially tells Teresa, Belén's mother, that he will send someone else to look for her, but she will not give up. When Costa begins to relent, Sebastián refuses to let him go. Again, he says, the most important thing is the film. Teresa continues to insist, and again, Costa tells her: "I'll send someone later." When Costa finally agrees to help her, Sebastián tries again to stop him, saying: "This confrontation will be over and forgotten, but our film won't. Our film will last forever."

At this point, when Costa, after much hesitation, agrees to help Teresa, he resolves a moral and ethical conflict that reflects his transformation. They find Belén and take her to the hospital. While waiting, he decides to go to find Daniel, to

tell him what has happened, and he realises that the protest is over and the people have won. Costa seems to emerge as the hero-saviour in the face of the limits of Sebastián's moral discourse, which breaks down and contradicts itself on various occasions. The amoral character at the beginning ends up helping Teresa, Belén and Daniel, establishing a friendship that is sealed with the embrace at the end and the gift of the bottle of *Yaku* (water) in the last sequence, whereby the director demonstrates that characters can improve and learn from their experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

The study of the gaze reveals that the discourse and style present in *Even the Rain* has elements of considerable value when the discourse is transformed into style and that Bollaín's gaze as a director, as a person, as a woman, is not undermined by the absence of female protagonists, but that she is capable of making similar points in stories with male characters. This means that her gaze, her point of view, transcends genders and types of stories. Her narrative voice, her artist's discourse and her distinct style emerge above all else, placing her in a unique and privileged position, as her reference is personal and her gaze, in which her style and her discourse converge, is something that she herself constantly discusses.

One aspect worth highlighting is the position from which the discourse is established, which can be referred to as the discursive distance. The discursive distance is the position adopted in the

story, the place from which the subject matter is observed, studied and analysed, and the actions organised to represent it. Bollaín's first four films maintained a discursive distance where the narrator acted as an observer, leaving spectators free to draw their own conclusions, without imposing value judgements as an artist. In contrast, *Even the Rain* establishes a new relationship in the director's filmography, because although she maintains the discursive distance (having become a hallmark of her work), she proposes a parallel that establishes a comparative relationship between two events, two subjects, two concepts that help us as spectators to understand the nature of the message and to create a clear critique in its construction. This is why *Even the Rain* represents an evolution in Bollaín's style, as this distance is cut down and reconfigured.

Even the Rain is a film that focuses on the tensions produced by social inequalities that form part of those aspects responsible for social conflict, such as immigration and its consequences, the discrimination and mistreatment of women, power relations, and cyclical phenomena resulting from human exploitation and capitalism. Indeed, this film could be described as a protest against social inequality. What makes this film original in Bollaín's filmography is the fact that it is told from the point of view of a group of men who come to realise that their convictions were wrong and that they must unlearn them. While the same discourse decrying inequality is present in all of the director's films, this time the struggle is not structured around gender, an issue that the director has never openly and intentionally highlighted in her films, but it is still the same theme as that of the feminist struggle. ■

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DISCOURSE AND STYLE: ICÍAR BOLLAÍN'S GAZE IN *EVEN THE RAIN*

Abstract

Icíar Bollaín's filmography has come to constitute a necessary and profound oeuvre in Spanish cinema. Her films fit in various movements: social cinema, feminist cinema, and filmmaking with a personal style. In her directorial discourse, her distinct style and her particular view of the world converge in the filmmaking act. An analysis of *Even the Rain* (2010) reveals elements present in the discourse in the form of expressive devices that are common in filmmaking, but which are reworked and reconfigured to become features of her own style. The approach taken in this film represents a leap in her filmography. However, an in-depth analysis shows that the artist's gaze, far from being altered or blurred, is transformed and consolidated into a clear style and a discourse that transcends genres and labels.

Key words

Icíar Bollaín; Discourse; Style; Film Analysis; *Even the Rain*; Narrative gaze.

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DISCURSO Y ESTILO. LA MIRADA DE ICÍAR BOLLAÍN EN *TAMBIÉN LA LLUVIA*

Resumen

El cine de Icíar Bollaín se ha convertido en una obra necesaria y profunda dentro del cine español. Sus películas se enmarcan dentro de diferentes frentes, del cine social, del cine con reivindicaciones feministas y de un cine con sello propio. En el discurso de la directora convergen su estilo diferenciado y su mirada hacia el mundo desde el hecho cinematográfico. Del análisis de *También la lluvia* (2010) se extraen elementos presentes en el discurso a modo de recursos expresivos comunes en el cine, pero renovados y reconfigurados, que ella convierte en elementos de su estilo. La película significa un salto en su filmografía por el enfoque planteado. No obstante, al analizarla a fondo, se descubre que la mirada de la artista lejos de cambiar, de desdibujarse, se transforma y se consolida en un estilo claro y en un discurso que sobrepasa los géneros y las etiquetas.

Palabras clave

Icíar Bollaín; Discurso; Estilo; Análisis cinematográfico; *También la lluvia*; Mirada narrativa.

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THE SITE OF THE AFFECTS: POLYPHONY OF VOICES AND URBAN FRAGILITY IN *LA ALAMEDA 2018* BY ROCÍO HUERTAS

SAMUEL FERNÁNDEZ-PICHEL
SERGIO COBO-DURÁN

I. INTRODUCTION

One day in the spring of 2020, during Spain's first lockdown, the filmmaker and multidisciplinary artist Rocío Huertas was walking through the emblematic neighbourhood of La Alameda, to the north of Seville's historic old town. She had just been to visit her mother, and on her way home she came upon a small group of women "taking the air" in the street in front of their houses.¹ The sight of these women immediately reminded her of a bygone era; the days of a place which, although still very familiar, she felt had disappeared. It was a place that Huertas could no longer find anywhere in the streets that converged on the large garden square in the middle of that neighbourhood. With the absence of the usual throngs of tourists and the suspension of leisure activities brought by the pandemic, the materiality of the constructed space of that place remained, recalling the old La Alameda de Hércules: a theatre of

memories, a visible vector of life stories containing some lessons—and flagrant omissions—related to the urban development of the Andalusian capital (Díaz Parra, 2019). But who really remembers, and how? And what has been forgotten or lost?

La Alameda 2018 (Rocío Huertas, 2020) is, in the words of its director, a "memory device" (Morillo, 2020) that fuses the autobiographical with the collective, the subjectivity of testimony and dream reconstruction with the (supposed) objectivity of archives and journalistic formats, contrasting the evocation of the place against the official narrative of its transformation. At the same time, Huertas's film—her first feature-length work—represents the final stage in a creative process involving more than a decade of transformations of its own: from an unsuccessful fiction film project to her first unfinished attempt at non-fiction, and from there to an expanded cinema exhibition project and back again to linear non-fiction. This long journey was guided by Huertas's explic-

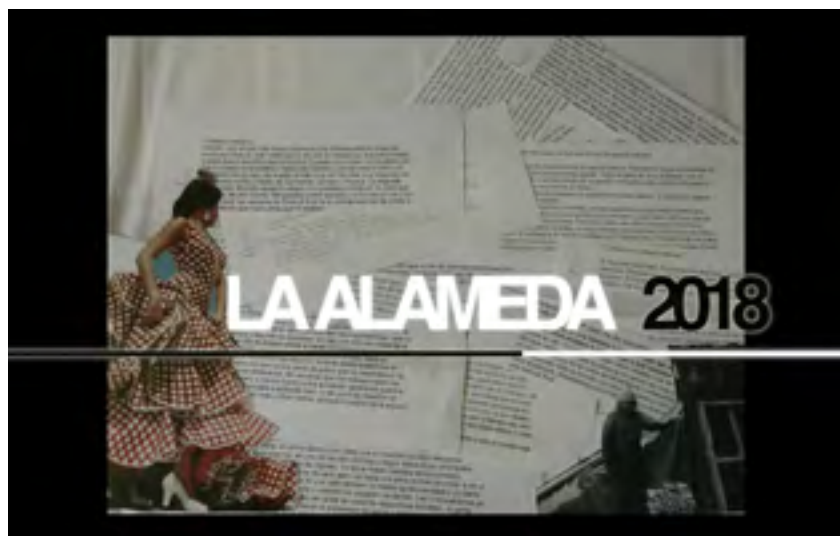


Image 1. *La Alameda 2018* (Rocío Huertas, 2020)

it affiliation with a local underground tradition of projects straddling the line between activism and art which, over the course of the past three decades, have explored La Alameda de Hércules as a site of lived experiences and an ideological battlefield.² *La Alameda 2018* thus brings together a plethora of discourses and memories that are associated with and embodied in an urban space endowed with symbolic value and a strong identity.

This article examines Huertas's film from a theoretical perspective that intersects film analysis with urban studies, drawing heuristic inspiration from an interdisciplinary field of research tentatively labelled *urban cultural studies* (Fraser, 2015). In consonance with the integrative aim of this perspective, this reading of *La Alameda 2018* combines analytical tools of the humanities with conceptual frameworks of social science. Thus, following a brief contextualisation of the filmmaker's career and her artistic project related to La Alameda, the film is analysed in two stages. The first stage focuses on the mechanisms of narrative and mise-en-scène used by Rocío Huertas to connect with the fertile and constantly evolving movement of first-person filmmaking (Lebow, 2012).³ As will be explored below, the use of a polyphony of voices and the filmmaker's (self-)place-

ment in the diegetic space results in a film that is at once an "autobiographical fable" and a "map of a neighbourhood's memory."⁴

Explicitly articulating the shift back and forth between micro- and macro-levels, a common strategy in non-fiction urban self-portraits (Villarme Álvarez, 2015: 103-152), the second stage expands on the strategies outlined in the first, linking them to an exploration of *fragility*. This concept is addressed in this study as a new category, a condition that expands beyond the spatial level to encompass the whole urban experience (Llorente, 2019a). Specifically, the focus of the analysis is on La Alameda's quality as a fragile *memory-scape*: a space at risk of disappearance, which Huertas's film helps to make visible and to preserve. As a kind of summary, the last section of the article outlines some considerations regarding the connections between the biographical approaches of first-person filmmaking, urban fragility and some of the trends of so-called feminist documentary, all of which inform Huertas's *La Alameda 2018* project.

2. CONTEXTUALISATION OF HUERTAS'S FILMMAKING CAREER AND GENESIS OF THE LA ALAMEDA PROJECT

Rocío Huertas is an unorthodox artist with experience in various fields (music, theatre, film, video art, etc.). Her extensive studies took her to various international locations: Berlin (Universität der Künste), London (the M.A. program in Performing Arts at Central Saint Martins College of Arts), Barcelona (the Master's in Digital Arts at Universitat Pompeu Fabra), New York (animation courses at NYU), Prague (performing arts) and Seville (theatre). She has written, directed and adapted plays including Harold Pinter's *Landscape* (Paisa-

jes, 1996) and Calderón de la Barca's *El gran teatro del mundo* (1998). Since 1998, she has been sharing the skills she has acquired in fields such as experimental film and animation in workshops and seminars. As a filmmaker her work includes short films that combine live-action with animation, and fiction with documentary, in titles such as *Muerte y resurrección* [Death and Resurrection] (2001), *Los desheredados* [The Disinherited] (2004), *Descubrimiento y caída de Europa* [Discovery and Fall of Europe] (2007), *Dadda Zeydam Brahim* (2007), *Poemario Normal* [Normal Book of Poems] (2008), *Simbad, el marino, ya no vive aquí* [Sinbad the Sailor Doesn't Live Here Anymore] (2011), and *Les Jeux* [The Games] (2013). Her work has been recognised with awards at film festivals such as Zemos98, Alcances, Peñíscola, Girona, San Roque, and Venezuela. Her productions have also been exhibited in numerous cities around the world, including Gran Canaria, Barcelona, Madrid, Seville, Paris, Tunja (Colombia), Saint Petersburg, Athens, Berlin, Guadalajara (Mexico), Osnabrück (Germany), Montevideo, Havana, Amsterdam, Leeds, and Manchester.

The film analysed in this article evolved over the years in parallel with the filmmaker's career and lived experiences, shaped by the effects of a context of ongoing crisis (from the Great Recession to the COVID-19 pandemic). It was in 2004 that Huertas drafted an initial synopsis for a fiction feature film that never came to be, with the working title *El cuento de las cosas importantes* [The Tale of Important Things]. The director's personal experience as a resident of Seville's popular La Alameda neighbourhood, her desire to explore the tumultuous social reality of the district and the inspiration of Juan Sebastián Bollaín's legendary film *La Alameda* (1978) were already evident in this seminal stage of the project. However, it was not until 2009 that Huertas received a feature film development grant from the Andalusian government to work on the film, which then received further support thanks to its selection for

IT WAS IN 2004 THAT HUERTAS DRAFTED AN INITIAL SYNOPSIS FOR A FICTION FEATURE FILM THAT NEVER CAME TO BE, WITH THE WORKING TITLE *EL CUENTO DE LAS COSAS IMPORTANTES* [THE TALE OF IMPORTANT THINGS]. THE DIRECTOR'S PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AS A RESIDENT OF SEVILLE'S POPULAR LA ALAMEDA NEIGHBOURHOOD, HER DESIRE TO EXPLORE THE TUMULTUOUS SOCIAL REALITY OF THE DISTRICT AND THE INSPIRATION OF JUAN SEBASTIÁN BOLLAÍN'S LEGENDARY FILM *LA ALAMEDA* (1978) WERE ALREADY EVIDENT IN THIS SEMINAL STAGE OF THE PROJECT

the European Audiovisual Entrepreneurs (EAVE) program in 2010. The journey continued a year later with another selection at the 8th Sofia Meetings, and the entry of the project into the script development workshop with the Katapult-European Script Centre in Budapest and the Sources workshop, both of which belong to the MEDIA Sub-programme of Creative Europe. In 2011 it received yet another grant, this time from Spain's Institute of Cinematography and Audiovisual Arts (ICAA) for international co-productions of feature films. Despite all this support, production of the film was halted following the withdrawal of its German co-producer from the project. After this setback, in 2015 the project shifted to the production of a documentary, but still using many of the ideas previously developed for the fiction film. That same year, the project applied unsuccessfully for support from the Andalusian Agency of Cultural Institutions under the title *El otro cuento* [The Other Tale]. This was when the filmmaker defined the hybrid approach combining animation and documentary that would characterise the film's subsequent development, and she began filming with the support of friends and colleagues. By this

stage, the idea of offering a portrait of La Alameda had turned into a project mixing a punk ethic with an experimental approach, without funding of any kind and constituting a clear expression of collective creativity under precarious conditions.

In 2019, an early version of the film was presented as a parallel activity in the context of the 16th Seville European Film Festival with the title *El otro cuento. Proyecto expositivo de cine expandido al espacio público* [The Other Tale: Film Exhibition Project Expanded to Public Space]. According to the filmmaker, it was because she was initially unable to find a satisfying linear form that she decided to develop *El otro cuento* as an immersive experience guided by residents or ex-residents of the neighbourhood. To this end, the film was edited into short pieces organised under different labels and posted on a YouTube channel. These pieces in turn serve as source texts that can be accessed using QR codes inserted into ceramic markers created specifically for the purpose and placed at different points around La Alameda de Hércules. By the year 2020 the project had turned into *La Alameda 2018*, a non-fiction feature film that premièred in an online exhibition format at the Alcances Festival in Cádiz, Spain, followed by its first public screening at the Seville European Film Festival of 2020.

The long process from conception to completion and release of *La Alameda 2018* reflects a number of realities that are implicitly conveyed in the film. These include the difficulties that many female filmmakers face in accessing stable sources of funding and forums for distribution and recognition, especially for experimental works or departures from the traditional fiction format (Oroz, 2018). Although Huertas's film could potentially have a place in the circuit of the so-called *Other Spanish Cinema* movement, there is another obstacle of a different kind that must also be taken into account: the position of Andalusia as a peripheral region outside the *centralist centralism* and *peripheral centralism* that shape the dynamics

of cultural legitimacy of independent, minority or auteur cinema in Spain.

3. A VOICE THAT SPEAKS TO/FOR US: MECHANISMS OF NARRATIVE AND MISE-EN-SCENE IN *LA ALAMEDA 2018*

The stylistic devices and narrative strategies applied to the enunciation in Huertas's film are based on an autobiographical approach sustained by the filmmaker's presence on both the soundtrack (voice) and the screen (body). This points to a key concern of any documentary, which, as Nichols points out, focuses on the quest for a voice: "[t]he 'vision' of the documentarist is more likely a question of voice: how a personal point of view about the historical world manifests itself" (Nichols, 1991: 165). From this perspective, the voice represents both the filmmaker's subjectivity and the inclusion of information and a certain degree of "textual authority" in the interpretation of the film (Piedras, 2014: 83).

According to Nichols (2001), the voice is a basic technique in the rhetoric of the documentary genre. Whether or not it is based on the filmmaker's personal experience, the nature of the voice affects the enunciative construction of the work.⁵ It is an element that has acquired key importance in the wake of the "subjective turn" (Lagos, 2011: 65) in contemporary documentary. It is precisely the quest for a voice that has the effect of blurring the boundaries between the private and the public in many new non-fiction formulas. For theorists like Plantinga, the construction of the documentary depends on three types of voices: formal, open, and poetic.⁶ Voice is thus related to point of view, although these two concepts are not "co-extensive", as point of view is one of the most hotly debated concepts in film theory (Plantinga, 1997: 139). In contrast to the historical authority assigned to a male narrator in the traditional documentary, in Huertas's film the female voice is constructed on a personal, familiar level,



Image 2. *La Alameda 2018* (Rocío Huertas, 2020)

an essential feature of feminist non-fiction (Mayer, 2011: 14). One of the opening scenes reflects this affiliation unequivocally: the recounting of a ludicrous anecdote about a girl being kept on a leash. The episode is based on and built out of the filmmaker's memory and the combination of diverse elements. This approach responds to the use of "the internalized child's voice" as a "hallmark of women's fragmented consciousness" (Lesage, 1999: 347). As the mentor-filmmaker Agnès Varda observes in another of the scenes in the film, contemporary life appears (to us) as a puzzle, a series of overlapping impressions. This poses a challenge to anyone attempting to reconstruct identity through filmmaking. In *La Alameda 2018*, this quest always points towards the declension of the "I" in the collective form and draws on various resources in the process, including animation as an aesthetic-mnemonic support.

Animated footage is used in various ways in non-fiction film, most notably as a means of addressing the complexity of expressing certain top-

ics, either because of an absence of images or because of "the subjectivity of experiences lived on the emotional or psychological level" (Fenoll, 2018: 47). From this perspective, animation has become organically linked to documentary film in recent decades as a preferred means of narrating what cannot be filmed, consolidating the presence of the subjective dimension. *La Alameda 2018* embraces this tradition when its director chooses to use animation to illustrate the dreams shared by the film's social actors as one of the structural principles of the narrative. The construction of the voice enters the realm of the unconscious, abandoning the representation of the real to explore the reality of desire. This transcoding of dream testimony into an animated sequence gives added depth to the profiles of the voice addressing us from the film. As an additional effect, it also enhances the narration, because "the stylization that animation bestows can intensify our perception of the events, as metaphors and vivid imagery in a written memoir do" (Bordwell, 2009). In this way, the decision to reconstruct memories through animation reinforces

IT IS NOT MERELY A QUESTION OF INCLUDING TESTIMONIES; THE INTENTION IS TO ESTABLISH A DIALOGUE THROUGH THE CREATION OF INTERSUBJECTIVE SPACES THAT WILL WORK ON THE MEMORY AND THE UNDERSTANDING OF BOTH THE FILMMAKER AND THE SPECTATORS

this idea of the difficulty of representing memory and intersubjectivity.

The film is divided into five blocks that structure the narrative episodically, but which are dialogically interconnected through an overlapping of the debates and social actors involved. This approach reinforces the articulation of a polyphonic voice based on the combination of voices, on the empathetic framing of the faces and on the depiction of fantasy and dream through the limited animation technique of cut-out figures. The first of the episodes, titled “*Identidad colectiva*” (“Collective Identity”), begins with the testimony of Rosa María Martínez Moreno (an anthropologist who lives in La Alameda) and alludes to the process of identity construction as something “unique, variable, and personal.” Identity here is a collec-

tive, fragmentary, and disjointed construction that signals community as one of the essential features of feminist documentary (Mayer, 2011: 29). This voice emerges through an aggregate effect, through the heteroglossia resulting from the combination of Huertas’s voice-over and the voices of her friends whose bodies appear on screen. In this respect, the director’s frequent appearance in reverse shots is striking; for example, in the interview with writer, playwright, and musician Fernando Mansilla, the chronicler of the *vidas perras* (“dog lives”) of La Alameda, a legend of the neighbourhood and, by extension, of the alternative artistic scene in Seville. Beyond its aesthetic significance, this strategy underscores the value of the interview as a communicative act articulated between the filmmaker’s ethics and the authority of her voice (Plantinga, 2005). What Nichols (1991) would define as *metaobservation*, meaning the presence in front of and behind the camera, is combined with *feminist epistemophilia*: the filmmaker is not positioned or framed alone, because filming is a collective act. It is not merely a question of including testimonies; the intention is to establish a dialogue through the creation of intersubjective spaces that will work on the memory and the understanding of both the filmmaker and the spectators.

Image 3. *La Alameda* 2018 (Rocío Huertas, 2020)



The second block or episode, titled “*Arqueología de la prostitución*” (“Archaeology of Prostitution”), attempts to geographically locate the places that were centres of prostitution in La Alameda de Hércules. The episode begins with a narration by Deborah Santa Cruz de la Jara, a transsexual prostitute who used to work in the neighbourhood, and who still lives there. This block connects with the third, “*Feminización de la pobreza*” (“Feminisation of Poverty”), which engages more explicitly with the economic violence perpetrated against women, examining the debate between abolitionism and the regulation of prostitution, with Hilario Saéz Méndez (a sociologist who belongs to a group called Men for Equality), Erica Bredy (an anthropologist who lives in La Alameda) and Vanesa Casado (a lawyer specialising in gender violence). This is the only place where the filmmaker is not present in either the reverse shot or the audio. In this way, Huertas seems to adopt the distance of an observer, leaving the conversation to the interviewers in the composition.

The fourth block, titled “*Especulación inmobiliaria*” (“Real Estate Speculation”), begins with Luis Moisés Heredia Maya, one of the children born in La Alameda in the 1980s who was subsequently displaced from the neighbourhood. This interview leads into archive footage from *La Alameda* (Juan Sebastián Bollaín, 1978), making the dialogue between the two films explicit. After this brief foray into the archives, Rocío, Vanesa, and Carmen, who live in La Corrala de la Ilusión (a property in the neighbourhood that was temporarily squatted), explain the precarious nature of their existence in the context of the Great Recession. These interviews reflect on the right to housing and constitute one of the most emotive parts of the film. The last block bears the title “*Cultura underground*” and again documents the recollections of friends and mentors of the filmmaker. The film’s final shot, with Rocío Huertas shown on a street of La Alameda with her daughter, closes

es the quest for and representation of a voice: the filmmaker’s voice speaking through others. This conclusion underscores the familiar dynamic of transmission, the need to keep talking over time, as an individual and as a community.

4. LA ALAMEDA AS A FRAGILE MEMORY-SCAPE

The particular polyphony of voices that informs the narrative construction conceived by Rocío Huertas and her co-writer and co-editor, Ana Álvarez Ossorio, is linked from the very beginning of the film to the cartography of La Alameda de Hércules. The credit sequence includes footage from the two group walks through the neighbourhood to present the expanded cinema activity of *El otro cuento*. In addition to serving as an audiovisual record of the event and a guide to the self-referential nature of the project, this sequence clearly establishes its role as a portrait of a community and a space (or a community *in* a space). From this perspective, the literal walk we are shown at the beginning also possesses a figurative or metaphorical meaning: an allusion to the film itself as an urban *memory passage*.

This dimension of the film will be made more obvious immediately afterwards, still in the first episode. In this scene, the filmmaker, while speaking in a voice-over, marks and draws on a map of La Alameda to indicate the diegetic space, the key themes of the film, and the mnemonic power of the enunciation. As Huertas explains in this reminiscence in the form of an animated collage, her original identification with the neighbourhood is situated between references to two local landmarks of popular religious significance and sacred iconography (the images of the basilicas of La Macarena and of Jesús del Gran Poder) and her childhood memory related to social and gender stigma. It is therefore the lived experience of a girl (Huertas herself) that explains the empathetic connection that inspired the La Alameda pro-

ject: the desire to explore the memory of the neighbourhood, with a focus on the endemic precarity and violence suffered by women. However, as the film itself reveals, this core of human interest is indissociable from the demographic transformations and speculative real estate transactions that are reconfiguring the space of La Alameda de Hércules, precipitating an intense activity of erasure.

The ordered nature of the change masks the eradication of the traditional dwellings of the district and their memories, which from that moment are no longer acknowledged. The transitory space is thus also a place where the “filmmaking operation” tracks down the evidence of displacements and disappearances, of enforced invisibilities, evoking the city’s lost past and making it present (Comolli, 2007: 504). This is why, when the Great Recession of the early 2000s led to the acceleration of the urban processes already under way, the two dimensions of the project aligned in the form displayed in *La Alameda 2018*.

Taken together, the common coordinates of reality framing the social actors of Huertas’s non-fiction film can be encompassed in the concept or context of fragility. In the sense it is used here, fragility refers to the experiential and temporal forms of uncertainty that condition not only the human plight, but all the expressions and representations that signify it, as well as the environments in which it exists (Llorente, 2019b: 5-7; Bitrián 2019: 143-144). As Llorente suggests, “through the fragility of lives, of things and of actions, the space itself is infused with fragility” (2019b: 8). This constant transfer between the anthropological and material-territorial dimensions of the city is de-regulated in the contemporary context of neoliberal

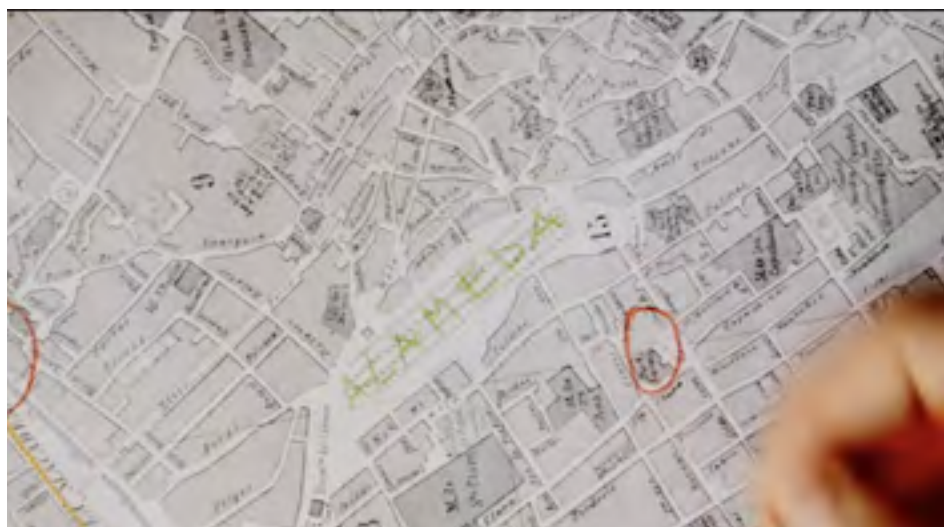


Image 4. *La Alameda 2018* (Rocío Huertas, 2020)

eral municipal governance, based on a conception of power with socio-spatial implications in terms of commodification and its silenced effect, *fragilisation*. This creates the context conducive both to the eradication of memories favoured by the management model for urban policy and to its opposite: the reinforcement of grassroots *counter-memories*. As Bitrián argues, these “non-hegemonic memories” contain a promise and a potential derived from their “capacity to introduce discursive variables into the space that are not agreeable to the social groups directing the process of spatial construction” (Bitrián, 2019: 159).⁷

Huertas’s documentary facilitates the emergence of this local counter-memory through the recovery of the *situated* subjectivity of interpellated bodies. Whether in their condition as displaced or still as residents in the neighbourhood, all these bodies share the same purpose of restoring lived experience. The interweaving of their testimonies, dreams, and perceptions reveals the history hidden inside the urban imaginary of La Alameda de Hércules. In this way, the evocation of children’s playing, of paternal and maternal figures, of prostitution, of trafficking and addiction, of existence as survival, *re-shape* the location, bringing to the time of reception the space made absent by

the establishment of the new *branded city*. This evocative portrait opens up a crack in the ongoing present of consumption and festive evasion in the gentrified and touristified La Alameda.

The challenge to the prevailing narrative of the redevelopment of La Alameda thus emerges out of the attempt to combine a series of life stories that expose the human cost of the *fragilisation* process affecting the neighbourhood. Through their combined effect, these stories rise above their distinctive individual features to acquire a sense of collective agency rooted firmly in the location. The *memory map* becomes a way of responding to this imposed fragility, an intervention in the space realised through the sharing of oral histories. In this sense, life stories are used as a technology of political imagination (Labrador, 2012). The cinematic operation of Huertas's film facilitates this productive collective work of the imagination through mediating strategies: from the adoption of the role of participating documentary maker/(self-)ethnographer by the film's director and crew, to the use of cameras, animation, and archive footage as technologies aimed at revealing a critical imaginary. This mediation is concerned less with establishing a mythical memory of the place than with exploiting the contradictions and emancipating possibilities of nostalgic discourses about it.

Following the relational logic that guides the whole project, the depiction of urban fragility in *La Alameda 2018* steers this act of collective im-

agination in the specific direction of an activism of connections and feelings. It is precisely this affective dimension that has been obliterated by the official discourse of modernisation of this old neighbourhood of Seville. This discourse needs to *externalise* the human cost and to elide everyday life to achieve its objective of management as an abstract operation. The technical, distanced view of urban planning is contrasted with the *passage* of the collective of residents who *remember*. Consequently, the journey proposed by the film embraces a temporality and an ethics in opposition to those of the authorities. La Alameda as filmed by Huertas is rooted in the conception of a different kind of city and urban visuality from the iconic voraciousness of tourist promotion campaigns and videos posted on social media by *prosumers* of urban experiences.

With its vindication of networks of mutual support and community recognition, the film engages with the critical program of feminist urbanism (Col-lectiu Punt 6, 2019). This program invites us to imagine spaces of coexistence where the awareness of the inherent interdependence and vulnerability of existence can mitigate the fragility imposed by the socio-spatial dynamics of neoliberal capitalism. By extension, in the specific case of the image, in *La Alameda 2018* this project to combat zombie capitalism is inspired by the new "poetics of patience and care" described by Martínez Luna (2019: 158). In Huertas's documentary, this patience and care are expressed through a capacity that is not so much contemplative as empathetic, the capacity of the image to capture a space in intimate connection with a public imaginary, thanks to the way the film re-activates threads of the past, bringing them into the present and infusing them with desire. What is at stake here is a place and the memory of its historical habitation. In this context of disappearances, the film is offered as a chorus of *situated* voices. La Alameda itself is spoken and reconstructed through an imaginary that incorporates

FOLLOWING THE RELATIONAL LOGIC THAT GUIDES THE WHOLE PROJECT, THE DEPICTION OF URBAN FRAGILITY IN LA ALAMEDA 2018 STEERS THIS ACT OF COLLECTIVE IMAGINATION IN THE SPECIFIC DIRECTION OF AN ACTIVISM OF CONNECTIONS AND FEELINGS

and transcends the materiality of the physical environment to become a framework for restoring identity. As its own reading suggests, Huertas's film is a voyage that can only be taken collectively. Only in this way is it possible to release the flow of public creativity capable of reconfirming that "the image is still our shared world. It will therefore be through the image that we can elaborate other ways of giving, receiving, and giving back, of engaging with others in the present, of taking time to look at the world" (Martínez Luna, 2019: 161-162).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The information sheet handed out to participants in the two walks presenting the expanded documentary project *El otro cuento* included a statement by Rocío Huertas that left little room for doubt. In just a few lines, the Sevillian director described the project as a contribution to the construction of La Alameda's identity. The same document also referred to the route through the places recovered in the film in terms of a funeral rite, but also as an exoneration of "guilt", a feeling arising from the filmmaker's awareness of her own role in the transformation of La Alameda de Hércules. The "guilty" conscience is the product of the filmmaker's affiliation with a specific demographic and cultural group: local youth of the late 20th century with musical and artistic interests. As Díaz Parra (2019: 125-127) points out, the impact of this group on the process of displacement of the neighbourhood's previous residents marks one of the episodes in the complex chain of migrations that explains the progressive conversion of La Alameda into a middle-class neighbourhood. However, as the film itself shows us, this guilt is assuaged when the story of the individual is fused with the stories of others; when it is inserted into the emotive narrative of bodies to produce a kind of shared knowledge of the fragilisation of living spaces. This is the unique direction taken

by the "distinctive epistemophilia" of the feminist documentary as represented by *La Alameda 2018*: a reinforced sense of ethics, the creation of an affective vortex to "meet the community through a film, to know that you are not alone" (Mayer, 2011: 39).

Huertas's affiliation with feminist documentary is also evident in the reconstructive approach she takes to the dilemma of identity. As has been outlined in this article, the first person in *La Alameda 2018* is articulated in plural, in a collective expression that brings together fragmented voices embodied in the inhabited space of La Alameda de Hércules. This use of the "formal dualism" of first-person filmmaking (Lebow, 2012: 2) clearly overlaps with the ephemeral condition of the urban landscape, upon which layers of memory, dream, and desire are superimposed. In this way, the profound connection between the exchange of life stories and the location turns into an almost literal interpretation of the idea of the subject of the enunciation as a "place" (Cadenas Cañón, 2019: 276). In Huertas's film, the intersubjectivity constructed using various formal devices is also the voice of the place, the gateway, the *memory passage* through La Alameda.

The imaginary commemorated by the film captures not only the traumatic signs of uprooting but also a subversive, joyful call for collective action. This voice of the place calls to us, speaking of the fragility of those who remain in other neighbourhoods, in other cities besieged by consumer logic and the rationalism of late-capitalist urban development. It is in this sense that *La Alameda*

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2018 embarks on a quest for other voices and becomes an intervention, a kind of *affectionate manifesto*: at once a programmatic vindication and a declaration of feelings about the disappearance of a lived space. ■

NOTES

- 1 Much of the information on the *La Alameda* project contained in this article was obtained in correspondence with the filmmaker herself, who provided important sources for our research (dossiers, early edits, etc.) and also gave a long interview recorded with audio notes between the months of June and September 2020. We would like to thank Rocío Huertas for her generosity, and for the opportunity her film gave us to join this collective passage through a neighbourhood and a memory that is also dear to us.
- 2 A full overview of this field of collective reflection, creation, and action can be found in the project *El gran pollo de la Alameda* (Various Authors, 2006), coordinated by Santiago Barber, Victoria Frensel, and María José Romero.
- 3 Although other terms exist for this concept, such as “autobiographical” (Lane, 2002; Renov, 2004) and “subjective” (Rascaroli, 2009), we have chosen the term used by Alisa Lebow. In consonance with Lebow’s argument, we believe that the use of “first person” offers a clearer and more open identification of the multiple hybrid forms of this type of documentary making (from the essay film to autofiction to filmed diaries).
- 4 These two descriptions appear in different documents and reports on the *La Alameda* project.
- 5 In his essay titled *The Voice of Documentary* (1983), Nichols uses the term “voice” in a broad sense; in subsequent publications, he would replace it with the term *argument*. This author contrasts the notion of argument against ideas like objectivity, neutrality or deference (Nichols, 1991: 349).
- 6 According to Plantinga, the construction of voice corresponds to how the filmmaker includes the spectator in the story. The formal voice is associated with

the traditional notion of truth; the open voice questions concepts of reality; the poetic voice, on the other hand, focuses on aesthetic questions.

- 7 In the case of Seville, the successive actions on the perimeter of La Alameda expose the contradictions of urban development in pursuit of the *hypertrophy* of memory described by Huyssen (2002). In contrast to the property frenzy that promotes the preservation and commercial thematisation of many historic districts, the north-east quarter of the now all-but-vanished working-class neighbourhoods in the heart of Seville (*Sevilla Roja*) offers an example of an area subjected to a decisive reconfiguration in the consolidation of the city (Díaz Parra, 2019; Díaz Parra & Jover, 2019; Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2019).

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THE SITE OF THE AFFECTS: POLYPHONY OF VOICES AND URBAN FRAGILITY IN *LA ALAMEDA 2018* BY ROCÍO HUERTAS

Abstract

In the non-fiction film *La Alameda 2018*, artist and filmmaker Rocío Huertas reconstructs a memory-scape of the emblematic Sevillian neighbourhood of La Alameda de Hércules based on her own lived experiences and those of other (former) residents. The film uses a variety of compositional techniques and devices (from animation to interviews and dialoguing with archive footage) to construct a collective, polyphonic voice that speaks of the radical transformation of an urban area besieged by gentrification and mass tourism. This article presents an interpretation of Huertas's film that explores the mise-en-scène and narrative construction of a plural voice (the "I-We") that addresses the audience, while at the same time drawing on the conceptual framework of urban fragility to reveal the intimate connection between the quest for identity in the film and the memory of a place in the process of disappearing.

Key words

Feminist documentary; Non-Fiction; Voice; Polyphony; Urban Memory; Urban Fragility; Animated Documentary.

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EL SITIO DE LOS AFECTOS: POLIFONÍA DE VOCES Y FRAGILIDAD URBANA EN *LA ALAMEDA 2018* DE ROCÍO HUERTAS

Resumen

La Alameda 2018 es una obra de no-ficción en la que la artista y realizadora Rocío Huertas reconstruye un mapa de la memoria del emblemático barrio sevillano de la Alameda de Hércules a partir de sus propias vivencias y las de otros (ex)habitantes de la zona. La película utiliza una variedad de técnicas y recursos compositivos (de la animación a la entrevista y el diálogo con el material de archivo) para componer una voz colectiva y polifónica acerca de la radical transformación de un entorno urbano asediado por la gentrificación y la masificación turística. El presente artículo propone una interpretación de la película de Huertas atendiendo, por un lado, a la puesta en escena y elaboración narrativa de la voz plural (el yo-nosotros) que interpela a los espectadores; por otro lado, se vale del marco conceptual de la fragilidad urbana para desvelar cómo la búsqueda de la identidad, y su manifestación concreta en *La Alameda 2018*, está íntimamente ligada a la memoria de un lugar en trance de desaparición.

Palabras clave

Documental feminista; No-Ficción; Voz; Polifonía; Memoria urbana; Fragilidad urbana; Documental animado.

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POLITICAL AND PERSONAL: PILAR TÁVORA AND CINEMA OF ROMANI REEXSISTENTIA*

TAMARA MOYA JORGE

INTRODUCTION: THE DECOLONIAL OPTION AND CINEMA OF REEXSISTENTIA

Gypsy¹ imaginaries have played a key role in cinema throughout its history and continue to feature in films that have earned critical acclaim both in Spain and internationally, such as *Carmen & Lola* (*Carmen y Lola*, Arantxa Echevarría, 2018), *Between Two Waters* (*Entre dos aguas*, Isaki Lacuesta, 2018), and *Last Days of Spring* (*La última primavera*, Isabel Lambert, 2020). However, members of this racialised community have traditionally been studied as objects of an external gaze rather than as narrators of their own stories on screen.² This reality, which reflects a broader historical process of colonialism that is both internal (through extermination, marginalisation, and silencing) and internalised (in the bodies and subjectivities of people labelled *barbarian* or *primitive*),³ has been underpinned by a colonialist discourse that has foreignised the *Rroma* in their own homelands, on

the assumption that they have always remained outside national or global dynamics. This process, combined with the *gendering* of racialised bodies, has meant that the predominant “gypsy woman” stereotype constructed by white feminists is characterised by submissiveness: “When, as a result of the activism of the Western feminist movement, women begin gaining a voice as individuals with civil and political rights and integrating into the labour market [...], the Other-woman cannot be a public figure of relaxed sexual morals; she must be reinvented” (Filigrana, 2020: 127).

However, although the stereotype is the most visible face of symbolic antigypsism,⁴ it is important to acknowledge that there are forms of ethnocentric rhetoric that “can treat complex cultural phenomena as deviant without recourse to a character stereotype” (Shohat & Stam, 2002: 209), ultimately resulting in the negation of identities and world-views that fall outside the ethnocentric framework, or in other words, the *subalterni-*

sation of “new legitimate spaces of enunciation” (Mignolo, 1995: 39). In this way, the voices of *internal Others* have traditionally been silenced in the hegemonic institutions, and the institution of the cinema is no exception, although it is at least a privileged space for negotiation. Consequently, even today studies of the category of *Romani cinema* exclude the perspectives and voices of the *Rroma* themselves, continuing instead to pursue a historiographic construction of Spanish cinema that ignores them: “In other words, they don’t tend to talk about *gitano* cinema, made by *gitanos*, but *gadjo* cinema, made by non-*gitanos* about what they consider to be *gitano*, which is really just a distorted reflection, the projection of their own prejudices. And meanwhile, films made by *gitanos* are ignored, as are *gitano* stories and characters” (Agüero & Jiménez, 2020: 154).

In the case of contemporary *Rroma* filmmakers in other countries, there is a more extensive bibliography of research on the work of directors like Laura Halilovic (Italy), Sami Mustafa (Kosovo), Katalin Bársony (Hungary), and Tony Gatlif (France) (Ippolito, 2019; Rucker-Chang, 2018; Jordanova, 2008, 2001; Dobрева, 2007; Naficy, 2001). Although there are numerous studies analysing the representations of *Rroma* in Spanish cinema from a perspective critical of stereotypes and mimetic distortions (Arranz, 2015; Villarrea Álvarez, 2009; Santaolalla, 2005; Garrido, 2003; Smith, 2000; Nair, 1999), anti-colonial readings of these representations are relatively recent and still quite limited (Cortés, 2020; Woods Peiró, 2012; Labanyi, 2004). This also suggests that academic studies of non-white Spanish filmmakers in general, and *Rroma* in particular, are virtually non-existent (Moya Jorge, 2020; Smidakova, 2016). The challenge of decoloniality, which as Catherine Walsh points out is not “a theory to follow but a project to take” (Walsh, 2013: 67), and which involves a reassessment of historical power relations not just between nations and continents but also within nations towards their *internal Oth-*

ers, is still unexplored territory in Spanish scholarship. In an effort to take up this challenge, this article considers an object of study conceptualised from a decolonial perspective as *Cinema of Reexistencia*. *Re-ex-sistencia* entails resistance—from the Latin *sistere* (holding firm, repeatedly opposing without giving up ground)—in the present and never giving up the gains in the area of human rights made by peoples who have been historically marginalised for ethno-racial reasons; but it also includes the idea of a *new, outward existence*—a denotation added by the prefixes *re* and *ex*. In this type of filmmaking, associated with processes of decolonisation led by Latin American indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities, the emergence of new symbolic universes may serve somehow to restore the political dimension through a generational contract founded on situated knowledge. This approach brings into play a kind of epistemic insurgence through which to question the forces that have sustained the coloniality of power, being, knowledge, and life that have structured the realities of their people. In this respect, it is important to bear in mind that the *decolonial option* (Garcés, 2016) adopted by this article needs to be understood as just that, i.e., not as the mere application of a theoretical framework, but as a praxis, a method in itself that situates the research epistemically and determines the tools to be used to analyse the object of study: “Here, theory, as knowledge, is understood as incarnated and situated, something that the university too often forgets. Theory—as knowledge—derives from and is formed, molded and shaped in and by actors, histories, territories and places that whether recognized or not, are marked by the colonial horizon of modernity” (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018: 28).

**THEORY, AS KNOWLEDGE, IS
UNDERSTOOD AS INCARNATED AND
SITUATED**

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The main strategies that colonialist discourse has made use of in cinema to stigmatise ethnicised peoples in general, and racialised women in particular, have been the “civilizing mission” and the “denial of coevalness” (Mignolo, 2003), discursive operations that have materialised in a “positing of lack” (Shohat & Stam, 2002). The aim of this article is to contribute to the bulldozing of both of these strategies in the case of the *Rroma* community in Spain. Taking the work of the filmmaker Pilar Távora as a case study, this aim is pursued in two specific ways: first, by identifying points of cinematic enunciation based on “situated epistemologies of feeling” (Periáñez Bolaño, 2016); and secondly, by analysing operations in her films that contribute to processes of decolonisation of ethno-racial modes of representation. To this end, the specific research conducted has included a review of the literature and of Távora’s filmography, an in-depth interview with the filmmaker herself, and an analysis of her latest film, *Helios Gómez, tinta y munición* (Helios Gómez: Ink and Ammunition, 2019).

The in-depth interview, conducted in December 2019, constitutes a key element of this research, based on the view that filmmakers “are not just textual structures or fictions within their films; they also are empirical subjects, situated in the interstices of cultures and film practices, who exist outside and prior to their films” (Naficy, 2001: 4). The film analysis follows Shohat and Stam’s suggestion to try to go further than examining stereotypes when exploring notions of *ethnicity* and *race*, and instead make use of discourse analysis. From this perspective, cinema is understood not only as mimesis or representation but also as enunciation and, as such, the logics of verisimilitude in relation to a homogeneous and immutable ontological reality are less important than the discourses articulated around that reality, and especially their capacity to intervene in

the territory of the real: “A predilection for aural and musical metaphors (voices, intonation, accent, polyphony) reflects a shift in attention from the predominantly visual logical space of modernity (perspective, empirical evidence, domination of the gaze) to a post-modern space of the vocal (oral ethnography, a people’s history, slave narratives)” (Shohat & Stam, 2002: 218).

PILAR TÁVORA: CINEMA AND ROMANI REEXSISTENTIA

As one of just a handful of Spanish female directors who made their first films prior to the 1990s, Pilar Távora is a pioneer in her field. She was born in the working-class neighbourhood of Cerro del Águila in Seville, into a family immersed in the world of bullfighting. As the daughter of Salvador Távora, director of the recognised theatre group La Cuadra de Sevilla, from a young age she was involved in flamenco and the stage, in an artistic atmosphere of opposition to Franco’s regime in the final years of the dictatorship. Her first feature film, *Nanas de Espinas* [Thorny Lullabies] (1984), is a film version of the play of the same name created by La Cuadra and inspired by Federico García Lorca’s play *Blood Wedding* (*Bodas de sangre*, 1931). Her first documentaries explore different aspects of popular Andalusian culture: *Sevilla, viernes santo madrugada* [Seville, Good Friday at Dawn] (1981), *Andalucía entre el incienso y el sudor* [Andalusia between the Incense and the Sweat] (1982), *Úbeda* (1985), *Costaleros* (1985) and *Antonio Divino* (1986) are a few of the short films that reflect Távora’s interest in filming Andalusia from an anthropological perspective: “When I say ‘authentic’ it is because I know what is authentic, because I have lived it as an Andalusian and I know I have the authority to talk about this because it is part of my heritage, part of my lived experience” (Camí-Vela, 2005: 211).

It was because of these early productions that Távora decided to create her own film studio (now

Productora Arbonaida) to be able to develop her own projects and the work of other directors in her hometown: “The only way I could get things off the ground was by producing them myself. There was nobody in Madrid who was interested in anything from Andalusia that wasn’t what was expected of Andalusia. And in Andalusia, producers were busy producing their own things; they didn’t produce other directors.”⁵ The filmmaker defines her work as a defence of Andalusia and of women, topics that overlap in her films and that converge allegorically in the film *Yerma* (1998), her second feature film, and another personal adaptation of one of Lorca’s plays. The gender perspective is also at the heart of other films that she has directed with different themes and in different formats: *Nosotras, femenino plural* [Us, Plural Feminine] (1987), *Mujeres rotas* [Broken Women] (1999), *Eternos interiores* [Eternal Interiors] (2004), *Brujas* [Witches] (2007), and *Madre amadísima* [Beloved Mother] (2008).

Over the course of her career, which has also included work on numerous television programs, plays and flamenco shows, Távora has represented other perspectives on Romani identity, which is always present in her iconographic elements and in the characters she gives a voice to as part of Andalusian identity, that *other* Andalusia of stories that have been silenced and buried under myth. This work is closely related to the activism that has led Távora to participate in political organisations (as an Andalusian Party candidate for Seville’s city council), professional associations (as president of the Association of Independent Producers of Andalusia, and as a member of the Association of Women Filmmakers and Audiovisual Media and of the Audiovisual Council of Andalusia), and social movements (as a public supporter of different causes related to human rights).

Notable among the titles that explore the contributions of *Roma* through topics that intersect with the world of flamenco is the series *Cavilaciones* [Musings] (Canal Sur TV, 1995). This series

OVER THE COURSE OF HER CAREER, WHICH HAS ALSO INCLUDED WORK ON NUMEROUS TELEVISION PROGRAMS, PLAYS AND FLAMENCO SHOWS, TÁVORA HAS REPRESENTED OTHER PERSPECTIVES ON ROMANI IDENTITY

offers an overview of historical documentation on the origins of *cante jondo*, positing a view of this artistic expression as an idiosyncratically Andalusian phenomenon and the flamenco world as “vernacular knowledge” (Periáñez Bolaño, 2016). In *Tablao flamenco: cara y cruz* [Flamenco Stage: Pros and Cons] (2003), Távora makes a clear effort to deconstruct the official history of the world of flamenco venues, exposing a system of exploitation of female bodies (Moya Jorge, 2020).

Two titles that focus on realities of the *Rroma* or the notion of Romani identity as a central theme are *Fregenal, gitanos en romería* [Fregenal, Gitanos on a Pilgrimage] (Pilar Távora, 1989), one of the episodes included in the Televisión Española series *De año en año* [From Year to Year] (1989), and especially the documentary series *Gitanos andaluces* [Andalusian Gitanos] (2012), which offers various portraits of *Rroma* men and women who share their life stories, offering perspectives from different contexts and different positions of contemporary Andalusian society. The discourse of this series is a clearly explicit condemnation of racism, a deconstruction of deep-rooted stereotypes and a call to normalise diversity in Spanish society. Among Távora’s films, the *Rroma* community is featured in *El Mozart gitano* [The Gypsy Mozart] (2012), a portrait of the musician Diego Amador, and in *Helios Gómez, tinta y munición* (2019), the title analysed below. Discussing the evolution towards a more pronounced visibility of the *Rroma* in her films and of her own consciousness as a *Rroma* filmmaker, Távora eloquently explains her personal experience:

When you start working [...] you realise there are no voices, there are very few and the few there are have a responsibility to speak for something that has been poorly told [...]. And your internal process also opens up new directions so that, without leaving behind your Andalusian identity, which is always where I frame everything, you start talking about things you didn't talk about before because you thought the mere fact you did things differently was enough; the fact that you made a *Yerma*, or that you made a series about the history of flamenco, that you made *Costaleros* [...]. But you realise that it isn't, that there is something still missing, that forms part of you, that still hasn't appeared, that you always hope that others will do but nobody does it, and then you start opening that direction of the topic too.⁵

In other words, Távora's cinematic enunciation through embodied knowledge and situated feeling as a *Rroma* filmmaker constitutes a political choice, a decision: "Asserting identity is a political decision, it has nothing to do with having a bigger or smaller percentage of *Rroma*. It has to do with you, but you could also decide to wash your hands of it and make a different life."⁵ Thanks to her decision, adding to the numerous national and international awards that Távora has received over the course of her career as a filmmaker and producer, in recent years she has received awards like the Premio Andaluz Gitano (2012), the Premio Fundación Secretariado Gitano (2016), and tributes in Filmoteca Española in the context of the *O' Dikhipen* film cycle organised by Spain's Romani cultural institute, Instituto de Cultura Gitana (2008-).

HELIOS GÓMEZ, TINTA Y MUNICIÓN: ROMANI CULTURE AS A POLITICAL DECISION

Helios Gómez, tinta y munición is Pilar Távora's most recent film, and it is also the most political of the works in which she has explicitly explored the question of Romani identities. In narrative

terms, this exploration is expressed in two ways. Firstly, she found it necessary to position herself within the story, with recourse to performativity (Nichols, 2013). This is a strategy she did not use in her previous feature film, *Salvador Távora: la excepción* [Salvador Távora: the Exception] (2017), even though that film was about her father. With *Helios...*, however, Távora felt the need to take a more personal approach to tell the story of the avant-garde artist, poet and intellectual, a great unknown not only to the *Rroma*, but in Spanish history in general.⁶ And secondly, the political dimension is evident in the fact that in this film the character's Romani background is not explored as just one more aspect of his identity, but as a central feature of the portrait.

Thus, although the documentary is presented as a biography of Helios Gómez (1905-1956), from the introduction to the film the iconographic dimension of the character is made patently clear. It would be a conventional documentary with a participatory approach and a historical theme if not for the added subplot that operates as a frame story: the tale of a fictional self-reflexive character representing the filmmaker herself in search of inspiration to find a "unifying theme" for her film about Helios Gómez. With this in mind, she sits on the banks of the Guadalquivir River with a book of the writer's collected poetry (Figure 1).

A second character, anonymous and unknown to Távora's protagonist, appears before her, claiming that he also knows about Helios Gómez. Indeed, in her conversation with this character, who at the end of the film will be revealed to be an illusion, he provides her with biographical information about Helios that suggests omniscience. In other words, this character possesses more information than either the narrator-protagonist or the documentary research, giving the story a metaleptic dimension. Viewers soon realise that this mysterious character is intended to function as a kind of mirror for the identity of the filmmaker's character, adding another layer for interpreting



Figure 1. Still frame from *Helios Gómez, tinta y munición*

her process of political consciousness and identification with everything that Helios represents. This interpretation is supported by the confrontational position in which the two characters are placed in the frame, but also by the performance of the actor chosen for the role, whose resemblance to Helios in the extant photos of the artist is more than obvious. Finally, the lighting chosen, which enhances the reflections of the sun, and subsequently of the overhead lamps on the water of the river, contributes to the creation of an ethereal atmosphere and the visual metaphor of a mirror (Figure 1).

The frame story then leads into the more conventional documentary part of the film, based on personal interviews combined with archive footage, this time without the use of a narrating voice-over. The presence of the first interviewee, Helios Gómez's son, keeps alive the family memory of the artist, who died in the 1950s. In this first interview, the character is positioned ideologically as a *Rroma*, an Andalusian, and a supporter of the Spanish Republic. This last aspect is

underscored by the music chosen for the visual transition to both historical and contemporary archive images: "*Banderas republicanas*," a tangos sung by the *cantaora* Carmen Linares. The song's lyrics make reference to the Triana neighbourhood of Seville: "*Triana, Triana, qué bonita está Triana, cuando le ponen al puente las banderas republicanas*" ["Triana, Triana, how pretty Triana

is, when the Republican flags are raised on the bridge"]. In this way, the pre-Franco past and the contemporary era are fused together into a single diegetic time-frame.

It is thus clear that the setting for the fictional subplot was purposefully chosen. In addition to the diegetic justification that Helios Gómez lived in Triana, this part of Seville is a very specific location that triggers a whole iconography associated with the *Rroma* community. The bridge that connects this working-class neighbourhood with the rest of Seville evokes a memory which, like the memory of the character in question, must be recovered through the culture of the district itself. The Triana neighbourhood was an old ghetto lo-

Figure 2. Still frame from *Helios Gómez, tinta y munición*



cated on the left bank of the Guadalquivir River, a place known historically for the intermixing of different marginalised racialised groups—*Rroma*, Arabs, and sub-Saharan Africans—and poorer non-*Rroma* families. This is the place where “ethnomusicologists locate the origin of the first flamenco *tonás*, derived from the first *soleá* songs,” the place where, in short, “Andalusian folklore was first expressed in flamenco” (Filigrana, 2020: 82). This is referred to explicitly by the character who represents Helios at the end of the film: “This bridge, a witness to our history, with the mighty Guadalquivir, great and deep in Andalusia and like the dark-sounding *cantes*.”

However, in addition, by adding the pro-Republican political dimension, Triana in particular and Seville in general are semantically distanced in the film from the connotations this setting subsequently acquired under the Franco regime (1939–1975).⁷ In the documentary, the Andalusian capital is redefined as a synonym for modernity prior to that episode of Spanish history, and as a cultural hub that produced some of the most important avant-garde artists of the early 20th century.

EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE AND SITUATED FEELING

The first mention of Helios Gómez’s Romani background returns us to the documentary’s fictional subplot in which the character representing Helios and the character Pilar discuss their Romani identity:

“The *gitanos*, that clear central pillar; the cellars of Triana. The *gitanos* of iron and fire, of the *cante*, of communal living and solidarity.

“What was it that Lorca said? That they were ‘the most elevated, the most profound, and the most aristocratic.’ And Helios Gómez, as a *gitano*, you have to feel him, it isn’t enough just to know him.

This conversation, in addition to invoking Romani mythology, also identifies a key point of reference: Federico García Lorca, an author who

has marked Pilar Távora’s oeuvre since her first productions but who at the same time triggers a memory of identity not only of the *Rroma*—as he was one of the *Rroma*-phile writers of the so-called Generation of 1927⁸—but of one half of Spain, i.e., the victims murdered by Franco’s Nationalists. However, Pilar’s character also introduces another important element: “as a *gitano*, you have to *feel him*.” This appeal to ways of understanding the world through empiricism and not solely through rationalism is a recurring trope in her work, appealing to what Iván Perriáñez Bolaño argues is the need to understand flamenco culture as an “epistemology of situated feeling.” For Perriáñez Bolaño, this involves “recognising the capacity of feelings and experiences in the production of knowledge [...], a different knowledge that overcomes the dualities of objectivity/subjectivity, as subjectivity connects with shared experiences and not with methods of validation and the objectives of rational Western science” (Perriáñez Bolaño, 2016: 32). In this case, this epistemology emerges through the symbolic function served by the character played by the actor who, as he forms part of a reality perceived only by Pilar’s character, although his presence appears physical, alludes to the mythical as a valid dimension for knowledge. In a way, the strategy of establishing a conversation between the filmmaker-character and the Helios Gómez character exemplifies the need for an epistemic operation that approaches knowledge through conversation as a form of “learning in relation to others.” The explanation offered by Perriáñez Bolaño in relation to writing could thus be applied to the process undertaken by Pilar Távora as the extra-diegetic filmmaker faced with the task of making a documentary about this artist:

The relational is relevant insofar as it shifts the importance from the writer to the level of those who participate in the conversation: at least, of the voices and positions of the co-protagonists who take part in it, of the narratives and perspec-

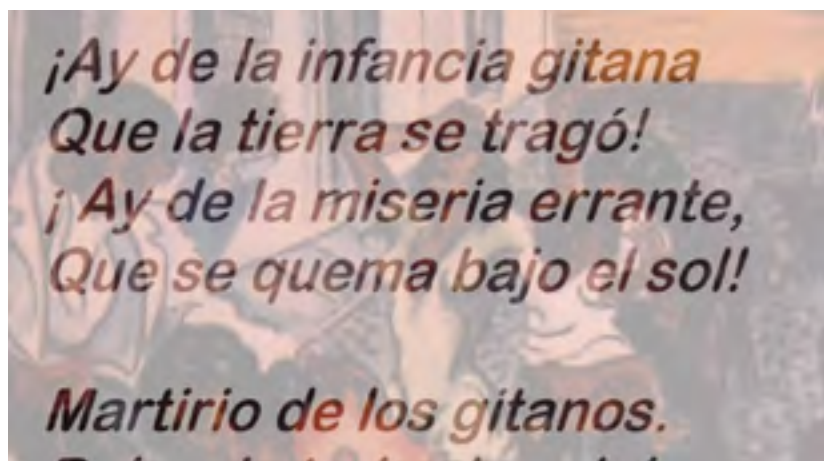


Figure 3. Still frame from *Helios Gómez, tinta y munición*

tives of the authors who appear in the text, of the author's voice; in this case, through a collective self to which I ascribe myself and through which I represent myself (Periáñez Bolaño, 2016: 33).

As this same author suggests, this epistemology of situated feeling requires a language "that acknowledges the plural nature of feelings" (Periáñez Bolaño, 2016: 33), which are not limited to the visual. This could be the reasoning behind the recurring technique used in the documentary of overlapping meaningful elements in different languages and formats, such as the interviewees' voices, flamenco music, archive photographs, paintings, sculptures, posters, newspaper headlines, moving images and written text (Figure 3), as if, in effect, the character's contribution could only be revealed through synaesthetic operations of knowledge.

HISTORICAL MEMORY AND THE DECOLONIAL OPTION

All of the biographical dimensions of the Helios Gómez character intersect in the film discourse with his status as a *Rroma* artist understood as a political choice. This involved standing up for the poorer classes and for Andalusia, but it also entailed theorising about Romani identity, as an activist stance that could constitute an alternati-

ve to the internal conflicts of the left. As one of the interviewees mentions, for Helios the Spanish Civil War would serve to liberate the *Rroma* from their traditional condition as a marginalised community. From a sociological point of view, it is worth noting the interpretation given to one of the bleakest episodes in Helios Gómez's life: his time in a concentration camp and his many incarcerations. As Diego Fernández, Director of the Instituto de Cultura Gitana, recalls in his interview: "The cell he had in Modelo [Prison, Barcelona] was eight metres, and it held eight inmates. Anyway, the mantra he always used in extreme situations was 'it's all the same, I'm a *gitano*.' His own cell-mates couldn't understand his resilience, but when he said that, what he was really saying was that they can't kill the *gitanos* twice; we are survivors and so he could bear it all with an enormous resilience."

This observation, which begins with the view of the speaker on screen, changes to a voice-over while we cut to archive footage (Figure 4) that evokes the memory of the *Rroma*, referring not just to the historical repression of Spain's *Rroma* community, but also to another episode contemporaneous to the diegetic timeframe: the *Samudaripen*, or Romani genocide during the Holocaust. The Romani's transnational identity is made equally clear in various ways. One example of this is when the character representing Helios in the fictional part of the film refers to the European context of the inter-war period as "that *gitano* Europe," extrapolating the repression in Spain to other countries. But another is the transnational dimension of Helios Gómez himself, who lived in various European countries and immersed himself in different avant-garde movements. Finally, the commitment to this transnational identity is made patently clear with the inclusion of the official Romani anthem "Gelem, Gelem" at the end of the film.



Figure 4. Still frame from *Helios Gómez, tinta y munición*

The discourse that serves to explain Helios's attitude as described in this part of the narrative is related to what the sociologist Nicolás Jiménez González identifies as one of the foundations on which Romani cultural values are built: *biophilia*, or a love of life. As the author explains, "the set of biophilic values include our playful attitude towards existence, our vitality and optimism. Biophilia is what makes us live in the present because, as a traditional Hindu proverb puts it, 'life is a bridge to cross over, not a place to build a house.' Here we have a principle in opposition to the pessimism and self-denial of the Western Christian tradition: life is not a vale of tears, but a bridge to cross" (Jiménez González, 2002: 18).

This semantic field related to linguistic metaphors alluding to the *passage* of human beings through the world, in addition to being reinforced by a *mise-en-scène* that positions the bridge over the Guadalquivir as another character in the story, is also present in the characters' conversations:

"Art is so important for blazing new trails, and it is so important to start with what is yours."

"With your own tools, with your own cultural, symbolic and experiential codes."

"The universal is always more when it starts from your own roots."

"And in Helios that was clear: he never abandoned the universe of his own identity to communicate with the world."

The dialectical process unfolding over the course of these fictional sequences makes it clear that this mirror-character resembling Helios is the culmination of the process of identification with Pilar's character. Indeed, the filmmaker and the artist share more than just a common homeland and ethnic background: while he was a "Sevillian pioneer" of avant-garde art in the early 20th century, she holds the same status in the field of filmmaking, and the two also share a political commitment and a way of understanding art as a tool for social activism, as well as an

interest in new forms that draw on traditional signifiers of Andalusian culture. The shot that concludes the fictional subplot, and also the documentary—which ends with the appearance of the film’s producer on screen—renders this mimetic connection between the filmmaker and the Helios character explicit through overlapping images that fuse their two gazes (Figure 5). The idea of re-incarnation through the recovery of memory, i.e., of somehow restoring his image, is also made explicit at this point when the artist’s son concludes: “My father didn’t die when he died.”

This film contributes to the strategy of promoting *positive models* launched by *Roma* community associations as a way of transcoding the *gypsy* signifier, a campaign that Távora herself has taken part in: “I feel that blazing the trail with Helios is blazing a lot of trails, because Helios also understood his *gitano* identity as a political matter, a social matter, and that is essential, because otherwise you’re stuck in ethnicity and you never get out of it.”⁵ It is also important because it constructs a discourse that restores the character of Helios Gómez to the narrative not only of Romani history but also of anti-Francoist history, as a way of bulldozing the discursive strategy of the denial of coevalness by exploring the participation of *Roma* men and women in a key episode in Span-

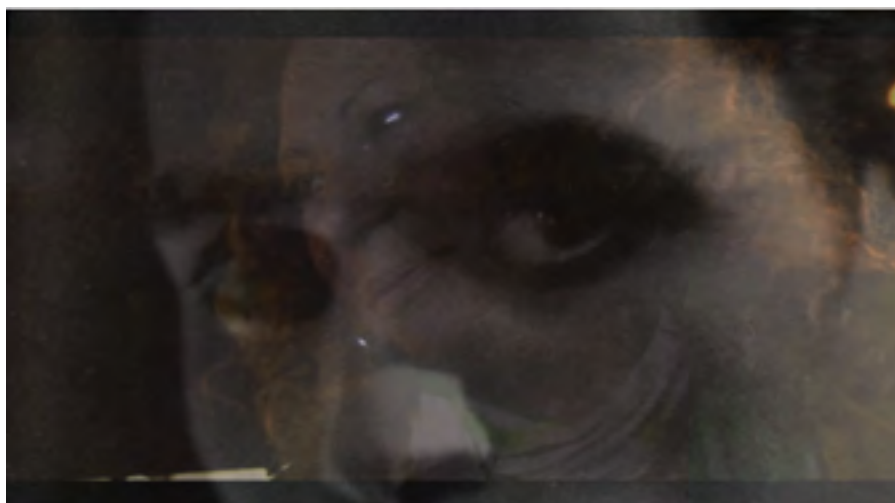
ish history like the Civil War. This is made clear in the dedication included in the final credits: “Peoples who lose their memory are doomed to repeat their mistakes. In memory of all those buried in the unmarked graves of oblivion.”

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The analysis of *Roma* self-representation in cinema can shed light on discourses founded on epistemologies of feeling situated in this community, a question that has so far been largely unexplored in Spain. This can contribute to a problematisation of the phenomenon of *Spanish women’s cinema* by considering Other gazes on and from those who have been constructed as historical alterities (Moya Jorge, 2020). In this sense, what is being described here is a kind of act-cinema with a decolonising function on two levels: external and internal. Through its recovery of memories, its exploration of contemporary struggles and its reflections on the future visibility of the *Roma*, the film *Helios Gómez, tinta y munición* contributes to processes of national decoloniality. But at the same time, it forms part of a decolonisation process undertaken by its director, who, through her enunciation based on an awareness of the embodied knowledge of the I/we of the *Roma* woman/women,

deconstructs the effects of internalised coloniality on bodies and subjectivities. Citing Mignolo once again, it could be argued that by feeling the colonial wound, i.e., by becoming aware of “our places in the normative systems that regulate ‘normality’ through racial classification” (Mignolo, 2015: 446), the filmmaker studied here engages in a *detachment* process that constitutes a resurgence characteristic of *Cinema of Reexistencia*. By constructing discourses on the historical memory of Ro-

Figure 5. Still frame from *Helios Gómez, tinta y munición*



mani realities through situated feeling and embodied knowledge, Távora's films contribute to what Filigrana describes as the need to "free ourselves from the colonisation of our identities in order to construct forms of struggle through them that can lead us to the emancipation and sovereignty of our lives and the territory we inhabit" (Filigrana, 2019: 273). In this sense, Távora's *Cinema of Reexistencia* takes up the line of argument pursued by decolonial feminisms of the global South, of "thinkers and activists committed to processes of struggle, resistances and/or of women together with their communities" (Ochoa Muñoz & Garzón Martínez, 2019: 15) for whom thinking, feeling and doing all form part of the same struggle. ■

NOTES

- * This study forms part of the research project *Cartografías del cine de movilidad en el Atlántico hispánico* [Cinematic Cartographies of Mobility in the Hispanic Atlantic] (CSO2017-85290-P), financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation and co-financed with funds from the ERDF. The research has been made possible by a University Professor Training (FPU) scholarship from the Government of Spain.
- 1 The term *gitano* ("gypsy") is the general name with which the *Roma* self-identify in Spain and a few other countries. This community is considered the biggest ethnic minority in Europe in general, and in Spain in particular. Around one million Spaniards are *Roma*, and close to 40 percent of them live in the Andalusia region (Ministerio de Sanidad, Servicios Sociales e Igualdad, 2016).
- 2 It is worth noting here the comparison made by Carlos Aguilar and Anita Haas in their book *Flamenco y cine* (2019) between processes of cultural legitimisation of jazz and the African American population in the United States and of flamenco and the *Roma* in Spain.
- 3 It is important to distinguish here between the notions of colonisation and coloniality, as the latter, applicable to our time, "refers to old patterns of power that emerge in the context of colonialism and redefine culture, work, intersubjective relations, aspirations of being, common un-

derstandings, and the production of knowledge" (Mendoza, 2019: 57).

- 4 The European Alliance against Antigypsyism describes this concept as a specific form of racism targeting the Romani population. This notion encompasses the systemic disadvantages faced by *Rroma* in Europe as a consequence of historical and structural racism (Alliance against Antigypsyism, 2016).
- 5 In a personal interview on 4 December 2019 in Madrid.
- 6 For more biographical information about Helios Gómez and the importance of his political discourse for the Romani movement, see Agüero & Jiménez (2020), or Sierra (2018).
- 7 The Francoist historiographic narrative posited a historical line of continuity between the Franco regime and the *Reconquista* of Spain in the 15th century, which sought to erase the Muslim past of the country's south. See Wheeler's analysis of Sevillian imaginaries in 16th-century theatre and painting: "significant intellectual, physical and emotional labour was nevertheless invested into disavowing this Islamic heritage. Hence, for example, there was a marked tendency to refer to the river as the Betis rather than the Guadalquivir in order to stress the city's Roman as opposed to Arabic past" (Wheeler, 2020:15).
- 8 Following Román Gubern, it could be argued that the association between Federico García Lorca and Helios Gómez was related to the position of the latter among a small group of intellectuals who situated their work about the poorer classes in a context in which most Spanish intellectuals, although "against the traditional-absolutist Spain responsible for the massacre of North Africans [...] at the same time lived disconnected from the Spain of the common people," and were thus effectively a "sociologically pure elite" (Gubern, 1999: 10).

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POLITICAL AND PERSONAL: PILAR TÁVORA AND CINEMA OF ROMANI REEXSISTENTIA

Abstract

While gypsy imaginaries have played a key role in the representation of a certain idea of national identity throughout the history of Spanish cinema, the social subjects, i.e., the *Rroma*, have traditionally been relegated to the position of object of the gaze rather than narrators of their own filmic discourses. This research considers contemporary self-representations in cinema based on an epistemology of situated feeling (Periáñez Bolaño, 2016) among the *Rroma* people and analyses the operations evident in films that contribute to processes of decolonisation of ethno-racial modes of representation. To this end, this article approaches the work of the Spanish filmmaker Pilar Távora from a decolonial perspective and contextualises it in what is described here as *Cinema of Romani Reexsistentia*. The methods used to achieve these objectives include a review of the literature and of the director's filmography, an in-depth interview with the filmmaker herself and an analysis of her latest film, *Helios Gómez, tinta y munición* (2019).

Key words

Self-representation; Decolonial feminism; Racism; Antigypsyism; *Rroma*; Spanish cinema; *Reexsistentia*.

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POLÍTICO Y PERSONAL: PILAR TÁVORA Y EL CINE DE LA REEXSISTENTIA GITANA

Resumen

Mientras que los imaginarios gitanos han jugado un papel fundamental en la representación de una cierta idea de identidad nacional desde los comienzos del cine español, los sujetos sociales pertenecientes al pueblo gitano han sido tradicionalmente relegados a la posición de objeto de la mirada pero no atendidos como enunciadores de discursos filmicos. Esta investigación atiende las autorrepresentaciones cinematográficas contemporáneas que parten de una *epistemología del sentir situada* (Periáñez Bolaño, 2016) en el pueblo gitano y analiza las operaciones inscritas en las obras cinematográficas que contribuyen a los procesos de descolonización de los modos de representación étnico-raciales. Para ello el artículo aborda la obra de la realizadora española Pilar Távora desde una perspectiva descolonial y la inscribe dentro de lo que hemos denominado un *cine de la reexsistentia gitana*. La metodología utilizada para alcanzar estos objetivos es la revisión bibliográfica y filmográfica, la entrevista en profundidad con la cineasta y el análisis filmico de su última película, *Helios Gómez, tinta y munición* (2019).

Palabras clave

Autorrepresentación; Feminismo descolonial; Racismo; Antigitanismo; Pueblo gitano; Xine español; *Reexsistentia*.

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DIALOGUE

“WE ARE PAYING TRIBUTE TO YOU”

Interview with

BELÉN FUNES

BELÉN FUNES

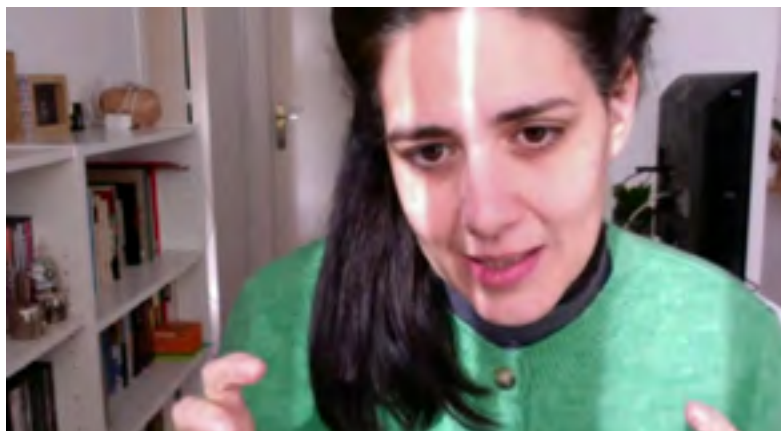
“WE’RE PAYING TRIBUTE TO YOU”*

SHAILA GARCÍA CATALÁN
 AARÓN RODRÍGUEZ SERRANO

Her Twitter profile banner greets you with the boys from Louis Malle’s *Au revoir les enfants* [Goodbye, Children] (1987) looking off frame, along with a photo booth picture from the 1990s of a teenage Belén Funes with adorable shadows under her eyes, hoop earrings, and a high ponytail, staring straight into the camera with an expression of startling self-assurance and conviction. But the most striking feature of this shot is her mouth, which is firmly closed, discreetly holding back a grimace, a smile, a laugh, or a word. This picture, the kind you would normally take in a hurry and without great results for your passport photo or student card, continues to be a strong and intense representation of the Belén Funes we know today. The screenwriter and director cut her teeth on film shoots, experiencing first-hand the emergence of what scholars like Arnau Vilaró (2021) describe as “a new Barcelona school”. Funes was third assistant director to Mar Coll on *Three Days with the Family* (*Tres dies amb la família*, 2009), a film considered to have spearheaded this new wave of female filmmakers. She subsequently worked on Elena Trapé’s crew on *Blog* (2010) and Nely Reguera’s on *María y los demás* (2016). She was also assistant director for Jaume Balagueró’s *Sleep Tight* (*Mientras duermes*, 2011), Paco Plaza’s *Rec 3* (2012) and three films by Isabel Coixet: *Yesterday Never Ends* (*Ayer no termina*

nunca, 2013), *Endless Night* (2015), and *The Bookshop* (2017). Coixet recognised her talent and backed the production of her first short films, *Sara a la fuga* [Sara on the Run] (2015) and *La inútil* [The Useless] (2016), through her studio, Wasabi Films. A decade after the foundational moment of working on the emblematic *Three Days with the Family*, Funes released *A Thief’s Daughter* (*La hija de un ladrón*, 2019), for which she won the 2020 Goya award for Best New Director, presented to her at the ceremony by Carla Simón and Arantxa Echevarría. Before winning the award, Echevarría had given Funes an amulet in recognition of the fact that she was the only woman nominated for a director’s award that year.

Belén Funes finds writing something of a painful process, but the script she co-wrote with Marçal Cebrian for *A Thief’s Daughter* won a Gaudí Award. She looks at society through a handheld camera that follows the tremors of the human body. Her films latch onto female protagonists who know what it means to be stuck in a rut; they carry wounds but are not fragile. She is never condescending. She needs to learn and to listen, but she never forces anyone to speak. The camera waits for their outbursts, but never provokes them, respecting what is left unsaid. Her characters are alone, somewhat bewildered, hoping or in a hurry, but never with time to think.



Belén during the interview

They can only keep going, move on, and endure the harshness of the moment. They never allow themselves to fall. Her work captures innocence lost, and precarity on social, emotional and subjective levels. Her films are about faces and institutions, processes, protocols, passageways, living spaces (with no home) and journeys (with no way out). Her enunciative voice underpins an emotional ambivalence that cannot be resolved: her characters want to escape from their families, and yet at the same time they refuse to stop believing in the promise of the family bond. Every shot is a work of subtlety: there is rage, silence, sometimes trap music, but it is never overstated, underscored or obvious; instead, there are watery eyes, reactions, and hints pointing to something outside the frame. And there are always details hidden in corners, serving to construct the real.

The first shot in Belén Funes's filmography is of a *Sara* escaping from an institution, while the last (so far) is another *Sara* standing in court. We talk to her about the repetition—the creative thread that runs through all her work—and about the invention—and the burden of being a *promising* Spanish filmmaker. We meet her online on a cold but sunny day in Barcelona, which takes us from that photo booth picture to a lockdown aesthetic characterised by an intense ray of sunlight lining her face while she offers us the most precious gift: time taken out to talk to us. ■

Do you feel that you are part of a generation? We're taking it for granted that there is a generation of female directors but we don't know what it looks like from the inside. Do you consider yourself to be part of a movement, or are you an autonomous creator?

I totally feel that I'm part of a group. I don't know if it's a generation because I think generations are something that are talked about after the fact. It may be too current and too soon to speak of a generation. What I do feel a part of is a group of friends. I think that is the change that we've been able to introduce. All those years of solitude, of women creating on their own because they didn't have a network of contacts, those years are over. Suddenly, a moment of solidarity has begun. Many of the female filmmakers I admire are my mentors and certainly their names could be placed under that heading of a *generation of female directors*: Carla Simón with *Summer 1993* (*Estiu 1993*, 2017), Elena Martín with *Júlia* (*ist* (2017), Clara Roquet with *Libertad* (2021), and Celia Rico with *Journey to a Mother's Room* (*Viaje al cuarto de una madre*, 2018). For me, these are my most immediate mentor. It's something I am very grateful for and I think it's very important that your mentor shouldn't be someone on the other side of the ocean. It should be someone you can call up on the phone and arrange to meet for coffee so that you can explain to them that you've got problems with a script, or that you're not getting any support to shoot a film and to work out what can be done. I feel that I'm part of a very *powerful*, very interesting group. But I think of them as my friends.

There is a lot of talk about the question of second and third films, about how you will consolidate your work, and what will happen there. Is that something you talk about with other female directors? Is how to keep moving forward and lay-

ing the foundations a concern that exists in your group of creators?

I think we're all working on our second films. Carla (Simón) just finished filming *Alcarrás* (2022), Nelly Reguera just finished filming *El nieto* (2022), Elena Martín is working on her second film, and I'm writing my second film. We're all in this process and I think it's something that concerns us because there was one thing that obsessed us when people talked about this generation of female filmmakers and it was that we didn't want it to turn into a fad; we wanted it to turn into a reality. We wanted to make movies. With your first film you always run the risk that it will stop there, with one film that you made one day. And that's something that we wouldn't want to happen. There's another important issue, apart from the career path, which is the pressure we feel on us. For better or worse we've all made films that have been important or have received support from critics and audiences. They are films that haven't gone unnoticed, that have had a certain degree of attention in the media. And you wonder whether this might never happen again, whether you'll make another film that will make an impact, whether the next film will turn out well or not. That pressure is something I think unites us; we've been able to share it, and, like all fears, when pressure is shared it is neutralised. We know it exists, we have it hanging over our heads, and we try to deal with it every day.

Is the challenge of making a second film harder than making the first?

When you create your first work nobody is expecting anything of you; it's just you at home, writing a film, making it. What really saddens me is that it's very hard to recapture that feeling again. Everybody is waiting to see what story you have to tell now. The other day I read an interview with Lucrecia Martel, an Argentine filmmaker that I admire a lot, who directed *La ciénaga* [The Swamp] (2001), *The Headless Woman* (La mujer sin cabeza, 2008), and *Zama* (2017). She said it was strange that people

should be expected to have a story to tell every year and I totally agree with that. To have something to tell and to find what it is you want to tell people in a film is complicated; it takes time, maybe more than a year. In a way, when you tackle your second film, the audience has already seen your first film and there is an expectation, however small it might be. There's an added pressure.

In an interview with Jara Yáñez you said that you realised that Sara, the woman in your first short film, was very probably the girl in your first feature film. It seems as if you're tracking down this Sara in your writing.

It's curious, because you carry characters around the same way you carry obsessions around. I realised afterwards that I was always working on the same thing. My partner is a screenwriter—he was the screenwriter for *A Thief's Daughter*—and we write together. One day I said to him: "Marçal [Cebrian], we're making a very different film," and he laughed and said no, that we weren't making a film that was very different from what I'd done before [laughs], but that there wasn't anything wrong with not being versatile. Versatility doesn't interest me. Directors don't have to be versatile; they have to be good. But I think that deep down we carry around obsessions, characters, settings, contexts, themes... I'm really interested in how individuals relate to the system and I've realised that my next film will come back to this theme again.

You began your filmography with *Sara a la fuga* (2015), about a girl escaping from an institution. And she escapes out a window... (Figure 1)

Now that you say it I think you're right, but at the time it was irrational. I did it because I thought the film should start with someone climbing out a window. But you have analysed it, you've taken all this and constructed a story and it seems to me to be much more fascinating and interesting.

We get the impression that for the first time, a generation (our generation) is being discussed through a portrait of an individual, a family and a society. Do you all have that impression of being voices for these people on the other side, giving them tools so they can think about their history?

I don't know if we're giving you tools, but what I do know is that we're paying tribute to you. For me that's the most important thing. Lately, I've had doubts about the transformative power of cinema. I used to be very sure of it. Not now. But I do think we make films with very little money and in very precarious conditions but that they're able to pay tribute the people on the other side. I think there is a dialogue going on. I feel that we're really obsessed with reality, which perhaps is something that not all female filmmakers want to do. We like to portray what is going on around us. And I feel that when you talk about what you know, the films take on a much more universal dimension because they are full of details. For example, if you analyse *Summer 1993*, it's a film of details, a story that reaches you because it's true and because it's made with the heart and with the gut. I feel that we're able to communicate with people who perhaps, at a given point, haven't found any films that they can really hold onto. This is really important, finding films that you can cling to and say: "this is something true, there is something valuable here and I want to keep this."

It is nice to see how you use your friends' films as examples rather than your own.

I'm surrounded by very talented women whose work is featured in a multitude of festivals, in scriptwriting workshops ... It makes me tremendously happy.

Can you tell us about how you all work in the scriptwriting workshops?

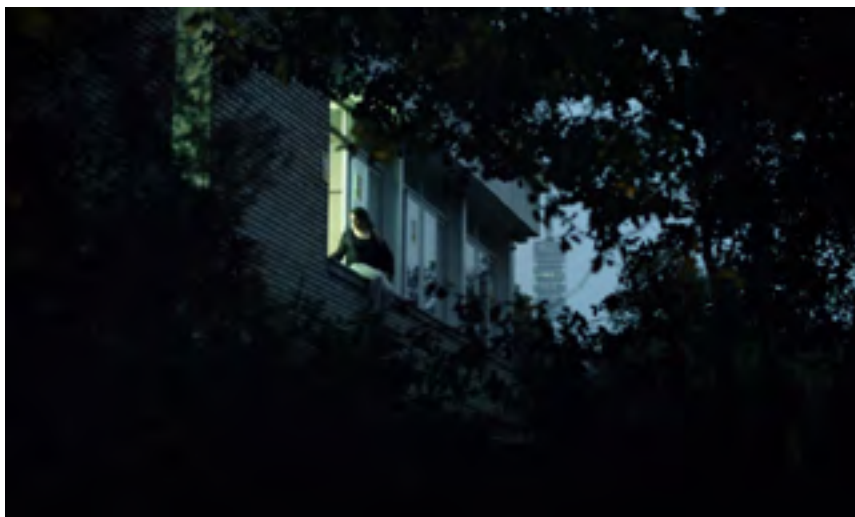


Figure 1. The opening shot in the short film *Sara a la fuga* by Belén Funes (2015)

They're script consulting sessions while you're writing a project. You apply and if you're lucky they select you, advise you, go over your writing and help you with the script development process. For example, TorinoFilmLab (TFL) and Laboratorio de Guiones del Mediterráneo are European initiatives, where you apply with what you're working on at the time: a treatment, a synopsis, whatever. You send your previous work, and if you're lucky they choose you. It's a lovely place to talk about your film and to continue writing it.

And do you create together? Is there a network of dialogue between your projects?

Yes. We send each other the scripts. When one of us is doing a casting call for a film, we talk about what each actor inspires in us, what they could bring to each character. And we talk about salaries, which is very important. There's a network. It's really lovely because it didn't exist before. When I met Josefina Molina—who directed *Melodrama infernal* [Infernal Melodrama] (1969), *Vera, un cuento cruel* [Vera, a Cruel Story] (1973), and *Esquilache* (1989)—at the International Film Week in Valladolid (SEMINCI) a few years ago, she told me: "You girls make me envious to see you here together, with your network. I wish we'd had that." Pioneering directors like her,



Figure 2. Plaits to disguise the wounds in *Sara a la fuga* and in *A Thief's Daughter*

or Cecilia Bartolomé, who made *Margarita y el lobo* [Margarita and the Wolf] (1969), *Vámonos, Bárbara* [Let's Go, Barbara, 1978], and *Lejos de África* [Far from Africa] (1996), were very much alone.

Are you all in contact with other regions of Spain? Is there any kind of European network?

I feel that I have a very intense relationship with Catalan filmmakers because I see them, because I have them nearby. But one thing that has happened to me doing those script workshops, for example, is that you'll meet an Italian filmmaker who

is trying to get her film off the ground, who gives you her script, and you discuss it, and so the network keeps growing. I have contact with female filmmakers in Galicia, who are mainly involved in making documentaries. But the thing is that there are a lot of us in Catalonia; I don't know why that has happened. I saw Ainhoa Rodríguez's *Mighty Flash* (Destello Bravio, 2021) and it seemed to me to be a film that is right off the map. Rodríguez is a filmmaker with Extremaduran roots who has managed to make a great film. She has received great reviews and I'm keen to learn from her.

Hairstyling seems to be a visual motif that doesn't point directly at a meaning but is there, operating on a subtle level. Brushing hair is present in *The Spirit of the Beehive* (*El espíritu de la colmena*, Victor Erice, 1973), and in *Cría cuervos* (Carlos Saura, 1976). It is present in *The Innocence* (*La innocència*, Lucía Alemany, 2019), and in *Schoolgirls* (*Las niñas*, Pilar Palomero, 2020). And plaits are in your filmography (Figure 2).

It is true that there is something about brushing your hair, about doing plaits, that for me inevitably makes me feel that this is a character who is trying to pretend that things are not as bad as they really are. Plaits convey an idea of wanting to pretend, to tell people that everything is so good that she has had time to plait her hair because it's completely normal and her life is fine. The treatment of hair in *A Thief's Daughter* is crucial. We burn Greta [Fernández]'s hair! Apart from the aesthetic aspect, the bleaching was a very powerful tool to distance the character from Greta Fernández, and so that we were clear that we weren't filming Greta. Because she has nothing to do with Sara: the two of them have lived completely different lives. She probably liked that blonde hair too, to look different, like *someone else* (Figure 3). But it is true that as a character, her hair was the way that Sara had of telling the world: "here I am and I'm fine; everything is working out and everything will work out." That plait is a struggle to be normal.

She plaits her hair when she is going to meet her father.

Of course, to show him that she's fine, and how well everything is going. For example, when she goes to see Dani at the bus station, she does up her hair with some hairpins and puts on eyeliner (Figure 4). Because she is still a twenty-two year-old girl. She had it in her head the whole time: she was a twenty-two year-old girl. A kid with a kid.

You talk about the desire to be normal. Is this a key quality of your characters?

For me it's very important because sometimes I see films where the characters have longings that I can't understand and that disconnects me a little from the story. They have desires that make no sense to me. When I decided to write the film it was very important to understand everything that was happening to Sara on a very deep level. I wanted to know exactly what it was that was happening to her. In the end we found that what the character wanted was a normal life, to be a woman with a job, with a house, with a family. What she was asking for, her demand, was for a middle-class life, but the middle class has become a very difficult place to get into. Here desire was to be a normal person. There are a lot of homages, but for me there's one film that is especially

Figure 4. Hair done up for Dani in *A Thief's Daughter*



Figure 3. The bleach in her hair constructed a distance between Greta Fernández and Sara

important and that is *Rosetta* by the Dardenne brothers (1999). Rosetta is lying in bed after dinner with a friend and is repeating over and over: "My name is Rosetta, I've got a friend, I'm a normal person" (Figure 5). They seemed to me to be really endearing characters who want something that is so simple but at the same time so difficult.

How do you approach a film shoot?

When we write a script, we try to test it out in reality, before filming. If there is a girl who has to work cleaning car parks, before filming we find out who cleans car parks. In fact, the women who appear in the opening sequences of *A Thief's Daughter* are real cleaners (Figure 6). What we try to do is invent a story and camouflage it in reality. We contact the cleaners, we find out where they are, we tell them what we want to do and they decide whether



Figure 5. The desire to be normal. In *Rosetta* (Jean-Pierre Dardenne & Luc Dardenne, 1999), the protagonist tells herself: “Your name is Rosetta. My name is Rosetta. You found a job. I found a job. You’ve got a friend. I’ve got a friend. You have a normal life. I have a normal life. You won’t fall in the rut. I won’t fall in the rut. Good night. Good night.” At the end of *A Thief’s Daughter* the judge asks Sara: “What is your brother like?” With tears in her eyes she replies: “Well, he’s a normal person, like me”

they want to be in the film or not. And we camouflage the actors inside this group of cleaners. We play dress-up. Obviously, when people in Spain see the film they see Greta Fernández and they know she’s an actor, but it’s fascinating to see what happens outside Spain because they don’t know her so well. In one talk someone asked me how we had found this cleaner to play the part, and I thought: “Well, we must have got something right!”

Returning to the question, what we do every day on the film shoot, depending on what we’re going to film, we have a basic storyboard, an idea for the camera that we discuss beforehand with the cinematographer. There’s one sequence in particular where someone enters an apartment. The idea of the sequence is that someone is invading the space. We positioned the actors, we asked them to move around the space, and based on that we worked out the camera positions. I don’t work with a very rigid storyboard, especially because in *A Thief’s Daughter* more than half of the cast were not professional actors. It seemed ridiculous for me to

tell them: “this is your mark and you have to stand here because I have this rigid plan.” What we did try to do was to play with the confusion. The sequences come out of that mould. I try not to go in with a very fixed idea; I just have an idea for the sequence and I try to place the camera where I think it will work best.

And how do you approach directing the actors?

Eduard [Fernández] always said to me: “you don’t want us to look like actors, right?” That’s what I

Figure 6. Much of the cast of *A Thief’s Daughter* is made up of non-professional actors



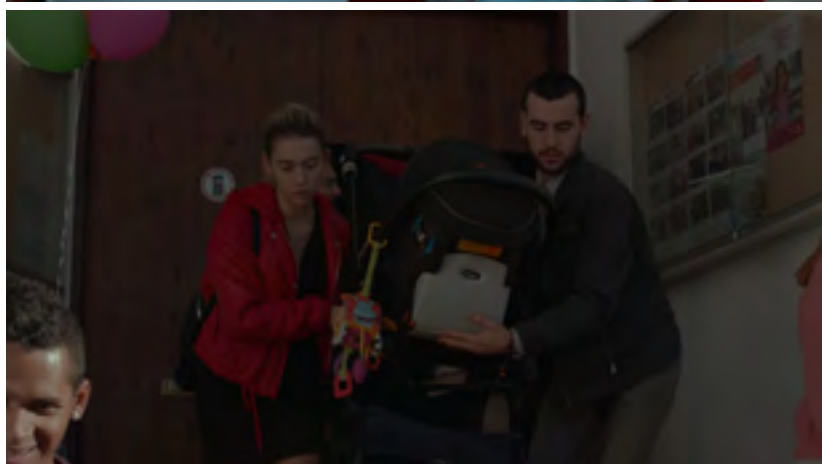


Figure 7. *A Thief's Daughter*

wanted. And when we screened the film outside Spain it was funny because they said that the protagonists looked similar. We would tell them that Eduard and Greta are father and daughter and they would be surprised. It's very different to watch the film without knowing who those two are. Greta

saved my life. She's such an incredible actor that she could take this character who is nothing like her and transform her into something you can really feel.

Sara (Greta Fernández) is always carrying something; every step she takes seems hard for her.

In pre-production there is always a moment when it seems like the film will never get done because everything is a problem. We started asking ourselves what if she didn't have a baby, because having a baby on a film set is a lot of trouble. I was so stressed that I asked myself whether the story would be the same if we took out the baby, but I realised it wouldn't. A shot of a woman carrying a child, bags and a trolley (Figure 7) is not the same as a woman who isn't carrying anything.

And there is a lot of walking around in *A Thief's Daughter*.

Yes, it's true. And a lot of people from Barcelona ask me where we filmed it, and we filmed it in Barcelona! That made us reflect on how unfamiliar cities can be to the people who live in them.

What bothers you about discussions of women's cinema? What do you hate to be asked in interviews? Or what would you ask of critics?

I would love it if critics would stop asking me what it means to be a woman and instead ask me about my film. It's my personal war. With the best of intentions sometimes we run the risk of talking constantly about how my greatest achievement is being a woman when it's something that doesn't even have to do with me. I would like the chance to answer questions like the ones you've asked me:

how I work on the film set, for example. I want to talk about this because my male counterparts talk about how they make their films, but I only talk about what it means to be a woman. And it's a question that is always asked with good intentions. Women directors have different opinions on this. For example, Clara Roquet once said in an interview that she would never get tired of talking about what it means to be a woman until it is normalised. And she's right, too. It's something we need to normalise, because we're going to talk about it, we're going to say it, so that it's present in the media. But I miss being able to talk about the film's formal approach, among other things.

What limits do you find in your filmmaking? What is a barrier for you?

I find it really hard to get out of my comfort zone. I can't write a film that is totally different from everything I've done just because I'm interested in it. It raises doubts for me, I go round in circles, what am I doing telling this story, what do I have to contribute to a film like this. That's why I don't see versatility as so important. I've found that most filmmakers I like have made the same film over and over. Éric Rohmer made the same film thirteen times and I find every one of them enthralling. There are days when I think I wish I was more daring.

Some directors—Guillermo del Toro, for example—say that in reality they're always making the same film, as if they were skirting around something that pushes them away.

It's highly probable that a filmmaker could be a person who constantly skirts around the same idea. I mentioned Rohmer because he's very obvious, but Cassavetes, the Dardenne brothers, and Ken Loach, for example, have obsessions and make similar films. Even in the films of Andrea Arnold there's a map of places that are very close to each other. It's something that obsesses me every time I write a new film: I believe it's going to work really well and I only think I mustn't get scared on the

day of filming, that I have to go onto the set and believe that it will work out well. And if it doesn't, it won't matter because I will have done it.

What would you say to a student who wants to become a filmmaker?

Anyone in their first year at university, or their second year... who wants to make a film, I would say that I want to see it, I want to see the story they have to tell, because I'm sure it's going to be fantastic. That they should try to learn with humility. You learn how to make films not just by directing; there are a lot of ways to approach it that I think are also really nice, such as being in or working on films by your fellow students to learn things that you want to repeat or that you would never do. They should create a work team and it should serve for everyone to learn together. And very importantly, they should celebrate the successes of their friends. They're not our enemies, they're our friends, and we should be happy when good things happen to them. Filmmaking is a very competitive industry and it has been put in our heads that we have to compete against each other, but in reality there is room for everyone.

NOTES

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“WE ARE PAYING TRIBUTE TO YOU”. DIALOGUE WITH BELÉN FUNES

Abstract

Interview with Belén Funes, filmmaker. Her first feature film, *A Thief's Daughter* (La hija de un ladrón, 2019), won the Goya Award for Best New Director.

Key words

Filmmaker; Female director; Barcelona School; New director.

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«OS ESTAMOS SALUDANDO». DIÁLOGO CON BELÉN FUNES

Resumen

Entrevista a Belén Funes, cineasta. Con su primer largometraje, *La hija de un ladrón* (2019), ganó el Goya a Mejor Dirección Novel.

Palabras clave

Cineasta; Directora; Escuela de Barcelona; Dirección novel.

Autores

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(DIS)AGREEMENTS

**WOMAN,
SPANISH CINEMA,
2022**

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I introduction

AARÓN RODRÍGUEZ SERRANO

As outlined in the introductory article, this issue of *L'Atalante* is intended to offer a kind of explicit exploration of the current relationship between cinema and women in the Spanish context. This is an open question that poses problems for critics, for creation, for exhibition and, of course, for audiences. As we all know, it is a question with many dimensions—many more than could ever be explored exhaustively, or even touched on—and it requires an approach that is active, constant and highly complex, balanced between the legacies of the past—with the shameful exclusion of women from positions in film creation, but also with the silence or complicity of a historiography and an academy often determined to look the other way—and a future that can be viewed as hopeful but nevertheless still fragile.

Indeed, until quite recently, it was quite possible to complete an official university program in audiovisual communication or read a film journal

without coming across more than a limited number of women. The same could be said of our own work as researchers in the field. It is therefore hoped that this modest proposal may serve as a simple attempt to reflect a little *more* and a little *better* on issues that frankly continue to look rather complex and challenging to delve into.

Of course, the exploration offered here might be accused of being inevitably contextual, a product of its time—sceptics and scoffers might even disparage it as an attempt to be *fashionable*—or a belated effort to embrace the seminal studies of cultural scholars and the latest reflections on cyberfeminism, gender fluidity and a long list of other phenomena. In any case, this study cannot possibly ignore the issues raised by events like the #Me Too movement or the questioning of traditional masculinities. The same could also be said of the rise of a group of female directors, critics and theorists who have shaken our culture's

foundations and invited us to ponder, for better or worse, *the gender question*, or, if you will, *the gender in question*. There seems to be a greater need than ever to find men and women to talk about this issue, to listen to them and consider their views. This is why this edition of the (Dis)Agreements section seemed to us to be absolutely necessary to take the pulse of our own institutions—and perhaps, with a little luck, the pulses of our readers as well.

Four especially important names in contemporary film and film studies have kindly agreed to take part in this discussion. The first is Mariona Borrull, a regular contributor to film journals such

as *El Antepenúltimo Mohicano*, *Fotogramas*, *Serializados*, *Sensacine* and *Otros Cines Europa*. Also taking part is the feminist theorist Mireia Iniesta, a regular lecturer at the Escuela Educa Tu Mirada film school, vice-president of the Catalan Federation of Film Clubs, programmer for the *39 Escalons* film club and programming manager for the Barcelona Craft Film Festival. Our third participant is Ramón Alfonso, a film critic for the journal *Dirigido por*, co-director of the Quartmetratges film festival and the author of around a dozen books on cinema. And finally, Eva Rivera, director of the Dock of the Bay Music Documentary Film Festival, will also contribute to the discussion. ■

Arima (Jaione Camborda, 2019)



discussion

I. Do you believe it is possible to speak of a new generation of Spanish female creators? Could that label be expanded beyond directors to include other areas of filmmaking, such as production, distribution, criticism, etc.?

Mariona Borrull

The generational handover that has received the most attention in the last decade would perhaps have been *Les amigues de l'Àgata* [Àgata's Friends] (Laia Alabart, Alba Cros, Laura Rius, Marta Verheyen, 2015), the indie phenomenon that will be turning eight years old in a few months. It's an interesting exercise to examine the influence this film has had. On the one hand, there is still a need to assess how its production model expanded the possibilities for filmmaking then and now. It was a profoundly collective and unfinished film that nevertheless seems to expand and continue endlessly. On the other hand, there have been so many Àgata style films made at Pompeu [Fabra University, in Barcelona] since 2014... You inevitably have to ponder what we've carried on with from the original idea. Was it the stories of a bunch of preoccupied girls, or was it the irreverence of recording the blast of wind in the face and all those blurted-out, disjointed statements, packed to the gills with truth?

In any case, I do think that my own answer reflects the extent to which we have neglected, and still neglect, the older generations that have been making films in these years. It's not just millennial female directors who are now sitting with the men on the board of the Goya Awards, with all that that implies (I'm thinking particularly of Mar Coll). In our constant quest for something new, we also run the risk of overlooking some women who are doing great work promoting film culture in Spain today: people who have never posed and never will pose on the flashy pages of the annual round-up in *Fotogramas* magazine, but who work in the shadows where nobody praises them for

what they do. A few that come to mind are Núria Giménez Lorang, who organises the La Inesperada documentary festival of "rarities" with Miquel Martí Freixas, or Mar Canet and her idealistic municipal film theatre project, or even someone like Gloria Fernández, who works on breaking down the codes with Enrique Garcelán to ensure that Spanish film history is not just white. There will be a handover, I guess, but sometimes despite it all we leave the people who are still there very much alone.

Mireia Iniesta

A few years ago, an acclaimed Spanish director told me that in the 1990s he taught classes at a well-known film school. Apparently, there were a lot more girls than boys in the classes, and the final projects by the girls were of much better quality. The school, which would give out awards for the best projects, took the decision to systematically award male students who didn't deserve it in order to avoid a flagrant gender imbalance in favour of their female classmates. The same director explained to me that he was surprised after seeing so many young women studying cinema that there were so few that got into the film industry. It's obvious that fewer women get into the industry, and it is also obvious that this trend is changing. But it is important to remember that visibility has played a vital role in all this. There are more young women directing, and more female producers who are daring to back films directed by women, but this has been happening for a number of years now. I think what is increasing is the visibility. Spanish cinema and the *other Spanish cinema* directed by women is getting more attention thanks to vari-



Canto cósmico. Niño de Elche (Leire Apellaniz, Marc Sempere Moya, 2021)

ous factors: the impact of social media platforms and programming at festivals that are not specifically dedicated to films made by women, which are programming more of their films, and online platforms that give these films a much longer life than they get on the festival circuit; the work of women's associations that have been fighting for years to promote the work we do in every area of the Spanish audiovisual industry; and the sudden appearance of all kinds of magazines, blogs, workshops, podcasts, etc., in the context of the fourth wave of feminism, which help give visibility to cultural products made by women.

To answer your question, yes, in my opinion it is possible to speak of a generation of women filmmakers who have a voice of their own. We'll have to wait and see how many of them manage to get past their first feature film, how many reach a mass audience, like Pilar Palomero has, and how many keep working. That is the real challenge.

In terms of the other areas you refer to in your question, I know that there are some bril-

liant women working in production, like Belí Martínez, for example. But if I'm going to be honest, the area I know best out of all the ones you mentioned is criticism. And in that field, the panorama is heart-breaking. If you look at how many women are writing in film magazines, the number is extraordinarily low compared to the number of male critics who are writing. There are more female critics than there were twenty years ago, and a few are in senior positions at film magazines, of course, but they are still given a lot less space. There are women who write really well and hardly anyone knows them. Especially if they're feminists. A number of publications will just shut the door in their faces.

Ramón Alfonso

It's obvious that in the last few years women have finally managed to break down many of the barriers traditionally imposed by the industry as a clear reflection, or an extension, of what is happening in society at large, and to present their work as

filmmakers. It is an extraordinary advance, without doubt, and although I'm not sure that we can speak exactly of a generation, or even that it is necessary to do so, at least from an *artistic* point of view, it seems undeniable that there is a group of artists: the first group that doesn't constitute a kind of one-off case in a context inevitably dominated by the male gaze. Of course, the emergence of new female filmmakers is directly connected to the increasing prominence of women in numerous occupations in audiovisual production.

Eva Rivera

I think it is possible to speak of a new generation of Spanish female creators. Suddenly, we are seeing the work of new female filmmakers making it onto screens at different festivals. We're finding more women with a place in the industry, at festivals, like Elena Martín Gimeno, Elisa Celda, Claudia Negro, Ainhoa Rodríguez, Núria Giménez, Pilar Palomero... I can think of a lot of things I've seen recently. I think there have been different waves within this group of female directors, women so young who are suddenly telling stories and finding a place in Spanish cinema. In music documentaries, it has been hard until now to find women working in the genre. Some who come to mind are Leire Apellániz with *Canto cósmico. Niño de Elche*

[*Cosmic Chant: Niño de Elche*] (2021), and Marina Lameiro with *Dardara* (2021), which are extremely interesting films in my area. There is also a whole bunch of women directors like Meritxell Collé, Diana Toucedo, Carla Simón, Elena López, María Elorza, Carolina Astudillo... all these women who are suddenly creating a way of making films with themes and a point of view of their own as creators. I don't think it's possible to speak of "women's cinema"—I don't really agree with that label—but there is certainly "cinema made by women".

In production, I am seeing female producers (Leire Apellániz, again), and in Galicia we have inspirations like Belí Martínez. These women are committing to a new way of making films. Maybe in the area of exhibition there are fewer; I think it's a field that is going through a difficult time right now. It is true that there are new exhibition models (I'm thinking of Numax or Zumzeig), but I don't see that many women. As for critics, I don't know if there is a new generation writing about cinema. I think the ones who were there before are there now. I'm thinking of Eulália Iglesias, Desirée de Fez, Jara Yáñez... but after that I run out of names. I don't know whether we can speak of a generation of women in that area of analysis and interpretation of women in filmmaking and criticism.

We're All Going to the World's Fair (Jane Schoenbrun, 2021)



2. In your experience as a viewer, and from a strictly personal, generational perspective, what have been the most significant Spanish films of recent years?

Mariona Borrull

I have to admit to feeling a momentary twinge of rejection when I see the inclusion of “generational” in the question. It’s clear that my environment has shaped my tastes and interests, but I refuse to equate the strictly personal with a question of the sociocultural climate. I want to stress this point, although it doesn’t mean that they have no correlation at all. In fact, I keep coming back to *Magical Girl* (Carlos Vermut, 2014) and *The Sacred Spirit* (Espíritu sagrado, Chema García Ibarra, 2021), two films that have managed to push the expressive limits of recent Spanish cinema to breaking point... One sublimates the filmmaking of Haneke and Bergman, placing them at the service of a little anime witch. The other recycles a very Spanish brand of absurdity based on the chaotic logic of the meme. Are they generational films? I don’t think so. Do they sing the praises of any of the causes I support (feminist, queer, environmental)? No, they don’t. In fact, there isn’t even a trace of me in these films. Maybe it’s for that very reason that they’ve survived so long in my head.

Mireia Iniesta

I find it hard to answer this question. There are so many, and it would be so easy to unfairly omit a few. I apologise to anyone I leave out whose work is as essential as the ones I mention here. I think the films of Virginia García del Pino, María Cañas, Pilar Monsell, Diana Toucedo, Pilar Palomero, Xiana do Teixeiro, Ingrid Guardiola, María Antón Cabot, Nuria Giménez, María Sanz, Emma Tusell, Blanca Camell, Laura Herrero, Mercedes Álvarez, Belén Funes, Elena Martín, Lucía Vasallo, and Ainhoa Rodríguez are all essential. And my beloved Carolina Astudillo, and Jaione Camborda, who left me shaking since her first short. And I’m still shaking.

Ramón Alfonso

I remember finding Elena Trapé’s *Distances* (Les distàncies, 2018) very interesting, perhaps because I got the impression that it spoke very clearly and honestly, without artifice or smug verbiage, about certain idiosyncratic feelings of sorrow and emptiness of a particular generation that is now around forty years old. The film depicts the reunion of a group of friends in Berlin and offers a beautifully disillusioned gaze on an existential wandering that inevitably leads down a dead-end street.

Eva Rivera

Something that I’ve loved was, for example, *My Mexican Bretzel* (Núria Giménez, 2020), as well as *Schoolgirls* (Las niñas, Pilar Palomero, 2020), and more recently, *Mighty Flash* (Destello Bravío, Ainhoa Rodríguez, 2021). I would also include Clara Roquet’s *Libertad* (2021), Júlia de Paz’s *Ama* (2021) and Margarita Ledo’s *Nación* (2020). They are things I’ve seen that I’ve loved. In the field of music documentaries, I’d like to mention Marina Lameiro and Leire Apellániz again, and also *Men-sese* (2019) by Remedios Malvárez. Among international music documentaries, I’d like to highlight the work of Marie Losier (for example, *Felix in Wonderland* (2019) and *The Ballad of Genesis and Lady Jaye* (2011)). However, I would love to be able to talk about more women making music documentaries.



Las distancias (Elena Trapé, 2018)

3. The debate over the feminine in contemporary cinema often confronts us with labels like “women’s cinema”. Do you think it is a useful approach, or conversely, should we opt for new approaches to exploring the relationships between gender and film?

Mariona Borrull

“Women’s cinema” is in itself a harmless label that doesn’t mean anything. It can therefore be used by institutions to conflate the feminist and the feminine, so that it only refers to women who can identify themselves with the collective. It’s a self-serving niche, an emblem that can hide darker repressions based on purplewashing: the queer movement arose precisely to combat the decline of a struggle that no longer spoke of material conditions, but only of *women* (see Nancy Fraser, Avtar Brah). I do think it is productive to try to find words for the queer solution. According to Sara Ahmed, we can trace a queer perspective from the constant reorientation towards the

hegemonic. It’s an impossible experience to master, in permanent *otherness*, always pushing us further. A double program on queer issues: from *Orlando* (Sally Potter, 1992) to *We’re All Going to the World’s Fair* (Jane Schoenbrun, 2021). Neither of these two films fits into the LGTB category.

Mireia Iniesta

The “women’s cinema” concept seems to me to be obsolete, stale, binarist, hetero-cis, and outdated. And above all, unfairly marginalising. I think it’s a monumental mistake for gender studies to take that perspective. As long ago as 1985, in her essay *Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women’s Cinema*, Teresa de Lauretis pointed to the need to

question this approach, warning of the danger implicit in the essentialism contained in the “women’s cinema” label. At a time when feminism is more accepted among men and when the gender binary, although still solid, is not quite as monolithic as it used to be, it is imperative to work from other more inclusive perspectives with transfeminism, queer theory and other ideas that can pull apart the “women’s cinema” label once and for all.

It is true that there are a number of themes that at any given time, due to the socio-political context, may affect and/or interest women more. Motherhood, for example. Motherhood was the final taboo associated with the female body and in the last few years that taboo has collapsed. The appearance of straightforward stories and books about remorseful mothers has given rise to a wave of “Mother Courage” figures in all film genres, especially in Spanish cinema. Women with unconventional lives who try to make amends to be good mothers who, like the spaghetti western heroes who can hit a target from half a mile away, have superhuman powers when it comes to protecting their offspring. The most recent example of this that occurs to me is the latest film by Manuel Martín Cuenca, *The Daughter* (La hija, 2021).

Is it women’s cinema? The answer is NO. It’s a topic that affects women and that is directed at society as a whole.

Ramón Alfonso

I think that above all, those of us who have grown up reading and hearing certain simple solutions—or comfortable clichés—over and over again to describe all kinds of issues, even if only

for a moment, inevitably tend to label things with meaningless names or headings. It’s ridiculous, really. Luckily, many people of the generation after mine—I’m forty years old—seem to me to be liberated from certain bad habits and ideas. In a moment as important as the current context, full of transformations, advances and hybridisations of all kinds, it is essential to effectively reject labels in order to develop new approaches, contemporary perspectives and constructions, or at least try to.

Eva Rivera

The “women’s cinema” label doesn’t interest me much. I think we can talk about “women creators” when we’re giving a point of view or talking about different themes and a way of looking at things as a woman, in terms of ways of doing, and in terms of the interpretation or the script. We’re talking about a way of looking at the female subject through the interpretation to position the woman-subject at the centre as a new way of looking at the world and of interpreting the world, but also as a new way of making films. Of course, we come up against problems raised by feminist perspectives aimed at abolishing gender or finding ways to dilute the genders and to be able to speak of fluidity, and new approaches to storytelling. I think it is still relevant to talk about “cinema made by women” (with gender readings, women’s issues when interpreting the film, etc.) but I feel it is really interesting to take into account the debates around gender abolition posed by feminism and that maybe they also offer new ways of exploring gender and audiovisual production together.

4. Do you believe that the acceptance and integration of women in Spanish audiovisual creation is stabilising, or does it require more effort from institutions, critics, or audience education? What do you think are its biggest challenges for the future?

Mariona Borrull

Positive discrimination to help the integration of disadvantaged groups is necessary, that is beyond question... However, until human and financial resources are directed at understanding and educating about the realities of the truly marginalised, it never be able to protect anyone beyond that established core of feminism that doesn't cause trouble (*ergo*, that oppresses). Put simply, only when trans people can enter a washroom without fear will feminism become more than just a big little fairytale.

Mireia Iniesta

No, it hasn't stabilised at all. As I said before, the hard part isn't making a first film, it's being able to move on from there. The same people who opened the doors for you can shut them in your face just as quickly. All it takes is a box office failure or a more negative or less welcoming critical response. The patriarchal system doesn't forgive even the tiniest hint of a female error. The foggy window of opportunity that we've managed to open is unfortunately very fragile. Feminisms have taken root in our culture as a result of years of tireless struggle. We are in the middle of a fourth wave of feminism. It's a double-edged sword: though right now the movement may seem to be in the spotlight, the advances move at a snail's pace. Added to the difficulties that have always been put in the way of our gender, we now have the rise of the far right promoting reactionary views and tremendous hostility, which unfortunately is seeping into progressive sectors, taking things from bad to worse. Another of my fears is that there are quite a few people out there who go in for the

"have a feminist at your table" fad, which takes our struggle and all our work as a "trending topic" of the day that they feel they have to sign up for, but who will abandon ship as soon as the going gets tough.

Ramón Alfonso

The biggest challenges for this process are mostly related to the precarious conditions of the film industry itself. The profound, general disconnect with the audience, the need to repeatedly clone unnatural ideas that obviously don't work, the nepotism and the countless obstacles to getting a new project off the ground are some of the issues that have been evident features of the audiovisual industry in Spain for quite a few years now. In a context like this, it is complicated if not nearly impossible to direct a film, of course, but also to work in any of the different fields with an acceptable level of stability. Everything is so insecure and fragile that at times you get the impression that it could all collapse in a second like a house of cards.

Eva Rivera

In none of the last CIMA reports since 2018 is there any comparison made between women and men in the industry. It is still important for institutions, critics and spectators to take measures to ensure that women can reach a level of equality with men, in the film industry and in the world in general. It's a long road that we're walking, and there's still a way to go, and that's why it's important to keep talking about quotas, about the visibility of the jobs that women are doing, about cinema made by women and about women's issues in cinema. ■

| clausura

AARÓN RODRÍGUEZ SERRANO

A fascinating panorama spreads out before us—in theoretical and practical, academic and creative terms. On the one hand, there is the question of “cinema created by women” in relation—and in conflict—with the different feminisms and the complexity of their propositions. On the other is the constantly changing territory that serves as the foundation for any analysis: questions such as the (necessary) inclusion of trans identities, the reassessment of the very idea of gender, and the elimination of essentialist concepts are staring us in the face, and it would be disastrous—or simply mean-spirited—not to give each one the attention it deserves. Moreover, as has been pointed out by one of our participants, the presence of reactionary forces sympathetic to the discourses of the far right make it more important than ever to

take a clear, progressive and even daring position when rethinking the relationships between bodies, their emotional responses and their representations.

At a historic moment when “post-modern” and even “post-structuralist” labels are being used pejoratively in certain conservative—or more accurately, *reactionary*—circles, it seems that reasserting these labels may be a good idea. These are labels which, whatever many people may think, were decisive for opening the debate to LGTB+ identities, and by extension, to the creation of much more pluralist, fair, inclusive and sensible frames for living and thinking. All these twisted reactions that we see today to certain fields of thought—*feminisms*, queer theories, non-binary genders, etc.—need to be understood as violent

manifestations that ultimately result directly in unjust policies and, most significantly, in specific harm to individuals who by now, in 2022, should be able to take it for granted that their rights are fully recognised. Whether we like it or not, denying the plural nature of bodies and continuing to argue for only one model of affectivity and of relating to the reality that inhabits us is the first step towards legislating explicitly against alterities rather than in favour of them.

In this debate, cinema emerges as a brilliant forum for the creation of possible identities and sites of resistance. We often forget (we should also resurrect the best of semiotics) that texts have more than merely a handful of interpretations, as they are mechanisms of *construction* that mould, construct, change impact and develop possible worlds that could in turn be inhabited by *real bodies*. The fact that a new generation of women are now behind the camera raises the possibility of changing these processes of signification, expanding them, turning them into *something else*. And

of course, this is not so much because it is plausible to argue for a kind of *female essentialism*—a supposed differential feature that arises naturally from the sex of the creator—but because the sense of belonging to the periphery itself, of being an exception, of having lived in other existential coordinates, can in turn result in other cinematic possibilities. And, of course, it is up to us to listen to them. ■

NOTES

- * This interview was conducted as part of the research project: Emerging Female Voices in 21st Century Spanish Cinema: Writings of Intimacy [VOZ-ES-FEMME] (Code UJI-A2021-12), under the direction of Shaila García Catalán, funded by Universitat Jaume I through its competitive call for research projects for the period 2022-2024.

Estiu 1993 (Carla Simón, 2017)



WOMAN, SPANISH CINEMA, 2022

Abstract

This issue's (Dis)Agreements section offers a dialogue reflecting on the current relationship between cinema and women in the Spanish context. This is an open question that poses problems for critics, for creation, for exhibition and, of course, for audiences. The participants are Mariona Borrull, critic; Mireia Iniesta, feminist theorist, programmer and lecturer; Ramón Alfonso, critic and Quartmetratges Film Festival co-director; Eva Rivera, director of the Dock of the Bay Music Documentary Film Festival; and Aarón Rodríguez Serrano, lecturer at UJI and critic.

Key words

Cinema; Woman; Creation; Criticism; Festival; Film.

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MUJER, CINE ESPAÑOL, 2022

Resumen

La sección de (des)encuentros propone un diálogo para reflexionar acerca de las relaciones actuales entre cine y mujer en el contexto español. Pregunta abierta que problema a la crítica, a la creación, la exhibición y, por supuesto, a las audiencias. Participan Mariona Borrull, crítica; Mireia Iniesta, teórica feminista, profesora y programadora; Ramón Alfonso, crítico y codirector del Festival de Cine Quartmetratges; Eva Rivera, directora del Festival de Cine Documental Musical Dock of the Bay; y Aarón Rodríguez Serrano, profesor de la UJI y crítico.

Palabras clave

Cine; Mujer; Creación; Crítica; Festival; Película.

Autores

Mariona Borrull escribe crítica para *El Antepenúltimo Mohicano*, *Fotogramas* y *Serielizados*, y habla semanalmente en el programa *Va de cine* de Ràdio 4 y *Tot és comèdia* de SER Catalunya. También colabora con *Sensacine* y *OtrosCines Europa*. Se ha especializado en la cobertura de festivales de clase A, lo que compagina con artículos para la distribuidora Mediatres Estudio y otros trabajos de prensa. Es miembro de la Asociación Catalana de la Crítica y la Escritura Cinematográfica (ACCEC) y de Fipresci. Contacto: info@revistaatalante.com

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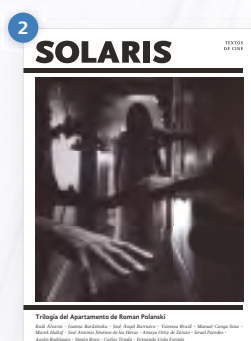
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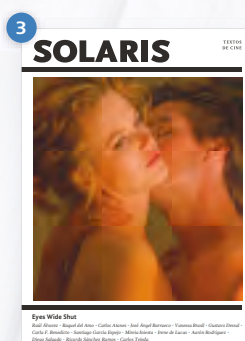
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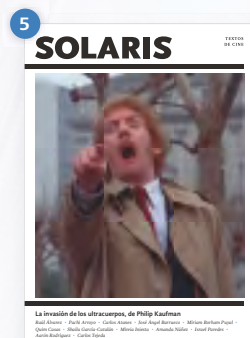
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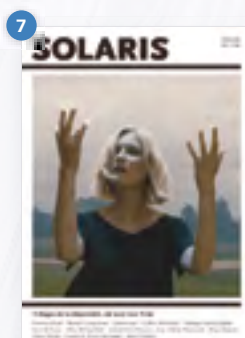
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VANISHING POINTS

**THE GAY PALESTINIAN IN ISRAELI
CINEMA: DESIRE, POWER AND THE
COLONIAL GAZE**

Loreto Ares

Susana Díaz

**POST-TELEVISUAL BRUSHSTROKES:
TWIN PEAKS: THE RETURN AND TOO OLD
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**FEMALE AI REPRESENTATIONS:
EX MACHINA REVISITS THE MYTHS
OF PANDORA AND GALATEA**

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Sue Aran-Ramspott

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THE GAY PALESTINIAN IN ISRAELI CINEMA: DESIRE, POWER AND THE COLONIAL GAZE*

LORETO ARES
SUSANA DÍAZ

0. GAZES, DESIRE AND POWER RELATIONS

This article applies a decolonial and queer perspective to the analysis of the (re)production of Palestinian non-normative sexuality in mainstream Israeli films exported to international LG-BTQ festivals.

The epistemological framework that informs this analysis pivots on three main focal points: The postmodern rupture that makes us aware of the power relations interwoven in the production and dissemination of knowledge, and that at the same time invites us to produce situated knowledges (Haraway, 1995).

The articulation of a decolonial perspective that inhabits the borders of the hegemonic Euro-and hetero-centric framework which, although inevitably touched by that framework, also contaminates it with *other perspectives and other logics* (Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel, 2007).

The performative and subversive capacity of discourse, as the only instrument for making sense of reality.

The theoretical framework for this analysis is underpinned by:

Intersectional feminisms that arise from Black feminist thought and activism (Crenshaw, 1989) and that explain how all identity variables intersecting in individuals are structurally interdependent and mutually productive.

The queer perspective, which applies the performative theories of discourse to gender, and which resists binaries and essentialism in gender and sexuality (Butler, 2010).

Critical theories related to Orientalism (Said, 2008) and homonationalism (Puar, 2007).

As for the approach to cinema, the filmic fact is conceived as a cinematographic act and as a discursive device, that is, as a (gender) technology. The analysis presented in this article is therefore

an operation of meaning production, the transformation of the textual space (the film-object) into text, with the aim of breaking down the naturalising mechanisms of discourse: how *truth* is manufactured by concealing, on the one hand, the constructed nature of the image as a representation of reality and, on the other, power relations of colonialism, race, gender, ability, class, etc. The aim, in short, is to unpack the mechanisms that naturalise a certain relationship between the nation-state, sexuality and race in the dominant Israeli LGBTQ (mainly gay) cinema.

The study sample consists of four Israeli films: the Israeli production *The Bubble* (Ha-Buah, Eytan Fox, 2006); the Israeli-Dutch co-production *The Invisible Men* (Yariv Mozer, 2012); *Undressing Israel: Gay Men in the Promised Land* (Michael Mayer and Yariv Mozer, 2012); and the Israeli-US co-production *Out in the Dark* (Michael Mayer, 2012). The criteria for their selection and definition as dominant narratives were: 1) international distribution with the labels “Israeli” and “gay-themed”, given the specific standard reading that this assigns to them; (2) state-supported production or distribution; 3) promotion at international festivals; and (4) non-normative Palestinian sexuality as a central theme.

The article will focus firstly on the eroticising of violence and domination in *The Bubble*, as well as the documentaries *The Invisible Men* and *Undressing Israel*. Secondly, it will explore the representation of sexual practices in the two fiction films: *The Bubble* and *Out in the Dark*. These four films naturalise and neutralise the existing power relations, which is evident in both the act of representation itself and the one-way gaze constructed between the Israeli and Palestinian populations. It is this gaze, a vehicle of desire and power that positions the Palestinian as an object, that is analysed here. The article will conclude with an exploration of the mechanisms of a specific type of discourse that constructs and normalises Palestinian sexuality from an Israeli perspective.

I. EROTICISING COLONIAL DOMINATION

The Bubble is a film by Israeli filmmaker Eytan Fox, produced by the Israeli Film Fund in collaboration with the company Uchovsky-Fox and three other Israeli production companies (Metro Communications, Ronen Ben-Tal Films and Feingold Productions). Three other Israeli distributors also contributed to the financing (Keshet, Hot and United King Films). *The Bubble* became one of the most widely distributed Israeli films among international LGBTQ audiences and won the GLAAD Media Award, the Glitter Award for Best Picture, and awards at the Dublin, Miami, Torino and Toronto film festivals.¹

The film tells a story of love between Noam, an Israeli living in Tel Aviv, and a young Palestinian named Ashraf. They first meet at a checkpoint where Noam is working as a reservist and where he drops his passport. Ashraf finds it and goes to Noam's house, where he lives with Lulu and Yali, to return it to him. At that moment, they begin a relationship. Noam, Lulu and Yali, the three Israelis, introduce Ashraf to the Tel Aviv gay scene after giving him a new identity, with the name Shimi, to hide his status as a Palestinian with no legal documentation. Lulu's ex-boyfriend, Sharon, discovers the lie and Ashraf, frightened, returns to Nablus, where he talks about his relationship with Noam to his sister, who does not take it well. Noam and Lulu go looking for him, posing as journalists, and Jihad, Ashraf's brother-in-law, walks in and catches him kissing Noam. A short time later, Ashraf, still in Nablus, discovers that Jihad is going to carry out an attack in Tel Aviv, in which Yali will be wounded. As a consequence of this, the Israeli army retaliates with an attack on Nablus and Ashraf's sister is killed. In desperation, Ashraf volunteers to avenge her death and travels to Tel Aviv with an explosive belt, which he activates just as Noam hugs him in the last scene.

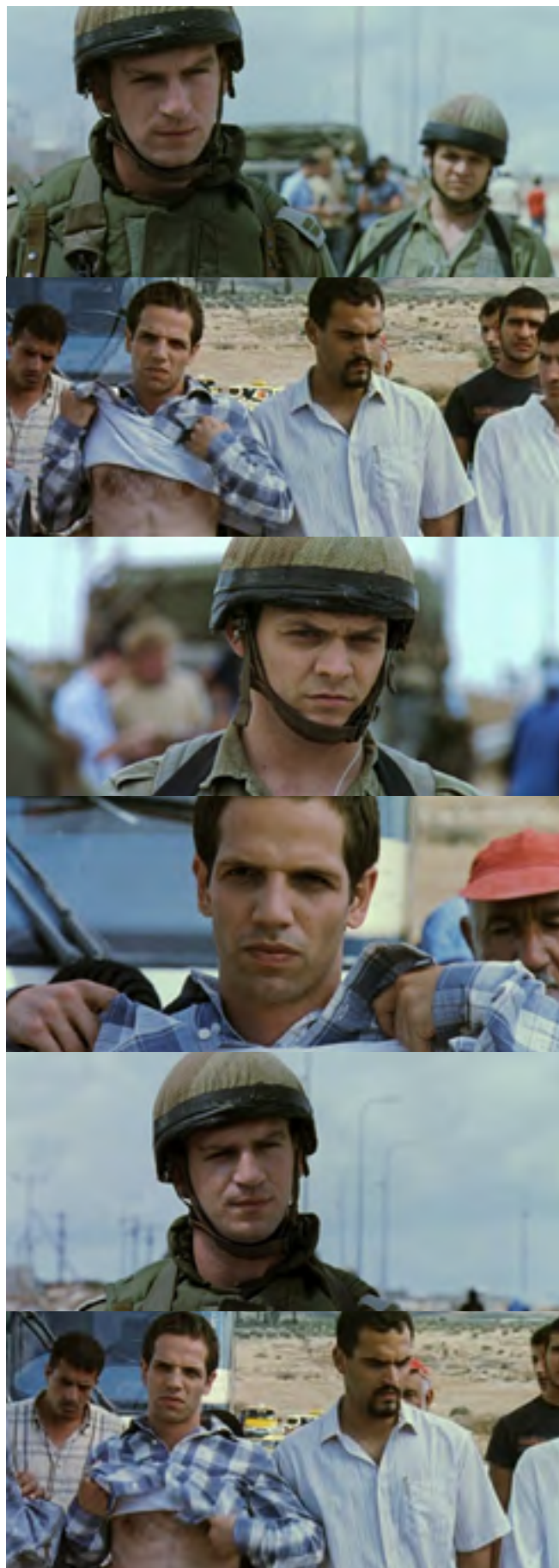
As will be shown below, *The Bubble* sexualises both the checkpoint and Palestinian terrorism,

developed in conjunction with the pride/shame binary as described by Jack Halberstam (2005), which is also present in *The Invisible Men*.

In the case of *The Bubble*, the checkpoint is a recurring, visible and violent representation of the colonial power relationship. It separates those who have to ask for permission from those who grant it. The Israeli army justifies the need to undress the Palestinian population as an exceptional measure on grounds of national security. In this way, this practice construes Palestinian bodies both as a threat of imminent danger (terrorists) and as a subjugated object with no agency (objects of the occupation) (Hochberg, 2010: 577-578).

The opening scene of *The Bubble* takes place in this highly charged context of power and violence. In this scene, the order to undress is given only to men, confirming Kotef and Amir's theory (2007) connecting this terrorist/occupied person binary with gender dynamics: the masculinisation of the terrorist and the feminisation of the subjugated figure. A brief medium shot of the senior officer, with Noam out of focus in the background (stillframe 1) is followed by a reverse shot of Ashraf slowly lifting up his shirt (stillframe 2). Next, a close-up of Noam shows him taking off his headphones, watching attentively (stillframe 3), followed by another close-up of Ashraf (stillframe 4). Finally, the camera returns to the senior officer in a medium shot (stillframe 5), after which Ashraf lowers his shirt (stillframe 6).

This succession of shots shows the first time that Noam's and Ashraf's eyes meet. On this occasion, it is not an exercise in omission of the power relations, since these are so explicit that, even the superior officer, a symbol of arbitrary power in the film, is present in the succession of shots and reverse shots. Instead, it is an eroticising exercise: "Stripped of any cultural meaning, the enemy it-



From top to bottom. Stillframes 1-6.
The Bubble (Ha-Buah, Eytan Fox, 2006)

self could not be appealing as a target. To become a target, it must be *sexualized*" (Kaplan, 2002: 193).

The presence of the senior officer, who serves as Noam's opposite in the good Israeli/bad Israeli binary, allows Noam to emerge unscathed from this scene, homoeroticising the tension while giving the other soldier the representation of hierarchical violence. It is the relationship between that soldier and Ashraf that is violent and colonial; Noam only appears in the scene to introduce desire. Later in the scene, their eyes will meet again, after Ashraf searches for him, with understanding and concern, as they try to help a woman whose water has broken and will soon lose her baby.

In 2005, Halberstam published the essay "Shame and White Gay Masculinity" in which he explores the narrative of homosexual identity structured in a shame/pride binary and how it is racialised and gendered to fit a white male experience. This narrative temporarily places shame before pride and is reclaimed and repositioned by a queer adult with the tools and language to transform their past experiences. In both its academic and activist incarnations, gay shame tends to become a totalising narrative that balances the consumer's focus on gay pride with gay, chic, white, faux-radical shame. Because of their binary structure, shame and pride seem to have covered the entire gay experience. This narrative effectively universalises the (white male) subject who overcomes an experience in which certain privileges have been denied him. For women and for non-white people, shame plays a different role, with different modes of subjugation and political strategies: shame for women is fought politically through feminism, and for non-white people through queer of colour critique (Ferguson, 2003; Halberstam, 2005: 223-224). The key also lies in what you can do with shame when you feel it. Michael Warner (1999: 3) and Halberstam (2005: 224) point to the same answer: project it on to *others* (others who are also racialised and gendered).

THE HOMOEROTICISING OF THE CHECKPOINT, THEN, CAN BE UNDERSTOOD AS A PROCESS OF PROJECTION OF SHAME ON TO THIS OTHER, RACIALISED SUBJECT

The homoeroticising of the checkpoint, then, can be understood as a process of projection of shame on to this other, racialised subject.

In *The Bubble*, Ashraf does not move in the same sexual shame/pride binary that Noam does. The process of being detained and observed at the checkpoint is for Ashraf, as Raya Morag suggests, "a physical experience of shame involving feminization and castration, which (in contrast to Noam's experience) undergoes racialization and is not transformed into pride" (Morag, 2010: 946). There is gay shame and there is racial humiliation, and this cannot be reabsorbed into the white narrative of pride.

As Halberstam and Morag both suggest, the projection of gay shame on to the non-white man is offered as a solution, through different types of mimicry: Noam's mimicry when he crosses the checkpoint, a game in which he gains access to vulnerability without humiliating himself; and Ashraf's mimicry in his process of gay-isation, displacing and denying racial humiliation with gay pride.

In another scene from *The Bubble*, when Ashraf has already been named Shimi and has completed the process of transforming gay shame into pride, he finds himself at the checkpoint again. This time he is not subjected to the eroticised gaze of the coloniser, since he is waiting in Nablus for his sister's wedding guests, who the ones being checked. Feeling empowered, he approaches the soldiers to try to get them to speed up the process. However, they respond to him negatively. He is a victim of and a witness to racial humiliation, which no sexual pride can overcome.

This analysis of *The Bubble* will be concluded with one final example of the eroticising of violence, in this case related to terrorism. At the beginning of the film, Noam has just been reunited with Lulu and Yali after returning from his period of military service. In their animated conversation Yali asks him: "And the guys on your reserve duty? No sexy suicide bombers?" Noam reproaches him: "Don't start." This comment, which sexualises both the checkpoint and the *enemy* construed as Palestinian and terrorist, is still a red flag that will be confirmed at the end of the film. It also alludes to the relationship between sex and terrorism in the pun on the word *explosive* and in the fade-out transitions after the sex scenes and after the final bomb.

The sexualisation of terrorism is linked to Islamophobia, as Huda Jadallah explains from her own experience: "Growing up, I was always keenly aware of being marked as dangerous, 'a terrorist.' I never understood as a child that this label was not simply a result of racial marking or being identified as Palestinian, but was also in part owing to being marked as genderqueer.² My gender non-conformity manifested itself in being stereotyped as violent and dangerous as opposed to submissive and oppressed, as Arab women who conform to gender roles are often perceived" (Jadallah, 2011: 276). Thea Gold also describes Islamophobic rhetoric about suicide terrorism as homophobic: "The 'scariness' of the figure of the terrorist lies not only in the threat of explosion but in the queerness of the suicide bomber's body itself. Like the 'degenerate' body of the homosexual and the 'sickly' body of the Jew, the suicide bomber's hybrid body (half human, half weapon) is queer" (Gold, 2010: 629-630). In *The Bubble*, Ashraf's suicide is not motivated by obviously political considerations, but by the fact that he has no way out of his lived experience of homosexuality.

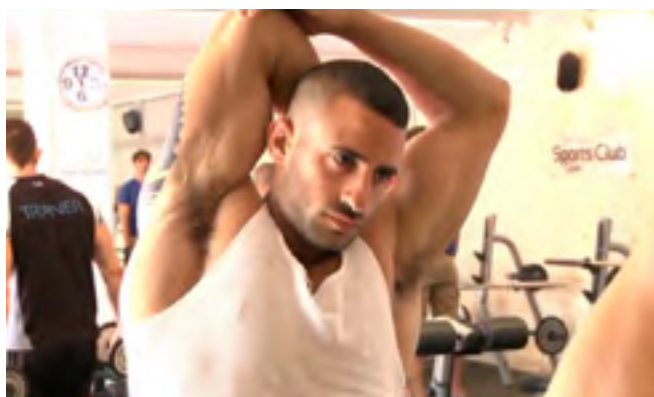
The filmmaker and producer Yariv Mozer directed both of the documentaries selected for this study, *The Invisible Men* and *Undressing Israel*, in

THE SEXUALISATION OF TERRORISM IS LINKED TO ISLAMOPHOBIA

the same year (2012). The first is an Israeli-Dutch co-production, financed by two Israeli non-governmental organisations (The New Fund for Cinema and TV, and The Other Israel Film Fund) and a Dutch government agency (Netherlands Film Fund). Other financiers included the Israeli production company Mozer Films (founded by the director), the Dutch producer LEV Pictures and the distributors Ikon (Netherlands) and Yes Docu (Israel). The documentary follows the story of three Palestinians, Louie, Abdu and Faris, who escape from their hometowns to hide in Israel, where they try to resolve their legal status.

Undressing Israel was co-directed and co-produced by Yariv Mozer together with the Russian-Israeli-American Michael Lucas. For this film, Lucas travelled to Tel Aviv from New York to discover the Israeli gay community, including a young Palestinian.

The Invisible Men evokes the same shame/pride binary discussed above. In one sequence, Abdu takes part in the Jerusalem LGBTQ Pride Parade. Happy to be there, he begins talking about shame: "What would happen to me if my photo appeared in the newspapers tomorrow?" This shame is racially marked, as Palestinian identity is a national and cultural identity, but also a racial one (Saliha, 2011): "A gay Palestinian participates in the Pride Parade!" However, it quickly turns to pride: "I was getting goosebumps all night, thinking about whether I wanted to come or not. But today I have decided I'm no longer afraid. That's my decision. I'm not afraid. I'm not afraid anymore." This conversation takes place in the context of an LGBTQ demonstration, with the rainbow flags and identifiable icons all around. His story ignores the power asymmetry and also romanticises the homonormative community: "[Gays] don't care if



From left to right. Stillframes 7 and 8. *Undressing Israel: Gay Men in the Promised Land* (Michael Mayer and Yariv Mozer, 2012)

you're Muslim or Christian or Jewish or Palestinian or Israeli or American." In addition, it is contradicted by the conclusion to the film: Abdu and Louie have to leave the country as political exiles (and in the process, they will again be constantly detained and harassed by Israeli soldiers).

In *Undressing Israel*, on the other hand, the sexualisation of the army and of military activity eroticises colonial domination. An animated infographic on the legalisation of homosexuality in the military precedes a sequence that begins with Michael Lucas entering a gym. This is followed by various eroticised shots of the muscular Eliad Cohen (stillframe 7), who is introduced as a personal trainer and ex-combatant, despite the fact that in the gay world he is known mainly as an actor and model. Lucas trains with him for a while before starting the interview (stillframes 7 and 8).

- Were you out of the closet in the army?
- Yes.
- Was that a problem?

– Not really, because, you know, my friends and I were like family there, and they accept you as you are. If you're gay, it doesn't matter.

– So, there's no "don't ask, don't tell."³ Can you be in the army as an openly gay man?

– Almost always, yes. I'm sure there are people who still don't say it, but I know other friends of mine who were in other units as fighters and who said it; it's okay.

– Everyone has to do military service, no matter if they're gay or hetero, right?

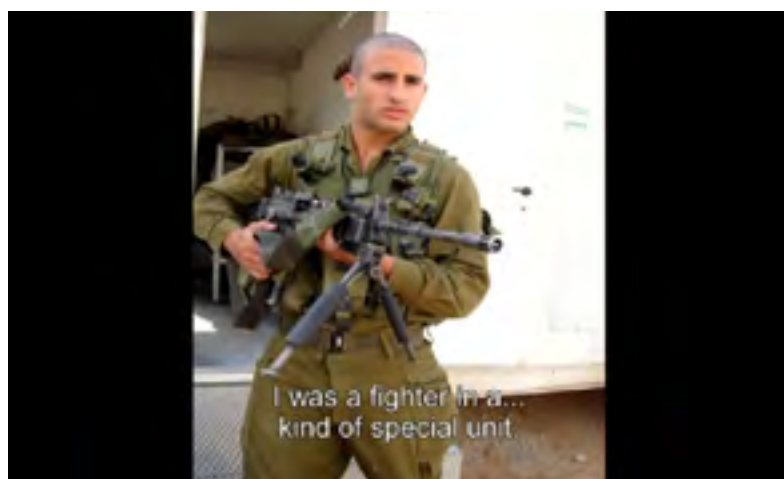
– Yes.

– Did you have a boyfriend while you were in the army?

– My first ex-boyfriend was in military service. He was the commander of another unit. It was a mind-blowing story, like *Yossi & Jagger* (Eytan Fox, 2002), the film. It was in the same place, in the Hermon, almost the same story as well.

While they talk about his experience in the army, emphasising the openness, the footage of the interview in the gym with the two tattooed and muscular bodies (stillframe 9) is alternated with photographs of Eliad as a soldier, in uniform and armed (still 10). The eroticising and romanticising of the army is reinforced in the next scene, when a group of gay men who speak to the camera repeatedly during the documentary offer testimonies about the Israeli military. Apart from stressing its ideological openness in terms of sup-

IN UNDRRESSING ISRAEL, ON THE OTHER HAND, THE SEXUALISATION OF THE ARMY AND OF MILITARY ACTIVITY EROTICISES COLONIAL DOMINATION



From top to bottom. Stillframes 9 and 8. *Undressing Israel: Gay Men in the Promised Land* (Michael Mayer and Yariv Mozer, 2012)

port for LGBTQ people, they also make comments that underscore the sexualisation of the army, like “there is the element of danger, and the uniforms...” and “it is a great fantasy, the Israeli army.”

In short, it is thus evident that the eroticising of violence and of power relations is central to both the fiction film *The Bubble* and the two documentaries selected for analysis.

2. SEX AND POWER

This section deals with the depiction of sexual practices in the two fiction films, *The Bubble* and *Out in the Dark*, analysing one scene from the first film and two from the second, which serve specifi-

cally to reflect on how the power relations operating between the characters are naturalised.

The central theme of *Out in the Dark*, the first feature film by Los Angeles-based Israeli filmmaker Michael Mayer, is another impossible love story between an Israeli boy, Roy, and a Palestinian, Nimr. It was financed by the public Israeli Film Fund, the Israeli production company Periscope, and the Israeli distribution platform Nana10, and the American company M7200 Productions. It won awards at numerous international LGBTQ festivals, including San Diego, Sydney, Amsterdam, Grenoble, Turin, Miami, Philadelphia, Guadalajara (Mexico), Toronto, Montreal, Los Angeles, Long Island, Melbourne, New York, Rochester, San Francisco and Tampa.

The two main characters in *Out in the Dark*, Nimr (Palestinian) and Roy (Israeli), meet in a gay bar in Tel Aviv, where Nimr’s friend Mustafa works. Nimr, who lives in Ramallah, is granted a permit to study psychology in Tel Aviv. Mustafa, who it turns out has been collaborating with the Israeli secret service, is deported

back to Ramallah, and after Nimr witnesses his brother Nabil murder Mustafa for betraying Palestine, he moves to Tel Aviv to live with Roy. It is then that the Israeli secret service offer him the possibility of being allowed to stay in Tel Aviv in exchange for information about his brother Nabil. Nimr returns to Ramallah, where his family eventually discovers his homosexuality. Nabil’s companions expect him to murder his brother but instead Nabil allows him to escape back to Israel under threat that he must not return. Nimr and Roy unsuccessfully try to obtain refugee status for him. In the end, Roy manages to arrange to have Nimr smuggled to France, but Roy himself is arrested as a collaborator.

The scene selected for analysis takes place in a swimming pool. It is night-time, and Nimr and Roy have sneaked in for a swim. The diegetic time does not correspond to that of the story, as the disordered shots show Nimr and Roy naked and then dressed and then naked again, increasing the sexual tension and, through a conversation about sex and coming out, delaying the moment of the climax: the kiss.

One of their exchanges is paradigmatic for what follows. Nimr speaks and Roy responds:

— When I started going out in Tel Aviv, I thought they wouldn't accept me because I come from the other side. It soon became clear to me that it doesn't really matter.

— A cock is a cock [laughs].

First, they establish a (hierarchical) opposition—Palestine/Israel—accompanied by serious expressions when Nimr utters the line “from the other side.” This dichotomy is emphasised in the conversation in which they continue comparing their respective experiences of coming out. Second, they identify sex as a vehicle for equality: “a cock is a cock.” This suggests that sexual relations between Israelis and Palestinians are not only divorced from power relations, but they can even be a tool for fighting the power and achieving peace. Is this possible?

Other studies have explored how the queer fantasy of reconciliation and peace through ro-

mantic love fails in the films selected for this analysis. In addition, power relations are always present in any interaction: to ignore it is merely to render it invisible. Roy's remark, “a cock is a cock,” brings to mind an observation made by Javier Sáez and Sejo Carrascosa in the introduction to their essay *Por el culo: políticas anales*: “The arse seems very democratic; everybody has one. But as will be shown here, not everyone can do what they want with their arse” (Sáez and Carrascosa, 2011: 14). Their essay deals with the anus and with anal sex, but in this case it could also be applied to the penises discussed by Nimr and Roy. Neither the body nor sexual practices are neutral; they are discursive devices marked by gender, race, ability, and many other variables that charge them with asymmetrical power relations. The fact that one is Palestinian and the other is Israeli in these interactions is significant. For Raz Yosef (2004: 118-119), interracial relationships pose a threat to Israeli purity and dominance in Zionist rhetoric, destabilising the subject/object binary of colonisation. While for the Israeli it is an engagement with the colonial ambiguity described by Homi K. Bhabha (2002) between the fear of hybridisation and the latent, Orientalist fascination with the Arab, for the Palestinian it is an exercise in *passing*⁵ and mimicry: sleeping with an Israeli is in a way like becoming an Israeli.

The most common interracial interactions in Israeli cinema, and the terror they arouse in Zionist rhetoric, are marked by heteronormativity. Homosexuality poses a lesser threat because it is not thought of as reproductive. However, there was a point at which hybridity and homosexuality coincided to become identified with each other as forms of degeneration (Young, 1995: 26). But Yosef's work goes beyond stale, essentialist conceptions of heterosexuality and homosexuality and tries to examine how homoerotic desire and regimes of (ab)normality are present in all interracial relationships, both homosexual and heterosexual. The use of privilege and power in sexual

SEXUAL RELATIONS BETWEEN ISRAELIS AND PALESTINIANS ARE NOT ONLY DIVORCED FROM POWER RELATIONS, BUT THEY CAN EVEN BE A TOOL FOR FIGHTING THE POWER AND ACHIEVING PEACE. IS THIS POSSIBLE? POWER RELATIONS ARE ALWAYS PRESENT IN ANY INTERACTION: TO IGNORE IT IS MERELY TO RENDER IT INVISIBLE



From top to bottom. Stillframes II-15. *The Bubble* (Ha-Buah, Eytan Fox, 2006)

practices between Israelis and Palestinians is reflected in this real testimony documented in the work both of Sofer and Schmitt (1995) and of Yosef (2004): “Amar fucked me three times in two hours. He [...] told me that I had to pay him [...], which I refused. [...] When I answered that [...] he could forget about it, he became angry and threatened me. There was nobody around, and I felt a bit insecure. However, I walked in the direction of the Jaffa Gate. He started being louder. I told him that he should not forget that he is an Arab, that under Israeli rule he had no case against a Jew, and that he’d better leave me alone. I never would have dared go to the police, but it worked. I also knew that he was deeply insulted, as he realized that the fuckee [the passive one] is not powerless, as he assumed” (Sofer and Schmitt, 1995: 114).

These words expose both the violent use of power and privilege and the paradox of the gay Israeli; while fighting a hegemonic masculinity and nationalism that oppress him, he uses those same categories to exercise his authority over Palestinian men (Yosef, 2004: 139). It also reveals the importance of the positions of penetrator and penetrated, which are all the more significant as they form part of nationalist narratives that compare colonisation to the act of penetrating a feminised territory.

In their work, Sáez and Carrascosa reflect on these roles in anal sex. “In these expressions we see the enormous imbalance that exists in the social perception of anal sexuality: giving and taking (up the arse). Being active or passive is historically associated with a binary power relationship: dominator-dominated, master-slave, winner-loser, strong-weak, powerful-submissive, owner-property, subject-object, penetrator-penetrated, all in based on an underlying gender scheme: male-female, man-woman. The male is construed according to these values as the first term of the pair. ‘The woman’ in the sense described by Wittig, of

a category created by the heterosexual regime, is construed as being associated with the second term of this binary pair” (Sáez and Carrascosa, 2011: 19-20).

In the film *The Bubble*, Noam and Ashraf go to bed together twice. The first time is on the explosive night they share in Tel Aviv. The scene combines images of the couple with Lulu, Noam’s housemate, and Sharon, her boyfriend. It begins with Sharon kissing Lulu (stillframe 11); Sharon goes down to perform oral sex on her (stillframe 12), the camera returns to a close-up of Lulu (stillframe 13) and then cuts to the head, now of Ashraf, who rises to kiss Noam (stillframes 14 and 15). Ashraf thus replaces Sharon in the image, as an icon of hegemonic masculinity, and Noam occupies the feminised position. The following image shows Ashraf penetrating Noam.

The second time the two go to bed together in the film, Noam is the penetrator, a fact which the couple will accord importance and ceremony. Before he starts, Ashraf slows him down and Noam reminds him that they don’t have to do it. “I want to,” he replies. Before he starts, Ashraf asks Noam his mother’s name (shortly before this, Noam had shared her story). “Sarah, her name was Sarah,” Noam replies, smiling. Then they begin to kiss. This scene reproduces the script of a sexuality marked by race, religion and asymmetrical power relations that would make it more difficult for Ashraf to be penetrated than for Noam. This difficulty, in a narrative that conceals these dynamics and how they historically affect anal sex, has less to do with the colonial relationship than with the image of an inherently homophobic Palestine, thus construed through dialogues, plot-lines, and point of view. In the scene where Noam and Ashraf watch the play *Bent* together, they both project their desire and impossible love on to those of the play’s characters. In the play, two men have sex without touching each other, just by imagining and talking, in a Nazi concentration camp. One of the prisoners has the yellow Jewish

star; the other, an inverted pink triangle, a symbol used to identify gay men. There follows a succession of shots and reverse shots between the two actors on the stage and Ashraf and Noam, who touch each other’s hands excitedly (stillframes 16 and 17). “We did it. How about that? Fucking guards, fucking camp, we did it. It was real. We made love. They’re not going to kill us,” says one of the actors. This projection once again renders the power relations between Noam and Ashraf invisible. In stillframe 16, the two prisoners in the concentration camp are watched by an armed guard, an image that alludes to the checkpoint, where it is only Ashraf who is being watched, not Noam. The actor’s last sentence, moreover, identifies making love with defeating authority and the guards: “They’re not going to kill us.” However, the end of the film reveals that this queer fantasy of reconciliation ends badly: death and fade to white.

3. CODA

There are four main ideas raised in the Israeli discourses analysed in this article:

1) The process of producing a historically determined *truth* is naturalised, while concealing the power relations arising from the very practice of film representation. The effect of reality and the referential character of the images are used as naturalising mechanisms of the filmic fact. The referential elements are not limited to recognisable characters, events, and spaces, but also include those that allude to the act of recording itself. Cinema as a (re)production of reality is thus transformed into representation, turning the images shown on the screen into the only (totalising and *objective*) *truth*.

The documentaries analysed here have specific mechanisms; in both, the very process of revealing that *truth* (and, therefore, its construction) is more explicit, but so is the reference to an extratextual historical world, and thus the effect of reality has extraordinary force. The power relations estab-



From left to right. Stillframes 16-17. *The Bubble* (Ha-Buah, Eytan Fox, 2006)

lished between the point of view (the editing process that organises and orders the film-object) and the social agents that participate in the documentaries are also invisible and, therefore, naturalised and depoliticised. This rendering invisible, naturalising and depoliticising is also practiced with the power derived from control in the representation. This control is inferred from the fact that, in both the fiction films and the documentaries, Palestine and its population are intelligible only through the Israeli gaze (explicitly observed in the types of shots and mise-en-scène chosen for the presentation of Palestinian settings and characters).

2) Simplistic, hierarchical, mutually exclusive dichotomies are constructed that create insurmountable differences between the imagined spaces of Israel and Palestine, which are depicted as opposite and hierarchical spaces. While Israel occupies the space of civilisation, where tolerance and diversity reign, Palestine signifies homophobia, oppression, and cultural backwardness (constantly linked to Islam and terrorism). This map conceals the interdependent nature of all dichotomies, the fact that Israel's imagined space needs that other imagined space of Palestine. This mutually exclusive binary produces another: homosexual/Palestinian. In other words, in Palestine you cannot be homosexual; in Israel you cannot be Palestinian.

Added to these dichotomies are two others, one within each territory: the *good Palestinian* and the *bad Palestinian*; the *good Israeli* and the *bad Israeli*. The relatively depoliticised *good Palestinians* ascribe their desires and sexual practices to gay identity and want to live in Tel Aviv, while *bad Palestinians* are politicised and aware of the occupation, religious, characterised by homophobia and identified as terrorists. Meanwhile, *good Israelis* are Westernised, depoliticised, and have no intention of engaging in the power relations inherent in the bonds they build with *good Palestinians*. Their actions, when they flout Israeli laws, have less to do with politics than with the ideal of romantic love. The presence of *bad Israelis* (icons symbolising unjust and arbitrary state power) make it easy to interpret the toothless criticism of the *good Israelis* as a real, radically critical and subversive political position.

3) In the films analysed, it seems that the only option that a Palestinian subject has in order to be *good* is to stop being Palestinian. Thus, these characters (*good Palestinians*, like Nimr or Ashraf) try to pass off as Israelis by constructing a gay identity that is depicted as neutral but marked by race. The *good Israeli* (Noam or Roy) is the mediator between that *good Palestinian* and the (gay) Israeli community. This process of mimicry is doomed to failure from the beginning because, as Bhab-

ha suggests, the *other* colonial subject being mimicked “is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha, 2002: 112). When they fail in their attempt, the difference between settler and colonised remains intact, and the threat posed by destabilising the violent hierarchy between the two figures is thus avoided. In sequences other than those analysed, it is the Israeli characters who try to pass themselves off with other identities. Although these are generally non-racialised processes of mimicry, in which some positions of privilege are exchanged for others, it also represents a failure that has dire consequences when this involves destabilising the power relations between settlers and colonised. The queer and colonial fantasy of mimicry and equality as a solution to the conflict is depicted as impossible.

4) The other queer and colonial fantasy that attempts to resolve the conflict is that of romantic love and sex-affective relationships between Israelis and Palestinians, but it is a fantasy that is continually shown to be inadequate, as it is in *The Bubble* and *Out in the Dark*. One of the main reasons why it does not work is, once again, the fact that the power relations between the two groups are rendered invisible. The one-way Israeli gaze that constructs the Islamophobic trope of the young gay Muslim is a vehicle of desire, but also of power. Its violence is (homo)eroticised both in the device of the checkpoint and of the army and terrorism. The existing hierarchy between the characters is not only naturalised but simultaneously exploited to reinforce the eroticism of the relationship. In this way, the queer fantasy of reconciliation through love and desire fails, with the blame falling on the politicised (terrorist) nature of the Palestinian population.

NOTES

- * This article is an adaptation of a chapter from the thesis *La sexualidad no normativa palestina en el cine: discursos hegemonics y discursos de resistencia*, defend-

ed by Loreto Ares under the direction of Susana Díaz Pérez and Elena Galán Fajardo at Universidad Carlos III in June 2017.

- 1 The information on production, distribution, and awards for all the films discussed in the article comes from the films' own credits, compared against the information in the IMDb database.
- 2 Genderqueer is a non-binary gender identity category.
- 3 “Don't ask, don't tell” was the popular name for US policy regarding homosexuality in the military from 1993 to 2010. Gay people could enter the military as long as they did not make their sexuality visible, and the military would not ask questions. The fact that Lucas compares Israeli policy with American policy without explanation reinforces two things: that the target audience is American, and that Israel is once again positioned as an even more civilised place than the US.
- 4 “Passing” is a term used in social identity theory to refer to a person's ability to be read as part of an identity category (racial, ethnic, class, gender, etc.) other than their own. It can be a deliberate and strategic practice.

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THE GAY PALESTINIAN IN ISRAELI CINEMA: DESIRE, POWER AND THE COLONIAL GAZE

Abstract

This paper analyses the (re)production of Palestinian gay identities in Israeli cinema from a queer and decolonial point of view. It focuses specifically on Israeli mainstream films that are exported to international LGBTQ film festivals. The main objective is the analysis of filmic mechanisms that represent Palestinian sexuality as an Other. This research is scientifically, politically and ethically relevant in view of the recent increase in racism and Islamophobia, which exploit queer experiences and discourses, and given the scarcity in the academic literature of studies exploring the filmic mechanisms holding, operationalising, naturalising, and resisting the colonial construction of Palestinian non-normative sexuality.

Key words

Israeli Cinema; Homonationalism; Pinkwashing; Palestine; Queer; Gay Cinema.

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EL GAY PALESTINO EN EL CINE ISRAELÍ: DESEO, PODER Y MIRADA COLONIAL

Resumen

Este trabajo analiza, con perspectiva decolonial y cuir, la (re)producción de la identidad gay palestina en el cine israelí *mainstream* que se exporta a festivales LGBTQ internacionales. El objetivo de este texto es el análisis de los mecanismos fílmicos que producen la sexualidad palestina como *otra*. La pertinencia y la relevancia ética, política y científica de esta investigación están justificadas por el contexto de creciente violencia racista e islamófoba, que instrumentaliza las experiencias y los discursos de las personas disidentes del género y de la sexualidad; así como por la escasez de un corpus bibliográfico que registre y explore los mecanismos fílmicos que sostienen, vehiculan, naturalizan y se resisten a la construcción colonial de la sexualidad palestina no normativa.

Palabras clave

Cine israelí; homonacionalismo; *pinkwashing*; Palestina; *queer*; cine gay.

Autor/a

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POST-TELEVISUAL BRUSHSTROKES: *TWIN PEAKS: THE RETURN* AND *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG* FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF “PICTORIAL TIME”

LAURA CALVO GENS

SERGIO MEIJIDE CASAS

I. INTRODUCTION

Determining the ontological status of contemporary serial fiction is an obviously complex task, as perhaps more than any other artistic product, it is a product existing in the complicated situation of being for-the-masses in an era when no such masses exist. There is no longer a general public; as Gilles Lipovetsky (2000) explains, the small group has brought an end to any possibility of a target audience.¹ Any approach to these diverse forms and formats must therefore be based on the multiple and the fragmentary, taking their quality of seriality as the sole common element for the development of an interpretative strategy. This situation has become more complex in recent years, as with the boom in “quality television”, networks and VOD platforms have been investing in fiction series where the psychological depth of the characters, careful attention to narrative development and “cinematographic” techniques

articulate a new audiovisual poetics that is reformulating the aesthetic practices defined by John Caldwell (1995) using the term “televisuality”. It is for this reason that the numerous products associated with what we commonly refer to as “television” need to be considered in light of a paradigm shift in contemporary audiovisual studies, which have begun analysing serial production from the perspective, for example, of the theory and philosophy of the image, or visual studies.

In this respect, although television studies have defined a line of research revolving around so-called TV aesthetics, with studies by Newcomb (1974), Williams (1974), Fiske (1987), Caldwell (1995), Metallinos (1996), Butler (2010), Creeberg (2013), Ellis (2017) and Nannicelli (2017), the changeable nature of the medium, the aesthetic impact of some of the more recent series on the contemporary visual imaginary and the intellectual and philosophical depth they offer require a constant updating of the theories and methodol-

ogies applied. As the focus of this research is the pictorial treatment of serial time, and in view of the absence of systematic studies analysing the subversions introduced by the series we have chosen for study, this article draws on other perspectives intimately related to the pictorial, such as aesthetics, art theory, and more specifically, the philosophy of painting. With this in mind, the theoretical framework for this research draws mainly from the theories of Gilles Deleuze and, especially, Jean-François Lyotard on time, the figure and the event, along with contributions from Pascal Bonitzer (1986), Jacques Aumont (1989), Nicole Brenez (1998), Jean-Michel Durafour (2009) and Luc Vancheri (2011), exploring the artistic nature of the cinematic image based on motifs like the *trompe l'oeil*, the landscape tradition, and even the *figure*. None of this is intended to suggest that time has not been a key focus in previous studies of contemporary seriality, as in fact it has been one of the chief concerns of scholars in this field.

Ever since the first TV series appeared, the duration of the season and the fragmentary nature of each episode has resulted in a very different treatment of time from the approach that has characterised cinema. A paradigmatic example of this can be found in *Lost* (J. J. Abrams, Jeffrey Lieber, Damon Lindelof, ABC: 2004-2010) and *24* (Joel Surnow, Robert Cochran, Fox: 2001-2010), two landmark series that have explored the possibilities of time as a narrative and aesthetic feature, popularising time jumps in television discourse through the use of flashbacks and flashforwards, ellipses, and the accelerated dimension of “race-against-the-clock” sequences, resulting in a frenetic narrative pace that directly affects their sounds and images.² However, such poetics of the cinematic hardly compares with the development of a mechanics whereby the potential (and dormant) power is kept on hold, waiting to be released. In his widely quoted analysis of poetry and the plastic arts, Gotthold Lessing ex-

IN TELEVISION, [...] THE ACCELERATION OF THE DISCOURSE CAN FAIRLY BE DESCRIBED AS THE HEGEMONIC APPROACH: CONSTANT MOVEMENT, MULTIPLE PLOT LINES, AND IMMERSION IN THE STORY

plains that the main difference between the two disciplines lies in the question of time: in painting, time is suspended and the painter has to choose the right moment for the action, while in poetry, time is flowing constantly and it is by means of that flow that the poet must give shape and solidity to the images (Lessing, 1990: 106-127).³ Although the audiovisual arts, much like dance or theatre, combine time and space, it is the duality of stillness and movement that concerns us here. In television, spaces for alternative forms of creation were—and still are—much more limited than in cinema, and it is for this very reason that the acceleration of the discourse can fairly be described as the hegemonic approach: constant movement, multiple plotlines, and immersion in the story. However, the two series chosen for analysis in this study completely undermine the traditional preference for movement over stillness, and for the “poetic-literary” over the pictorial.

In our view, the time-image does not represent an improvement on the movement-image, any more than photography represents an improvement over painting, or cinema over photography. This is one of the reasons why the discussion here will focus exclusively on painters working since the birth of cinema, as they were working in a context of full awareness of this contemporary development. In considering this co-existence, which has occasionally resulted in boundaries where it can be hard to discern where one discipline ends and the other begins, we will try to steer clear of the stale debate over the definitions of the two types of cinematic image pro-

posed by Deleuze. Although the movement-image has sometimes been construed in relation to certain privileged movements, what matters here is its construction as a mobile section of duration that responds to the causal chain (Deleuze, 1984: 26). In contrast to this category, the time-image progresses in a non-linear manner from the loosening of the sensory-motor links, a condition that precedes the liberation from narrative forms (e.g. Antonioni's idle moments and geophysical landscapes) or the breakdown of space-time linearity (e.g. the blurred lines between dream and the waking world in Resnais and Rivette) (Deleuze, 1987: 11-26). In this case, although Deleuze gives this process of transcending the narration the same level of importance as "the conquering of a purely optical space in painting, with impressionism" (Deleuze, 1987: 13), we are still watching a series of successive images.

However, there is a third position which, rather than reconciling the movement-image and the time-image, isolates any instant from the whole that constructs the continuity of movement. This was the position first proposed by Lyotard in his essay on "acinema" (1973: 71-94), which was inspired by his reflections on the figure and which in turn served as a point of departure for Deleuze's considerations related to the "haptic" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980) and the "sensation" (Deleuze, 2002). But what concerns us here is Lyotard's reformulation of his position several years later in the article "Idée d'un film souverain" (Lyotard, 2000: 209-221), where he expands the application of the concept of *acinema* beyond experimental film to include all cinema, pointing out that the sovereign image is always shown directly as an instant that cannot be totalised as a whole film. This idea already suggests that "pictorial time" is something that can be applied to audiovisual media. The same serialising of the instant attempted by Barnett Newman in his work *The Stations of the Cross* (1958-1966), as the addition of independent moments, may refer equally to the practice

of avant-garde filmmakers (Hans Richter) and to "Part 8" (#3x08, David Lynch, Showtime: 2017) of *Twin Peaks: The Return* (David Lynch & Mark Frost, Showtime: 2017). However, the focus of this study lies in the specific fact that the visual coding of the story as painting, through referential strategies and the experimental use of the pictorial image, allows us to expand our understanding of the instant to include the *serialised* nature of television fiction.⁴

The release of *Twin Peaks: The Return* represented the opening of a new breach in televisuality, and it is through that space that we can perceive mutations towards the pictorial, reopening a debate in which the questions have changed as much as the answers. As *Too Old to Die Young* (Nicolas Winding Refn, Ed Brubaker, Amazon Prime Video: 2019) has demonstrated, this new way of conceiving of a device associated with the mainstream as a means of unorthodox expression has not been limited to the unsettling "return" of Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) and his companions, but constitutes the consolidation of a new authorial poetics, and of a new aesthetic approach to be continued by future fiction series. What in cinema was known as "arthouse" has been transferred in these news creations to a territory that it once seemed impossible to conquer: traditional television and streaming platforms, the hardcore of the hypermodern liquid culture in which we continue to drown. Our study is limited to the analysis of the two aforementioned series, symmetrical and opposed in their morphology, syntax and phonetics, both concerned with pictorial time and mechanical potential, since in both the sovereign image can be identified, which, in its pictorial referentiality, is rendered autonomous as an independent picture of the *serialised whole*. Based on this autonomy, the whole of the audiovisual product of which it forms a part is displayed centrifugally, as something different from the reality captured by the camera: in short, as painting.

2. REFERENCE AS A MECHANISM OF TEMPORAL REVELATION

"Go check out the satellite dish, the TV isn't working," Don Ricardo (Emiliano Díez) tells his son at the beginning of the episode of *Too Old to Die Young* titled "Volume 2: The Lovers" (#1x02, Nicolas Winding Refn, Amazon Prime Video: 2019). This setting for the conversation, this arrangement of a family dinner table, with no objects or characters to interrupt our gaze, inevitably recalls the Last Supper. Indeed, like the Last Supper itself, this meal foreshadows a death the following day: that of the *pater familias*, in a moment that again alludes to the pictorial code canonised by Da Vinci on the wall of the Dominican convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie. "It's not the satellite [...]. The satellite dish is fine. We've got no signal because..." replies Miguel (Roberto Aguire) after checking the problem that his father has pointed out. He cannot finish his sentence; Don Ricardo is already looking at something else and doesn't want to be interrupted. Before his eyes is not a television screen, but a painting: the picture of his late sister Magdalena. "Why are you always such an embarrassment to me?" the old man retorts. "I'm trying to fix your problem," his son protests. "Well do it later!" But there is no later. Don Ricardo will die and the television set will remain out of order.

The Last Supper signals a specific moment in the life of Christ, on the eve of his death, but also an event in Biblical history. In this sense, the structure not only indicates the imminence of the father's death, but also hints at the traditional view of the nature of contemporary serial fiction. The "TV isn't working" because something has broken down and someone, like Christ himself, will die the next day. Or in the night, like Don Ricardo. The painting becomes an object of family worship, of dialogue, of communion. An object of devotion for the late Magdalena's brother; of imitation for Yaritza (Cristina Rodlo), who is revealed to be a new "mother"; and also a source of devotion for Jesús (Augusto Aguilar), as the character who resembles his mother. But the introduction of painting to the serial format was already established by David Lynch with his pictorial references in *Twin Peaks: The Return* through the inclusion of the canvases of Francis Bacon, Edward Hopper and René Magritte. In this case, the relationship between the two formats results in the replacement of one with the other: there can be no coexistence. In *Too Old to Die Young*, the TV is broken, so we look at the painting. However, David Lynch's approach is rather more peculiar, as his device broke down many years before. After the opening credits to *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (David Lynch, 1992), the spectator witnesses the explosion of the TV set on which those credits appeared. This is why, in

Left: Part 2: The Lovers, *Too Old to Die Young*. Right: *The Last Supper* (1498) by Leonardo da Vinci



subsequent “Lynchian” products, there is no antagonism between warring opponents; instead, there is a post-cinematic, post-televisual, and post-pictorial symbiosis.

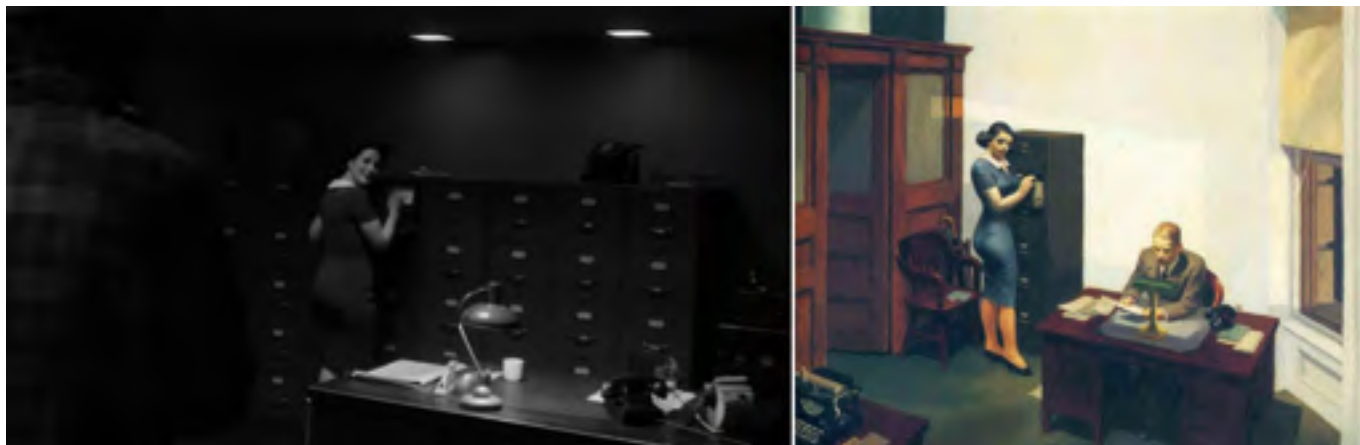
This image from the prequel to *Twin Peaks* (David Lynch & Mark Frost, ABC: 1990-1991) is referenced indirectly in the first episode of *Twin Peaks: The Return* (#3x01: Part 1, David Lynch, Showtime: 2017). In some dark corner of New York, a character unknown to the spectator sits down in front of an empty glass box, waiting for a possible apparition. This is when—and where—the representation of the box, which had served as the outline and boundary that had isolated numerous figures of Baconian imagery, makes it possible to add the specific terms of Bacon’s work, recall the explosion of the TV set and re-establish both media through their temporal specificity. The reference, rather than the referent, ascribed to its own tradition, and therefore a signifier with its own meanings, is positioned in the reverse shot of the characters who observe it like a painting. It is in these static shots of the box that the interpretative key to the series is revealed: if the reference is pictorial, the way to read serial fiction will appear by synonymy, analogous to the interpretation of painting. These characters, like the “attendants” in Bacon’s painting (Deleuze, 2002: 23), are also spectators of *Twin Peaks: The Return*, who revolt against the degree-zero narration and the slow pace of the story. The series can be painting because the boundaries that should contain it are dissolved, like the glass box, which is not a boundary but glass that is broken.

THE SERIES CAN BE PAINTING BECAUSE THE BOUNDARIES THAT SHOULD CONTAIN IT ARE DISSOLVED, LIKE THE GLASS BOX, WHICH IS NOT A BOUNDARY BUT GLASS THAT IS BROKEN

However, the pictorial dimension does not refer exclusively to the work of Bacon, but also alludes to Edward Hopper and René Magritte. *Figurant* or figured, at times *figure*,⁵ the presence of both painters is visible in the imaginary composition of *Twin Peaks: The Return*, taking its own meaning to the limits of what is painted. In this way, the referential strategy serves not only to stretch the relationship constructed between the images, with the purpose of subverting their inherent meaning, but also to undermine the temporal understanding of the whole. The allusion to Magritte would therefore not be a mere tribute, as it reveals a kind of superposition of realities. In this same sense, the introduction of Hopper is equally significant, as it acts as a structural source for the unsettling “Part 8”, set in a kind of horrifying reverse universe configured by the painter where the pictorial space is combined with cinematic time.

This “Part 8” is the best example for explaining the pictorial-temporal drift we wish to highlight here. In strictly narrative terms, i.e. as a particle of time positioned in relation to a narrative line, it could be understood as a kind of excessive flashback (Martin, 2018: 48-50), as the return is not located within the narrative boundaries of the story, but in the crypts of a past time unseen by the audience: the 1940s, when a bomb explodes in black and white. The director includes sufficient elements to make the spectator aware of the time-frame of the episode in question, such as the use of captions and the black-and-white image, also intended to recall a time when images had yet to be coloured in. However, these signs seem to be insufficient for the atmospheric (re-)creation of the historical time in question. In this place, in this space, the reference reappears to the immortal art of Edward Hopper, “a storyteller, not a still-life painter” who delved more deeply than anyone into the American dream (Wenders, 2016: 47).

The narration of an enclosed landscape, of a specific time in history that endures iconographi-



Left: stillframe from “Part 8” of *Twin Peaks: The Return*. Right: *Office at Night* (1940) by Edward Hopper

cally, is shown to us through the revelation of the Hopperian canvas: his pictorial spaces—theatres, porches, offices, service stations—come together to compose the fictional and temporal universe of the episode in question, and it is here that the emergence of the canvas on screen facilitates a highly unusual temporal disruption, as it is the iconographic recognition of the canvas that enables us to begin the structural interpretation of the flashback. Suddenly, time is depicted as historical while the spectator carries out an analysis to identify the properties of the series. However, the director knows that this referential relationship reveals not only the depiction of a historical time, but also the corollary of the permanence of time through the painting that bears witness to it.

For this mechanism to work, a different kind of relationship within the images is needed: the understanding of the shot as *painting*. The canvas does not appear in *Twin Peaks: The Return* as a composite element of the image; rather, it is the whole image. The properties, the details of the painting and the actors are all characters in Hopper’s stories. Herein lies the difference between the two series: while Winding Refn’s characters look *at* the painting, Lynch makes it very clear that they *are* the painting, because Lynch has in fact dedicated his whole life to painting. Thus, in addition to being his main (albeit lesser known)

activity, it is also the “foundation” of his work.⁶ Quite apart from his direct adherence to a particular mode of composing, this activity enables the filmmaker, as a creator of images, to cultivate a series of pictorial references with a particular aesthetic sensibility and from a position within the discourse that underpins his work. Time must emerge, re-emerge, or manifest itself through signs that indicate to the spectator that it has a form, where the “pictorial reference” is articulated as a sign through which time can be conveyed.

An example from a series released around the same time as *Twin Peaks: The Return* may be relevant for explaining this rupture. In the first season of *Westworld* (Jonathan Nolan, Lisa Joy, HBO: 2016-), Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood) discovers, in a shocking revelation for the spectator, that the Man in Black (Ed Harris) is William (Jimmi Simpson): the character who had once adored her now detests her. This revelation takes place in a combination of montage and dialogue, serving as elements that expose the different time-lines that the spectator has not previously identified, which are suddenly made visible by an apparent sleight of hand. Time has been revealed, and in the end the twist that lays bare the temporal structure or device of the fiction makes it possible to reconstruct both the identity of the characters and the temporal identity of the series itself (Salvadó-Cor-

retger & Benavente, 2021: 275). Dolores' realisation of this situation therefore not only entails a narrative proposition of an extreme situation for the psychological conditions of the characters, but also means that the spectator can become aware of the existence of various time-lines over the course of the series that now—and only now, when the revelation occurs—have to be reconstructed.

On the other hand, what *Twin Peaks: The Return* proposes is, first of all, a valuation and comprehension of time on the part of the spectator that subverts traditional narratives of serial space, as the temporal revelation brings a different order to light. The wild sensationalism of the *Westworld* universe contrasts with the artistic turn in *Twin Peaks: The Return*, as its time structure is revealed through the pictorial formulation of the image, through a recognition that requires a referential reading. This time revolution appears as an addition to the artistic quality of the story. Pictorial referencing is the interpretative index that hints the spectator that this type of story has more to do with the painting alluded to than with television. Ultimately, the new sense of time in the series is different from the hegemonic standard for contemporary fiction programming. In both *Twin Peaks: The Return* and *Too Old to Die Young*, the slow tempo, the drawn-out shot, the overwhelming sensation of narrative stagnation and the characters' inaction are all diametrically opposed to the time mechanisms of stories like *Westworld*, but they still reveal an underlying concern associated with the nature of seriality: the possibility of exploring time as inescapable narrative material in contemporary television.

3. THE QUESTION OF THE FRAME: FROM BOUNDARY TO THRESHOLD

In *Twin Peaks: The Return* the reference to Bacon reveals the complex relationship between contemporary serial fiction and painting for the sim-

ple fact that the latter is made tangible. But even more interestingly, with this strategy the reference outlines a particular relationship between the time of the story and pictorial time. As noted above, when the glass box breaks, the boundary between painting and television seriality vanishes. This is the result of a visual formula that isolates the two media, just as in Bacon's paintings the figures are isolated in boxes; yet this makes it possible to relate them to his audiences, as they lead to that "extreme solitude of Figures, extreme enclosure of bodies that exclude any spectator: the Figure does not come into being except by that movement in which it is enclosed" (Deleuze, 2002: 25). As in Baconian iconography, the boundary is established as a need in the story; a visual index is traced or outlined to make it recognisable, a frame which, after the enclosure of the figures, will disintegrate through the visual strategies of the scene. The reference creates a conceptual relationship between pictorial form and serial format, while bringing to light connections of contiguity between them and their external spaces. When the glass box is broken in *Twin Peaks: The Return*, the leap is made from one coding system to its opposite: from the centripetal, which leads the characters to a contemplative state, to the centrifugal, which dissolves the distances between the two. In other words, an abrupt fracture occurs in the different ways of perceiving adopted by the spectator for painting and for television. The scene indicates that there is a specifically pictorial (i.e. contemplative) state, which changes the way of viewing the story; but at the same time, the frame—in this case, a box—becomes the screen:

The frame of a painting encloses a space that is oriented so to speak in a different direction. In contrast to natural space, the space in which our active experience occurs and bordering its outer limits, it offers a space the orientation of which is inwards, a contemplative area opening solely onto the interior of the painting. The outer edges of the screen are not [...] the frame of the film image. They

are the edges of a piece of masking that shows only a portion of reality. The picture frame polarizes space inwards. On the contrary, what the screen shows us seems to be part of something prolonged indefinitely into the universe. A frame is centripetal, the screen centrifugal (Bazin, 2004: 166).

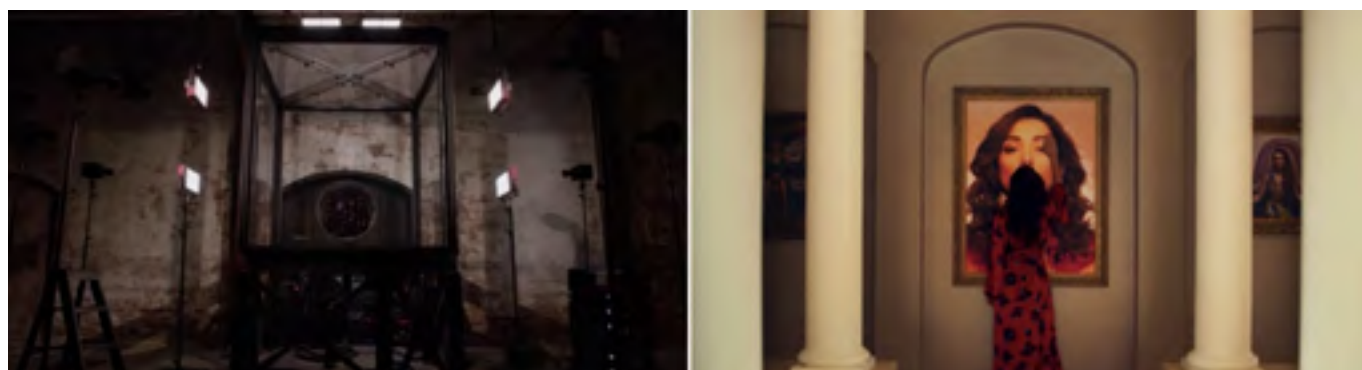
Based on Bazin's argument, in *Twin Peaks: The Return* the nature of seriality is quickly transformed into the all-consuming relationship that television engages in with its contiguous spaces, and in that relationship "what the screen shows us seems to be part of something prolonged indefinitely into the universe" (Bazin, 2004: 166). In David Lynch and Mark Frost's series, there is no frame to which the forces must conform: the story expands in every direction to encompass the world beyond and consume it in a centrifugal moment, just as the inner space of the box does to its attendants, like that malignant force that breaks the glass to kill the waiting characters. This is the vocation of the screen: to reach all possible places instead of absorbing the spectator into the area inside the frame, destined exclusively for the painting. This dissolution into the audiovisual whole of the pictorial regime, of the static and inanimate matter inside the glass box, signals that everything in this third season—including what lies outside the shot—can become a frameless painting.

In this respect, the exercise proposed by Winding Refn and Brubaker is formulated on different

terms. While the characters in *Twin Peaks: The Return* are consumed by the pictorial material, the characters in *Too Old to Die Young* cannot gain access to that space, despite their stillness. Martin (Miles Teller), Janey (Nell Tiger Free), Viggo (John Hawkes) and Don Ricardo are merely spectators of an estranged world, gazing with desire on that which they could never become: the painting, the unattainable libidinal space. In his world, as in our own, Jesus cannot reach his mother because she is on the other side of the canvas, separated by the frame. *Twin Peaks*, however, is not our world; or, if the world of *Too Old to Die Young* is not our world either, the *Twin Peaks* world is not even like our world. There is no frame or curtain here; only a threshold. Sarah Palmer (Grace Zabriskie) demonstrates this when she peels off her face and enters the universe of Magritte, revealing that the Black Lodge, Twin Peaks and New York all form part of the same space: the space of painting.

The approaches in both series forge their conflict on a different perspective, not of audiovisual, but of pictorial activity. It is worth highlighting here that Winding Refn prioritises the two formats' differences over their similarities, dismissing the possibility of "painting" on the screen. He is a filmmaker, and however much his characters may wish to be the painting, to penetrate the Mother's frame, they never will, as the frame is motionless and his work is in movement, even when that

Left: stillframe from "Part 1" of *Twin Peaks: The Return*. Right: still-frame from "Part 6": *The High Priestess* from *Too Old to Die Young*





Six Figures Getting Sick (1966) by David Lynch

movement is barely perceptible. On this point, he reflects Walter Benjamin's perspective:

Let us compare the canvas (screen) on which a film unfolds with the canvas of a painting. The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested (Benjamin, 2019: 190).

Standing in opposition to this perspective is Lynch, for whom painting is movement that changes and mutates as much as the film shot, which is why he believes he can also paint on the

screen. If there are no frames in *Twin Peaks: The Return* it is because we are viewing the screen, the centrifugal force that submerges us in a world where there is no painting because the world itself *is* painting. What these two perspectives raise is not only the question of painting as an art form, but also the debate about its boundaries, its attributes and specific qualities.

4. THE TIME OF THE INSTANT

In the mid-1960s, David Lynch studied painting at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. He would work there with kinetic dynamic "real"

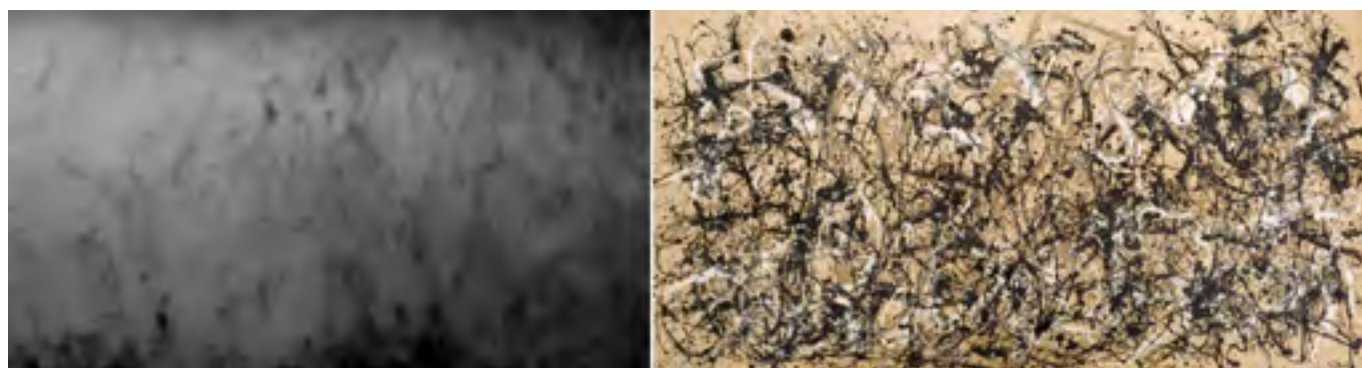
paintings, or “moving paintings”, such as *Six Figures Getting Sick* (1966), a high relief painted specifically for an animated projection that would turn the surface into a screen and the painting into movement. Later, this sensitivity to movement in painting would find full expression in his filmmaking, because, as Allister Mactaggart (2010: 12) points out, “[f]ilm allowed Lynch to add movement and sound to the muteness and static nature of his paintings as well as an opportunity to extend beyond their frame.”

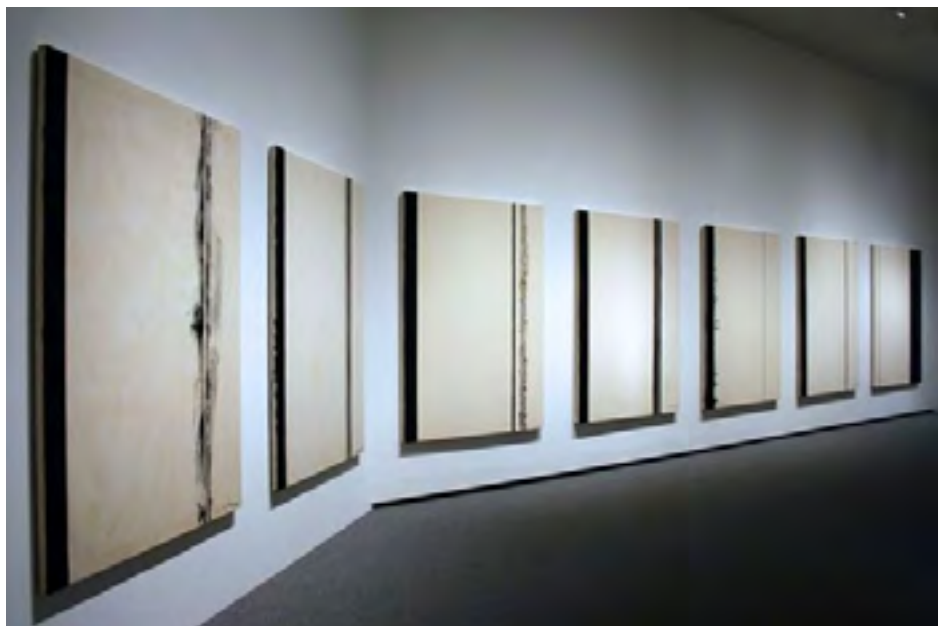
This absence of distinction between pictorial and audiovisual material is depicted in “Part 8”. The function of this episode—other than continuing the taste for digression established by the iconic “Fly”⁷ (#3x10, Rian Johnson, AMC: 2010) episode of *Breaking Bad* (Vince Gilligan, AMC: 2008-2013)—is to explain the origin of evil in the American context through the atomic bomb experiments in White Sands, New Mexico, in 1945. This event combines the social context framing the series, whose story would be the direct consequence of this historic moment, and the artistic concerns of its creator. In this case, temporal dislocation and the emergence of the abstract constitute a veritable vanishing point that distorts the spectator’s perception. When the bomb explodes, before the Hopperian imagery fills the screen, the spectator witnesses nearly three minutes of narrative suspension during which fire and smoke take the form of creating a drip painting, bringing

Hopper and Pollock together as part of a single unit of time, as part of a single frame that combines the different times of figurative painting and of abstract painting.

Correcting the naive dichotomy proposed by Lessing, Lyotard explains that there are many times in painting: the time of production, meaning the time it takes to paint the painting; the time of consumption, referring to the time required “to look at and understand” the work; the time of circulation, or the time it takes “to reach the viewer” once it has been “created”; and “the time the painting is”, which we have referred to in this article as “pictorial time” (Lyotard, 1991: 78). It is this last category of time, in the specific case of abstract expressionism, as Newman labels it (2003: 580-582), that has the particular quality of not *being*, because once it is it already *has been*. In other words, its time is the time of the event itself. On this point, Lyotard clarifies that “the sublime is now” should not be interpreted literally, but as “now the sublime is like this”, because “the feeling of the instant is instantaneous” (Lyotard, 1991: 93, 80).⁸ There are no elements to identify; there is only *figure*. There is no reading time, because there is nothing to read, only an instant to experience. It is this context that frames the explosion in “Part 8”. The screen becomes a painting, but unlike what happened to the paintings of Newman and others of his generation, time is not suspended by a time cut; instead, the serialis-

Left: stillframe from “Part 8” of *Twin Peaks: The Return*. Right: *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)* (1950) by Jackson Pollock





The Stations of the Cross (1958-1966) by Barnett Newman

ing of that cut connects the figurative stain with Hopperian imagery.

A work that helps explain the similarities and differences between such imagery and Newman's abstraction is the series *The Stations of the Cross* (1958-1966), made up of 14 paintings depicting the Via Crucis of Christ. As might be expected of this painter, none of the 14 images alludes to any element that could connect the work with the narrative time of the Passion. All 14, following Newman's poetics, are instants that suspend the logic of progressive time. During the explosion in *Twin Peaks: The Return*, each stillframe resembles an instant, and as they are stains on the screen there is no movement deconstructed into fragments. However, the series of instants extends beyond the stain and reaches Hopper's gas station, extending it into the figurative. The difference here from Newman's *Stations*, a work with which it shares a serial dimension, is that the episode is not a collection of separable paintings, but a single canvas on which Lynch paints stains, but also subjects, as the appearance of the reference has determined that everything must belong to the same space. The lightning flash is placed in 1945,

where Lynch and Frost position it narratively, and it is in the heart of this paradox that the instant that suspends time is inserted into the chronological evolution of humanity.

While Lynch and Frost insert the abstract into the spatio-temporal frame of the real, Winding Refn and Brubaker's characters go on gazing at the painting. They remain still. They keep trying to be abstract paintings when their figurative nature prevents them from appearing as stains. In a recent interview, Winding Refn pointed this

out explicitly: "I lost interest in realism when I realised that I would never be able to capture reality faithfully enough. Since then I have felt closer and closer to abstraction. And I have the intention of getting closer still to it" (Salvà, 2019). Indeed, Winding Refn is now a long way from the naturalist poetics that he cultivated enthusiastically and diligently in his early years as a filmmaker in films like *Pusher* (1996), *Pusher II* (2005), *Pusher 3* (2006) and *Bleeder* (1999); nevertheless, as he himself acknowledges, he is also still a long way from complete abstraction. In fact, he is convinced that as an artist he is doomed to pursue the impossible, and that, like his characters, he will never be able to achieve it.

If *Twin Peaks: The Return* is to be read as positive, the screen made painting, *Too Old to Die Young* is negative: the screen cannot turn into a canvas. The insertion of figurative forms in "Part 8" contrasts with Winding Refn's endeavour to hypostasise the figurative. The profusion of paintings that appear in *Too Old to Die Young* remind us that they can only exist in the space where they are presented. The direction taken here is thus the opposite to that taken by Lynch and

Frost: the paintings are on the screen, but they are not the screen. Indeed, all the decisions and comments of their respective creators come into conflict. Both series premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, two years apart; however, unlike Lynch and Frost, Winding Refn and Brubaker refused to present the first two episodes, choosing instead to show the fourth and the fifth. *Twin Peaks* came back to television, where it had begun, but moving from ABC to Showtime, while *Too Old to Die Young* was available on the video-on-demand platform Amazon Prime. David Lynch has often expressed his disdain for mobile devices as film viewers, while Nicolas Winding Refn is a recognised admirer of its possibilities (Salvà, 2019). And yet, the two series are also very similar. It is no secret that Refn is a great admirer of Lynch's work, and the influence of the return of *Twin Peaks* is clear; but his career has taken him in a different direction, while matching him in daring and wit. Their resemblance, as made explicit at the beginning of this article, lies in the artistic turn of both, in moving beyond a "way of making" television which, even in its best manifestations, has prioritised narration: what Lessing calls the "poetic" and which in these two cases is clearly marked by the "pictorial".

This is what we have referred to above as the poetics of the "cinematic", meaning that area of the mechanics—and prior to the mechanics—that studies movement through time without considering the force it generates. Without doubt, the movement of the narration in series like *The Sopranos* (David Chase, HBO: 1999-2007) or *The Wire* (David Simon, HBO: 2002-2008) is not without its artistic forces or libidinal drives, but if this is the case, it cannot be denied that while viewing them our attention is always on the "movement": on the plot, the characters, the conflicts. With *Twin Peaks: The Return* and *Too Old to Die Young*, the characters are transformed into objects, thereby ceasing to be the articulating centre of the story: Martin, the supposed protagonist, dies before we

IF *TWIN PEAKS: THE RETURN* IS TO BE READ AS POSITIVE, THE SCREEN MADE PAINTING, TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG IS NEGATIVE: THE SCREEN CANNOT TURN INTO A CANVAS

learn much about him, and without even making it to the last episode; Dougie is a character with no traits of his own, constructed out of the rather blurry outlines of the real character Dale Cooper; and Philip Jeffries (David Bowie) is literally turned into a machine. The force is contained in the stillness, in the visual tension of an impregnable surface that is revealed as such when, assessing the movement, we remember the other factors at play. This idea, which of course has been explored in cinema, is now becoming a central motif in serial fiction.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Without denying the multiplicity of criteria involved in a task of such complexity as the analysis of time in contemporary serial fiction, this article has sought to introduce two series into the continuum of theoretical and philosophical reflection on pictorial time. These case studies were chosen because both depart significantly from the now traditional forms of "quality TV" and take directions that require the application of interdisciplinary methods, of which this article intended as no more than an example.

Our findings reveal the existence of two key moments in the history of serial fiction, occurring two years apart. The first was the release of *Twin Peaks: The Return*, in which pictorial reference transgresses its traditional accessory function to become an inherent element of the story, transforming the shot into a canvas and erasing the boundaries between painting and movement-image—a task that Lynch began in his work

as a painter. The analysis of this phenomenon has been supported here by the theories of Lyotard and Deleuze on time, the figure and the sublime, while also considering the work of painters like Hopper, Magritte, Bacon, Pollock and Newman. These painters have allowed us to explore the introduction of abstract forms reflective of the instant into the temporal structure that concludes the eighth episode of Lynch's series. The second key moment was the release of *Too Old to Die Young*, in which Winding Refn and Brubaker offer their own exploration of time and painting, positioning themselves in opposition to Lynch and Frost. The constant that has defined our interpretation of this second series is the idea of the impossible nature of a dialogue between painting and television, articulated through the slowing down—but never full suspension—of the characters, and their strange interaction with the canvases appearing in the series.

While the first example breaks up the literary format, introducing a counter-seriality based on other stillnesses, other repetitions and other plasticities for the images, the second offers a perspective marked by scepticism. It may be expected that the dialectical movement begun by these two productions will be taken further in the future, and we hope that these post-televisual brushstrokes may contribute to a debate that is yet to begin.

NOTES

- 1 According to Lipovetsky (2000), capital persuades each individual in a personalised way. The standard defined by Marcuse (1972) under the category of "one-dimensional man" has thus become an outdated concept: there is no longer any effort to convince "rigid individuals", as it is in the small group that contemporary narcissism is configured.
- 2 The methods and notions applied in the analysis and categorisation of time and temporality in serial fiction today are many and varied. As a result, not all the classifications of the temporality of fiction identify

Lost and *24* as products that treat time the same way. Considering the possibilities of exploring the psychology of characters in American TV fiction, Carrión proposes a categorisation based on a series' "internal velocity", whereby "on one end we would have action products with extreme situations and plot twists occurring at a dizzying pace, like *24* or *Prison Break*; in the middle, changing speed constantly, would be *Dexter* or *Lost*; and on the other end, the relative slowness of the best TV series in history, like *Six Feet Under*, *The Sopranos* or *The Wire*" (Carrión, 2011: 185-186). Yet although categorisations differ, the book edited by Melissa Ames (2012) is one of the most recent and complete compendiums dealing directly with questions of time and temporality in contemporary television.

- 3 With his approach Lessing calls into question the Horatian maxim *Ut pictura poesis*, which posits poetry and painting as analogous art forms. However, what is of interest for this article is the multiple types of time proposed by Lyotard based on Lessing's model.
- 4 An entire article could be dedicated to the similarities and differences between the theories of Lyotard and Deleuze, but their ideas are merely summarised here to avoid excessive digression from the focus of this paper: the turning point in serial fiction represented by the two objects of study. For further exploration of the questions raised here, see Durafour (2009) and the anthology edited by Jones and Woodward (2017).
- 5 The term "figure" is used here not with reference to the image so much as the icon, since it pertains to the discourse. Our intention is to highlight the fact that these three painters (Bacon, Hopper and Magritte) all found ways to subvert the image so that the spectator can sense a kind of pattern in the stains that are more than iconic. To support this idea we refer to Deleuze (2002), and especially to Lyotard (1971).
- 6 In the interview published by Rodley, Lynch claims that painting is his primary activity, and that "there are aspects of painting that are true for everything in life" (Rodley, 2017: 43). Studies like Mactaggart's (2010) also explore this interdisciplinary dimension of his work, and it is also referenced in works like *David*

Lynch: *The Art Life* (Jon Nguyen, Rick Barnes & Olivia Neegaard-Holm, 2017), the recent documentary on the director's life and work.

- 7 Adrian Martin (2018) offers an overview of the many different critical positions that spectators have adopted in relation to these kinds of narrative experiments. He thus points out the romantic attitude of Lynch and Frost, who, in opposition to the demands of the contemporary television format, do not subscribe to the idea that the flashback must have a narrative justification. In this respect, he cites cases like "Fly", an episode that provides the storytelling with a narrative pause that is obvious as a digression from the main line of the story.
- 8 The specificity that Lyotard saw in Newman's works is the autonomy of the painting compared to the narrative time of *discourse*, a question that the French philosopher had already explored in *Discourse, Figure*. Indeed, our extrapolation of the theoretical framework applicable to Newman to include Pollock follows Lyotard's intuitions on the materiality of the form-figure, posited against the existentialist approaches of critics like Rosenberg (1959) or Tomassoni (1968), who understood Pollock's work as the result of a performative process, and therefore as part of an evolution that is not instant. Of course, what interests us here in Lynch's filmmaking praxis is his complete transgression of these binaries: the screen is a painting that moves, temporalising the instant through sequencing. What is new is not the temporal fracture of the acinematic moment (Lyotard, 1973), but its repetition and, of course, its difference (Deleuze, 1968).

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POST-TELEVISUAL BRUSHSTROKES: TWIN PEAKS: THE RETURN AND TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF "PICTORIAL TIME"

Abstract

Just as they did in the 1990s, David Lynch and Mark Frost made an unexpected return to the small screen in recent years that called into question the prevailing artistic and narrative forms of contemporary serial fiction. Understanding Nicolas Winding Refn and Ed Brubaker's *Too Old To Die Young* (Amazon Prime Video: 2019) as a successor in certain respects to *Twin Peaks: The Return* (David Lynch & Mark Frost, Showtime: 2017), this article offers a comparative analysis based on the theories of Gilles Deleuze and, especially, Jean-François Lyotard, related to "pictorial time", with the aim of reappraising these forms of seriality, exploring the treatment of art and time in two series with unorthodox ways of conceiving plot continuity and shot duration, very far from the (still hegemonic) standards established by "quality TV".

Key words

Painting; Contemporary Serial Fiction; Time; *Twin Peaks: The Return*; *Too Old To Die Young*; David Lynch; Nicolas Winding Refn; Jean-François Lyotard.

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PINCELADAS POSTELEVISIVAS. TWIN PEAKS: THE RETURN Y DEMASIADO VIEJO PARA MORIR JOVEN DESDE EL TIEMPO DE LA PINTURA

Resumen

Como ya había ocurrido en los años noventa, el inesperado regreso de David Lynch y Mark Frost al quehacer televisivo supuso el cuestionamiento de las formas plásticas y narrativas imperantes en la ficción serial contemporánea. Entendiendo *Demasiado viejo para morir joven* (Too Old To Die Young, Amazon Prime Video: 2019), de Nicolas Winding Refn y Ed Brubaker, como sucesora de algunos de los aspectos de *Twin Peaks: The Return* (David Lynch y Mark Frost, Showtime: 2017), trazaremos una comparación entre ambas que se apoye en las reflexiones de Gilles Deleuze y, especialmente, Jean-François Lyotard sobre el «tiempo de la pintura». Nuestro objetivo es repensar las formas de la serialidad aproximándonos al tratamiento plástico y temporal de estos dos ejemplos, heterodoxos en su manera de concebir la continuidad argumental o la duración del plano, y muy alejados del estándar —aún hegemónico— fijado por la Quality TV.

Palabras clave

Pintura; Ficción serial contemporánea; Tiempo; *Twin Peaks: The Return*; *Demasiado viejo para morir joven*; David Lynch; Nicolas Winding Refn; Jean-François Lyotard.

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FEMALE AI REPRESENTATIONS: *EX MACHINA* REVISITS THE MYTHS OF PANDORA AND GALATEA

GOKSU AKKAN

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KLAUS ZILLES

The portrayal of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in contemporary cinema speaks to the dominant discourse in the European tradition about humanity's fears and hopes generated by the creation of artificial life. A central theme in these narratives is the dichotomy of self vs. other in which the other is perceived as a strange, unsettling creature. With the advent of the 2020s, robotics and artificial intelligence became an increasingly hot topic, and the work of filmmakers explored both long-standing and recent concerns about female robots by bringing them to life on the screen (Dvorsky, 2013; Dockrill, 2016; Gershgorin, 2016; Pandya, 2019; Strait, Aguilon et al., 2017; Hamilton, 2018). The debate surrounding the postmodern condition posits the demise of the grand narratives predicated on history, identity, and belief systems. These were supplanted with new narratives grounded in technology and surveillance (Denzin, 1991; Kellner and Best, 1997). The present study seeks to analyse the portrayal of the female

as an iconic representation of Artificial Intelligence in the context of the current *zeitgeist* (Drosnin, 1997; Keane, 2006). We submit that an exploration of Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014) as a new reading of the Galatea and Pandora myths will bear out our hypothesis that the female robot model projects the spectre of the monstrous feminine, and may embolden filmmakers to endeavour more complex representations of females capable of subverting the power structure of patriarchal ideology (Modleski, 2002).

INTRODUCTION

Stories that have their origin in Greek mythology, or in the writings of medieval scholars, constitute early archetypes of artificial creatures, which have come to form part of our collective consciousness of an *other* resembling a human. Classical and medieval accounts of artificial creation of life allow us to gain deeper insight into the

ways these earlier cultures understood human nature and the origins of human life. Thus, we shall explore the emergence of the first examples of humanoid robots equipped with artificial intelligence (the androids of the science fiction genre, SF from now on), which have given rise to so many other fictional constructs in literature, the arts, and cinematography (Graf, 1993; Dougherty, 2006).

Our interpretation of the feature film, *Ex Machina*, as a revisiting and rethinking of the myths of Pandora and Galatea, is structured as follows. Initially, the two mythological narratives are analysed regarding their gendered representation of the two mythical creatures: Pandora as a misogynist narrative of an evil creation designed to inflict misfortune upon men. Galatea, in turn, represents a distinct kind of misogynist narrative in that the story features a man, who regards mortal women as inferior and deficient, and sets out to create an ideal female for himself to fulfill his desires. We then provide a nexus between the artificial archetypes and modern AIs by charting a history of AI in SF narrative both in literature and on the screen before turning our attention to *Ex Machina*. Drawing on Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous Feminine* (2007), as well as on our previous discussion of mythical female creatures, we analyse the two female AIs featured in the movie, and their unsettling conceptualisation as dangerous females. We shall see that our reading of *Ex Machina*, informed by the previous exploration of

the female AIs of old, heightens the acuteness of our appreciation of AI characters in modern SF movies.

PANDORA AND GALATEA: TWO GREEK MYTHS OF THE CREATION FEMALE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Pandora and Galatea are mythological representations of AI which, over the centuries, are revisited by the arts in many different shapes and purposes with the recurrent themes of the dangerous female and the female companion, respectively. An exploration of their origin stories will lead to a deeper understanding of the conception of AIs in contemporary cinematography.

In *Theogony*, Hesiod (2006) writes that Zeus, infuriated at Prometheus for stealing the fire and giving it to the mortals, decides to unleash Pandora and her box of evil afflictions upon humanity. On Zeus's orders, Hephaestus creates the first mortal woman in a fashion similar to Prometheus's creation of man. Hephaestus moulds her from water and clay, and aptly names her Pandora, the all-gifted or all-giving (Hesiod, 2006: 6).

Indeed, Pandora was a collaborative effort by the Olympian gods. Athena bestowed femininity on Pandora by teaching her how to weave and dress alluringly. Aphrodite "shed grace upon her head and cruel longing and cares that weary the limbs". Hermes gave her "a shameful mind and deceitful nature" thereby endowing her with the skills needed to deceive Prometheus' brother Epimetheus. The Graces draped necklaces around her neck, and the Horae gave her a crown of flowers (Hesiod, 2006: 63-81).

Gods and men alike were amazed by her beauty. Prometheus warned his brother not to take any gifts from the gods, but Epimetheus did not heed the warning. As soon as he accepted Pandora, she took the lid off her jar and unleashed evil, toil, and disease on humankind, initiating the suffering of men for ages to come. Considered an

STORIES THAT HAVE THEIR ORIGIN IN GREEK MYTHOLOGY, OR IN THE WRITINGS OF MEDIEVAL SCHOLARS, CONSTITUTE EARLY ARCHETYPES OF ARTIFICIAL CREATURES, WHICH HAVE COME TO FORM PART OF OUR COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS OF AN OTHER RESEMBLING A HUMAN

anti-feminist or misogynist myth (Kahn, 1970; Koning, 2010), this trope emerges in SF films featuring bionic femme fatale characters that bring misery upon men, such as Maria in *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927) or Ava in *Ex Machina*.

The Pygmalion story in Ovid's *Metamorphosis* (2010) speaks to further motivations for creating an artificial female. Pygmalion is a Cypriot sculptor who is disillusioned with women –“loathing their lascivious life” (Ovid, 2010: 275)– and decides to remain unmarried. Instead, “fearing idleness, the nurse of ill” (Ovid, 2010: 275), he carves the statue of a woman from ivory and falls in love with her. On the day of Venus's (Aphrodite's) feast, Pygmalion makes an offering to the goddess and Venus grants his wish to give Galatea a human existence.

Galatea's genesis typifies the search for the ideal female devoid of the imperfections of mortal women. Like Galatea, there are numerous AI characters in SF movies who become the object of their maker's desire, though mostly they are the product of technological aspirations rather than artistic endeavour.

Similarities emerge between the creation of humans and the creation of artificial intelligence by humans. First the creator (Zeus, or Prometheus; God in monotheistic religions) made humans from clay and animated the inanimate. Archetypes of the *mute* artificial creation as inferior, such as Talos in Greek mythology and the Golem in Jewish tradition, appear to be a prevailing feature of monotheistic religions in that the creation never lives up to human intelligence. Conversely, the polytheistic Greeks saw Galatea and Pandora as *fully human*, Pandora as the temptress, a bringer of misfortune, and a precedent of the hegemonic interpretations of the biblical Eve. Conversely, Galatea is an example of the sexualized woman that obeys her male *master*, which is a common trope among the hegemonic (and patriarchal) narratives. Dichotomous relationships between the creator-creation prevail such as master-slave,

god-human, or oppressor-oppressed. However, the relationship can be subverted when the creation acquires too much power, a prevalent theme in both SF literature and audio-visual productions.

THE EMERGENCE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN SCIENCE FICTION NARRATIVE

Many critics (Scholes and Rabkin, 1977; Aldiss and Wingrove, 1986; Gunn, 1988; Claeys, 2010; Mann, 2012) agree that the first truly recognizable work of SF is Mary Shelley's (1993) *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*. The text draws on the 16th century Dr. Faust, putting the *mad scientist* Victor Frankenstein centre-stage for the first time. Frankenstein's scientific endeavour comes to fruition when one night his creation made up of dead body parts comes to life thanks to electricity, a technology available at the time. However, scared of the monstrosity of his creation, Victor abandons him, only for the monster to come back later and beg Frankenstein to create a female companion for him to end his agony, suffering and loneliness. However, Victor does not follow in God's footsteps and declines to create an Eve for his AI Adam.

Freedman argues that the *Promethean* aspect of the text renders it so important, since the “epistemological radicalism of the novel, its sense that the most fundamental of material and intellectual categories condensed into the problem of life itself—can no longer be taken for granted but are now somehow up for grabs and can be challenged and rethought” (Freedman, 2013: 4). *Frankenstein* essentially questions the notion that human life can be created successfully through science, yet despite the failure of the science experiment it paves the way for later texts which use science, reason, and technology as their core narrative motifs.

Frankenstein's monster is a crucial example of *the other* as he is created artificially, does not look

like a normal human, and is grotesquely ugly and scary, thereby epitomizing human fears of the unknown:

The monster and the alien (both variations on the theme of the non-human) are used by SF, as by the Gothic novel, to give form to inchoate fears and prejudices. The dread of the non-human encapsulates legion cultural anxieties about the contamination of dominant social classes, privileged sexualities, national values and whole empires by a putatively deviant and evil *alter ego* (Cavallaro, 2000: 3).

Frankenstein is the definitive predecessor to SF literature for its Promethean outlook that seeks to challenge foundational ideas through science and technology, and because it is an early example of a narrative in which binaries such as *us* vs. *them* and *self* vs. *other* are explicitly foregrounded.

There is a general consensus that Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* constitutes one of the first feature-length SF films. *Metropolis* remains highly controversial. It was dismissed as communist propaganda for vilifying the ruling class and praised by Nazi officials for invoking social justice (Schoenbaum, 1997). Although Lang and Von Harbou were influenced by H. G. Wells when writing the screenplay, Wells dismissed its "foolishness, cliché, platitude and muddlement about mechanical progress and progress in general [...] Quite the silliest film." (McGilligan, 1997). It was amongst the first films to feature themes like man vs. machine, man vs. technology, as well as featuring a female android being, whose evil otherness renders the film misogynistic and technophobic according to some scholars (Ruppert, 2001; Donahue, 2003).

Allison Muri argues that "the fictional female cyborg typically occupies one of the two poles of a spectrum extending from heroism to evil, but in either case she effects the coupling of the femme fatale with an equally perilous technology" (Muri, 2007: 168). In *Metropolis*, the real Maria is thus the heroic version as she gives hope to the workers of the city, whereas the fake Maria, or the robot Ma-

ria, is seen as evil, as she turns workers against one another.

The preoccupation with AI reached new heights in 1970s SF cinema and it proved to be more than a simply a fad for Hollywood but rather a genuine exploration of the nature of human existence against the foil of artificial humanoid creations. Thus, *Westworld* (Michael Crichton, 1973) features a theme park with robots who believed they were humans, thus confronting audiences with the millennia-old question: how do we define human life and consciousness? *The Stepford Wives* (Bryan Forbes, 1975) took to task the patriarchal American middle-class by having men play out the fantasy of creating androids to supplant their flesh-and-bone wives. The sheer misogyny and delusion exhibited by the male characters brings audiences face to face with the potential consequences of using female AIs as submissive sex toys-cum-homemakers.

One arrives at the gloomy conclusion that "the SF films of the early 1970s were unable to imagine the possibility of redemption and viewed humanity as simply doomed. Thus, while they have been seen as radical, they were also profoundly nihilistic, providing no alternative to the decadent order of things" (Geraghty, 2009: 60). And yet, by the end of the 1970s, the SF genre was firmly established, and a series of blockbuster movies kicked off film franchises that have extended well into the 2010s and 2020s, many of which seek to paint a more sanguine picture of the potential of AI technology by making entertaining films that eschew the ominous, fear-inducing quality of their predecessors.

The 1980s saw entertainment and films mutate under the Reagan administration highlighting a sense of nostalgia and *back to basics* tendency (Britton, 2009). American exceptionalism, brought to the fore by benevolent and friendly aliens such as *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (Steven Spielberg, 1982), provided relief to cold war anxieties stirred up by monstrous evil aliens. Ryan and

SINCE THE COLD WAR, FEMINIST DYSTOPIAS HAVE BEEN ON THE RISE AS A SF GENRE

Kellner (1988) see this nostalgic return as a conservative backlash to the political radicalism of the 1970s. Examples of the upbeat side of the two currents are Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *E.T.*, whereas Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982), and James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984) provide enthralling, albeit gravely unsettling, visions of artificial intelligence.

Blade Runner epitomizes the philosophical and epistemological thrust of movies revolving around AI in that it inhabits the interstice between modernism and postmodernism where time, the self, and reality become uncertain and open to questioning. Indeed, AIs called replicants are equipped with memory implants. Personal history is foregrounded as a defining feature of being human, as opposed to artificial creatures who, like Galatea and Pandora, have no history and memories prior to their genesis.

If *Blade Runner* was arguably the pioneering SF film of the 1980s, a worthy successor in the 1990s may be *The Matrix* (Lana and Lily Wachowski, 1999) with its entire universe of codes, controlled and managed by an unknown force, riding the wave of anxieties engendered by the new millennium. The 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 brought the fragility of Western civilization into sharp relief. Perhaps the resulting vulnerability accounts for Chris Columbus's *Bicentennial Man* (1999) as it depicts a compassionate robot that resigns from immortality for a beloved human, similar to the Galatea myth.

Since the Cold War, feminist dystopias have been on the rise as a SF genre. Cavalcanti submits that they "envision imaginary spaces that most contemporary readers would describe as

bad places for women, being characterized by the suppression of female desire (brought into effect either by men or women) and by the institution of gender-inflected oppressive orders" (Moylan and Baccolini, 2003: 49). Charlotte Haldane's *Man's World* (1927) and Katherine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1937) are among the first examples of this sub-genre, followed by Pamela Kettle's *The Day of the Women* (1969) and Suzy McKee Charnas's *Holdfast* (1969) tetralogy. They all imagine a future society in which women are oppressed and seen as inferior to men or machines.

EX MACHINA: MALE ANGST OF THE FEMME CASTRATRICE

In Alex Garland's *Ex Machina*, Caleb, an employee at a big tech company, is summoned to the remote residence of the firm's owner and head innovator, Nathan. Caleb believes he is tasked with performing a Turing test on the AIs Nathan has been building. Caleb is unaware that Nathan has designed and programmed his latest creation, Ava, to emotionally manipulate Caleb, thereby proving that she has human intelligence and thus passing the Turing test.

However, things do not go exactly to plan. Ava does succeed at ensnaring Caleb and she seizes the opportunity to free herself and to kill her creator before escaping into the city.

While the film's central theme is the AI vs. the human, it also explores religious dualities (creator vs. creation, god vs. man) and dualities of human nature (the good male vs. the evil female). Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* (2007) eloquently speaks to the portrayal of female *monsters* such as Ava when she discusses horror and SF film genres from a feminist, Freudian perspective to unpack the construction of the female *other* in post-modernist critical theory.

The title of the film itself points to a narrative which continues and expands the mythical origin stories of female AIs. *Deus ex machina* ("god from

the machine”) is an ancient plot device in Greek theatre to resolve an unsolvable impasse in a play’s plot. Actors were lowered onto the stage or hoisted from trap doors by crane-like *machines* for surprise effect or to create comic relief (Chondros, Milidonis et al., 2013).

The movie’s title craftily sidesteps the word *deus* to bring Nathan’s god complex into even starker relief. He is, after all, a tech millionaire and master creator of superior life forms. Thus, he is in good company among the mad scientists of SF literature, who are afflicted by the *Frankenstein complex*, as Isaac Asimov calls it (Zunshine, 2008; Indick, 2013; King, 2017). Following William Indick’s (2013) typology of SF scientists, Nathan neatly fits into the category of narcissistic, callous, entitled, arrogant, haughty prodigies. But Nathan is also a modern Prometheus, a sly operator who *steals fire from the gods* by giving Ava a human consciousness *attained through immoral means* as Nathan illegitimately and immorally harvests mobile phone data and porn search histories to endow Ava with the wiles to seduce and manipulate Caleb. Like Epimetheus, Nathan does not grasp the monstrosity of his creations until it is too late, and he dies at Ava and Kyoko’s hands, thereby violating the first of Asimov’s Three Laws of Robotics (Asimov, 1995): the robot must never injure a human. Nathan must pay the price for his hubris and for entering into his Faustian pact.

We can also bring the lessons from the Pygmalion myth to bear on *Ex Machina*. Pandora was equipped with “a shameful mind and deceitful nature” (Hesiod, 2006), which helped her trick Prometheus’ brother Epimetheus. Will Ava also take the lid off her jar to unleash misery upon humanity? The movie is open-ended. We leave Ava as she heads for the city, but if her treatment of Nathan and Caleb is anything to go by, the fictitious humans in *Ex Machina* are in for a nasty surprise.

The film’s portrayal of the feminine *other* also resonates with the idea of the *Monstrous-Femi-*

nine. As Creed points out, throughout antiquity up to the Renaissance, the uterus was drawn with horns to intimate how much it resembles the devil (Creed, 2007: 170). Margaret Miles argues that in Christian art, the uterus is often represented as hell, in which “sinners were perpetually tortured for their crimes” (Miles, 1989: 147). This representation of women in art as evil or grotesque has had an impact on cinema, too. The womb as a cinematic space is where pain, helplessness and suffering reside.

What is more, the portrayal of the film’s second AI further validates our contention that studying AIs in classical and medieval stories enhances the acuteness of our understanding of modern SF AIs. It is no coincidence that Kyoko is reminiscent of the Jewish Golem myth. She is mute, servile, and beholden to her creator until Ava turns her against Nathan. Like the mythical Golem, Kyoko too must die when she gets too powerful, like the Golem does at the hands of the Rabbi.

Besides Greek mythology, *Ex Machina* also alludes to Judeo-Christian motifs. Names refer to religious creation myths throughout the film. All main characters have *Old Testament* (Hebrew) names. Nathan means *he gives*; Caleb means *dog* or *unsophisticated servant*, and Ava, originating from Eve by way of Hebrew Hava, fittingly means *to live* (Abarim Publications, 2006). Nathan is the god-like giver of life. Caleb is but a pawn in Nathan’s game, expendable, doggedly loyal, and unsuspecting. Ava is clearly the Eve to Adam, the first AI in the female form who *joins* humanity by eating from the *tree of life* and acquiring sentience and awareness. Lilith was the first woman God created in the *Talmud* (Hurwitz, 2007). Lily is the first female AI Nathan creates and subsequently destroys.

Further allusions to Judeo-Christian origin stories include the duration of the narrated time, which is seven days. The tree featured in the first scene with Ava is the tree of knowledge, or tree

of life, which is the only tree Eve and Adam must not eat from, and which gets them banned from paradise. However, Garland repurposes the origin story for his film. Ava successfully fools both Caleb and Nathan, trapping Caleb in *hell* with Nathan's dead body just beyond the glass screen. The scene is tinted in deep, dark, infernal red, while Ava is outside, surrounded by nature in bright shades of green—the Garden of Eden.

As shown in figure one, Caleb is trapped inside the control room which is steeped in a *bloody* dark red hue. Beyond the screen, Nathan's lifeless body is sprawled on the floor. God is dead. There is no *deus* who can emerge from the machine. The machine, the *monstrous feminine* (Creed, 2007) has taken over, trapping Caleb in his own private hell/womb. We see him wielding a stool, trying to break through the screen. Ominous music accompanies and enhances his desperate struggle, made even more dramatic by the parallel editing which continuously cuts back and forward between the Ava's calm, green Eden, and Caleb's struggle to be reborn from the infernal matrix. Male vs. female, hell vs. heaven, good vs. bad. The audience is confronted with these dichotomies repeatedly in a short amount of time.

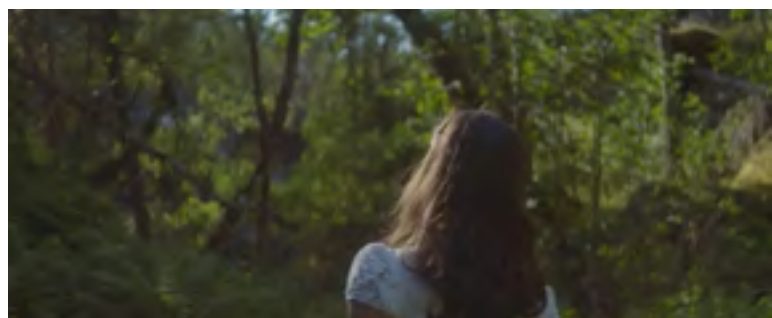
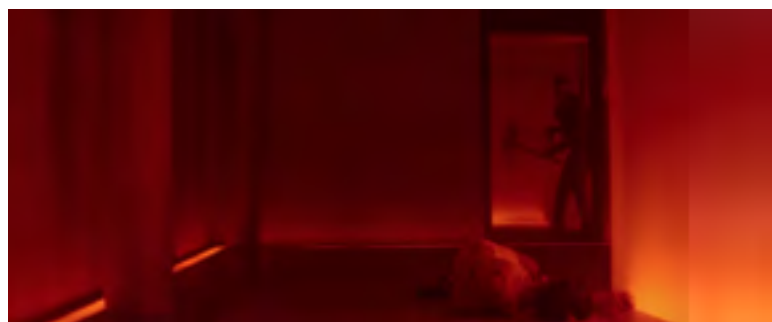
Ava's body epitomizes anxieties related to the female body, the womb being one of them, as well as the anxiety in the male gaze. Ava is not biologically human, and thus genderless and sexless. Yet according to her creator her sexuality is self-explanatory:

NATHAN: Every conscious thing has a gender, why not her? You want to take her chance of falling in love and fucking away from her? And the answer to your real question is, you bet she can fuck, man.

CALEB: That wasn't my real question. My real question was, did you give her sexuality as a diversion tactic?

NATHAN: Like a hot robot that clouds your ability to judge her AI? Exactly.

CALEB: So did you program her to flirt with me?



Above. Figure 1. Dead Nathan and Caleb trapped in the red-hued room that signifies danger. *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2014). Below. Figure 2. Ava out in nature that represents heaven. *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2014)

NATHAN: No... you're like the first guy that she met who isn't me and I'm like her dad, right? So, can you blame her for getting a crush on you?

On this issue, Sharon Russell argues "females seldom create monsters or control them, except perhaps a variant of the mother/son relationship, as in *Trog*, or through the act of giving birth to a monster" (Russell, 1984: 117).

In *Ex Machina*, Ava is not defined as a monster by the power of an infernal womb. She is monstrous and dangerous because she has agency. She takes revenge on Nathan who has created and killed many like her, and she uses her sexuality to dominate Caleb and to free herself. Creed calls this type of female representation *femme castratrice*, one who "controls the sadistic gaze: the male victim is her object [...] who contains male traits like aggressiveness and violence" (Creed, 2007: 563-678). Rather than being objectified, she objectifies her creator (Nathan) and her potential mate (Caleb), thus subverting the patriarchal male

gaze on her as housekeeper and sex doll. Ava upends the traditional victimhood of the woman in horror movies. Men become her prey. She is monstrous, devilish, *the other*, and in the end she commits patricide, the ultimate form of castration according to Creed (2007).

The real test for Ava is not passing the Turing test, Nathan tells Caleb, but to escape by means of self-awareness, imagination, manipulation, sexuality, empathy. These are all characteristics of the *phallic woman* or the *femme castratrice* that render women more masculine than conservative definitions of womanhood (Britton, 2009; Clover, 1989; Creed, 2007). Escudero Pérez defines this as “the ultimate Turing Test: not to mimic human intellect, but to attain human emotion” (Escudero Pérez, 2020: 329).

Figure 3 shows Ava’s full body shot with Caleb peering at her like a child in a zoo. The audience peers at her as well. She has body cavities, wires, and a humanoid body outline. However, she has learnt to hate her artificial body. Later, she wears clothes and covers her whole body with synthetic skin from dead AIs to conceal her *imperfections*, the wires, chips, and synthetic parts. Her body, uncannily human on the outside, is both familiar but strange. Though humanlike with an expressive face, she is not made of organic matter, she is artificial. She has a sense of self, but she is not human. She is thus the embodiment of the post-modern condition in Creed’s poststructuralist/psychoanalytic/feminist reading. Ava’s body is a pastiche of *micro* narratives that challenge the grand narratives. It is a mishmash of biology and technology; organic and synthetic at once, imbued with data stolen from porn searches in browser histories of millions of men around the world, making her the anti-thesis of a natural, biologic, *modern*, body (Lyotard, 1984).

When Ava covers up her artificiality, she is indistinguishable from a real woman. She can make real time decisions and act in response to any given situation. She is a perfect pastiche of a real

human being and sophisticated technology. Like other poststructuralist thinkers, Fredric Jameson invokes the link between signifier and signified. When the connection between them, like the real and the representational meaning of what is *human*, is lost, what is left is schizophrenia (Jameson, 1991). This holds true for Ava, as her individuality as a human subject appears under erasure. She is a mere replica of what a human can be, without the human’s uniqueness and authenticity.

Baudrillard identifies this phenomenon as the hyperreal and writes: “the unreal is no longer that of dream or of fantasy, of a beyond or a within, it is that of a hallucinatory resemblance of the real with itself” (Baudrillard, 1983: 142). As a result, Ava’s body seems real, and she is a person since she has a conscience, but she is not real and authentic, but merely a hyperreal simulation because she is not organic. She wasn’t born from a mother. She didn’t experience biochemical processes like becoming ill or getting her period. She didn’t grow up like other women, she does not have memories that would build a personality, and so on. She is a hyperreal pastiche of the real human body that relies on data and technology. This also further highlights Ava’s position as a dystopian body. Her body warns the audience that the more like her are manufactured, the greater the threat of danger and destruction grows.

The ending shows us the literal mutilation and symbolic castration of Nathan, as he is slain by Ava with the help of Kyoko. Figure 4 shows the exact moment in which Ava stabs Nathan, his blood seeping through the back of his shirt as a result of the blade slashing through his insides. The colours of the scene are muted, so that the redness of the blood stands out on the grey/white

**IN EX MACHINA, AVA IS NOT DEFINED
AS A MONSTER BY THE POWER OF AN
INFERNAL WOMB**

background. Ava has avenged her *kind*. She has taken revenge for the previous AIs that have been killed off ruthlessly by Nathan, showing that she will not share the same ending as them. She becomes the quintessential *femme castratrice*.

According to Creed, women's revenge film is a subgenre of horror in which the woman uses her agency to castrate and to annul the sadistic male (Creed, 2007: 559). However, this is only one layer of the anxieties that *Ex Machina* encapsulates. In terms of the male/female dichotomy, we agree with Creed that Ava is a typical *femme castratrice*. However, if we factor in that Ava is not a female human, but an AI in the guise of a female, it makes her all the more subversive.

In Creed's readings of feminine dystopias like *The Brood* (David Cronenberg, 1979), *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976), *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), and *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), the feminine is a real monster with no possibility of existing in real life. By contrast, female AIs are real and are rapidly approaching Ava's sophistication. The film serves as a dystopian warning about the real-life perils of AI if the technology is not regulated by the governing bodies. Perhaps more importantly,

Ex Machina uncovers deep-seated fears of *the other*, the non-human and non-male, and thus gives form to internalized fears and prejudices about cultural, sexual and social anxieties "by a putatively deviant and evil alter ego" (Cavallaro, 2000: 3).

Caleb is appalled when Nathan discloses that he will update Ava's software, bringing about the demise of Ava's *self*. Nathan scoffs: "Don't feel bad about her, man. Feel bad for yourself. One day, the AIs will look at us in the same way we look at fossil skeletons in the plains of Africa... we are all set for extinction". It is conspicuous how Nathan is sure that AI will destroy humanity and dominate Earth, a foreshadowing of the open ending of the film. Ava's monstrosity is not entirely symbolic. In 2014, AI technology was far advanced. Perhaps Ava is not a reality yet, but she will be, as many scholars agree that the Singularity is near (Vinge, 2017; Eden, Eric et al., 2012; Müller and Bostrom, 2016). *Ex Machina* speaks to a well-founded anxiety about being annihilated by AI in the future, and a real fear of female empowerment and female wrath.

In the final scene, Ava has reached the place she said she would go to, a busy traffic intersection in the city. Ava, created as an Artificial Intelli-

Figure 3. Ava's body silhouette. *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2014)





Figure 4. Ava stabbing her creator, Nathan. *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2014)

gence in the female form, has completed her transformation into a real human; fluid, imperfect and chaotic, just as Nathan had described the human mind. The film leaves Ava's fate to the viewers' imagination. Will she survive and live a normal life? Will she manipulate, endanger, or kill? Prompted by our fear of the unknown, we are likely to leave Ava behind on the screen, though expectant and fearful of walking past her on a busy intersection, oblivious to her engineered, uncannily human, and highly dangerous postmodern existence.

CONCLUSION

We have set out to show that examining inchoate AI creatures in classical myths and medieval stories enhances the acuteness of our appreciation of AI characters in modern SF movies. We singled out *Ex Machina* for its array of characters reminiscent of, and building on, religious origin stories and ancient myths, how keenly they speak to a collective human angst of the unknown, and how the film taps into human anxieties and issues warnings about the future, thus making it a perfect specimen of SF dystopia. Millennia ago, humans began to imagine proto-AI phenomena across different cultures and religions. *Ex Machina* captures the hopes and fears stirred up by the idea of artificially creating a perfect being. Creed (2007) and Badley (1995) contend that within psychoanalysis the female is the radicalized gender,

and that in a male-dominated culture the *self* vs. *other* dichotomy is tantamount to *male* vs. *female*. In many SF audiovisual texts the monster is a type of *phallic female*, whereas the victims, like Ava and Caleb, are *effeminized* males.

There is compelling research that shows that women are overwhelmingly more expressive in their emotions and are *easier to read* than men, a difference that starts to show in children at the age of five (Kring and Gordon, 1998; Kelly and Hutson-Comeux, 2002). It is striking that most service (and *servile*) AIs, regardless of their corporal status, the Siris, Alexas, GPS default voices, automatic answer services and most virtual assistants, are given female voices as they are seen as more helpful and they are not expected to question orders. This reinforces the stereotype of the helpful, solicitous female like secretaries, caretakers, nurses, cleaners, etc. Ava and Kyoko and their prototypes were designed to do housework and have sex. Sex dolls are mostly female, and AI assistants like Siri and Alexa had only female voice options when they were first launched. In many ways, this male conceptualization of artificial female creatures harkens back to the mythical origins of Pandora as a temptress and a femme castratrice, and of Galatea as a kind of erstwhile Stepford Wife. *Ex Machina* is a foreboding of what may ensue when the creation attains power over her male creator and master and, in the end, turns on him.

In sum, the phenomenon of artificial intelligence goes far beyond serving as an intriguing character in the SF genre, even beyond genre tropes such as “post-romantic” (Escudero Pérez, 2020) and “monstrous feminine” (Creed, 2007). Rather, representations of AIs reflect contemporary social fears and anxieties, and they convey gender ideologies, and stereotypes. AIs can tell us a lot about power, identity, and the postmodern condition. AIs like Ava may challenge gender stereotypes and the patriarchy in multiple ways, as they display agency and consciousness, and make and enforce their own choices.

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FEMALE AI REPRESENTATIONS: EX MACHINA REVISITS THE MYTHS OF PANDORA AND GALATEA

Abstract

The portrayal of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in contemporary cinema speaks to the dominant discourse in the European tradition about humanity's fears and hopes generated by the creation of artificial life. The present study seeks to analyse the portrayal of the female as an iconic representation of Artificial Intelligence in the context of the current *zeitgeist* (Drosnin, 1997; Keane, 2006) as the work of filmmakers explores both long-standing and recent concerns about female robots by bringing them to life on the screen (Pandya, 2019; Hamilton, 2018). We submit that an exploration of Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014) as a new reading of the Galatea and Pandora myths will bear out our hypothesis that the female robot model projects the spectre of the monstrous feminine, and may embolden filmmakers to endeavour more complex representations of females capable of subverting the power structure of patriarchal ideology (Modleski, 2002).

Key words

Artificial Intelligence; Robots; Science Fiction; Film Studies; Gender Studies; Greek Mythology.

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REPRESENTACIONES FEMENINAS DE INTELIGENCIA ARTIFICIAL: EX MACHINA REVISLA LOS MITOS DE PANDORA Y GALATEA

Resumen

La representación de la inteligencia artificial (IA) en el cine contemporáneo recoge el discurso dominante en la tradición europea sobre los temores y esperanzas de la humanidad generados por la creación de la vida artificial. El presente estudio pretende analizar el retrato de la mujer como representación icónica de la inteligencia artificial en el contexto del *zeitgeist* actual (Drosnin, 1997; Keane, 2006), ya que los cineastas exploran tanto las preocupaciones antiguas como las recientes sobre los robots femeninos al darles vida en la pantalla (Pandya, 2019; Hamilton, 2018). Sostenemos que una investigación sobre *Ex Machina* (2014), de Alex Garland, como una nueva lectura de los mitos de Galatea y Pandora corrobora nuestra hipótesis de que el modelo de robot femenino proyecta el espectro de lo femenino monstruoso, y que se puede animar a los cineastas para que lleven a cabo representaciones más complejas de mujeres capaces de subvertir la estructura de poder de la ideología patriarcal (Modleski, 2002).

Palabras clave

Inteligencia artificial; robots; ciencia ficción; estudios fílmicos; estudios de género; mitología griega.

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