

Introduction

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Over the last half century, visual stories have claimed an ever-larger share of the popular culture, as literature initiated its gradual descent to a quantitatively and qualitatively more restricted audience. During this time, film has achieved technical sophistication and social prestige. It is now firmly established as an academic discipline in its own right, enjoying pride of place within the larger paradigm of Cultural Studies. But although Spanish film is today the object of teaching and research in many departments, analytical resources are still scarce in English. The existence of a few histories of Spanish cinema (the best of which, John Hopewell's *Out of the Past*, has long been out of print), of specialized work on a few privileged directors (Buñuel, Saura, and Almodóvar), and a handful of collections of essays (notably those edited by Peter William Evans and Barry Jordan) does not cover the interpretive needs of the English-speaking student of Spanish cinema, who is often at the mercy of reviews of scant exegetical value.

The present volume is intended as a contribution to remedy this relative dearth by offering a set of original pieces on carefully selected directors and films spanning the period from the origins of the New Spanish Cinema in the 1950s to the end of the twentieth century. It would be easy to draw attention to what is missing and to dispute the choices made. Every selection entails judgments of value and one chooses at one's peril. But it is also true that books have a fate. However, rather than recounting the history of the editorial choices that have led to this particular constellation of films, I would like to use this introduction to provide a broad sense of the directions of Spanish cinema in the years studied by the contributors. It is not a question of providing a compact history of a half century of Spanish film but rather of sketching a sense of its development, however simplified or simplistic the result may be.

Our history of Spanish cinema starts in 1952 with *¡Bienvenido, Mister Marshall!*, the first international success in the post-Civil War period. Although approved by Franco personally (Díez Puertas 303) and presented as the official Spanish entry to the Cannes Film Festival the following year, *Bienvenido* inaugurated the critical cinematography that comprises the best Spanish movies of the following decades. Today, Luis García Berlanga's *¡Bienvenido, Mister Marshall!* and Juan Antonio Bardem's *Muerte de un ciclista* (1955) are widely considered the two unquestionable classics from the period leading up to the New Spanish Cinema of the 1960s. Both of these works sought, in different ways, to overcome the censor's zeal with discourses that hinted at the social conditions toward the end of the autarchy through the detours of humor (Berlanga) or the *crise de conscience* of a wayward member of the hegemonic bourgeoisie (Bardem).

Bardem operated with the basic assumption that guided the social realist literature of the same period. "Film—he said—will be either a form of witnessing or nothing" (*Cinema universitario* n. 4, December 1956, qtd. Heredero, *Las huellas* 298). Others agreed. But "witnessing" could be understood in different ways and did in fact give rise to different methods, each attempting in its own way to circumvent the structural impossibility of reproducing the lessons of Italian neorealism in a Spanish context. Thus, alongside Bardem's deadpan moralism in *Muerte de un ciclista* and *Calle Mayor* (1955), Marco Ferreri launched his biting satires of Franco's happy society. Leaning on scripts drenched with the blustery humor of Rafael Azcona, Ferreri undertook a mordant critique of the dictatorship's developmental myths in *El pisito* (1958), *Los chicos* (1959), and, especially, *El cochecito* (1960), an original crossbreed of Italian neorealism and Spanish grotesque. The theoretical impulse for a critical cinema came from the legendary "conversations" at Salamanca in May 1955, pointing the way to the New Spanish Cinema. On this occasion, Bardem declared, "Spanish cinema is politically ineffective, socially false, intellectually abject, aesthetically nonexistent and commercially crippled" (qtd. Besas 41), implicitly turning this first conference on national film into the zero degree of post-Civil War cinema.

In the meantime, Luis Buñuel, the sole international referent of Spanish cinema, had continued his career in exile. For the young Spanish directors, who depended on an anemic industry, his series of low-budget films shot in Mexico were a usable lesson in the kind of diagnostic realism that had been advocated at Salamanca. Thus, in 1960 a group of people, including the young Saura, who had produced *Los golfos* the previous year, convinced Buñuel to shoot a film in Spain. *Viridiana* premiered at the Cannes Film Festival as the official Spanish entry on May 17, 1961, but it was subsequently banned in Spain as a result of the Vatican's irate

reaction. Having become the object of diplomatic persecution, *Viridiana* was saved by the fact that the Mexican husband of the lead actress, Silvia Pinal, was its main financier, and through this circumstance the film acquired Mexican nationality (Edwards 144).

While Spanish directors centered in Madrid searched for a national idiom, in Barcelona a young group of aspiring filmmakers tried to develop a cinema based on an international sensibility, though in fact indebted to the *nouvelle vague* of Truffaut and Godard. In the past, Barcelona had pioneered film production in Spain, but the dictatorship's concentration of resources in Madrid had led to the dismantling of Barcelona's film industry. In the ruins of that industry and deprived of the subventions that the government reserved for degree-holders of Madrid's Official School of Cinema, the members of the School of Barcelona practiced an antirealist film with hardly any exposure to national audiences and virtually no attention abroad. Even in Barcelona, this adventure achieved little more than private repercussion. Aesthetically, the films of the School strived to be cosmopolitan but did not even manage to become local, except in the narrowest sense: a neighborhood affair in the upper-class districts of Sarrià and Sant Gervasi.

It is true that in Spain no other film movement has drawn as much hostility as the School of Barcelona, but it would be unfair to suggest that the displeasure was principally motivated by the frustration of the alternative projects of the New Spanish Cinema and an aborted Catalan cinema (Riambau and Torreiro 184). There is a measure of truth in Angel Llorente's scathing attack in "Cine Made in Barcelona," published in *Cinestudio* in January 1968. In this abrasive article Llorente accused the Catalan group of elitism, snobbishness, and a mimetic cosmopolitanism inflected by the communist icons that were popular among the offspring of the European bourgeoisie (Riambau and Torreiro 191). But the critique could also lay bare the conservatism of the proponents of the New Spanish Cinema. In a letter addressed to Jacinto Esteva on June 8, 1968, Francisco Regueiro and Antxon Eceiza assailed this promoter of the Barcelona School because "rumor has it that in your new film you again insult the Spanish people, that is to say, the Castilian essence of this people, whose eternal values Francisco and I have defended more than once at the risk of losing our national identity card." And: "We have heard, that is to say, we have been assured in Cuba that in your film people speak in French, English and Catalan, with the purpose, obviously, that no Spanish worker can understand it, thus creating an aristocratic minority and limiting the access of the masses to culture" (qtd. Riambau and Torreiro 194). Although Regueiro now claims that this letter was meant to be humorous, the truth is that in the 1960s competition between the realist

aesthetics of the New Spanish Cinema and the avant-garde proclivities of the School of Barcelona was keen. Joaquim Jordà wrote at the time: "There are two possible cinemas in Spain: one backward-looking, which explains that we are as we are, and another that explains our present and tries to show how we could be. The first kind is made in Madrid; the second in Barcelona" (qtd. Riambau and Torreiro 189).

Over time, the members of the School of Barcelona have tended to adjust their valuation to the historical judgment on their formal games. Thus, Jordà now regards that phase "with sympathy but without [finding in it] the least efficacy or usefulness" (qtd. Riambau and Torreiro 362). And Pere Portabella, whose *Pont de Varsòvia* (1989) remains the film most clearly conceived in the wake of the School's aesthetic, reminisces about those earlier experiences: "I believe that all that did not happen gratuitously, without cause. But I refuse to sublimate the facts. I think that we must be very critical with the results we achieved" (qtd. Riambau and Torreiro 362). Notwithstanding the predictable failure of a movement that turned its back on both the audiences and their cultural memory, the School's formal experimentation produced long-term effects in the visual style of the mature Saura, in the later films of Vicente Aranda and Gonzalo Suárez, in Bigas Luna, Agustín Villaronga, and, arguably, in the far more coherent analysis of the image in the unclassifiable films of José Luis Guerín.

Catalan cinema did not stage a spectacular comeback at the end of the dictatorship. Reduced during that period to producing no more than a dozen full-length films, and still dependent on undercapitalized ventures, the Catalan film industry was not able to profit from the spectacular cultural budgets of the 1980s and 1990s. Installed in the centralist inertia from the Franco era, the socialist Ministry of Culture refused to transfer the prorated monies from the state's "Protection Fund" to the Catalan government. For its part, the Generalitat has been accused of devoting a larger share of its cultural budget to dubbing than to the production of films unless shot in Catalan. However offensive such a policy may be from the viewpoint of producers, the critique reflects a shallow understanding of the priorities for a society that emerged from the dictatorship with widespread illiteracy in the native language and a total eradication of Catalan from cinema screens. Even now, more than a quarter of a century after the transition to democracy, Catalan cinema is not, to any significant degree, cinema in Catalan. Notwithstanding the existence of social demand, cinema in this language continues to struggle against resistance on the part of distributors and palpable discrimination from exhibitors. The only noteworthy exception to the sense of doom is the case of Ventura Pons. After producing one of the cult films of the

Transition, the documentary *Ocaña, retrat intermitent* (1978), Pons took a dip into the commercially motivating but aesthetically barren low comedy, reemerging in the 1990s with an interesting film based on a literary text by Quim Monzó (*El perquè de tot plegat*, 1994) and then producing in quick succession the stunning *Actrius* (1996) and *Amic/Amat* (1998), both based on plays by Josep Maria Benet i Jornet, and two adaptations of the theater of Sergi Belbel: *Carícies* (1997) and *Morir (o no)* (1999). Later came the more questionable *Anita no perd el tren* (2000), which follows a text by Lluís Antón Baulenas; *Menja d'amor/Food of Love* (2002), based on a novel by David Leavitt; *El gran Gato* (2002), an urban documentary about the music of popular singer Gato Pérez; and, more recently, *Amor idiota* (2004), another adaptation of a novel by Baulenas.

But the best moment, commercially, of Catalan cinema came in the 1990s, with Bigas Luna's Iberian sequence *Jamón, jamón* (1992), *Huevos de oro* (1993), and *La teta y la lluna* (1994), a trilogy in which the contradictions of a swiftly but cursorily modernized Spain appear in all the brutality of the country's peculiar "return of the repressed." After reaching this high point, however, the director failed to repeat his commercial feats, and in his subsequent films, *Bambola* (1996), *La camarera del Titanic* (1997), *Volavérunt* (1999), and *Son de mar* (2001), a talented cinematic career appeared to taper out.

During the same period, Basque directors succeeded in creating a cinema of indisputable excellence. Whether the happy cluster of first-rate directors constitutes a national or merely an "autonomous" cinema is a political question that film criticism is not in a position to resolve. What criticism can and should do is to eschew the essentialism that has plagued the analysis of Basque films in Anglo-American academic circuits, where the musty clichés of a centralist mind-set often turn up in the midst of theoretical platitudes. Three stirring films by Imanol Uribe—*El proceso de Burgos* (1979), *La fuga de Segovia* (1981), and *La muerte de Mikel* (1983)—dealing with the latent war between Euzkadi and Spain initiated a string of revelations, from Montxo Armendáriz's lyrical *Tasio* (1984), *Las cartas de Alou* (1990), *Historias del Kronen* (1995), and *Secretos del corazón* (1997), to Julio Medem's technically innovative and psychologically intriguing *Vacas* (1992), *La ardilla roja* (1993), *Tierra* (1996), and *Los amantes del Círculo Polar* (1998). Although these were followed by the unsatisfactory *Lucía y el sexo* (2001), a film with many concessions to low-brow audiences, Medem went on to produce an exceptional survey of political opinion in Euzkadi: the honest and, at the time, plucky *Euskal pilota/La pelota vasca* (2003). In the 1990s Basque cinema was able to balance commercial appeal with technical competence, turning out a satisfactory thriller, *Todo por la pasta* (Enrique Urbizu, 1991); a Satanic comedy, *El Día de la Bestia* (Álex de

la Iglesia, 1995); and high-strung drama in Juanma Bajo Ulloa's *Alas de mariposa* (1991) and *La madre muerta* (1993).

Just as histories of Spanish cinema routinely feature a chapter on the cinema of the "autonomies," they also tend to include a section on women directors. Such protocols raise the question of whether the particular categories thus "distinguished" do not pay too high a price in condescension for their inclusion. Qualitative arguments are superior to quantitative ones, and criticism must be critical rather than all-inclusive. In my view, films by three women fully justify their inclusion in a canonical selection of Spanish film: Pilar Miró, with *El crimen de Cuenca* (1979), *Gary Cooper, que estás en los cielos* (1980), *Beltenebros* (1992), and *El pájaro de la felicidad* (1993); Icíar Bollaín, with *Hola, ¿estás sola?* (1995), *Flores de otro mundo* (1999), and especially *Te doy mis ojos* (2003); and the Catalan Isabel Coixet, with *Cosas que nunca te dije/Things I Never Told You* (1996) and *A los que aman* (1998).

No account of Spanish film in the last half century may bypass the work of two directors who emerged from the experience of the New Spanish Cinema with great visual proficiency: Basilio Martín Patino, the independently minded producer of *Nueve cartas a Berta* (1965) and the magisterial *Los paraísos perdidos* (1985), and Víctor Erice, a leading light of Spanish cinema, with *El espíritu de la colmena* (1973), *El Sur* (1983), and *El sol del membrillo* (1992). Although initially supported by the powerful Elías Querejeta, Erice's demanding craftsmanship ended up discouraging this producer, who withdrew the funds and left *El Sur* an unfinished masterpiece. Thereafter, the director was forced to work outside commercial venues for his outstanding exploration of the relation between the painterly and the cinematic image in his third film. As if he were the victim of a curse, Erice saw the contract for his next project, the filming of Juan Marsé's novel, *El embrujo de Shanghai*, rescinded by Andrés Vicente Gómez without regard for the nearly five years of preliminary work already devoted to the assignment.

Three Spanish films have obtained the coveted Academy Award. The first, Fernando Trueba's *Belle Époque* (1992), was a sexual divertimento with sham historical airs. In this film Trueba dresses up a facile eroticism and a humor bordering on slapstick with the wardrobe of a romanticized Republican era. The most recent one sanctions the lightning career of Alejandro Amenábar, who, while still a student in 1995, debuted with *Tesis*, a thriller rich in metacinematic reflections and an engaging analysis of the voyeuristic drive. The next year Amenábar produced *Abre los ojos* (1997), a tangled play on memory padded with the pseudoscientific belief in physical immortality and the consequent virtualization of experience. Then came *The Others* (2001), a gothic pastiche harking back to the

romantic roots of suspense. But it was with *Mar adentro* (2004), a film based on the real-life struggle of Ramón Sampedro for the right to die, that he struck a sensitive social chord and was awarded the Oscar for best foreign film in 2005.

It would be presumptuous to pretend that this overview renders visible something like a map of Spanish film during the last half century. It is at best the rough outline of an evolution and at worst a random set of subjective preferences. It is meant merely to provide a few points of reference that permit the reader to fill in some of the gaps between the essays that follow. And all the rest is Almodóvar.