

# Cuentos póstumos de Una, Grande, Libre Nación: Españolidad en las películas españolas post Franco

## Posthumous Tales of One, Great, Free Nation: Spanishness in post-Franco Spanish Film

---

Alfredo Martínez-Expósito

University of Queensland

a.martinez@uq.edu.au

### Resumen

Los relatos en los que la nación española aparece como una entidad perenne y suprahistórica (mitología del origen de la nación, héroes legendarios, etc.) siempre han desempeñado un papel importante en los modos de comprensión de la propia nación. Este tipo de conocimiento se basa en que la suspensión de la incredulidad por parte de la audiencia y es difícilmente compatible con el acercamiento historiográfico. Las identidades nacionales construidas sobre la suspensión de la incredulidad tienden a reificar o personificar (a veces incluso a deificar) a la nación. La cuestión de la autenticidad se convierte entonces en la clave de cualquier debate entre conocimiento mítico y objetivo. Este artículo analiza los modos de representación mítica de la nación en el cine español del último cuarto del siglo XX.

Palabras clave: Identidad nacional; Conocimiento mítico; Conocimiento objetivo

### Abstract

An important form of transmission of knowledge about the Spanish nation is based on the continuous telling of stories in which the nation features as a suprahistorical, perennial entity. Myths of national origin, golden-age legends, and epics of national heroes are some of these stories. This mode of access to knowledge assumes a suspension of disbelief for the audience, and precludes other attempts to comprehend the nation through scientific research. Subjective national identities constructed upon such suspension of disbelief have a tendency to reify, personify or even deify the nation. In the struggle between mythic and objective knowledge, the question of authenticity becomes a hotly contested arena. This paper attempts to address questions of mythical national representation in Spanish films of 1975-2000.

Keywords: National identity; Mythic knowledge; Objective knowledge

### The long shadow of Franco's Spain

---

Pedro Almodóvar's twelfth film, *Carne trémula* (1997), contains one of the director's rare references to Spain's political transformation between the birth of its main character, in 1970, and the birth year of his first son in 1996. Although it is not its primary thematic concern, the depth and breadth of such

transformation is very evident in the film: from the cold, deserted Madrid streets of a Christmas night under military rule and the state of emergency, to the busy, carefree consumerist feast in the same streets under the rule of law after thirteen years of Socialist government. In the new Spain of the film, a set of modern characters coexist with old-fashioned, macho, violent men reminiscent of the old days. In the film, however, remarks concerning the transformation of the country are given as a background to a story of passion, lust, jealousy and death that unfolds in melodramatic style. In a perhaps daring comparison between storyline and film history, it could be argued that the same relation between political background and entertaining foreground can be observed in the Spanish cinema of the last three decades. With a few exceptions in the transition years, and in sharp contrast with other Spanish-language cinemas, the tendency in Spanish film has been to leave national and political concerns in the background. Unfair and uncompromising as it may be, this comparison is, however, useful for establishing this paper's two premises: firstly, that the nation imagined and enforced by the *Movimiento Nacional* was contested by an alternative concept of the nation intent on reversing each and every *falangista* principle; secondly, that rather than dissolving away in the mist of History, the *falangista* idea of Spain remained floating in some form of collective memory and has never been completely deactivated. King Juan Carlos and president Suárez tried to dismantle that nation, but there was neither reactivation of the nation envisaged by the Second Republic nor formal disavowal of Franco's regime. In the absence of a radical redefinition of the nation, many Spaniards opted for one or both of two diversions: i) the vindication of formerly repressed national entities, namely Catalonia, the Basque Country, Galicia, the Canary Islands, Aragon, Andalusia, Valencia and Asturias; ii) the transfer of the national to the bigger, newer and increasingly more prestigious idea of Europe. The replacement in common parlance of the 'Spanish Nation' with the 'Spanish State' was indicative of a process of symbolic denationalisation of the significant 'Spain.' Given the relative emptiness of the new significant, the Francoist idea of Spain remained for decades a strong referent that refused to go away and that still today is able to articulate discourses on Spanishness and polarise debates.

The way in which the dictatorship fabricated a convenient idea of Spain that was apt to repress, reorganise, and homogenise Spaniards is now well documented. To that end, Spain's imperial past, together with the social penetration of the Catholic Church and the prestige of a victorious army after a three-year civil war, was invaluable. The official motto *Una, Grande, Libre* stressed the fundamental values of unity against regional separatism, imperial greatness based on military power as opposed to notions of civil decay, and freedom from communism and semitism under the authoritarian management of the postwar period. When Berlin, Rome and Tokyo collapsed, unity was degraded to blatant centralism, greatness became a euphemism for military rule, and freedom iced up as autarky and xenophobia. Franco's regime appropriated Maeztu's term *Hispanidad* as a suitable platform for the symbolic erection of the values of 'new' Spain.

"Of those values, perhaps the most central was the exaltation of a Hispanic race, clearly inspired by German and Italian fascism. Stressing the spiritual superiority of this vaguely defined racial stock, Francoist apologists emphasized the religious unity of the nation in traditional Catholic values. *Hispanidad*, Spanishness, as the new order insisted, was a crusading mission to which all true Spaniards were tied: the recuperation of the historical greatness of the long-lost Spanish empire." (D'Lugo, 1991, p. 16).

Under Franco, the idea of Spain as a ductile significant was the object of endless semiotic operations; it was defined politically, historically, culturally. Spanishness (both spiritual *Hispanidad* and political

*españolidad*) became a powerful icon of the regime itself; unsurprisingly, all dissenting voices were branded as anti-Spanish. Francoist Spanishness was defined through a set of Catholic moral values (*honor/honra*, decency, family loyalty, discipline...), and a set of popular cultural practices (Andalusian folklore and re-dressed regional traditions as interpreted by the Movimiento's *Sección Femenina*). After the dismissal of the dictatorial regime, Spanishness was rapidly appropriated by the King, who tried to recode it according to his own interests – mainly, to naturalise the monarchy as a regime legitimised by historical tradition; but this time there were other agents (such as the leftist opposition, the Republican exile, and the local/regional bourgeoisie) who tried to influence the new definition. Spain was broadly redefined in political, historical and cultural terms, but many symbols remained, and no motto filled the place left empty by the Francoist *Una, Grande, Libre*. Coincidentally, Franco's reinvention of Spain corresponded quite exactly to the stereotyped Spanishness that had become current in European and American countries. Old stereotypes of savagery, fanaticism, machismo, hot bloodedness, Cainism and underdevelopment were reinforced by official propaganda and tourism campaigns. Stereotypes of Spanishness did not disappear with the dismantling of Franco's regime and its rhetoric; on the contrary, most of them were recycled around visuals and images of the new Spain as provided by film and television. Films by Almodóvar and Bigas Luna provided foreign audiences with the iconic and symbolic imagery to turn the old gallery of bullfighters, rural priests, civil guards and flamenco dancers into fashion designers, carefree lovers and nomadic citizens. Moreover, the films of Ventura Pons and Julio Medem presented foreign audiences with versions of the country that had little resemblance to the Castile or the Andalucía of most mainstream productions. Spanishness in post-Franco Spanish film cannot be taken for granted as a cultural or national expression. This is how Kinder defines 'Spanish specificity' in the opening lines of her *Blood Cinema*:

“[A] nation whose history is marked by a fratricidal civil war with bloody repercussions, by a long period of Francoism that glamorized death, by a deep immersion in the conventions of the Counter-Reformation that fetishized the bleeding wounds of Christ and other martyrs, and by a 'Black Legend' of cruelty and violence dating back to the Inquisition and the Conquest which Spaniards have tried to overcome for the past five hundred years.” (Kinder, 1993, p.1)

The key notion of 'national cinema' encapsulates many of the difficulties inherent to the issue of the 'national specificity'. The whole question of whether Spanish cinema faithfully depicts Spanish people or some kind of metaphysical Spanishness can be easily relativised by the negligible presence of Spanish films outside of Spain and their failure to dominate their own domestic market. In 2002, Spanish films represented 17.82% of all films released in Spanish theatres, but they attracted only 13.43% of the audience; US films released in the same period were 39.65% of the total, but they gained an audience share of 70.32% (Academia 2003:11). In Spain, US films are, as they have been for generations, more numerous and consistently more popular than Spanish films. Any national value that Spanish cinematography might have is conditioned by the fact that Spaniards' film culture is created and developed primarily by Americans. In different ways, this neocolonial pattern features in most analyses of Spanish film. In her seminal book, *Blood Cinema*, Marsha Kinder discusses the “question of whether the cinema of any nation carries distinguishing traces of its own unique history, culture, race, or blood and the correlative issues of how these 'fictional' concepts of national identity are constructed through cinema and other forms of popular culture.” (Kinder, 1993, p. 1). According to Kinder, one of national cinema's main strategies consists of emphasising its international dimension in an attempt to win international

legitimation as the 'valid' representative of its culture over other national movements which are considered or presented as nonrepresentative, unrealistic or influenced by foreign trends. Kinder explicitly uses Spain as a case study to problematise the concept of a national cinema, "claiming that it must be read against the local/global interface, which has become increasingly important in the new world order of the 1980s and 1990s." (Kinder, 1993, p. 7). In the same vein, Marvin D'Lugo's readings of auteurs such as Saura, Aranda or Bigas Luna consistently focus on the problems posed by the national. If Kinder speaks of Spanish cinema in terms of a 'reconstruction' of a national identity, D'Lugo reads Bigas' trilogy *Retratos Ibéricos* as a remaking of the national for two different audiences – Spanish and European (D'Lugo, 1995, 1997a, 1997b). Bigas Luna, according to D'Lugo, does show how traditional Spanishness was inflected by the multinational corporate capital, while offering facile Spanish stereotypes to European audiences. Following Kinder's stance on macro- and micro-regionalism, D'Lugo locates the national midway between the regional and the transnational. In a recent programmatic article, Barry Jordan centres the issue on the straight-forward question, 'how Spanish is the cinema from Spain?' In his attempt to define Spanish film, Jordan considers four sets of issues: the problematic definition of Spanishness or national identity;<sup>1</sup> the place of Spanish cinema in international film markets;<sup>2</sup> the overwhelming influence of Almodóvar's codification of Spanishness;<sup>3</sup> and the reinvention of Spanish film in the 1990s as a part of a global, transnational film business.<sup>4</sup> There seems to be consensus among most analysts about Spanishness having undergone a process of reconstruction, remaking, reconfiguring or reinvention. For Jordan, it is not only that stereotypes of Spanishness are being continually recycled and subverted, but primarily that the signs of a stable Spanish identity seem to have mutated beyond recognition, thus rendering Spanishness virtually unnoticeable.

---

<sup>1</sup> National identity defined as the "interplay between Spanish films and their constructions of *Spanishness*" (Jordan, 2000, p. 69). In a global media environment in which the definition of what is Spanish is no longer self-evident, Spanish national identity would, then, emerge as "irreversibly variegated, heterogeneous and decentred". Interestingly, youth and other urban cultures are virtually indistinguishable from country to country. (Allinson, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> US and American-influenced perceptions of Spanish cinema depend largely on the marketing category of European cinema: foreign language, non-Hollywood, art-house, auteur-driven, high-culture, national film. This has limited the circulation of Spanish film to just auteur names such as Almodóvar, Bigas, Aranda, Medem and Saura. That *Torrente* has not entered the international market demonstrates that films that don't conform to the market's expectations have no chance. Art and heritage film travel well; popular genres don't. This has an effect on the filmmakers' choice of theme/genre – and an effect on how they craft 'Spanishness'.

<sup>3</sup> By simultaneously reforming gendered stereotypes of Spanishness (Kinder, 1993, p. 3) and "reinforcing rather than exploding the embarrassingly folkloric images of sexual repressions found in the sexy Iberian comedies of the 1970s" (Jordan, 2000, p. 75). It is difficult not to agree with Jordan that "the dominant construction of Almodóvar as the quintessential post-Franco 'Spanish' and 'national' filmmaker might require some revision." (Jordan, 2000, p. 75).

<sup>4</sup> New directors tend to avoid any prescriptive political/cultural agenda and feel free of the burden of the past. Their recipe incorporates everyday life themes + transnational visual rhetoric (comics, ads, fanzines, video clips...) + assimilation of American genres. (Heredero, 1997)

## Spanishness concealed

---

The soft, shy and elusive treatment of Spanishness that characterises Spanish film in the nineties contrasts with the maximalist, head-on treatment of three decades earlier. This toning-down process follows the general trend of other European cinematographies and can be observed both in the aesthetic and the industrial domains. The fading presence of Spanishness in the cinema echoes a similar process in the broader Spanish society. According to CIS figures, the centrality of the idea of Spain and Spanishness as an identity has progressively dissolved in the last decades in Spanish collective imaginary. In today's cultural life at large, Spanishness might be no longer a first-line operative idea, but it certainly floats as an echo, a shadow or a memory that adopts different forms according to the ideological strategies it still serves. Official discourses on Spanishness were minimal with Socialist governments, but were reignited with the Populares: in the late 1990s there has been a renaissance of publications about the idea of Spain and the Spanish nation. Five factors can be observed as likely causes of this process: i) the replacement of the Francoist National State with the liberal State defined in the 1978 Constitution; ii) the rapid westernisation of the country, which on the political side would culminate with Spain's incorporation into NATO and the EEC; patriotic values, on which Franco's Spain was grounded, gave way to a set of Western or American values such as civil liberties, human rights and consumerism; iii) the staging of devolution and the mediatic paraphernalia of the implementation of the *Estado de las Autonomías* created the widespread idea of Spain being challenged by conflicting national sentiments (Catalonia, Basque Country); the paradigms Centralism versus Autonomy and Imperialism versus Independence have been, and still are, presented in bitter opposition to each other; it has been argued that defendants of Spanishness created the idea that Spain would not survive a victory of the second paradigm; iv) European integration and the domestic fusion of two discourses: modernisation and Europeanisation; v) the politics of globalisation, which demands the denationalisation of political life because the US global agenda is easier to implement if the local culture has been previously accommodated to American cultural values.

Today's Spanish cinema has become an unsuitable vehicle for the thematic representation of Spanishness. It might be the case that Spanishness has ceased to exist in the straightforward, fundamentalist sense of *Hispanidad*. But Spanish cinema is no longer offering representations of Spanishness in its blander, everyday sense of cultural values that are specific to, and shared by, Spaniards. Other national and national-like representations exist as notions of Basqueness, Catalanness, Gypsiness, Europeanness, etc. It is not, then, that the cinema of Spain has become insensible to national concerns, or that audiences have grown bored with issues of nationhood. The disappearance of signposts and representations of Spanishness that I am referring to, rather than having been total in a definitively closed journey, has been a slow process that started in the final years of the Franco regime, and whose ending is difficult to anticipate. Today's Spanish cinema shows, at some times, the traces left by its lost Spanishness; sometimes, it is the empty space of a gesture, the rhetoric of a national narrative no longer believable; at other times, it is the phantasmagorical reenactment of historical events, collective rituals, cultural clichés, canonical films, social or regional stereotypes; most times, however, it is just a void space where the national used to be. This nothingness is sometimes filled with other regional/national elements (e.g. Basque history, Canary Islands costumes, European film allusions, American way of life...); other times, the hollow is left alone, untouched. Although the gap separating auteur and genre films is now very narrow, it can be argued that it is in the more auteurist films where the vacuum of Spanishness is most noticeable, while the more orthodox genre films are not now more

disinterested with issues of Spanishness than they used to be – the exceptions being epoch films such as *El Dorado*, *La niña de tus ojos*, *Juana la Loca*, literary adaptations, and some comedy forms including the Iberian sexy comedy of the seventies and the *comedia madrileña* of the eighties. Interestingly, while comedy films were traditionally deemed unexportable because of their cultural specificity, today's comedies are now more attentive to Western sensibilities than to Spanish models, and they travel better and more often. However, they are usually perceived as truly Spanish films and attract review descriptions filled with stereotypes of Spanishness.

Spanishness has abandoned the locale of Spanish cinema by fading away from its screens, by deserting its industry, and by ebbing away from society. It is not, obviously, the first time that a theme is obliterated by Spanish cinema; religious and child films disappeared before the 1970s; *destape* disappeared in the early 1980s; *folklóricas* movies had disappeared long before the genre's suicide with the unfortunate *Yo soy ésa*. Is the market logic (no demand, exhausted audiences, repetitive themes) a sufficient explanation in the case of Spanishness? Spanish themes used to be frequently used before the 1990s, not necessarily as settings and characters, but mainly through the hispanisation of the narrative and visual material. Therefore, Hollywood icons were recycled 'through a Spanish lens' (Besas 1985) in *El espíritu de la colmena* or *El amor del capitán Brando*, while Almodóvar was able to recode as stereotypically Spanish heterogeneous material of a diverse origin. The trend of the last three decades, anyhow, is one from the indisputably Spanish to the vaguely Western. The codification of Spain that we find in mid-seventies films such as Drove's *Tocata y fuga de Lolita* or Borau's *Furtivos* was perfectly stable, easily recognisable both in Spain and abroad. In the new century, after countless films on the Civil War and other historical episodes, the presence of Spain in Pons' *Morir (o no)* or Medem's *Lucía y el sexo* is volatile, elusive, perfectly irrelevant. The youngest generation of filmmakers favours a very low-key presence of Spanishness that does not interfere with their more urgent need to speak for and about a cosmopolitan, multilingual, Europeanised and generally post- or anti-nationalist young audience.<sup>5</sup> The fact that the cinema was becoming one more link in the chain of youth culture and entertainment, and that the average age of Spanish movie-goers had been dramatically lowered, was already clear by the mid eighties, when Jorge Berlanga said:

“Ya va siendo hora de dejarnos de engañifas y decir claramente que el cine que se hace en estos momentos en España no interesa para nada en el extranjero y muy poco aquí. La verdadera industria no dice tonterías cuando tiene comprobado que el 80 por ciento del público cinematográfico tiene menos de 25 años. En esta década, y algunos deberían enterarse, la sensibilidad ha cambiado, al igual que el lenguaje. La mayoría de los españoles están comprometidos en la apuesta de la modernidad. En muchos sectores del arte y de las ideas estamos en vanguardia. No podemos quedarnos en la retaguardia del cine con rancios dramas rurales, guerras pasadas o amoríos que matan de tedio. Hay que vivir el presente y el futuro. El pasado es de los muertos” (Berlanga 1986:15).

Modernisation and Europeanisation were the two sides of the coin of progress, which, in turn, was the only way out of a past of underdevelopment, parochial rivalries, and mummified morality. That explains, in part, the Spaniards' enthusiastic embracement of the new, modern, efficient, advanced European values,

---

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Jordan's comment above on the 'reinvention of Spanishness in the 1990s'.

and even of a brand new 'European' identity. 'Spain' replaced by 'Europe'. Europe has become an easy replacement, related to the myth of Modernity.

The film industry itself is now less national than it was 30 years ago, if only because it is now more aware of its role in international competition, more active in coproductions, more involved with foreign stars and with foreign projects, much more conscious of overseas markets and their perception of Spanish film, etc. There can be no question that, by taking up a proactive stance in the international arena, the Spanish film industry is now more competitive. It has become a more interesting place to make movies, while it has lost many of its national constraints. In 1975, the film industry was controlled by the State through censorship, financial aid, a government-led union, and laws regulating distribution and exhibition conditions. Spanish films, as a result, were very much part of the establishment. Dissident voices were rare and their films had to be coded to avoid censorship – thus losing popular appeal. The government controlled at will the themes, the genres, the stars, and even the degree of political dissent to be allowed. Cinema was, after TV – limited to just one State-owned channel – the most popular form of entertainment. In 2000, the real interest of media corporations is in TV – where the big chunks of audience are. Figures of cinema goers declined consistently during the 1980s and 1990s (due to the combined effects of home video, proliferation of TV stations and platforms, and a 'stay-home' culture). Although the industry as a whole depends on the State subsidies, ideologically and aesthetically cinematographers are now much more independent of the State, and some have their own production companies. State legislation is now dependent on European norms, and, with censorship gone, is limited to the areas of financial incentives and exhibition ratios between EU and non-EU (American) films. If in 1975 it was difficult to openly criticise the status quo from a film, in 2000 it has become imperative for any domestic film to 'say something' about 'us'.

Spaniards continue to obliterate Spanish film by overwhelmingly choosing US over Spanish films. US films obtained in 1988 a box-office share of 64.63%; in 1997 the percentage was up by more than 4 points to 68.74%, and in 2002 it was at 70.04%.<sup>6</sup> The impact of a massive diet of US films enjoyed by generation after generation of Spaniards since the 1930s must have been enormous, and must have affected the way Spaniards perceive the US and the history of the world since WW2, as well as the way they understand and read movies. More importantly, it must have had an enormous impact on the way Spaniards see themselves, since, after all, the degree of penetration of US films in the country can only be understood as a colonising tactic. It is a known fact that Hollywood is the second largest US exporter, second only to the aeronautics industry. It is not just Spain, but the whole of Europe and most of the world that is now subject to a massive imposition of US films. The US market, as the neoimperial metropolis it has become, remains closed to foreign film. Hollywood's mission in the economy of the imperial agenda could be interpreted to consist in, firstly, eroding the credibility and presence of local representations of the national, and, secondly, replacing them with American films filled with American values. Frantz Fanon's classical description of colonial cultural domination surprisingly coincides with Hollywood's neocolonial tactic, and, in the case of Spain, with the sense of inferiority and inappropriateness that characterised its national pathos in the 1970s and early 1980s.

English-language commentators tend to refer to US imperialism with oblique terms such as internationalisation, globalisation, transnationalisation, and similar expressions that focus on a sanitised and ideologically neutral market process. Marsha Kinder, for instance, observes, without mentioning

---

<sup>6</sup> Data from *Anuario El País* and *Academia* 86 (January 2003).

Hollywood nor explaining its role, that “[n]ow that the concepts of ‘cinema’, ‘nation’, and ‘national cinema’ are increasingly becoming decentered and assimilated within larger transnational systems of entertainment, Spanish cinema is bound to be radically transformed.” (Kinder, 1993, p. 440). Spanish commentators make more frequent use of the term *colonización*; they are also more aware than their English-language colleagues of the colonial logic that governs the audiovisual sector in Spain. For example, Caparrós Lera suggests subtitling, instead of dubbing, as a resistance tactic against US “*colonización*” (Caparrós Lera, 1999, p. 183). After all, foreign-language films exhibited in the US are seldom dubbed into English, which, together with a strict limitation on imports, poor distribution outside large urban areas, a narrow-minded classification system prone to R ratings for any European movie with sexual references, marketing tactics addressed to the elites, and the classification of foreign films as just foreign-language, or art-house films, without further distinction between nationalities, languages or genres, turns the US market into a fortress.

Spanish film has become less Spanish because Hollywood films, genres and stars – which remain inimitable not so much because of their budgets as because of the colonial logic – dominate the market; because American themes and lore inspire and permeate many domestic films; because some directors, actors and other professionals migrate to either Hollywood (Cruz, Banderas, Trueba) or to the independent American arena (Coixet); because the reception of a Spanish film in the US market is a key measurement criterion for quality and success – despite the patronising attitude of the US film sector, and despite its protectionist policies, which lead some producers to think of their films in terms of their American marketability; and, finally, because Spanish society, transformed, as every other around the world, into just a captive audience for Hollywood films, has now accepted without reservations the teachings of the American propaganda machine, and has assumed burgers, NATO and the American way of life as their own – or, at least, as the model to be learned and emulated, in the understanding that Spain is, of course, an imperfect society which, nevertheless, could learn fast and soon become as ‘civilised’ (that is, Americanised) as any other in the global village or US Empire.

## Discourses on Nation

---

The incontrovertible fact that Spanishness has faded away from the cinema of Spain can be interpreted, glossed, explained, exploited, narrativised in many ways. A study of national symbols and metaphors could help us trace the dissolution of the national specificity in genres as relevant as the historical drama, the political film and the *comedia costumbrista*, or in themes and motifs with some connection to the national, such as family, travel, international affairs, etc. Thus, for instance, the portrayal of a family representing Spain in Franco’s programmatic film *Raza* would emerge as an influential source of the long-standing equation of national history and personal memory<sup>7</sup> which can be perceived in the rich tradition of family-as-nation films, including Francoist propaganda comedies (*La gran familia*), post-Franco accounts of the regime (*El desencanto*, *La escopeta nacional*, *Mamá cumple cien años*, *Tata mía*), or satires and evaluations of national values or customs (*Una familia decente*, León de Aranoa’s postmodern *Familia*). Indeed, a critique of the national could be achieved indirectly through its intersections with the paradigms of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and so on. Instead of recurring to generic or thematic descriptors,

---

<sup>7</sup> “By invoking national history in the name of the family, the film effectively collapses the distinction between history and personal memory, crystallizing as plot a process that was to be one of the ideological constants of Francoist domestic propaganda for decades.” (D’Lugo, 1991, p. 18)



however, I will describe what I believe to be the three discursive configurations that have articulated the notion of nation in contemporary Spain. These discourses (detailed below) do not correspond to fixed chronological periods, although each predates and prefigures the next. In the 1990s the three discourses are found to be operative, although not with the same influence or power. Moreover, they are not mutually exclusive; they can overlap; they can be found to coexist and filter each other within the same film or auteur. The three are fictional discourses in the sense that they refer to fictional or nonexistent entities: a national soul, its refutation in the form of a national body, and the quest for national/cultural authenticity. In the first discourse, Spain is largely a preconceived, inherited concept whose nature and definition is not open to any form of public discussion. This closure becomes the focus of the second discourse: the nature and definition of Spain, both as a nation and as a state, must be discussed, reframed, modernised. Being a reaction, this discourse depends, for its very existence, on the 'universality' of the first one. Spain becomes largely an object of enquiry, sometimes a utopian, sometimes a dystopian notion. The confrontation of these two discourses has adopted an endless number of topical configurations, ranging from the dictatorship-versus-democracy theme to the topics of everyday life, sexuality, customs, etc. Allegedly, the impossibility to resolve the tension between the two discourses in some sort of a Hegelian synthesis has led many young filmmakers to try to escape the dialectics of Spanishness by declaring it obsolete, irrelevant or merely decorative in their identities. The third discourse, despite its apparent disconnectedness from serious politics, is deeply rooted in the politics of Spanishness: its main stance, 'Spain is just a small part of me', reveals the tedium, if not the anxiety, created by the decades-long fight between a metaphysical and materialist notion of Spain. This third discourse is marked by a central internal contradiction: on the one hand, it maintains that modern youth is no longer obsessed with national confrontations, if only because there are many other urgent needs such as unemployment, housing, Third World exploitation, and so on, that leave no room for old domestic disputations. On the other hand, however, the nation-less generation they attempt to depict in their films is haunted by the same ghosts of the past they want to overcome, as if a phantasmatic representation of the nation still rules in the form of language, customs, family, sexuality, etc. This contradiction between the desire to forget and the ubiquitousness of History generates the anxiety mechanism that colours today's Spanish film.

### i) National soul, or the myth of the national essence.

The idea of Spain as a unified nation was central to Francoism; it did not disappear with the new regime. The myth of atemporality and immortality, supported by a metaphysical rhetoric of 'destiny', 'transcendental mission', 'spiritual motherhood' and so on, was preserved after 1978 in the collective memory as a milestone reference, not only in relation to extreme-right parties, those nostalgic of Francoism, and young neofascists, but also – mainly – by the majority of Spaniards and the institutions of the new regime in their attempt to preserve all Francoist elements that were not frontally opposed to the 1978 Constitution, namely the indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation. Beyond the basic belief in a national essence, official narratives and symbols of nationhood were changed from dictatorship to monarchy, and in the new plural democracy different paraphernaliae are being used by hardliners, neofascists and other groups. A pure national soul requires the exclusion of all extraneous elements (non-Catholics, communists...). Importantly, as it was repeatedly denounced over the years, this is a mythic discourse. It is not a description of facts, but a statement of desire. Yet, the massive indoctrination of Spanish society during the years of the dictatorship (and beyond) was based on the usefulness of this

myth as a form of transmission of knowledge about the Spanish nation and the continuous telling of stories in which the nation featured as a supra-historical, atemporal, perennial entity. In order to be effective, it was necessary that the society's momentary suspension of disbelief was turned into a permanent belief in the myth's validity, followed by the construction of a national ethos and a national subjectivity. A reified nation was, undoubtedly, the regime's *pièce de résistance* against the incredulous, the disaffected, and all dissidents, now branded as 'enemies of the nation'.

The origins of this discursive formation predate Franco's dictatorship. If European nationalisms were a Romantic fashion that quickly fuelled strong identitarian bonds, in Spain the liquidation of the overseas Empire in 1898 and the growing agitation of the army, topped up with social unrest, triggered the necessity to reassess the fundamentals of the nation in an unprecedented scale in the first third of the twentieth century. The nation was, in fact, the Gordian knot of *noventayochistas* – as illustrated by Unamuno's important concept of *intrahistoria*, later reappropriated by Falange as a rationalisation of the *España eterna*. But it was moderate conservatives, the urban bourgeoisie and liberals who codified what Franco would later refer to as 'Spanish values' (moral, religious, political) in a long process which started with the Borbonic *Restauración*. Spanish culture, understood as a folkloric organisation of popular song and dance, traditional games and customs, religious festivities and local gastronomies, was prefigured during the reign of Carlos III, and by 1900 already constituted a recognisable set of articulated practices. Spanish values and culture were at the core of Unamuno's *intrahistoria*, and were also the key to explaining the 'imperial vocation' of the country in the tendentious explanations of José Antonio and Ortega. Anti-Spanish thinkers (Sabino Arana) implicitly reinforced this myth by reacting against its version of Spanishness.

In the films of the dictatorship period Spanishness is consistently treated according to this model. *Raza* (and the epic films of the immediate postwar) epitomised Franco's Spain, both as a set of values and as a form of (filmic) representation.<sup>8</sup> In the last years of the regime, Armiñán's *Mi querida señorita* shows the effects of an undebated national metanarrative that is mercilessly imposed on the life of an anonymous citizen who does not conform to the *Raza* model. In a small provincial town, an old-fashioned spinster lives an empty life which she tries to fill by obsessively attending religious services and neurotically denying her lesbian impulses towards her younger domestic assistant. The audience receives a sketchy but sufficient outline of the provincial, narrow-minded, atemporal oppressiveness of a small-town everyday life under Franco; the sanctity of the Spanish way of life delimits a narrow space for each individual, and prescribes life models for each member of the nation. The turning point of the film takes place when the spinster, on her confessor's advice, consults her sexual problem with a doctor and, to her immense surprise – and the viewer's – she is told that she is not a woman, but a man. Since the film is not scientifically driven the details of her trans-gender journey are not spelled out; instead, the viewer is presented with this visual sequence: a zoom in on the face of the patient when she is given the life-changing diagnostic, a black dissolve, the end of a tunnel, and a series of point-of-view shots in which the unprepared spectator is invited to look at different aspects of big-city everyday life as a born-again man. Those shots reveal the disproportionate effort of self reinvention and reconstruction that the transgender person must make in order to accommodate to an inflexible and monolithic society. The point is not whether being a man is more difficult or convenient than being a woman in such a society, because the movie does not contain any battle-of-the-sexes agenda. Neither is the point whether gender benders are

---

<sup>8</sup> For a different appreciation of *costumbrista* and religious films of the 1940s, see (Camporesi, 2000) .

morally correct or not, because the movie carefully locates the problem within the realm of medicine and science; the señorita does not choose what happens to her. The tragedy of *Mi querida señorita* resides in the inhibition of the system over the physical impossibility of a transgender to remain loyal to the model. The nation, based on the exclusion of all non-conformant elements, relies precisely on the exclusion of non-Catholics, republicans, Jews, non-heterosexuals, non-Castilian-speakers, and so on and so forth, for its own survival. The system of Spanishness singles out the abject, but it is unable to recycle it back to society; it is the individual who must accommodate themselves to the system, not the other way round. A further twist in the film happens when the spinster, now an anonymous man without a past living in Madrid, reencounters his former maid, who now works in a coffee-shop. The long and meandering seduction process that follows, marked by his impossibility to explain to her who he is and who he was and what happened in between, culminates with two declarations that opened up a new era in Spanish film: he gives in and accepts that he will never be able to utter the unspeakable, that he will never challenge the cultural system he belongs to; but she replies with a spontaneous and deeply revealing “¡Qué me va usted a contar, señorita!” followed a few seconds later by a facial gesture of disbelief and puzzlement. Gender and class interdictions, in which the Francoist nation was firmly rooted, are transgressed in the movie, not in order to propose an alternative model but merely to map out the silhouette or contour of the hegemonic national system.

Popular genres (religious, child, comedy) were used as a form of propaganda, each focusing on different parts of the myth: religious films on Catholic values, child films on moral values, customs comedies on moral and cultural values, and so on. In typical *españolada* movies, which portrayed a clichéd image of Spain, essentialised Spanishness is taken for granted and presented as a background. Audiences were never massively excited by *españolada* movies, which were considered a barely tolerable domestic caricature of the good cinema – the American.<sup>9</sup> Neorealist and social films, intent on denouncing conditions of life in the country, usually would do so by blaming the vices and shortcomings of either atemporal Spanishness or, in the existentialist films, the human condition. Attacks on the regime itself were unthinkable, and the rare attempts had to do so in an indirect manner such as attacking Spanishness as a displaced allegory of the dictatorship. Sometimes, like in *Calle Mayor*, the national reference was thoroughly avoided, even if the storyline contradicted such disavowal.

New Spanish Cinema auteurs reinforced, perhaps unintentionally, the myth through their fatalist constructions of Spanishness as a static force behind the ‘claustrophobic inanity and hopeless inevitability of life in a country which (...) offered little opportunity for individual fulfilment.’<sup>10</sup> Or perhaps they reinforced the myth consciously, since the *Nuevo Cine Español* operation was orchestrated from the government through the Dirección General de Cinematografía and García Escudero. The other side of the coin is the realisation that, although Spanishness existed as a recognisable national identity, a specific and recognisable Spanish film style did not exist:

---

<sup>9</sup> Talking about *la españolada* in perspective, Álex de la Iglesia considers it to be past history: “Almodóvar vació un bote de alcohol sobre la herida y la limpió profundamente. Ahora hay que convencer a la gente de que una película española puede ser divertida, terrorífica, excitante, inteligente, frenética, encantadora, inquietante, apasionante...” (Hereadero, 1999, p. 57)

<sup>10</sup> As Dominic Keown describes Martín Patino’s *Nueve cartas a Berta* in *Encyclopedia of European Cinema*, p. 307 (is this the page number? Also, is there a publication date to go here?).

“Cintas y cineastas que, si bien serían acogidos por muchos como la tan soñada ‘nueva ola’ española, pronto se descubriría que carecíamos de una personalidad propia, genuinamente hispana, y que se vivía de mimetismos – Antonioni, por ejemplo – de otros autores y era en buena parte tributaria de cinematografías vecinas.” (Caparrós Lera, 1999, p. 128)

## ii) National body, or the tabula rasa myth.

This is the myth of the dissolution of the myth of the national essence. This is the discursive configuration used by post-Franco Spanish establishment to distance itself from a national construct perceived to be metaphysical, historically incorrect, maximalist and anti-democratic. The new idea of Spain still defined it as a nation, but no longer as an essential nation; rather, the national body was proposed as plural, inclusive and observant of internal differences. Different languages, iconographies and narratives were invited to enrich the nation’s cultural commonwealth. This was wrapped up in a rebirth rhetoric of ‘new beginning’, ‘overcoming of past differences between regions’, ‘catching up with Europe’, etc. Obviously, it is a reactive discourse, whose only *raison d’être* is to respond to and deactivate Franco’s Spanishness; it is also a utopian discourse whose description of Spain as a sisterhood of mutually consenting nationalities belongs to the realm of desire. The body national is only possible by the inclusion of all its members.

The *falangista* myth became progressively contested in the 60s and 70s. *Conversaciones sobre el cine nacional*, the Salamanca Conversations organised in 1955 by the editors of the magazine *Objetivo* (PCE members Juan Antonio Bardem and Ricardo Muñoz Suay, plus Eduardo Ducay and Paulino Garagorri) and Basilio Martín Patino, denounced the myth as false. Bardem famously described Spanish postwar cinema as “... politically futile, socially false, intellectually vapid, aesthetically void and industrially paralytic.” (D’Lugo, 1991, p. 21)

Political reaction to Francoism marked the post-Franco period. The new regime sought to distance itself from the old through the key concepts of democracy, individual liberties and regional autonomy, versus authoritarianism, autarchy and centralism. Far-right parties disappeared. Santiago Segura’s *Torrente* marks their absence, as well as the country’s need for an iconography that many love to hate.<sup>11</sup>

Almodóvar is the (film) icon of the democratic Spain, which is predicated on the overcoming of Francoism. “In the 1980s, it was Spain’s *movida* generation and its view of Spanishness which seemed to achieve a hegemonic position in defining the national, at home and abroad. It did so most emphatically through the subversive representations crafted by such popular auteurs as Almodóvar.” (Jordan, 2000, p. 72). It is well documented that Almodóvar reversed the Francoist censorship code in his first underground films,

---

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, some Catalan and Basque nationalist discourses do reproduce the discourse of the myth of the national essence; in its inverted form, Spanishness becomes the abject that must be expelled: *Quin curs el meu tercer*, *El amante bilingüe*. In his study on Medem and postnationalism, Smith uses works by Jon Juaristi, Juan Aranzadi, and Patxo Unzueta, who “have sought, like Medem, to disentangle nationality from the land (and language) with which it is so frequently fused.” (Smith, 2000, p. 150). Arguably, the same disentanglement can be observed in some leftist proponents of the Spanish nationalism. Predetermined, fixed visions of the national character can be seen in the new comedy (Colomo, Gómez Pereira) and migration films (*Flores de otro mundo*, *Bwana*, *Cosas que dejé en La Habana*).

where drug use, gratuitous violence, explicit sex scenes, adulterous relations, suicide, homosexuality, prostitution, attacks to the family and other censored motifs abound. The reversal of the censor's code was just the beginning of a more profound reversal of national values whose ultimate effect would be the codification of a new – reinvented, reimagined, reconstructed... – Spanishness. *La ley del deseo* represents a dramatic turning point in Almodóvar's career: for the first time the content of one of his films was so unanimously considered to be subversive that it was denied any financial grant, either public or private. The offensive element of the film was, of course, homosexuality. Almodóvar not only shot and successfully released his film, he also used the lack of financial support to create his own production company, which would prove crucial in his later auteur career. Compared to *Mi querida señorita*, and to all other Spanish films with a presence of non-heterosexuals, *La ley del deseo's* gay characters inhabit a totally different world in which sexual identity is not necessarily to be hidden, non-heterosexuals are allowed a considerable amount of sociality and social visibility, and moral impositions seem not to exist. The strategy of reversal, of replacing an old value system with a new one, is stressed and explained in one telling scene of the movie: Pablo, the main character, has suffered a car accident and has temporarily lost his memory; his sister visits him in hospital to feed him with their shared family memories; the hyper-feminine sister's tale, accompanied by pictures and other memory-prompters, abruptly changes its course from the depository of shared memories to the shrine of personal secrets – from common history to radical subjectivity. The spectator, and Pablo, then learn that his sister, a lesbian, was born a boy, that he had a sexual affair with his own father, who convinced him to undertake a sex-change operation in Morocco, only to abandon her afterwards. A succinct compendium of what Francoist Spain used to consider abject, only this time presented, if not as normal, at least as understandable. The main value of Almodóvar's Spanishness seem to be its ability to understand and condone even the most bizarre and weird personal narratives, in an obvious and quite deliberate reversal of old-Spain intransigency. Naturally, many gay men, lesbians, and transgender people complained that Almodóvar's representation of Spain was just as partial and fictitious as the one he was reacting against, for Spanish society was far from being as understanding with non-heterosexuals as *La ley del deseo* suggested. When *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* won international recognition as a genuine representative of the new Spanish cinema, a similar concern was expressed by feminist groups about the fabrication of an image of Spain that had little to do with reality. This time, however, the reversal was canonised as the new paradigm of Spanishness both in Spain – with the help of the PSOE administration, eager to reverse a far-right image of the country – and abroad.<sup>12</sup>

### iii) National authenticity, or the quest for an identity.

This discourse is the logical consequence of the excessive mythic/utopian imagination generated around notions of Spanishness. Arguably, the anxiety provoked by a saturation of national-identity disputations might have found an expression in the questioning of the need for a national identity, especially in a global context of gradual debilitation of a nation-based world order. Younger Spaniards, better educated and more aware of world affairs, questioned not only received definitions of Spanishness, but also perceptions of Spanishness abroad. Authenticity became the key issue for those who felt trapped between the excess of domestic fictional propositions and the excess of foreign stereotypes of Spanishness. The quest for authenticity, however, is itself marred by the mythical assumption that some

<sup>12</sup> Arguably, foreign representations of Spanish femininity have now replaced the Carmen model with the more neurotic, hyper-active, domineering and powerful model provided by Almodóvar. Cf. Steven Jacobs' *La Spagnola*.

expressions of national identity are more authentic than others, contaminated with ideological or partisan slogans or commodified by mass-culture icons. In the struggle between mythic and 'objective' discursive modes, some notions become especially relevant: the questions of truth and belief, discursive power, and the closely related notions of identity and authenticity. Spanish film of the 1990s has explored these issues in a large number of films. Benito Zambrano's acclaimed opera prima *Solas* got some sort of a symbolic status amidst the fever generated in Spain around the international recognition of Almodóvar's *Todo sobre mi madre*. *Solas* was seen by many as a realist and honest alternative to the fictional and eccentric excess of Almodóvar's style; its visual simplicity and unassuming camera work, together with the candid realism of its characters and storyline, represented a fresh departure from *Todo sobre mi madre*'s baroque visual rhetoric and stylised characterisation. *Solas* tells the story of an Andalusian rural family during the critical days in which the father undergoes a heart operation in a Seville hospital. Old-age mother and grown-up daughter share for a few days the latter's city apartment. Their frequent clashes over each other's lifestyle reveal how profound the gap between them has grown. The mother's traditional, old-fashioned sense of discipline and female subordination sharply contrasts with the daughter's alleged independence and self-control. For one thing, *Solas* testifies to the disentanglement of Spanishness and Andalusian-ness that was so necessary after Franco's insistence on their mutual identification – *Bienvenido Mr Marshall*'s grotesque Andalusation of a Castilian village was perhaps the most famous example of that identification. *Solas*' Andalusian setting and characters has no pretence to be taken as a synecdoche for Spain. However, the allegorical dimension of its family drama becomes apparent with the ghostly figure of the father, who is not a loving, caring figure but an authoritarian, possessive macho whose main frustration seems to be his inability to tame down and dominate his own daughter. Unable to move out of his hospital bed, he contemplates with deep contempt what he considers indecent behaviour of everyone else – primarily his subdued wife and rebellious daughter. Both women are further distanced by their different reactions to the patriarch's cruelty, in a way reminiscent of the different attitudes towards Franco's authoritarian rule decades before. Authoritarianism and patriarchy were so tightly intertwined in the traditional Spanish value system that it is simply not possible not to perceive the political allegory of the old, sick tyrant and the divisiveness and unhappiness he brings about. *Solas* is not a comforting film packed with quick answers to old questions; instead, it opens up those questions to more subtle and unsuspected nuances. For instance, questions pertaining to historical truth: what sort of certainties can be established in a family – or a nation – so dramatically marked by a despotic use of authoritarianism? Even within a postmodern paradigm of discursive relativities, why should any version of the family – or the nation – be taken as more valid than any other? Why should anyone be believed? There are some neorealist details in *Solas*, such as the mother being illiterate, which are closely related to the social-denunciation films of the 1960s and 1970s, and which reveal unexpected similarities between today's rural women and their mothers and grandmothers, in terms of poverty, ignorance, subjugation and disavowal; also in a neorealist mood, urban women such as the daughter are shown to be annihilated by an omnipresent and overwhelming patriarchal capitalism. The film's zone of discomfort reminds the viewer that subjective identity is determined by the unequal and violent distribution of power; other films of the same period have denounced the role of the press and the media in this process of disempowerment.<sup>13</sup>

At the heart of *Solas* and many other 1990s Spanish films lies a fundamental question about authenticity – not only national, but also racial, sexual, generational and so on. It is not a question about how to be

---

<sup>13</sup> For instance, genre films such as *El corazón del guerrero* and *La mujer más fea del mundo*.

more authentic, more genuine, or more similar to one's own self-fantasy, as was the case in the films about the one and true Spain, about the sexual liberation of the 1970s or the gay access to visibility of the 1990s, or about the endless negotiations between Spanish and Catalan identities of the 1980s. It is not an Almodovarian question about the correspondence between ego and desire, as illustrated by the several 'very authentic' female characters in *Todo sobre mi madre*. The question of authenticity in recent Spanish film is sceptically approached with the conviction that the instrument by which identity could be rendered legible, that is, language, including film language, has become too unreliable to be a trustworthy system of identity representation. This is why *Solas*, in spite of its obvious distribution of likes and dislikes, does not contain a moral assessment of any of its characters; far from being a case of moral relativity, or lack of values – in the words of many adherents to metaphysical ethics – this film is a good exponent of the identity-anxiety that has now become a trademark of Spanish film.

## Referencias

---

- Academia de Artes y Ciencias Cinematográficas de España (2003). Academia newsletter, 86.
- Allinson, M. (2000). The Construction of Youth in Spain in the 1980s and 1990s". In B. Jordan and R. Morgan-Tamosunas (Eds.). *Contemporary Spanish Cultural Studies* (pp. 265–73). London: Arnold.
- Berlanga, J. (1986). *Fotogramas*, 1725 (December).
- Camporesi, V. (2000). *En busca de una política cinematográfica. La "españolidad" del cine español en el contexto europeo (1940–1946)*. Alicante: Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes.
- Caparrós Lera, J. M. (1999) *Historia crítica del cine español: desde 1897 hasta hoy*. Barcelona: Ariel.
- D'Lugo, M. (1991). *The Films of Carlos Saura: The Practice of Seeing*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- D'Lugo, M. (1995). Bigas Luna's Jamón, Jamón: Remaking the National in Spanish Cinema. In J. Colmeiro; C. Dupláa; P. Greene, and J. Sabadell (Eds.) *Spain Today: Essays on Literature, Culture, Society* (pp. 67–82). Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College.
- D'Lugo, M. (1997a). Bigas Luna's Huevos de oro: Regional Art, Global Commerce. *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies*, 1: 63–76.
- D'Lugo, M. (1997b). La teta i la lluna: The Form of Transnational Cinema in Spain. In M. Kinder, (Ed.) *Refiguring Spain: Cinema / Media / Representation* (pp. 196–214). Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Fanon, F. (1963). *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.
- Herdero, C. F. (1997). *Espejo de miradas: entrevistas con nuevos directores del cine español de los años noventa*. Alcalá de Henares: Fundación Colegio del Rey.
- Herdero, C. F. (1999). Cine español. Nueva Generación, *Dirigido Por*, 278: 50–67.

Jordan, B. (2000). How Spanish Is It? Spanish Cinema and National Identity. In B. Jordan and R. Morgan-Tamosunas (Eds.). *Contemporary Spanish Cultural Studies* (pp. 68–78). London: Arnold.

Kinder, M. (1993). *Blood Cinema: The Reconstruction of National Identity in Spain*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Smith, P. J. (2000). *The Moderns: Time, Space, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Spanish Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## Historia editorial

---

**Recibido:** 09/04/2007

**Aceptado:** 29/01/2008

## Formato de citación

---

Martínez-Expósito, Alfredo (2008). Cuentos póstumos de Una, Grande, Libre Nación: Española en las películas españolas post Franco. *Athenea Digital*, 14, 143-158. Disponible en <http://psicologiasocial.uab.es/athenea/index.php/atheneaDigital/article/view/357>.



Este texto está protegido por una licencia [Creative Commons](#).

Usted es libre de copiar, distribuir y comunicar públicamente la obra bajo las siguientes condiciones:

**Reconocimiento:** Debe reconocer y citar al autor original.

**No comercial.** No puede utilizar esta obra para fines comerciales.

**Sin obras derivadas.** No se puede alterar, transformar, o generar una obra derivada a partir de esta obra.

[Resumen de licencia](#) - [Texto completo de la licencia](#)