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Formal Trends in Spanish Cinema (1990-2011)*

José Luis Castro de Paz

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Abstract / Resumen / Résumé

Without trying to exhaust all possibilities, but to draw a provisional map of the shapes and the most unique stylizations in the Spanish cinema of the past twenty years, our article approaches the trends that structure the two decades, trying to highlight the main generic and semantic options and balance the presence of veteran filmmakers focusing on the young people made known in the early nineties of the twentieth century. Our aim is to get inside the most unique filmographies (Pedro Almodóvar) and bring to light how certain non less important filmmakers (as Alex de la Iglesia) draw out the complex lines of the Spanish creative tradition, without putting aside the hottest reality of the country. We also want to look closely both at those films that -without sacrificing quality- try to fit themselves within the coordinates given by a transnational market and those -directed by Marc Recha or José Luis Guerín- which lie in the blurred but exceptionally fertile territories of extraterritorial, “non-fiction” and essay-film.

Sin ánimo alguno de exhaustividad, pero sí de trazar un mapa provisional de las formas y las estilizaciones más singulares del cine español de los últimos veinte años, nuestro artículo se aproxima a las líneas de fuerza que estructuran el *ventenio*, procurando destacar las principales opciones genéricas y semánticas y equilibrar la presencia de cineastas veteranos con la atención hacia los jóvenes revelados a comienzos de los años noventa del siglo XX. Buscamos a la vez penetrar en las filmografías más singulares (Pedro Almodóvar) y sacar a la luz la manera en que ciertos cineastas no menos relevantes (como Alex de la Iglesia) prolongan las complejas líneas de la tradición creativa española, sin que ello suponga dejar de lado la más candente realidad del país. Nos interesa, asimismo, detenernos tanto en los films que -sin merma de su calidad- tratan de situarse en el interior de las coordenadas dictadas por un mercado transnacional como en aquellos otros -los dirigidos por Marc Recha o José Luis Guerín- que se sitúan en los confusos pero excepcionalmente fértiles territorios de lo extraterritorial, la “no ficción” y el cine ensayo.

Sans prétendre être exhaustif, mais établir une carte provisoire des formes et les plus uniques stylisations dans le cinéma espagnol des dernières vingt années, notre article aborde les lignes de force qui structurent les deux décennies, en essayant de mettre en évidence les principales options génériques et sémantiques et d'équilibrer la présence des cinéastes vétérans en mettant l'accent sur les jeunes révélés au début des

années 90 du XXe siècle. Nous sommes aussi à la recherche de pénétrer les filmographies les plus uniques (Pedro Almodóvar) et mettre en lumière comment certains cinéastes non moins importants (comme Alex de la Iglesia) étendent les lignes complexes de la tradition créatrice espagnole, sans que cela entraîne renoncer à la réalité la plus chaude du pays. Nous souhaitons discuter aussi bien les films qui -sans sacrifier la qualité- essayent de s'intégrer dans les coordonnées données par un marché transnational que ceux d'autres -réalisés par Marc Recha ou José Luis Guerín- qui se trouvent dans les territoires confus mais exceptionnellement fertiles du cinéma extraterritorial, «non-fiction» et le cinéma d'essai.

Key Words / Palabras clave / Mots-clé /

New Spanish Cinema, Pedro Almodóvar, José Luis Guerín, Álex de la Iglesia, Marc Recha

Nuevo cine español, Pedro Almodóvar, José Luis Guerín, Álex de la Iglesia, Marc Recha

Nouveau cinéma espagnol, Pedro Almodóvar, José Luis Guerín, Álex de la Iglesia, Marc Recha

Where to start

How have the last twenty years of Spanish cinema represented the world visually? What material have films from Spain offered audiences' eyes in these last two decades? In this article, I will attempt to offer some necessarily succinct answer to these questions, outlining the main parameters

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that have shaped the cinema of the period under study in terms of genre choices, and to balance an examination of veteran filmmakers with a consideration of emerging young directors in the period. I will also endeavour to explore how certain contemporary filmmakers have often expanded on the complex lines of the Spanish creative tradition, and to point out the particular ways in which Spanish films address both historical and contemporary events of significance. Another of my aims in this article is to highlight the fact that alongside films positioned within coordinates dictated by the market (without this undermining their intrinsic quality) are other works situated within different parameters (the avant-garde, or the hazy territory of non-fiction). I also intend to explore the way in which many Spanish films in recent years have clearly aimed for 'internationality', with a practical reflection on the real chances of survival of a national film tradition in the context of increasingly transnational production.

Pedro Almodóvar

My study will begin (as indeed, it could not begin otherwise) with Pedro Almodóvar, recognized by many in the industry as the true driving force behind the renewal of Spanish cinema in the 1990s. As has often been noted, the films of young directors who began their careers around the beginning of this decade (from Alex de la Iglesia to Juanma Bajo Ulloa, or from Julio Medem to Alejandro Amenábar) were largely a reaction against the expository films of the 1980s, bogged down as they were in academic adaptations of the works of literary giants (Camilo José Cela, Miguel Delibes, Ramón María del Valle-Inclán, Federico García Lorca, etc.). Although this new generation initially appeared to follow in the dominant film tradition of opening up the wounds of the Franco era through metaphor, this appearance was merely illusory, as titles by Alex de la Iglesia, Bajo Ulloa's *Airbag*, the *Torrente* films by Santiago Segura or Javier Fesser's *El milagro de P. Tinto* (1998) represented a counterpoint to the prevailing movement of the 1980s. This rejection was based on an implicit reassertion of a very different tradition: the films of Rafael Azcona, Marco Ferreri, Luis García Berlanga and Fernando Fernán-Gómez, *Los tramposos* by Pedro Lazaga (1959) or *Atraco a las tres* by José María Forqué (1963). It could be suggested, as Jaime Pena and Jostxo Cerdán point out

in a groundbreaking study, that this new generation has sought to travel back through more than two decades of cinematic tradition using Almodóvar as a bridge (Pena & Cerdán, 2005).

This bridge, it must be said, has been accused by many of being built with hollow post-modern bricks and, in a certain way, of contributing to the de-ideologized and de-politicized cinema of many of the young filmmakers of the nineties, whose roots were traceable not to Spanish literature or even to Spanish film, but to television, comics, music videos, advertising, and contemporary Hollywood movies. In response to such a superficial indictment, Santos Zunzunegui has called attention to the true nature of Almodóvar's art: his exemplary skill in revisiting countless aesthetic forms in the Spanish tradition (from the comic book to *costumbrista* farce and grotesque tragedy, from the *bolero* to the *copla*, from revue-style theatre to pop music, from bull-fighting to religious iconography). This technique of Almodóvar's was heavily *stylized* by a writing which, by recycling these forms and subjecting them to the logical transformations arising from both historical context and the filmmaker's authorial idiosyncrasies, placed them, following the death of Franco and in the context of the '*Movida Madrileña*' countercultural movement, at the service of new meanings (Zunzunegui, 1997).

This should not obscure the fact that, at the same time, the elements of the Spanish tradition put into play by Almodóvar are often combined with others taken from the film traditions of other countries (especially from the US, but also in certain cases from Italian Neorealism), sometimes resulting in highly fertile processes of hybridization. Almodóvar would thus also look to Hollywood, and especially to the vast range of formal resources contained in the work of Alfred Hitchcock (not for nothing one of the most influential directors on filmmakers of subsequent generations up to the present day), both to articulate his complex and unorthodox plots and to give specific visual and sonic form to a particular diegetic situation (Castro de Paz, 2009). Indeed, as early as *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* (1984), Almodóvar's repeated on-screen exploration of the conflicts of the unconscious –the 'true subject of his films' as it surely was for Luis Buñuel or Hitchcock (Fuentes, 2005)– has gone hand-in-hand with his quest for a cinematic universe that is increasingly reflective, abs-

tract, and conceptual, constructed as *text*, as representation, almost as an ‘essay’. Zunzunegui (1997) sums this up very well when, referring to the conceptual collage that is *Kika* (1993), he suggests that the stylistic approach in the film was visually based on superimposing a (geometric, chromatic) pattern on the story in order to draw attention to the superficiality of the cinematographic image.

However, while the elements rooted more in farce and grotesque comedy are kept alive in titles like *Volver* (2006), Almodóvar’s inimitable attempt at cinematic deconstruction of male behaviour and the disheartening and essentially melancholy fate of male desire reaches its peak in *Hable con ella* (2002), *Los abrazos rotos* (2009), and *La piel que habito* (2011), three titles comprising a trilogy that turns ever more insanelly bleak as it progresses.

In the murky melodrama *Los abrazos rotos* (2009) –anguished and pessimistic in spite of (or perhaps because of its contrast with) the comedy *Chicas y maletas*, one of the films within the film– Almodóvar, recently described by Richard Allen as the ‘Spanish Hitchcock’ (2011: 587), continues to explore the pain of masculine nothingness and the causes and consequences of symbolic male blindness. Of course, critics have not overlooked the close connection between this film and *Vertigo* (whose protagonist, in the words of the philosopher Eugenio Triás, is ‘a walking incarnation of cinema itself’, chasing ‘Woman’, the sole object of his gaze, but failing to capture her except as a work of art). It should thus come as no surprise that, after the death of his ‘Madeleine’ (Magdalena is also the name of the character played by Penélope Cruz, although she goes by the name of Severine when working as a prostitute), the protagonist Mateo Blanco should lose his sight and abandon directing to work as a screenwriter. Moreover, mimicking the *apocryphal* ending to the 1958 film, he comes under the care of Judit, a copy of Midge Wood, a real woman who is a combination of nurse and mother, and a former short-term lover (whom he, in this case literally, is unable to see).

Yet if there is any film that so influenced *Los abrazos rotos* that it might be construed as a kind of unadmitted remake of it, that film is Lorenzo Llobet-Gràcia’s *Vida en sombras* (1948), itself heavily influenced by Hitchcock, but anticipating by ten years the horrifying semantic core of *Vertigo*. As in Almodóvar’s equally metacinematic film,

the protagonist of *Vida en sombras* is a director who has retired (from film-making and from the world) because of the incurable psychological wound caused by the loss of the woman who was the object of his desire. And there can be no doubt that it is in Llobet-Gràcia’s film that we can find the origin of the powerful, unforgettable image which, after the death of the woman on one narrative level, condenses and epitomizes the pain resulting from the male subject’s inability to fuse the ‘Woman’ with a capital ‘W’ (a captivating, idolized Imago, brilliant and blinding, created from the vestiges of primordial images) with the everyday woman, the person with whom he shares his life. This image would return, omnipresent and obsessive, to preside over the brutal, definitively savage psychoanalytical nightmare underlying the disturbing *La piel que habito* (Castro de Paz, 2012a: 333-40).

Lena is a purely cinematic, imaginary image, and although Almodóvar allows Mateo the absurd possibility of possessing her, the loss is again immediate: she is another sleeping beauty (like the female protagonist in *Hable con ella*), alive only in memory and on film. Just as in *Vida en sombras* a delirious Carlos Durán can only direct another film after coming *face to face* with the living image of his dead wife in family movies, inscribing the absence on celluloid, Mateo Blanco will only recover his identity –his name and his life as a director, which will enable him to [re-]edit his ill-fated film– after caressing the last living image of Lena, barely a glimpse, decomposed in pixels.

Los abrazos rotos uses a narrative structure even more complex than that of *Hable con ella*, as intricate and enigmatic as the operation of the unconscious itself, composed of blocks of time that intersect and combine to the point of becoming *infected* with meaningful material from other blocks and other moments (a unique and perhaps post-modern but in any case radical ‘time-image’). In doing so, the film constructs a highly subtle chromatic discourse, developed as a paradigm for the extraordinarily unique process that has taken Almodóvar’s camera shot, practically emptied at this point of any relation to the world by saturation, to an unfamiliar level of *abstract digitalization*. In this way, in an Eisensteinian (or, in Hollywood terms, Hitchcockian) manner, and by rubbing up against other equally saturated shots, Almodóvar is able to reactivate a narrative style that can speak to us with a rare emotional power about

the wounds of the world and of desire, and recapture a lost reality through an ostentatious and apparently extravagant but ultimately fruitful formalist hypertrophy. The red stain—the maternal stain that Julia Kristeva would speak of in her celebrated text *Powers of Horror*—becomes the device which, always positioned at the left of the frame (the place of loss in the text), imbues a relationship marked oedipally by the evil, envied father ultimately represented by Ernesto Martel with impossibility and pain. Although this *formal figure* only acquires full and clear meaning in compositions such as that of a bloodied Lena dressed in red, occupying the extreme left of the shot after her ‘fall’ down the stairs or, definitively, in the composition of the red car moving left out of shot (in the scene of the fatal accident in Lanzarote). The omnipresent colour of blood and desire, as a painful and incurable *vestige*, floods countless visual surfaces (the woman’s toenails in the scene of the initial fetishist coitus, the empty dress hanging in Judit’s office, the flowers in the pots, the overcoat on the coat hanger or the numerous shots in Martel’s house or office) where its appearance is as striking as it is sometimes *unintelligible* according to the (in this case totally useless) logic of a single narrative (the conversation between Judit and Mateo during shooting, before any wounds) (Castro de Paz, 2012b).

Alejandro Amenábar as an example of transnational cinema

It is of course quite probable that some of Almodóvar’s young disciples have been attracted merely to the surface of this increasingly subtle, abstract and pregnant Almodovarian *collage*. More generally, in a phenomenon reaching beyond Spain’s borders, numerous young filmmakers have been drawn to his quest to achieve a mastery bordering on virtuosity with audiovisual grammar and certain generic codes, especially those taken from thriller and fantasy, with Hitchcock always as a mythical figure. It is from this perspective of transnational standardization of the dominant narrative that Alejandro Amenábar’s work acquires its full significance. Born in Santiago, Chile, in 1972, but raised and educated in Spain, his remarkable career consists of only five feature films (*Tesis*, 1996; *Abre los ojos*, 1997; *The Others*, 2001; *Mar adentro*, 2004; and *Agora*, 2009), which have nevertheless been enough to make him

one of the biggest commercial heavyweights in the Spanish film industry.

One of the problems that Spanish film critics have faced in trying to locate the films of Amenábar in the Hispanic film tradition is related to the position occupied by Hispanic cinema within the cultural and aesthetic traditions that have shaped it historically. Josep Lluís Fecé has pointed out that ‘[s]ome of the most popular films in recent years, such as *The Others* or *Mar adentro* [...], have a relationship with the “Spanishness” defended by the “Spanish Film Institution” which at the very least is problematic’, making it clear that the categories of ‘nation’ and ‘national film tradition’ have become ‘hazy concepts, assimilated within the broad and complex transnational structures of the entertainment industries’ (Fecé, 2005: 90). Without denying the partially obvious truth of these assertions, it should be noted that the dialectic between Hollywood and the peripheral national cinema(s) (in this case, Spanish cinema) has constituted one of the most fruitful creative *conflicts* in Spanish cinematic history, offering extraordinarily rich *hybrid texts* both before and after the Spanish Civil War, i.e., long before the currently prevailing (and standardizing) globalization of the entertainment industry.

A profound admirer of American cinema, Amenábar conceived of *The Others* as a suspense-thriller that takes its inspiration from sources that are diverse but clear and recognizable. While the influence of classical Hollywood cinema is obvious (especially the Gothic, phantasmal tone of Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* [1940]), it is equally impossible to overlook its intimate correlations with more recent titles, such as Jack Clayton’s acclaimed version of Henry James’ *Turn of the Screw* (*The Innocents*, 1960), or the lesser known but disturbing work *The Changeling* (Peter Medak, 1979). Indeed, Amenábar himself would claim to have filmed a version of the same story as *The Changeling* in some sense, but *inverting the perspective*. Effectively set in the reversible logic of point of view, the film retells the classic *haunted house* story largely (although not exclusively) from the perspective of Grace, a guilty and heartbreakingly human ghost. Her inflexible and destructive Catholic beliefs, deeply rooted in Spanish tradition, are metaphorically depicted in the absolute isolation, necessarily dark with marked and restricted points of light, for which Javier Aguirresarobe’s cinematography

draws on solutions linked to Hispanic pictorial techniques. Meanwhile, the belated spectral appearance of the father, one of the climactic moments of the film, marked by a surprising poetic sonority, draws from one of the central motifs of Spanish cinema of the post-war period: paternal absence. The breakdown of this dysfunctional family core, with unmistakable religious resonances and tragic, fatal consequences, does not prevent *The Others* from being, at the same time, a barrier to the rites of passage of childhood. Therein lies the profound sadness evoked by its images. Like the young protagonists in *El espíritu de la colmena* (Victor Erice, 1973), which Amenábar also claims to have been inspired by, two children are faced with a world from which there is no way out, where, in spite of their efforts, the light will never enter the *colmena*. And they will have no choice but to share their beautiful British (or Spanish?) mansion with strangers; a mansion whose furniture, incidentally, was used years earlier (or later?) in Buñuel's morbid masterpiece *Viridiana* (1961).

Although the Spanish-US co-production *The Others* brought Amenábar a resounding box office success and also seemed to win a certain critical approval in Spain (although always limited and restricted to the traditional 'commercial' sphere rather than the art house sphere), there would be a far less unanimous response to *Mar adentro*. In this film, Amenábar turned his well-oiled and fine-tuned mastery for the thriller genre onto melodrama –or, as he himself would unashamedly suggest during shooting, from Hitchcock to Steven Spielberg's *E.T.* (1982)– to bring to the screen a story based on the last years of life of the Galician quadriplegic Ramón Sampedro. The film inspired a heated debate among critics that cannot be reduced (as accurate as such a reduction may be in some respects) to the simplistic political terms in which it came to be posited: '*Mar adentro* vs. *Tiovivo* c. 1950, Amenábar vs. José Luis Garci, PSOE [Spanish Socialist Workers Party] vs. PP [People's Party]' (Pena, 2004). The situation was actually more complex and involved, and while more conservative critics have tended to praise the visual and narrative brilliance of *Mar adentro* better to explain the 'diabolical moral horror' (De Prada, 2005) concealed by a pro-euthanasia film, the more progressive and severe critics have expressed their disdain for a film which, while based on a true story, turns its back on reality and displays a sentimental vein meticulously woven into the script.

Yet an analysis of the film's discursive mechanisms reveals that rather than a pro-euthanasia piece, Amenábar saw in the charismatic figure of Ramón Sampedro another protagonist who could feed his obsessive directorial desire to explore the intermediate (non-)spaces between life and death (a central theme of his three previous films), and, beyond this, the role of the filmmaker as a post-modern demiurge with the ability to conquer, combine, and play morbidly with such spaces. The hypnotic and reflective beginning of the film already foreshadows the possibility –subsequently rendered literal– of making him fly, converting him into a superhero, an extraterrestrial or a video game player (the filmmaker himself has in fact remarked many times that his model in this case was Steven Spielberg's *E.T.*). This 'conversion' is aided by the surprising central presence of one of Spain's greatest film stars (Javier Bardem) amongst hearty country folk with (genuine) Galician accents. In short, Amenábar is a filmmaker-demiurge apparently capable of releasing (curing) the (un)happy (Sampedro) Bardem (and with him, the spectator) *virtually*, but who will in fact take a front row seat at his death, camera in hand, to make an ad hoc live recording of the event (Castro de Paz, 2008: 270-71).

Realism(s)

In general, projects like *The Others*, *Mar adentro* or *Ágora* clearly entail a certain implicit distancing, to a greater or lesser degree, from the cultural, social and political reality of the country in which Spanish films are conceived and produced. This criticism –which is present in certain critical appraisals of Spanish film in the 1990s– raises questions of profound historical and anthropological significance that go beyond the scope of this article. However, one of the most recognizable aspects of the work of some new filmmakers is a (re)discovery, or an updating, of cultural traditions that reconfigures the appearance of the landscape without losing its roots. One of the territories that have been most powerfully shaken up by this renewal is the realm that could be vaguely situated between realism (social, critical, poetic) and *costumbrismo*. Whichever side any particular work may lean towards, in either case the hypertrophy of their formulations in Spanish cinema has given rise to a need for formal renewal as the only means of survival. *Costumbrismo* must be transformed

through the search for new social groups around which it may take shape (or, at least, around which some of its main characteristics may be reproduced). What is required is a contemporary reconstruction of this uniquely Spanish style that will still maintain its emphasis on everyday life, and it is perhaps no accident that some of the films that most clearly adopt this new trend have been directed by women: *Hola, ¿estás sola?* and *Flores de otro mundo* (Iciar Bollain, 1995 and 1999), *Tengo una casa* and *Juego de luna* (Mónica Laguna, 1996 and 2001) and *Retrato de mujer con hombre al fondo* (Manane Rodríguez, 1997).

For other films that could be classified as *realist* the situation is no less complex, particularly considering the repeated criticism that the work of these new directors turns its back on reality. However, apart from some of the titles already cited, others such as *Nadie hablará de nosotras cuando hayamos muerto* (Agustín Díaz Yanes, 1995), *En la puta calle* (Enrique Gabriel-Lipschutz, 1996), *La primera noche de mi vida*, *El cielo abierto*, *Rencor* or *Nacidas para sufrir* (outstanding examples of the remarkable filmography of Miguel Albadalejo, 1998, 2001, 2002 and 2009), *Solas* (Benito Zambrano, 1999), *Familia*, *Barrio*, *Los lunes al sol*, *Princesas* and *Amador* (F. León de Aranoa, 1996, 1998, 2002, 2005, 2010), or even *Tapas* (José Corbacho, 2005) and *Cobardes* (Juan Cruz, 2008), display a clear intention to examine a problematic and/or marginal reality very highly regarded by certain ‘realists’, although all too often resorting to elements drawn from a more regulated ‘realism’ –if it can be called such– to the point where the cast-iron scaffolding of a script constructed according to the canonical principles of introduction, development and conclusion often ends up being imposed on a social realist film that does not need it at all, but on the contrary is burdened and constrained by it.

But in spite of such limitations (on occasion fully admitted by the filmmakers themselves), the uniqueness of some of these films merits a detailed analysis that goes further than generic disqualifications. The appeal of a film like *Barrio*, for example, lies as much in its having found a *form* for talking about marginal realities (it is a static film, with no progression, its narrative fabric woven together by the characters’ little stories) as its doing so from a sympathetic point of enunciation which, by intersecting the heritage of social realism with the choral structure of a kind of mise-

rablist *sainete*, produces a result that is far from common in recent Spanish cinema. The film basically explores the clash between the official and the real Spain, and it is in this sense that *Barrio* offers its most eloquent image, so unique that it even serves as a poster to promote the film: a jet ski parked on the footpath in front of the ominous ugliness of public housing flats. A symbol of implausibility as incongruous in the urban context in which it is located as a surrealist *objet-trouvé*, its iconic effectiveness lies in its very bizarreness.

The old masters and the encounter with myth

In a certain way, however, the attention given to the new generation of filmmakers has tended to obscure the work of veteran directors who have nevertheless offered some of the most important films of the period. Pere Portabella, updating the radicalism of his avant-garde and political narrative style in films like *El silencio antes de Bach* (2007) or *Mudanza* (2008), is one of these (Fanés, 2008), as is Basilio Martín Patino in his modern and highly original *Octavia* (2002). But for this analysis I will focus on the work of Mario Camus, as an outstanding example in narrative cinema that could equally be provided by some of the work of Vicente Aranda, the most recent films by Berlanga or Fernán-Gómez or the two films by the indomitable José Luis Borau (*Niño nadie*, 1996; *Leo*, 2000).

Over the course of the period examined here, Camus would construct the most scathing political analysis of the country, exploring everything that practically every other Spanish filmmaker prefers to ignore: the disillusionment of the left, corruption, or the GALs¹ (*Después del sueño*, 1992; *Sombras en una batalla*, 1993; *Amor propio*, 1994). In *Después del sueño*, for example, Camus uses a cast in which actors like Carmelo Gómez and Antonio Valero embody a *new generation* whose heritage –and their man-

¹ The Anti-Terrorist Liberation Groups (GALs), active during the first terms of socialist Prime Minister Felipe González from 1983 to 1987, were illegally organized to engage in state terrorism against the terrorist group ETA. The investigation into the activities of these paramilitary groups constituted one of the biggest political and social scandals in the history of democratic Spain.

ner of *drawing from it*— would form the axis on which the transparent metaphor represented by the film turns. In this sense it could be argued that, after *rendering services* to a *high prestige* government-sponsored literary film project, the filmmaker determined to offer his own reading of Spain's recent history and rebel self-critically against both the inanity of Spanish films of the 1980s and the failure of a (political) 'change' that transformed the old legacy of solidarity (*the treasure* for which the unknown Picasso serves as a metaphor, and Camus does not miss the chance to point out the origins and the sacrifices that gave rise to it) into mere exchange value. The tragic consequences of all this on daily life—as the rot set in and spread to every social sphere— would be declaimed against in a subsequent, equally outstanding film by the same director: *Adosados* (1996).

At the opposite extreme from *realism* we find myth, a 'figure' tackled from various perspectives, but somehow always privileging its popular over its literary *form*. Several major veteran directors continue to find especially fertile ground here as well. Francisco Regueiro, for example, in his *Madregilda* (1993), offers a suggestive and viscous discourse on war and its tragic psychic consequences. In this morbid, baroque, tragic and absurdist film, Regueiro is found plunging unabashedly into the *primordial mire* of an extraordinary 'cycle' of films produced in the post-war period, featuring children who suffer a symbolic or real orphanhood that dooms them to lives marked by solitude, madness, and death. Among such films are *Las inquietudes de Shanti-Andía* (Arturo Ruiz Castillo, 1946), *La sirena negra* (Carlos Serrano de Osma, 1947), Llobet-Gràcia's aforementioned seminal work *Vida en sombras*, *Un hombre va por el camino* (Manuel Mur Oti, 1949), *Marcelino pan y vino* (Ladislao Vajda, 1955), the Mexican-Spanish film—or more precisely, Spanish film in exile— *En el balcón vacío* (Jomí García Ascot, 1962), *El espíritu de la colmena* (Erice, 1973), and José Luis Borau's *Furtivos* (1975). It is no mere coincidence that *Madregilda* was co-written by the same writer who collaborated on the script for *El espíritu de la colmena*, Ángel Fernández Santos, as the film seems quite literally to give a *female cinematic body* to the essential horror almost always underlying the metaphorical and ambiguous fusion of war/mother/imaginary fixation/paternal absence that lurks at the thematic heart of all the films cited above. Set in 1946, the film tells the

story of another fatherless child engaged in a delirious dialogue with his mother, whom he imagines talking to him from the screen of Charles Vidor's mythical *Gilda*. The son of a whole company of Franco's army, whose soldiers all had sex with his mother during the war (apparently, we are told, by order of Franco himself), the child was born out of labour, cut from his mother's womb with a knife by the cowardly man who could not prevent her fate. In reality, she is an embodiment of Franco's Spain, the terrifying mother whom the infantilized 'widower' (a colonel whose mission it is to guard garbage and recycle it to feed the Spaniards) adores in a blasphemous image of the Virgin Mary, surrounded by candles and trinkets. But she will return to show her scar to her son, to reveal herself to him as an object of desire so that the boy may touch her, embrace her, and throw himself at her feet, and, in an ambiguous and incestuous gesture, feel his mother's milk fall upon his hungry, bewildered and pain-racked face.

Indeed, the central theme of symbolic or real orphanhood and its tragic consequences—one of the densest semantic cores in Spanish cinema since the Civil War— would be used as a point of departure for several important films, completely different from one another but linked, each in its own way, to the universe of myth. Such is the case of the sensitive and cinematically precise *Secretos del corazón* (1997) by Montxo Armendáriz or Agustí Villaronga's dense work *Pa negre* (2010). Another example is *El laberinto del fauno* (Guillermo del Toro, 2006). Directed by an established Mexican filmmaker, with a mixed Spanish and Mexican production team, co-produced by a Spanish television channel (Telecinco's Estudios Picasso) and an independent Mexican company (Tequila Gang), and distributed by a major Hollywood studio, the film is a stellar example of the transnational process engulfing the film industry today. It is also the *latest version* (post-modern, perhaps, but certainly very effective) of that series of films which, since the end of the Spanish Civil War, have explored the fate of the orphan child, emotionally castrated by the conflict and doomed to delirium and madness. With a plot that revolves around the fantastic journey of a young girl in post-war Spain, *El laberinto del fauno* constitutes a highly effective post-modern re-working of *El espíritu de la colmena*, an intelligent look at the country's historical-fantastic past and a fruitful mixture of foreign influences and local traditions that gives rise to a universal Spanish

tale, potentially consumable and culturally meaningful on a global scale.

But among Spain's younger filmmakers, myth would be invoked through a more diverse range of mechanisms: the constant presence of oral storytelling as a way of recounting an essentially idealized past experience; the narrative development of stories through images, often not only mediated images but images shaped by and according to popular traditions; or the constant vivification and even humanization of landscapes (whether urban or rural). *Vacas* (1992), for example, Julio Medem's first and perhaps most significant film, exposed its creator to criticism from the outset for being a filmmaker who presented himself from the first as possessing an extremely personal gaze. A story of rivalry between two families in a small town in the province of Guipúzcoa, the tale covers a broad historical period (1875-1936) between the two fratricidal conflicts that were the Second Carlist War and the Spanish Civil War. Its way of fusing history and myth (following in the tradition of Erice's *El espíritu de la colmena* and Borau's *Furtivos*), based as it is on an unambiguously pursued stylistic naturalism, constitutes the most appealing quality of this work. While the precision of the dates and the events narrated belong to a first level, a second level is developed through the division of the film into chapters, each with its own title. Also unfolding on this level is the role played by omnipresent nature, embodied by the forest that is home to the 'burning hole' that seems to allow access to primordial worlds, by the cows (three generations of them, like the three generations of the rival families) whose eyes undauntedly reflect the drama they witness, or by the allusion to incest that runs throughout the film, along with the underlying theme of eternal return.

Similar mythological explorations can be found in films with urban settings, such as the first two feature films of Juanma Bajo Ulloa, *Alas de mariposa* (1991) and, especially, *La madre muerta* (1993), a contemporary reading of *Little Red Riding Hood*. There are also efforts veering towards myth (re)creation, although with uneven results, in the first films of Arantxa Lazcano (*Los años oscuros*, 1993), Mario Barroso (*Mi hermano del alma*, 1993), Manuel Hueriga (*Antártida*, 1995), and David Trueba (*La buena vida*, 1996). Another example is *Las voces de la noche* (Salvador García Ruíz, 2003), a film as little-known as it

is dense and unique, which achieves a startling degree of stylization in its narration of a post-war story, taking it to a level of essentializing that is at once historical and atemporal. And even the concise work *La vida manchada* (Enrique Urbizu, 2003), a melodrama whose lyricism and sharpness (the result of working with camera position, direction and duration of the actors' gazes and performances, unusual in Spanish genre films) enters mythical territory –although in a very different sense– by intersecting (without abandoning provocative social and *costumbrista* touches that are typically Hispanic) with other semantic and stylistic elements taken both from the Hollywood encyclopaedia (George Stevens, John Ford) and from Spanish film history (J. A. Bardem). The lack of attention given by Spanish critics to titles as outstanding as the last two cited above has been –with few exceptions– as widespread as it has been surprising, both by the group of critics who, complacent and averse to distinguishing nuances, prefer to support easier and more accessible titles, and by the group which, on the opposite extreme, dismisses any film that could be said to be associated with a particular genre and, more generally, with any 'script principle'. This is the only explanation for the fact that *Los lunes al sol* (2002) and *La caja 507* (Enrique Urbizu, 2002), for example, have been boxed in the category of a supposed 'timid realism' that would actually encompass, in the broadest terms, practically every Spanish film ever made (Quintana, 2005). However, the warm reception given by more serious critics (as well as by the general public) to Urbizu's extremely energetic and subtle thriller *No habrá paz para los malvados* (2011) would seem to suggest that a certain degree of sound judgement is returning to film criticism.

Comedy: tradition and modernity

In terms of what could be encompassed within the comedy genre (and although Transition-era filmmakers like Fernando Colomo have maintained faithful audiences which, without making big waves, have nevertheless ensured a steady career), it is worth noting that since the abovementioned film *Airbag* (Juanma Bajo Ulloa, 1996), directors of the new generation are perhaps the only ones who have been able to adapt to the transformations to the systems of film exhibition. Films such as those comprising the *Torrente* saga, constituting the recycled detritus of the best and the

worst of Spanish comedy (1998, 2001, 2005, Santiago Segura), or *La gran aventura de Mortadelo y Filemón* (Javier Fesser, 2003) have attracted viewer numbers unheard of in the previous thirty years, and have even broken historical records. In this case, the break with the past was also a changing of the guard, at least in certain genres of comedy easily recognizable by the public. Thus, the Madrid comedy tradition, or what could be understood as such during the Transition years (i.e., films about the generational crisis or the difficult transition of youth into the adult world), was resurrected sporadically in the work of Álvaro Fernández Armero and David Trueba, and also by Emilio Martínez Lázaro in his successful adaptations of the scripts of David Serrano, *El otro lado de la cama* (2002) and *Los 2 lados de la cama* (2005). Within the varied Spanish tradition and its well-known array of forms, the most characteristic comedy of the 1990s, the most vaudevillesque and with the lushest atmospheres, had its greatest exponent in Manuel Gómez Pereira, who, after some shaky first steps, achieved major success with *Boca a boca* (1995) and *El amor perjudica seriamente la salud* (1997), before crashing artistically and commercially with *Desafinado* (2001). Indeed, *Boca a boca* consolidated early in the period the use of a stylized assemblage of sophistication and tradition, employing certain generic, stylistic and semantic devices drawn from classic American comedy and characteristically *costumbrista* elements belonging to a revue-style, *populist* and conventional model sown in fertile Hispanic soil. Meanwhile, Gómez Pereira's third film, *Todos los hombres sois iguales* (1994), was the inspiration behind a popular television series of the same name, legitimizing a practice that would become common during the period under study here: a constant exchange between cinema and television of successful models within the comedy genre. The increasing success of television comedy would ultimately influence Spanish national cinema, with the boosting of the careers of certain actors or the transfer of trends with a recognized popular response, along lines that bear little relation to those of other eras, sustained by the simple exportation of comedians. It is, in short, a paradoxical process: while television has taken from cinema a 'light' version of the best of popular Spanish comedy since the 1970s, it has ended up sending it back the mere carcass, the insipid remains of the original.

Although his film *Muertos de risa* (1999) is located precisely within this world of television and popular comedians,

Alex de la Iglesia is probably the filmmaker who has most cleverly continued some of the more fertile traditions of Spanish comedy. De la Iglesia's work, after a unique first film (*Acción mutante*, 1992) that already hinted at some of his basic traits (mixing science fiction, comics and absurdist farce), achieved its definitive confirmation with *El día de la bestia* (1995), which with almost 1.5 million viewers constitutes the first major popular success of this group of filmmakers –including the already cited Medem and Bajo Ulloa– which began to emerge in the early nineties. Fantasy film, which 'flees from realism as from the devil', represents the most solid recent update of this absurdist vein in Spanish cinema and art. It is an *esperpento* which is not a means of escaping from reality, but a necessary form of exploring it through the extreme distortion of some of its characteristic features.

Initially conceived as a horror movie, the shift from drama to comedy in *El día de la bestia* would ultimately lead Alex de la Iglesia to embrace a well-established tradition in Spanish cinema, which allowed him, without abandoning humour, to superimpose a distorting pattern that was at once aesthetic and moral onto the reality of contemporary Spain. In this way, he was able to turn the zany adventures that culminate at the foot of the Gate of Europe Towers into a fertile cinematic extension of the Spanish tradition of the *esperpento* as a privileged formula which, in the words of Valle-Inclán (*Luces de Bohemia*), can 'deform expression in the same mirror that deforms our faces, and the whole miserable life of Spain'. It is a formula (which also might be said to be evident in certain titles of the irregular filmography of the *La Cuadrilla*² or, for example, in the extremely dark and little-known *Platillos volantes* [2003] by Oscar Aibar) to which de la Iglesia would return, reformulating it, in *Muertos de risa* (1999), *La comunidad* (2000), and *Crimen ferpecto* (2004), reaching a terrifying, excessive, paradoxical and brutal climax in the controversial award winner *Balada triste de trompeta* (2010), an insane, creepily grotesque film, at once coarse and energetic, whose purpose seems to be to deliver a final crushing blow to the war orphan of Spanish cinema and to the country itself, which is once again an impoverished

² A directorial team made up of the filmmakers Santiago Aguilar and Luis Guridi.

failure, a huge grotesque circus doomed forever to choose between the evil clown and the stupid clown.

Towards a new cinema of the real

I will now turn from genre films to examine a unique territory of filmmaking – a fertile hybrid between documentary and fiction – that has indisputably resulted in some of the most significant contributions of the period. This fruitful intersection was opened up in the early 1990s by three outstanding films: *Innisfree* (José Luis Guerín, 1990), *El encargo del cazador* (Joaquín Jordá, 1990), and *El sol del membrillo* (Víctor Erice, 1992), three films that were themselves heirs to a way of understanding art house cinema based on the cinematic transformations of the 1960s and 1970s, along with the impact of J. L. López Linares and Javier Rioyo's *Asaltar los cielos* in 1996. What followed was a series of productions essential to the Spanish documentary's recovery of prestige in the new century. These films included titles either shot by the same directors – Erice (*La morte rouge*, 2006; *Correspondencia. 10 cartas con Abbas Kiarostami* 2005-2007), José Luis Guerín (*En construcción*, 2001; *Guest*, 2010) or the late Jordá (*De nens*, 2003) – or by new filmmakers who took these three as mentors and/or points of reference, such as Mercedes Álvarez (*El cielo gira*, 2004 and *Mercado de futuros*, 2011) or Isaki Lacuesta (his 'post-biographical' works, also influenced by the films of Basilio Martín Patino, *Cravan vs. Cravan*, 2002 and *La leyenda del tiempo*, 2006, or the Festival de San Sebastián award winner *Los pasos dobles*, 2011). In *El cielo gira*, for example, Álvarez offers a first-person reflection on the Castilian town where she was born. In this film, strongly influenced by both José Luis Guerín and Víctor Erice and winner of numerous international awards, the director introduces a sincere performative introspection (as Erice would do in the intrinsically mythical *La mort Rouge*, in which he reconstructs his first film-making experience as a viewer) in the reflexive and poetic model of her mentors, making their aesthetic choices her own. In an exercise of transcendence, *her* film is the story of her (and everyone's) origins, of the beginning and end of life, and the vestiges of the past in the present. It is a mythical tale in an age without myths (an impossibility cast on the canvas of the screen in the same way that a painter who is

losing his sight stains the canvas), in which documentary devices are no more than a tool at the service of a fictional *mode of representation* which, taking the passage of time in her now practically deserted native town as a point of departure, uses its living and dead inhabitants as ghosts in a *place* which exists only in the imagination and which can thus only be recreated using a sophisticated (and only apparently simple and *random*) representative mechanism.

All of these together, in spite of the temporal distance between them and their obvious and even extreme differences, because of their adherence to a *non-fiction* film tradition with few precedents in Spanish cinema, have allowed these directors to reflect on cinematic language in a quest for what has been referred to as a kind of 'restoration of the gaze'. These films are not so much documentaries of surface reality as of the meaning behind that reality, and when they reach the necessary degree of radicalism, they become true *essay-films*, a category that goes well beyond the epistemological frontier of the reflective documentary. As Josep Maria Catalá (2000) has pointed out, the new documentary would never have broken away completely from the old paradigm to take the definitive step towards 'cinema of the real' if it had not incorporated into its structure an element of the old which, because of its scientific heritage, had been almost completely proscribed: the expression of emotions.

Not too far away, although clearly in the category of fiction, are works by directors like Pablo Llorca (*Todas hie-ren*, 1998; *La espalda de Dios*, 2001; *La cicatriz*, 2005; *Uno de los dos puede estar equivocado*, 2007; *El mundo que fue y que es*, 2010), Marc Recha (*El cielo sube*, 1991; *El arbol de las cerezas*, 1998; *Pau y su hermano*, 2001; *Las manos vacías*, 2003; *Días de agosto*, 2006; *Petit indi*, 2009) and, later, Jaime Rosales (*Las horas del día*, 2003; *La soledad*, 2007; *Tiro en la cabeza*, 2008), Pedro Aguile-ra (*La influencia*, 2007; *Naufragio*, 2010), Javier Rebollo (*Lo que sé de Lola*, 2006; *Una mujer sin piano*, 2009; *El muerto y ser feliz*, 2012), the highly unique films *Honor de cavallería* (2006), *El cant dels ocells* (2008), *El senior ha fet en mi meravelles* (2011) by Albert Serra, *La línea recta* (2006) and *Aita* (José María de Orbe, 2010), and Daniel V. Villamediana's *El brau Blau* (2008) and *La vida sublime* (2010). These are filmmakers who, often with the

production of fellow filmmaker Luis Miñarro or Portabella himself, and each in his inimitable way, have chosen to explore the value of downtime, inaction and stillness, silence and ellipsis, the gaze and the off-screen, based (once again, and among others) on the lessons of Víctor Erice. In *El árbol de las cerezas* (1998), for example, Recha investigates a 'fragment of life' of a group of characters burdened by a painful past, examined at different moments in time. But this starting point, which has a clear debt to Rosellini (the characters are presented as 'figures in a landscape' in a town in the mountains of Castellón) and analysed with an austerity that recalls the films of Robert Bresson, is transformed and positioned in relation to the world of myth through a child's gaze that firmly inscribes the film in one of the major movements of contemporary Spanish cinema: the movement launched, once again, by *El espíritu de la colmena*. Meanwhile, the cool, stripped-bare chronicle of the day-to-day life of a serial killer in *Las horas del día* (Jaime Rosales, 2003), and the equally severe style employed to describe the precarious daily life of a young woman in *La línea recta* (José Maria de Orbe, 2006), or

even the offbeat adaptation of Cervantes' Don Quixote in *Honor de cavallería* (Albert Serra, 2006) constitute some of the most outstanding first works of the new century. In the last of these, following the path taken by Gus Van Sant in *Gerry* (2003) or the work of Argentine filmmaker Lisandro Alonso, Albert Serra films two characters –whom we know are Don Quixote and Sancho Panza– as they wander through the Catalan countryside, placing the emphasis on the downtime, on the moments most lacking in literary value that the traditional tale has elided.

Finally, it would be remiss not to make mention of two of the most notable Spanish films of the period analysed: *Tren de sombras* (1997) and *En la ciudad de Sylvia* (2007), both directed by José Luis Guerín. Both are texts of a singular mythical depth and heart-rending beauty, deeply reflective and essentially melancholy. It is a melancholy which, for Guerín, is consubstantial with the cinema, because cinema, like no other art, offers us a bare, direct experience of the devastating heart of every tale: time and its dark roads towards death.

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