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Crime, Knowledge and the Photographic Object in *La isla mínima*

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KEYWORDS: *La isla mínima*, photography, transition to democracy, violence, criminality, *El Caso*

This article explores the role of photography in the recent Spanish crime thriller *La isla mínima* (Alberto Rodríguez, 2014). It argues that the indexicality of the photographic object is the key to the allegorical message of the film, in which the criminal investigation also serves an historical investigation into the compromises that were made in the name of Spain's transition to democracy. The photographic object in turn both reveals and conceals the extent to which violence was integral to the 'pacto de olvido' of the transition, and presents itself as an uncomfortable truth that Spain has not yet reconciled itself with. The article also discusses the influence of photography on the cinematography of the film, as well as the important role that *El Caso* and photojournalism played during these years.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *La isla mínima*, fotografía, transición a la democracia, violencia, criminalidad, *El Caso*

Este artículo explora el papel de la fotografía en el reciente thriller policial *La isla mínima* (Alberto Rodríguez, 2014). Sostiene que la indexicalidad del objeto fotográfico es la clave del mensaje alegórico de la película, en el que la investigación penal sirve también de investigación histórica de los compromisos que se hicieron en nombre de la transición de España a la democracia. El objeto fotográfico, a su vez, revela y oculta hasta qué punto la violencia formaba una parte integrante del 'pacto del olvido' la transición y se presenta como una verdad incómoda con la que España todavía no se ha reconciliado. El artículo discute también la influencia de la fotografía en la cinematografía de la película, así como el importante papel que *El Caso* y el fotoperiodismo han desempeñado durante estos años.

The recent crime thriller *La isla mínima* (Alberto Rodríguez, 2014) is permeated with photographs. The film is focalised through the movement of two ideologically opposed Madrid-based detectives, Juan (Javier Gutiérrez) and Pedro (Raúl Arévalo), who have been sent to the marshlands of Guadalquivir to investigate the disappearance of two teenage girls. The discovery of the identity of their killers is made possible through the medium of photography. If, as Thompson has written, the crime film addresses the criminal investigation ‘a problem of *knowledge*’¹, knowledge in *La isla mínima* is produced through the indexicality of the photographic object. Through a trail of erotic photographs, family portraits and forensic pictures, the clues behind the girls’ violent rape and murder gradually come into focus. Yet the photographic object is also key to the allegorical message of the film, in which the criminal investigation also serves an historical investigation into the complex political fault lines, concessions and compromises that were made in the name of Spain’s transition to democracy. Set in September in 1980, when military hostility towards the democratic process was threatening to simmer over, *La isla mínima* also explores the extent to which violence was in fact an integral part of democratic reform. Indeed, far from being a ‘peaceful’ transition, as it has been viewed until recently, Spain witnessed according to Aguilar and Payne ‘the most violent democratization process, by far, of any country at the time, for example compared to Portugal and Greece’.² As such, they argue that the ongoing violence of this period and its role in promoting the ‘pacto de olvido’, the institutionalised act of forgetting about the Civil War and the dictatorship, have often been overlooked.³ Revealed through the photographic object, violence in the film emerges as a physical trace, one whose presence and absence throw up a series of unresolved questions that continue to resonate in Spain to this day.

In exploring these questions, this article seeks to examine the various ways in which *La isla mínima* interacts with the medium of photography. Not only do photographs populate the *mise en scene* and drive the narrative, but photography itself was a crucial influence on its cinematography of the film. In the film’s raw depiction of rural life in Guadalquivir, Alberto Rodríguez and his cinematographer, Alex Catalán, were influenced by the images of Andalusian photographers, Hector Garrido and Atín Aya. The film also pays testament to the critically overlooked role played by photojournalism in Spain during these years, through the crucial appearance of the investigative journalist from *El Caso* (played by Manolo Solo), a crime newspaper that was hugely popular during the regime and the transition. *La isla mínima* therefore appears to bear out Mary Ann Doane’s claim that cinema has ‘consistently returned to photography as a privileged generator of *epistemological dilemmas* that cannot

fail to contaminate film as a form'.⁴ In staging a dialogue with photography, Rodríguez's film illustrates a similar contamination, one which also provides a meditation the cinematic form itself. As this article ultimately seeks to argue, its contamination is mostly keenly felt through the persistence of the photographic object. Following Doane, the physical imprint of celluloid similarly emerges as an epistemological dilemma, a problem of knowledge that democratic Spain has until recently sought to repress.

Between stillness and motion

Through its meticulous attention paid to period detail and its ochre-tinted texture, the cinematography *La isla mínima* vividly recreates the historical setting of rural Andalucía during the transition. The film was notable critical and commercial success: it won 11 Goyas in 2015, including for best film, director, actor (Javier Gutiérrez), and best original score (Julio de la Rosa), and earned almost 8 million Euros at the box office.⁵ In its depiction of a newly democratic Spain that was rife with corruption, economic hardship and institutional violence, Rodríguez's film resonates more broadly with recent public re-readings of the transition that have sought to challenge its idyllic image. As is well known, the official breaking of the silence surrounding the 'pacto de olvido' was brought into effect through José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's implementation of the 'historical memory law' in 2007. In the ten years that have followed the law, Spain has undergone a protracted period of economic deterioration and political unrest, a context that has led to a further critical revision of democratic process. Indeed, as Kostis Kōrnetis has written, 'the current economic recession in Spain prompted a need to reassess post-authoritarian phenomena, as in moments of deep social, political and economic crisis the recent past tends to become an issue of contention'.⁶ Post-crisis films such as *23-F: La película* (Chema de la Peña, 2011) and *El futuro* (Luis López Carrasco, 2013) have demonstrated a renewed interest in these years, while recent critical works by Germán Labrador and Guillem Martínez, along with the earlier seminal writings of Cristina Moreira Menor, Teresa Vilarós and Jo Labanyi, have contested the dominant narrative of the transition. *La isla mínima's* status as a police procedural crime thriller, a genre whose narrative is usually focalised through the figure of the detective and not the victim, provides a further dimension to these debates. Despite the Moncloa Pacts of 1977 and the Constitution of 1978, the transition was still nevertheless marked by what Kōrnetis has termed 'the residues of authoritarianism'.⁷ The film provides an illustration of how 'social conservatism and cultural repression during were not eliminated' during these years.⁸

From the very beginning of *La isla mínima*, the social and economic stasis of the Guadalquivir is explicitly emphasised through the medium of still photography. Right from the opening scene, the film presents us with inextricability of film and the photographic, movement and stasis. A series of birds-eye-view shots slowly track the landscape of Doñana National Park, whose distinctive fractal-like patterns of land and water serve to establish the setting of the film. These images originated from a series of photographs that had been taken over a period of twenty years by a local photographer, Hector Garrido. The original purpose of Garrido's pictures was to provide a census of the migratory movement of birds in the region, with a selection of the images ending up published in a book entitled *Armonía fractal de Doñana y las marismas* in 2012. The images were discovered by the director Rodríguez, who after contacting Garrido and requesting to view his extensive archive of pictures, began to construct the overall aesthetic of the film. Garrido's photographs were then digitally animated in postproduction to resemble a landscape in motion, so that the impression of turbulence was added to the water and that the birds appeared to be in flight.⁹

As the title of Garrido's book suggests, the aerial pictures reveal the geometrical harmony of nature, a landscape whose complex play of tessellations and symmetries is revealed in a crystalline simplicity. Yet this ordered geometry stands in striking contrast with the movement of Juan and Pedro, who find themselves increasingly ill at ease and disorientated within a hostile terrain. When filmed in exterior locations, the actors' movement is frequently staged in a sustained depth of field, a visual strategy which emphasises the vastness of the landscape that surrounds them. This is further compounded by the film's striking use of anamorphic widescreen, deployed to dramatic effect when the detectives are searching for clues.¹⁰ The breadth of the image is emphasised, for instance, when the actors are seen snaking through the thick grass either on foot, or when their car is captured by the camera outside the hunting lodge, partially covered by undergrowth. In a memorable tracking shot, when Juan and Pedro chase the poacher Jesús (Salva Reina) on foot, the wide angle lense presents us with the dynamic sweep of landscape, an extended horizontality that appears to elude the grasp of the detectives. If the camera frequently depicts their dislocation, Jesús, as a poacher, is able to negotiate the local topography with far greater ease of movement. Indeed, after Jesús is caught, he assumes an increasingly significant role in the narrative: he leads Juan and Pedro to the site of the violent crimes, a hunting lodge so remote that it cannot be found on any map. Jesús's role here intriguingly echoes that of the photographer Hector Garrido during the production of the film, who served as an informal guide for the director and his crew, ensuring that they did not get lost within the location of

the largest island of Guadalquivir, a labyrinthine territory of 15,000 hectares.¹¹ As Garrido has commented ‘Perderse es lo más habitual y de noche más normal todavía sobre todo si no tienes cobertura, como sucede en esta zona’.¹²

Another important influence was the black-and-white photography of the late Atín Aya. Based in Sevilla, Aya originally worked as a photojournalist for *ABC*, *Cambio 16* and other newspapers before presenting his own work in exhibitions the 1990s. He was most known for *Marismas del Guadalquivir* (1991-1996), an exhibition of pictures depicting everyday scenes of rural life in the region. In spite of Guadalquivir’s proximity to Seville, a city whose accelerated modernisation was best symbolised by its Universal Exposition of 1992, his photographs chronicle a region where time has ostensibly stood still. The images were a source of inspiration for Rodríguez and Alex Catalán, whose cinematography recreates the rough texture and austere compositions of the portraits. Rodríguez has commented that Aya’s exhibition ‘era un reflejo del fin del tiempo, de una época’, a period which reflected the uncertainty of agrarian life in the face of the growing mechanisation of the countryside.¹³ The kinds of crumbling rural buildings found in Aya’s photographs, whose remnants bear the trace of more prosperous times, emerge as key locations within *La isla mínima*. The detectives discover the handbag and tights of one of the victims in the well of the grounds of ruined farmhouse, a building that Jesús thinks is haunted. Elsewhere, the *mise en scene* appears to echo the composition of Aya’s photographs. Jesús’s appearance appears to be influenced by Aya’s photograph of a tousled-hair poacher, standing on a cracked, dried-out riverbed with two greyhounds in tow; a van containing a gaggle of geese, seen in the film moments before the bodies are discovered, appears to be a direct recreation of another of his photographs.

Like Aya’s photographs, the film depicts the palpable effects of poverty and economic underdevelopment on this isolated region. As Raymond Carr has shown, the mechanization of rural Andalucía in the 1960s and 1970s was in part responsible for the increase of social inequality during these years, a trend which would in turn transform labour relations, as the ‘gangs of day labourers (*braceros*) hired in the local town plaza have been replaced by combine harvesters’¹⁴ The angry calls of local workers, demonstrating for fairer wages, can frequently be heard in the film. Wealth in the area has been concentrated into the hands of Alfonso Corrales, a landowner who wears a panama hat and a flashy gold watch, who is reportedly described by Marina as smelling of expensive cologne. Described by María Delgado as a ‘shadowy figure’¹⁵, his surname Corrales (translated as ‘enclosures’ or ‘farmyards’ in English) evokes the Andalusian legacy of *latifundismo*, when absentee

landowners frequently presided over precariously employed seasonal workers, who struggled to eke out a living on their extensive plots of land. The paucity of work has led to an exodus of younger people from the area. Much like the migratory geese, whose calls frequently punctuate the film's soundscape, *La isla mínima* is populated with characters marked by their transience. When, in an early scene, the detectives approach a possible witness, she proudly shows them photographic portraits of her children, who have abandoned the village in search of a better life. With two sons in Barcelona, a third in Germany and a daughter in France, her children are illustrative of the well-documented migratory patterns from rural Spain to the city and Europe, a process that gathered pace during its so-called miracle years of economic development (1959-1973). Indeed, it is precisely the distant dream of economic opportunity that lures Estrella and Carmen and the other victims into the hands of the killers, who have been promised jobs on the Costa del Sol, a region whose tourist industry witnessed a sharp increase in female employment following the revoking of the *permiso marital* in 1975. Their bloated bodies are discovered in the same river as Adela, an earlier victim whose murder it appears was covered up by the *guardia civil* three years before. Castro, Adela's boyfriend, speaks of how next to her body a suitcase was also found – a prop that was also central to the *mise en scene* of Spanish cinema charting the migration of *desarrollismo*, as seen most famously in the opening sequences of *Surcos* (José Antonio Nieves Conde, 1951) and *La ciudad no es para mí* (Pedro Lazaga, 1966). Elsewhere, copies of a glossy leaflet encouraging women to enter the labour market for the first time are found amongst the victims' belongings. Used by Sebastián, one of the killers, as a means of cruelly enticing his victims with the prospect of a brighter future, their bold and saturated colours stand in contrast with the muted palette of browns and beiges of Guadalquivir, a region whose local economy appears to subsist on the circulation of contraband tobacco and heroin.

Physical traces of violence

If still photography as a medium has shaped the aesthetic of *La isla mínima*, it also frequently appears as a theme within the film, as well as a crucial component of its *mise en scene*. In most of the occasions that photographs appear, their material presence is visually emphasised by means of the extreme close-up, a shot which disrupts the otherwise dominant use of long shots in the film. The circulation of photographs of the victims, passed back and forth between the police and potential witnesses, testify to the once physical presence of people who are now absent. For instance, the image of Carmen and Estrella, around whose disappearance the narrative first revolves, is first introduced to the viewer through

photographic portraits. When Castro, the boyfriend of the victim Beatriz, turns up drunk at the hotel, he removes a locket containing her portrait from his neck and shows the detectives the picture. As well as serving as a substitute for their image, the photograph is frequently emphasised as a tactile object, a thing to be touched, held or caressed.

The film appears to most explicitly alert us to the materiality of the photographic image when it serves as visual evidence. Central to the film's narrative is the discovery of an undeveloped camera film, whose shadowy and blurred images reveal Carmen semi-naked with another man. First discovered by their mother Rocío (Nerea Barros), she passes it onto the detectives without their father, Rodrigo's knowledge (Antonio de la Torre), telling them that she found it in a fire. The decomposed nature of the negative, marked by the environmental effects of heat and deterioration of time, vividly reveal the material trace of technology. Sitting in their car, Juan and Pedro hold up the negatives to the light that shines through the windshield, an effect that accentuates the indelible imprint of their image on the celluloid. Here the status of the image appears to dramatize Martin Lister's claim that 'the photographic negative was once, as it were, in touch with the object it depicts'.¹⁶ Both the light and the touch of the actors draw our attention to what Andre Bazin has famously termed the 'ontological status' of the photograph, one that provides us with a mimetic proximity to reality. Yet the imprint of the image here conceals more than it reveals, setting in motion the thriller-type enigma that is central to the film. While Carmen's face can be clearly seen, the flare of the flashlight obscures the face of the man. The blurred and decentered composition of the snapshots, spontaneously taken in succession of one another, also points to intervention of another absent subject: the mysterious figure of photographer himself, who as participant or voyeur, was also involved in their abuse and murder.

After sending the negatives to Madrid to be developed, Juan and Pedro receive magnified versions of the images in which a glimpse of a distinctive triangle-shaped tattoo can be seen, a vital clue which later reveals him to be Quini (played by Jesús Castro). Again, the camera here interrogates both the meaning as well as the materiality of the photographic image. The gnarled edges of the film strip are starkly thrown into relief behind the black background of the photograph, while the image of Carmen, although now far clearer, is nevertheless mottled with scratches and tears resulting from its exposure to the fire. Their imperfections here vividly illustrate the fragility of photochemical film stock, which as Liz Watkins reminds us, is strongly 'sensitive to light, heat, humidity, a touch'.¹⁷ In common with *Tren de sombras* (Jose Luis Guerin, 1998), a film that also centres on the tactility of celluloid film, the shape and texture of the photographic object here similarly invite what

Abigail Loxham has eloquently referred to in Guerin's film as a 'contemplation of surface'.¹⁸ The persistence of celluloid *La isla mínima* also contributes more broadly towards the historical surface of the film, an aspect of its production design which seeks to reflect the material world of Spain during these years. As a technology that is increasingly obsolete, the photographic object is one of several outdated artefacts that permeate the film's *mise en scene* (along with the Citroen Dyane 6, the black-white television set, brown flared trousers and kipper ties, to name but a few), whose presence serves to anchor the film in the recent past. The depiction of the photograph's surface -- emphasised here as degraded, grainy and rough -- contrasts more broadly with the digital cinematography used in film, which was shot with the lightweight digital Arri Alexa XT camera. The director of photography, Alex Catalan has confessed in an interview that he would have preferred to have used celluloid to digital film, which is more clean-looking: 'Evidentemente sería otra ya que se notarían más las texturas, el polvo, los tonos de piel... La sensación cinematográfica sería de mayor calidad'.¹⁹ In referring to the texture, dust and touch of celluloid film, Catalan here alerts us to the ontology of the film material, a physical presence that digital photography obviously lacks. The indexical relationship with the image that is most closely associated with analogue photography is supposedly lost with digital photography, which is made up of digital code.²⁰

In his desire to preserve the degradation associated with celluloid, Catalan here illustrates what Laura Marks has famously called 'analog nostalgia'. She writes that 'Paradoxically, the age of so-called virtual media has hastened the desire of indexicality'. This in turn has created an 'analog nostalgia', which she describes as a 'retrospective fondness for the problems of decay and generational loss that analog video posed'.²¹ In *La isla mínima*, the remediation of the analogue within the digital similarly produces a set of questions and anxieties around the indexicality of the image. The materiality of the photographic object – itself an object of criminal evidence – is thematically tied to the production of knowledge in the film. Indeed, in sending the negatives to be developed, the detectives are able to unravel the clues behind the image, a process which intriguingly brings into play the double meaning of the Spanish verb *revelar*. While *revelar* means to 'develop' a camera film, it also signifies to 'reveal'. The development of camera film, is of course, a photochemical process: the revealing of knowledge is facilitated through the remediation of analogue technology. In a further crucial revelation, Pedro asks the reporter to investigate the provenance of the negative. Here, knowledge is even more explicitly tied to the materiality of form. Through reading the numbers on the edge of the film strip, the reporter is able to locate the exact location of the shop where they were taken to be developed – a crucial piece of

information that further leads to the incrimination of Quini. Liz Watkins writes that '[a] focus on the image and narrative as the primary content of the film distracts from the contingent details that register in the photographic material itself'.²² The evidence here is similarly located at the periphery of the image, residing in the material trace of the technology itself.

If photography is repeatedly emphasised as an instrument for revealing, a material document of visual evidence or proof, this is most explicitly dramatized through the role of the reporter. Indeed, he is first seen in the film holding a camera, attempting to take photographs of Estrella's and Carmen's bodies. Juan angrily confronts the journalist, violently pushing him away on discovering that he writes for *El Caso*. Moments later, Villafranco's judge asks the detectives to handle the case with the utmost discretion. Founded in 1952, *El Caso* swiftly became one of the significant news publications during the regime. The news weekly pioneered the practice of investigative journalism in Spain, becoming best known for a tenacious reporting style that dared to cover crime stories that no other medium would touch at the time. In drawing on police and judicial reports, its team of investigators chronicled the dark underside of Spanish society during the regime, one that ran counter to its official narrative of civil order, peace and security. As Francisco Umbral noted in 1983, the regime frequently turned a blind eye to the graphic nature of the reporting, believing that the crime on cover served to depoliticise its readers, thereby providing a distraction from the regime.²³ Until the Ley de Prensa in 1966, *El Caso* was limited by the censors to publishing only one major crime investigation per week.²⁴ Yet it was the inclusion of graphic photographs, frequently on the front cover, which provided the publication with its greatest affective charge. Alongside mention of the official police reports, *El Caso* arguably conferred the photographic image with an evidential status, an index of reality that was rarely seen in other media. When Pedro first secretly visits the journalist in his shabby hotel room, he asks him for further information on the negatives. The journalist agrees to investigate the provenance of the camera film exchange for photographs of Estrella's and Carmen's bodies. After the end of the regime, the front covers of *El Caso* became increasingly violent and bloody, often featuring photographs of corpses – a characteristic that led to the popular saying that its covers 'chorreaban sangre' (dripped blood).²⁵ In addition to its lurid images of death, photographs in *El Caso* provided its readers with the broader context of criminal cases. With photographs often appearing alongside mention of the official police reports, *El Caso* conferred the photographic image with an evidential status, an index of reality that was rarely seen in other media – and certainly not in crime cinema during the regime.

Photographs in *El Caso* were used not only to furnish evidence or context for the crime story, but also as a story-telling device. Pedro asks the journalist disapprovingly if his family know what he does for a living; he scoffs before responding somewhat airily that they believe him to be next Truman Capote. Although his response here is self-deprecating, the writing of *El Caso* frequently exhibited skill and artistry, despite the sensationalist tone of its covers. Indeed, with its tersely written prose, the reporting style *El Caso* was influenced by the investigative journalism that first developed in United States. A practice that presented the details of criminal cases in the form of a gripping narrative, it was subsequently popularised in a literary form by authors such as Capote. *El Caso* also combined investigative journalism with the publication of American crime fiction with the frequent appearance of the short stories of Cornell Woolrich (who often went under the pseudonym William Irish), an American pulp writer whose works were frequently adapted into films *noirs*.

With a desk lamp illuminating his photographs with a reddish hue, the reporter's hotel room has been converted into a make-shift dark room, a space which emphasises analogue photography as a photomechanical process. Unsurprisingly, the dark room also figures as a prominent location in the types of films that Doane mentions, such as *Blow-Up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1967), in which also photography emerges as a theme and subject matter.²⁶ Yet the dynamic play between light and shade here, a lighting scheme which is also used in other interior locations throughout the film, points to the influence of film noir on the film's cinematography. Of the several cinematic influences on the film, Rodríguez has mentioned John Sturges's noir western *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1955), whose distinctive use of CinemaScope similarly emphasised the isolation of outsider arriving at an unwelcoming small town, and Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), a political allegory in which water famously occupies a central role. More significantly, Rodríguez has pointed to the influence of Spanish *cine negro* – in particular Pilar Miró's *Crimen de Cuenca* (1980) and Ladislao Vajda's *El cebo* (1958) – two thrillers where, in common with Rodríguez's film, humans are pitted against hostile and oppressive rural surroundings.²⁷ The uncompromising and violent *tremendismo* of these films, wherein people appear to be driven by brute and atavistic forces, is a current which runs throughout the history of Spanish film, as exemplified in *La caza* (Carlos Saura, 1965) and *Furtivos* (José Luis Borau, 1975). Indeed, as John Hopewell has written, '(Spanish) filmmakers return time and again to the brutality of the Spaniards, their residual animality of conduct, with an insistence even on the same broad metaphor – human relations as a hunt'.²⁸ While Hopewell's classic study here deals primarily with auteurist and allegorical filmmaking that was made during the late Franco years, the visual iconography of

these earlier films appears to have made its way into contemporary genre films, such as *La noche de los girasoles* (Jorge Sánchez-Cabezudo, 2006) and *La isla mínima*. In the developed version of the sex photographs, for instance, a series of large antlers can be seen mounted on the wall adjacent to the bed. The image leads the detectives to a hunting lodge, the site of crime where the rape and murders took place. The underlying metaphor of predator and prey, hunter and the hunted, is further reinforced through the dual purpose of weapons used for the crimes. As María Delgado has pointed out, hunting guns and knives used to gut fish are also revealed as instruments of torture against the young girls.²⁹

Index as Evidence

In the film's denouement, a final photographic image reveals that the deadliest predator is, in fact, the detective Juan Robles. After the crime has ostensibly been solved, the detectives drink together in the bar, where local workers are also celebrating their salary raise in light of their hard-fought trade dispute. Also present is the reporter, who provides Pedro with a final series of enlarged snapshots that were taken during a student protest in Vallecas in 1971, when a female student was shot by the police. One of the photographs vividly captures Juan in motion, his body careering forward as he fires a pistol into the crowd. As the reporter readies himself to leave, he discloses final piece of information to Pedro: Juan was formerly known as 'El Cuervo' (the crow, a bird whose ominous symbolism suggests death and war), who as a secret agent for the Brigada Politico Social, tortured over 100 victims during the regime. The Brigada Politico Social (or Brigada de Investigación Social, as it was more euphemistically known) continued to torture civilians right into the twilight days of the regime, although isolated cases also continued to be found during the early years of democracy.³⁰ In this final disclosure, the moral ambivalence of the historical moment is revealed in its full complexity: Juan Robles, a loyal partner who has just saved Pedro's life, is also a torturer. That someone like Juan, whose heinous acts would otherwise be considered criminal within a constitutional democracy, continues to work with impunity dramatically illuminates the failings at the heart of *Reforma Pactada*. That a torturer could have been smoothly assimilated into the national civilian police force owes itself to the contradictory nature of the Amnesty Law of 1977, one of the cornerstones of Spanish democracy. Paloma Aguilar and Leigh Payne show how the final version of the law included exemption 'for the repressive agents of the dictatorship'.³¹ They write that the army's threats to overthrow the fragile democratic government if it tarnished Franco's legacy effectively 'constrained the opposition in its efforts at flexing its newly acquired post-election muscle to bring about

change'.³² As a result, the opposition 'had to accept those limits to the law and the impunity for Francoist agents as the price of winning amnesty for political prisoners'.³³

This tension between peace and violence during this period is dramatized from the outset of the film, when Juan and Pedro arrive in Villafranco to find its annual fair in full swing. The noise of firework explosions commingles with the gunfire from fairground shooting games, a soundscape of celebration with an ominous undertow of violence. As the detectives reach their dimly illuminated hotel, a television set broadcasts documentary footage of the Fuerza Nueva (the Spanish far right) standing in salute, while the receptionist informs them they have to share bedroom together.³⁴ Their uneasy cohabitation more broadly reflects that of Spain at the time, where those still loyal to the institutions of National Catholicism were forced to live alongside a more youthful generation clamouring for democracy. Gesturing wistfully towards the fireworks, seen through the open window of the bedroom, Juan announces 'tu nuevo país'; Pedro demonstratively takes down a crucifix from the bedroom wall, whose frame is (somewhat hyperbolically) adorned with thumbnail photographs of Hitler, Franco, Mussolini and Salazar. The opposing ideologies of the detectives are further thrown into relief some moments later, as they partake in a tense shooting game in a kiosk at the fair. Taking aim at one of the bottles, Juan says 'No era momento de criticar a los militares', a reference to a letter Pedro recently published in the newspaper denouncing the anti-democratic tendencies of an important military officer. As well as providing crucial exposition to the characters, the tense exchange here points to underlying tension amongst the Civil Guards, a hostility which would reach its violent conclusion five months later in the attempted coup *d'état* of 23 February 1981, when lieutenant colonel Antonio Tejero led 200 armed officers into the Congress of Deputies in Spain.

The final photograph thus situates Juan within a broader genealogy of police violence, one which was not only endemic in Spain both during Franco and the transition to democracy, but that pre-existed the regime too. *El Crimen de Cuenca*, for instance, was notorious for its re-enactment of the brutal torture of two innocent men by the Guardia Civil. Taking place in Cuenca in 1910, the shocking miscarriage of justice also resonated violently with moment in which it was produced. The story that surrounded the exhibition and reception of Miró's 1979 film revealed the fragility of Spain's democratisation, a fraught and polarising process that was frequently interrupted with violence. As is well known, the film was originally refused an exhibition in Spain. A screening of the film at the Berlin Film

Festival led to its confiscation; Miró was summoned to military court soon after April 1980 for ‘injurias a la guardia civil’ (slurs against the civil guard).³⁵

In his hotel, Pedro rips up the photographs, thereby destroying evidence of Juan’s involvement in the crime. In common with the suppression of Miró’s film, the destruction of visual evidence here points to the tenacious influence of old guard in the period immediately after Franco. Miró’s film therefore tells us as much about the material circumstances of its production as it does about the historical period it seeks to represent – a fraught relationship between present and past that is similarly echoed in *La isla mínima*. Still until this day in Spain, not one of the perpetrators of police abuse during the regime has ever been sentenced, owing, as Aguilar and Payne have shown, to a ‘very restrictive interpretation’ of the aforementioned Amnesty Law.³⁶ Indeed, at the time of *La isla mínima*’s production, there was much media coverage surrounding one of the regime’s most prolific torturers, Antonio González Pacheco, otherwise known during these years ‘Billy El Niño’ (Billy the Kid). It is perhaps significant that it was a publication of a photograph that brought his case into the public eye. A relative of one of his victims contacted Lidia Falcón, an Argentine lawyer, after seeing his picture in the newspaper, in which he was seen taking part in a marathon in Madrid. Falcón sought to extradite Pacheco, but the Amnesty Law meant that the case was eventually thrown out of court. While the photograph of Juan unequivocally exposes the police brutality that took place during the regime, the suppression of evidence points to Spain’s constitutional failure with officially reconciling itself with the wrongdoings of the regime -- an unresolved question which, as attested to the controversy surrounding González Pacheco, continues to resonate in the present.

The reporter also provides Pedro with a final magnified photograph of the sex game, this particular image partially revealing the presence of another man. Although his face is hidden, his shirt and expensive watch suggest it is Corrales, a final clue that potentially incriminates the most powerful figure in Villafranco. In same way that he ignores Juan’s wrongdoings – a decision that, according to Delgado ‘enacts a country’s pragmatic decision to avoid retribution in favour of a compromised working relationship’³⁷ -- Pedro decides not to pursue Corrales’ involvement in the crime. In choosing instead to return to Madrid, where a promotion awaits him, Juan’s actions constitute a deferral of closure, thereby divesting the narrative of the fully satisfying resolution that is typically expected from the genre of the crime thriller. ‘¿Todo en orden?’ Juan asks, sensing his unspoken hostility as they leave the town together. The reference to ‘orden’ here would therefore appear to be double-edged. The persistence of the photographic object suggests crime has not been fully solved and order has

not been restored – at least, not in any narrative sense. Yet his failure to address the true implications of the image nevertheless points to the *continuismo* of the Francoist order and its institutions during the transition. The patriarchal and corrupt power structure that that was sustained by the regime, embodied here by the tight-knit cronyism between the judge, the *guardia civil* and landowner, remains largely intact by the end of the film. Reflecting on the democratic process, Robert Graham wrote in 1984 that ‘[t]he new institutions – an elected parliament, trade unions, and a free press – have been grafted on to the old order’.³⁸

The superimposition of a youthful present onto a stagnant and violent past is keenly felt within the setting of the film. To this effect, Delgado has noted the symbolism of the fictitious town’s name, Villafranco.³⁹ Past and present are further contrasted in the *mise en scene* of the school classroom, where a photograph of Franco is positioned pride of place next to the blackboard, accompanied by the picture of a youthful King Juan Carlos. The persistence of the old order, whose violence and oppression continue to be deeply entrenched into the structures of everyday life in Villafranco, is further evoked through Julio de la Rosa’s score. We constantly hear a low-frequency drone throughout the film, whose discordant bass notes produce a discomfiting aura of dread. This is often accompanied by the notes of a mandolin or flamenco guitar, played in a series of short and subtle refrains, their gentle movement like ripples on the surface of water. De la Rosa has commented that he wanted to ‘mostrar ese ambiente enrarecido de un lugar donde el mal se puede esconder detrás de cualquier cara conocida’.⁴⁰ The drone here evokes the undertow of violence that was simmering underneath the surface during these years. Indeed, in writing on the fractious *convivencia* of the two Spains during this period, Iglesias comments that ‘esa tensión, que como un rechinar de dientes, tenía que oírse por debajo’.⁴¹ When in the closing scene, Juan’s final question is met with Pedro’s silence, the lack of dialogue alerts us to the sound of de la Rosa’s score. Mute yet compliant, Pedro’s tacit response points here to Spain’s ‘pacto de silencio’, an enforced forgetting which is enacted by the final destruction of photographic object in the film.

Conclusion

By coincidence, most of *El Caso*’s extensive archive of photographs were eventually destroyed in a fire, after the publication changed hands and moved its office to Almeria in 1987. Those that survived the fire inexplicably ended up in the bin.⁴² If these photographs are now definitively marked by their absence, the materiality of the photographic archive in the film alerts us to often overlooked political significance of *El Caso* during the Franco

years and the transition. The evidence provided by the photographs – one that, as we have seen, is repeatedly accentuated in the film by its physical trace -- presents us with an uncomfortable truth which cannot be easily assimilated into the typical thriller narrative of enigma and resolution. Through the tension enacted between stillness and movement, the analogue and the digital, *La isla mínima* dramatizes Mary Ann Doane's claim that film cannot fail to be contaminated by the trace of photography. If at the beginning of the film, the narrative of *La isla mínima* is driven by the problem of knowledge, the knowledge that has been gained by photographic object at the end becomes a problem in itself. As the stubborn materiality of the photograph suggests, the residual violence of these years continues to be a problem that Spain has not yet reconciled itself with.

Notes on contributor

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¹ K. M Thompson, *Crime Films: Investigating the Scene* (London: Wallflower, 2007), 31.

² P Aguilar and L. A. Payne, *Revealing New Truths about Spain's Violent Past: Perpetrators' Confessions and Victim Exhumation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 8

³ Ibid, 8.

⁴ M. A. Doane, 'Real Time: Instantaneity and the Photographic Imaginary' in *Stillness and Time: Photography and the Moving Image* ed. by P. Green and J. Lowry (Photoworks/Photoforum: Brighton: 2005), 22-38

⁵ The film was viewed by 1.3 million spectators. See the database of the Ministerio, Educación y Cultura: https://icaa.mecd.es/Datos_tecnicos_Peliculas.aspx ?

⁶ K Konetis, ' "Is there a future in this past?": Analyzing 15M's intricate relation to the Transición', *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, Vol 15, Nos 1-2, 83-98, 83

⁷ Ibid, 85.

⁸ Ibid, 85.

⁹ A Marcos, 'Así se fotografiaron los espectaculares paisajes fractales de 'La isla mínima'', *El País, Verne*, 9 February 2015

http://verne.elpais.com/verne/2015/02/09/album/1423492051_323603.html

¹⁰ The original aspect ratio of the film is listed as either 2.35:1 or 2.39:1, which both constitute the current widescreen cinema standard.

¹¹ Marcos, 'Así se fotografiaron'

¹² Cited in Marcos, 'Así se fotografiaron'

¹³ Cited in J. M. Baquero, 'El objetivo que cazó 'La Isla Mínima'', *El Diario*, 8 February 2015, http://www.eldiario.es/andalucia/pasaporte/objetivo-cazo-Isla_Minima_12_352884709.html

¹⁴ R. Carr, *Spain, 1808-1939* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 752

¹⁵ M. Delgado, 'La isla mínima', *Sight and Sound*, August 2015

¹⁶ M. Lister, 'Photography in the age of electronic imaging' in *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, ed. L. Wells, Third Edition (London: Routledge, 2004), 295-336, 331

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- ¹⁷ L. Watkins, 'The Materiality of Film' in *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Contemporary World*, eds P Graves-Brown and R Harrison (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 578-594, 578
- ¹⁸ A. Loxham, 'Objects of Memory in Contemporary Catalan Documentaries: Materiality and Mortality', *Senses of Cinema*, October 2011
- ¹⁹ Anon, 'La excelente fotografía digital de Alex Catalán en 'La isla mínima' logra un Goya', Panorama Audiovisual.com, February 2015 <http://www.panoramaaudiovisual.com/2015/02/08/la-excelente-fotografia-digital-de-alex-catalan-en-la-isla-minima-logra-un-goya/>
- ²⁰ Rodríguez and his artistic team took full advantage of the malleability of the digital image during the film. Through the use of computer generated imagery, it was possible to make the location of Villafranco appear to be larger than the actual location that was filmed, through adding the digital backdrop of extra buildings that can be seen in the scene when the detective first arrive in town. Elsewhere, when a bird is found in Juan's bedroom late one night, its plumage is digitally coloured to resemble a more exotic species, perhaps even a hallucinatory figment of Juan's imagination.
- ²¹ L. U. Marks, *Touch. Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 152
- ²² Watkins, 583
- ²³ Cited in R. Rodríguez Cárcela, 'El Caso. Aproximación histórico-periodística del semanario español de sucesos', Universidad de Sevilla, 224
- ²⁴ Rodríguez Cárcela, 226
- ²⁵ Rodríguez Cárcela, 230-231
- ²⁶ Doane
- ²⁷ Anon, 'Alberto Rodríguez: Javier Gutiérrez tiene una cantidad de registros brutales', *La Noche Americana*, 28 September 2014, <http://lanocheamericana.net/entrevistas/alberto-rodriguez-javier-gutierrez-tiene-una-cantidad-de-registros-brutales.html>
- ²⁸ J. Hopewell, *Out of the Past: Spanish Cinema After Franco* (London: British Film Institute, 1986), 27
- ²⁹ Delgado. Cecilio, one of the peasants in *La noche de los girasoles*, is similarly killed with an agrarian tool, a pitchfork.
- ³⁰ See A. Domínguez Rama. *Enrique Ruano: memoria viva de la impunidad del franquismo* (Madrid: Editorial Complutense, 2011)
- ³¹ Aguilar and Payne, 6
- ³² *Ibid*, 6
- ³³ *Ibid*, 6
- ³⁴ As Sarah Thomas has pointed out, in a paper entitled 'The Intermedial Past in Recent Award-Winning Films from Spain' given at SCMS in Chicago 2017, the footage seen here was taken from the documentary *Atado y bien Atado y No se os puede dejar solos* (Cecilia y José Juan Bartolomé, 1981), a film Rodríguez and Rafael Cobos note as a key influence. See R. Cobos and A. Rodríguez, *La isla mínima (Guión cinematográfico)* (Madrid: Ocho y Medio, 2014), 162.
- ³⁵ J Cerdán, R. Gubern, J. Labanyi, S Marsh, T. Pavlovic and N Triana Toribio, 'Censorship, Film Studios, and Production Companies' in *A Companion to Spanish Cinema*, eds J Labanyi and T Pavlovic (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 391-433, 400-401
- ³⁶ Aguilar and Payne, 9
- ³⁷ Delgado
- ³⁸ R. Graham, *Spain: Change of a Nation* (London: Joseph, 1984), 251
- ³⁹ Delgado
- ⁴⁰ Campos, http://www.elconfidencial.com/cultura/cine/premios-goya/2015-02-07/en-busca-de-la-banda-sonora-de-los-goya_696414/
- ⁴¹ A. Rodríguez, 'Alberto Rodríguez escribe sobre 'La Isla Mínima'', https://www.infolibre.es/noticias/cultura/2014/09/26/alberto_rodriguez_escribe_sobre_isla_minima_21936_1026.html
- ⁴² R Lardín, 'Ocurrió en España – 60 aniversario de El Caso', *Vice España*, 14 February 2012, <https://www.vice.com/es/article/el-caso-joan-rada>. There is no evidence to suggest that Rodríguez was influenced by this fact when writing the screenplay to the film.