

# Foundational Myths, Repressed Maternal Metaphors, and *Desengaño*: Iconography in *Vacas* (1992)

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This essay examines the representation of foundational myths and repressed maternal metaphors in *Vacas* (1992) with reference to Kristeva, Irigaray, Cixous, and feminist theologians Rosemary Radford Ruether, Amy Hollywood, and Pamela Sue Anderson. It argues that Médem's idiosyncratic fusion of Transition *mises-en-scène* has become an iconic 1990s *desengaño* text: one that combines the *movida* focus on masquerade with the nostalgic gaze of the 'cine de reconocimiento' (Monterde 1993: 153) in a way that anticipates more widespread preoccupations and developments of the 1990s in Spain. *Vacas* was released in the midst of a period of post-Transition *desengaño* when the Spanish film industry was in crisis, and yet, this analysis argues, it marks a decisive point of forward momentum by adding depth to the *movida*'s sometimes frenzied masquerade and to the 'simple decorado' of historical film (Seguín 1995: 81), and by mediating the effects of exposure to the feminist movement on a traditionally masculine filmic gaze.

**KEYWORDS** Spanish film, Julio Médem, Foundational Myths, Carlist Wars, *Desengaño*, *Vacas*

Could it be that the male, marginalised from direct participation in the great mysteries of gestation and birth [. . . created] ritual expressions that duplicated female gestating and birthing roles so as to transfer power of these primary mysteries to the male? (Radford Reuther 1986: 278)

A nosotros, que supimos, cuando ya no había remedio, que aquel mundo imperial en Cinemascope y color DeLuxe que nos habían prometido en el colegio y en tantos discursos y sermones, no existiría nunca. (Garcí, *Asignatura pendiente*, 1977)

This essay examines the representation of foundational myths and repressed maternal metaphors in *Vacas* (1992). It suggests that Médem's idiosyncratic fusion of Transition *mises-en-scène* has become an iconic 1990s *desengaño* text: iconic for the way it combines the *movida* focus on masquerade with the nostalgic gaze of the 'cine de

reconocimiento' (Monterde 1993: 23) and for the way it anticipates more widespread preoccupations and developments during the 1990s in Spain.<sup>1</sup>

This is a film about a mad, lame, ex-Carlist soldier, Manuel Irigibel, who is obsessed with a hollow tree stump. He encourages his grandchildren to throw animal sacrifices into it. He chops the hooves off a dying cow and throws the bloody pieces of her flesh into it. This tree and the magnetic force it holds over Manuel (and the cinematography) have intrigued viewers, and they provide the focus of this analysis of Médem's reworking of foundational myths.<sup>2</sup> Anne White notes that the central, unexplained role of the tree stump gives the impression of 'a film which has something to say despite the fact that nobody can work out quite what it is' (1999: 3), and in this essay I should like to look more closely at what this 'something to say' may be. Beginning with a review of earlier critical responses, and a reminder of the emphasis placed on foundational myths (Basque and Christian) in the film's opening and closing *mises-en-scène*, I shall refer to some of Médem's *desengaño* precursors, then focus on the representation of foundational myths and maternal metaphors in order to argue that this film by a virtually unknown first-time director provides an uncannily prescient *mise-en-scène* of the cinematic and social concerns of Spain in the 1990s.

*Vacas* pays striking attention to the role of foundational myths in its representation of mad Manuel, and the link between the mythical tree and maternity has been noted.<sup>3</sup> Anne White was, to my knowledge, the first critic to make extended reference to the representation of paternal anxiety and the suppression of the maternal (1999), and in the same year Isabel Santaolalla (1999) noted the importance of Basque mythology and highlighted the maternal symbolism of the hollow stump.<sup>4</sup> De Ros (1997), Gabilondo (2002), and Richardson (2004) have written persuasively about the role of the tree in the representation of Basque identity, and Stone discusses the mixture of Basque mythology and magical realism (2007: 41–43). Perriam calls Médem's first three films 'mythogenetic and mythographic' (2003: 71), and in his analysis of *Tierra*, Smith comments on the representation of 'a mysticism with no divinity' and the 'intersubjective fusions which transgress the fixed frontiers of male and female, real and fantastic' (2000: 155, 157).

*Vacas* predates the more diffuse exploration of geographic, historic, psychoanalytical, and gendered identities that Smith analyses in *Tierra*, and its representation of a paradoxical longing for discredited myths is more precise. It begins with an extended, syncopated view of an enigmatic Basque man (Carmelo Gómez) chopping

<sup>1</sup> For more on masquerade and the *movida*, see Pavlović's in-depth analysis of the role of performance, drag, and transvestism in the Transition (2005: 91–105).

<sup>2</sup> The wood holds an attraction for Manuel, Cristina, Peru, Ignacio, and Catalina, and is the site of their semi-clandestine encounters, but Ignacio's neglected wife Madalem is afraid of it. She warns Cristina to stop the brown cow, Xargorri, wandering through it because the mushrooms will send her (and, by implication perhaps, the others who like to wander through it) mad.

<sup>3</sup> The foundational image that inspired Médem was the vision of a woodcutter flinging an axe into the wood that is discussed in more detail below in relation to Basque mythology (Ángulo & Rebordinos 2004: 192).

<sup>4</sup> Santaolalla explores the relationship of *adur* (the feminine principle in Basque mythology) to the cows and wood and *indur* (its masculine counterpart) to the axe, concluding persuasively that the theme of rivalry relates not only to the Basque Country but to the theme of gender division.

wood and ends with a potentially incestuous couple riding towards an ambivalent post-Fall horizon.<sup>5</sup> Peru (Carmelo Gómez again) and Cristina (Emma Suárez) have been ejected by the Civil War from the complicated Eden of their shared childhood, and Cristina's conclusive: 'Estamos llegando' is the last line of dialogue.<sup>6</sup> Their fate is uncertain, however. They may be dead. Cristina may have been killed by a stray bullet in the forest and Peru may not have survived the firing squad, so their departure on the horse may be an uncanny dream. If they are alive, it is not certain that they will reach France (where the prospect of World War II awaits them), because the final zoom and fade to black inside the hollow tree stump suggests they will be pulled back, metaphorically, to their site of origin. Foundational myths reverberate throughout as the iconic Basque woodsman (of the opening sequence) and the post-Fall couple (of the denouement) act out their roles within the force field of the buzzing, dead-and-alive vortex of the hollow tree stump that dominates the rivalrous *mise-en-scène*.<sup>7</sup>

When Médem was writing the script for *Vacas*, the *movida*'s 'terrorism of frivolity' was over and post-Transition *desengaño* was entrenched.<sup>8</sup> By the time it was released, the drug-related deaths of *cine quinqui* actors like José Antonio Valdelomar (*Deprisa, deprisa*, Saura, 1980) and José Luis Manzano (*El pico*, Eloy de la Iglesia, 1983) testified to the side-effects of Transition 'frivolity' and the beginnings of a new era of post-Transition *desengaño*. Víctor Fuentes senses that Almodóvar's 'postmodern/neobaroque extravagance hides a horror of the void' (1995: 161),<sup>9</sup> and although I share Pavlović's caution with regard to Almodóvar (who always seems so at home at the edge of an abyss), Fuentes's image of a 'horror of the void' is particularly relevant to the wider Transition 'gaze' (Pavlović 2005: 98).<sup>10</sup> The edges of a distressing abyss can clearly be seen in documentaries like Basilio Martín Patino's *Queridísimos verdugos* (1973, released in 1977) and Jaime Chávarri's *El desencanto*

<sup>5</sup> Stone describes the wood-chopping as 'a near abstract symbol of male aggression against the pure, sacred, feminine ideal of the landscape that is central to Basque mythology' (2007: 52).

<sup>6</sup> Richardson describes the location as 'a kind of Garden of Eden where a Basque Adam and Eve meet in the shadows of a mythic tree to form the first Basque man' (2004: 194).

<sup>7</sup> The link between symbolic maternity and the void is of course central to Kristeva's study of abjection (1982), and to Irigaray, who does not shy away from comparing what she refers to as 'the horror of nothing to see' with the prevalence of phallic imagery in man-made culture (1985: 26).

<sup>8</sup> *La ley del deseo* (1987) shows evidence of what I refer to here as post-Transition *desengaño*: the protagonist's health is poor and he is dissatisfied with the drugs and open sexual relationships. For more on the '*movida* masquerade' see Pavlović (2005: 91–105). This particular quotation on the 'terrorism of frivolity' is from José Luis Gallero, who also describes Transition culture as 'minada de transcendencia', quoted and translated by Pavlović (2005: 95). Stone points out that Médem was geographically isolated from the *movida* and had more contact with a 'Basque cultural movement [that] was conscious of its social, political, linguistic and artistic responsibilities' (2007: 34).

<sup>9</sup> Fuentes compares Almodóvar's films to the novelist and essayist Severo Sarduy, for whom 'simulation yields emptiness and death'. It should be noted that Fuentes's perceptive analysis is written at a time when he felt the director's output was in 'relative decline' (1995: 156). Almodóvar's ever-increasing international stardom makes it more difficult now to interpret his films in quite the same way.

<sup>10</sup> I use the term the 'gaze' fairly loosely here. It is often used to refer simply to the exchange of looks that takes place on-screen in film and has been adopted by film theorists to explore how the spectator becomes the 'subject of the gaze' (watching from the perspective of the projector). I have discussed elsewhere (Evans 1999: 103) the more precise Lacanian definition of the 'field of the gaze' as not a look at or a look shared, but a space beyond human perception momentarily exposed by the effects of *trompe l'oeil* (Lacan 1979: 92).

(1976), and in Pere Portabella's *Informe general* (1977) unfinished 'Regime' business haunts the preparation of the new Constitution.<sup>11</sup> The flamboyance of the *movida*, with its focus on the present, and more recent attention given to the role of *desmemoria* in the Transition can sometimes overshadow this 'other', more backward-looking filmic gaze.<sup>12</sup> José Luis Garcí's *Asignatura pendiente* (1977) reflects an atmosphere of Transition ennui, and concludes with an on-screen dedication to a new Spanish generation (a new 'us') that already feels too old:

A nosotros, que supimos, cuando ya no había remedio, que aquel mundo imperial en Cinemascope y color DeLuxe que nos habían prometido en el colegio y en tantos discursos y sermones, no existiría nunca [...]

A nosotros, que hemos ido llegando tarde a todo: a la infancia, a la adolescencia, al sexo, al amor, a la política [...]

A nosotros, que nos quitaron, año tras año, el significado de cuanto nos rodeaba, aunque fueran las cosas más pequeñas, menos importantes [...]

Josefina Molina's *Función de noche* (1981) is similarly nostalgic and *desengañada* in mood and subject. Improvized in the dressing room of her stage performance of *Cinco horas con Mario*, the actress Lola Herrera Molina and her former husband look back at their marriage, separation, and divorce and Molina's intermittent despair is a chilling reminder of the separation of Spanish women from the wider feminist movement north of the border. Among these diversely melancholic Transition film narratives of the 1970s, Eloy de la Iglesia's *El diputado* (1978) and Zulueta's *Arrebato* (1979) stand out, *El diputado* for its treatment of homosexuality and left-wing politics, and *Arrebato* for its whole-hearted, avant-garde updating of the 'camera-as-vampiric consumer' trope popularized so controversially by Michael Powell in *Peeping Tom* (1960).<sup>13</sup>

While the so-called 'Miró law' privileged literary adaptations like Camus's *La colmena* (1982) and *Los santos inocentes* (1984) at the beginning of the next decade, a more marginal historical approach was still well represented: Berlanga's *La vaquilla* (1985) was the first comedy about the Civil War, and Uribe's *La muerte de Mikel* (1983) and Saura's *¡Ay Carmela!* (1990) blend a *movida* concern for the intimate and spectacular with themes that are political and historical. In general, however, the historical focus in Transition film was described as 'un telón de fondo que acaba

<sup>11</sup> For more detailed discussion of documentaries released during the Transition period, see Hernández Ruiz & Pérez Rubio 2004: 117–35, and for more on historical fiction films see Archibald 2004. Among the many other 'backward-looking' Transition films, *Un hombre llamado Flor de Otoño* (Oleas, 1978) and *El crimen de Cuenca* (Miró, 1979) were set in the pre-Franco era. The title and content of Camino's *Las largas vacaciones del 36* (1976) directly addresses the Civil War. Berlanga's cynical *La escopeta nacional* (1977), Camus's elegant *Los días del pasado* (1978), and Erice's *El sur* (1983) were all set during the Regime. Fiction films set in the contemporary period also addressed the void. Gutiérrez Aragón's *Sonámbulos* (1978) is a well-intentioned, if somewhat laboured, allegorical representation of fragmented Transition identities.

<sup>12</sup> Monterde notes more than two hundred films based on some kind of historical theme released between 1973 and 1992, although he is dubious as to their overall quality: 'nos quede la duda de si entre tantas 'historias' ha habido alguna Historia' (1993: 152).

<sup>13</sup> Hernández Ruiz & Pérez Rubio (2004: 205) also consider *Arrebato* to be 'sin duda uno de los largometrajes más relevantes de la Transición'.

por no ser más que un simple decorado' (Seguín 1995: 81),<sup>14</sup> and the film most critics regard as pivotal in representation of the post-Transition *desengaño* that would infect the *movida* by the end of the 1980s is *El pico* (Eloy de la Iglesia, 1982) for its representation of:

el problema irresoluble de una juventud sin expectativas de futuro que interroga, a través de la heroína y el sexo, el vacío que dejan en ella la acción política [...], la vida académica y la propia familia [...], un conflicto en el País Vasco sin aparentes vías de solución'. (Hernández Ruiz & Pérez Rubio 2004: 212–13)

*Vacas* was released into a climate of full-blown post-Transition *desengaño*. The Spanish film industry was in crisis and this was a first full-length feature directed by a former medic living halfway up a Basque mountain, and yet, I would argue, it marks a decisive point of forward momentum for Spanish film narrative.

Immediately after the prelude with the Basque woodcutter, an on-screen title refers to 1875, indicating that this tale of rival families begins sometime between the restoration of Alfonso XII (in 1874) and the defeat of the Carlist rebels (in 1876).<sup>15</sup> To appreciate the symbolic implications of this to Médem's representation of foundational myths and repressed maternal metaphors, it is important to remember that the Carlist civil wars began in 1833 when Fernando VII left the Spanish throne to his infant daughter, Isabel, rather than to his brother Carlos (Carr 1986: 151).<sup>16</sup> Historians have attributed this decision to pressure exerted on Fernando by his wife, María-Cristina, and her supporters in the Spanish court (Carr 1986: 151). This attribution of guilt to the wife draws attention to the gender stereotyping that was to play such a fundamental role in the civil wars that punctuated the nineteenth century and culminated in the 1936–1939 Civil War. Both Fernando VII and his father Carlos IV have been represented as hen-pecked. Fernando's mother, María-Luisa, was thought to have had a long-standing affair with Manuel Godoy, implicating her in the disastrous alliance (and *mésalliance*) with France that led to the Peninsular Wars, and a generation later, María-Cristina, Fernando's wife, would be blamed for the decision to overturn Salic Law that set in motion the Carlist civil wars.<sup>17</sup>

Whatever the truth behind the power (or lack of it) of these Royal wives, with the benefit of hindsight, it is ironic that in Goya's famous portrait of the family (Figure 1), the unidentified woman who stands in for Fernando's future wife is such a discreet figure.

<sup>14</sup> Trueba carried this 'telón de fondo' tradition into the 1990s with the entertaining but essentially banal historical settings of *Belle Epoque* (1992) and *La niña de tus ojos* (1998).

<sup>15</sup> Raymond Carr summarizes the contradictions of Carlist ideology in the 1870s. He notes that the rebel army was at its most powerful in 1874 and that 'there was an organized Carlist state in the north with its own administration, postal system, electric telegraph, and newspapers' but that 'nevertheless Carlism in the 1870s had the strengths and shortcomings of the old inexpandible Carlism of the first Carlist war: an army of the faith, dedicated to the Virgin and with every battalion telling its rosary at sunset' (1986: 339). For details of the 'negative pronunciamiento' that brought Alfonso XII to the throne after his mother had been forced into exile in 1868, see Carr 1986: 341–42.

<sup>16</sup> Fernando overturned Salic law, disinheriting his closest male relative, with the Pragmatic Sanction of 29 March 1830.

<sup>17</sup> Bearing in mind the negative response to these women, it is interesting that Carr concludes that letters exchanged by María-Cristina and Godoy suggest their relationship was 'hypochondriacal rather than sexual in nature' (1986: 82).

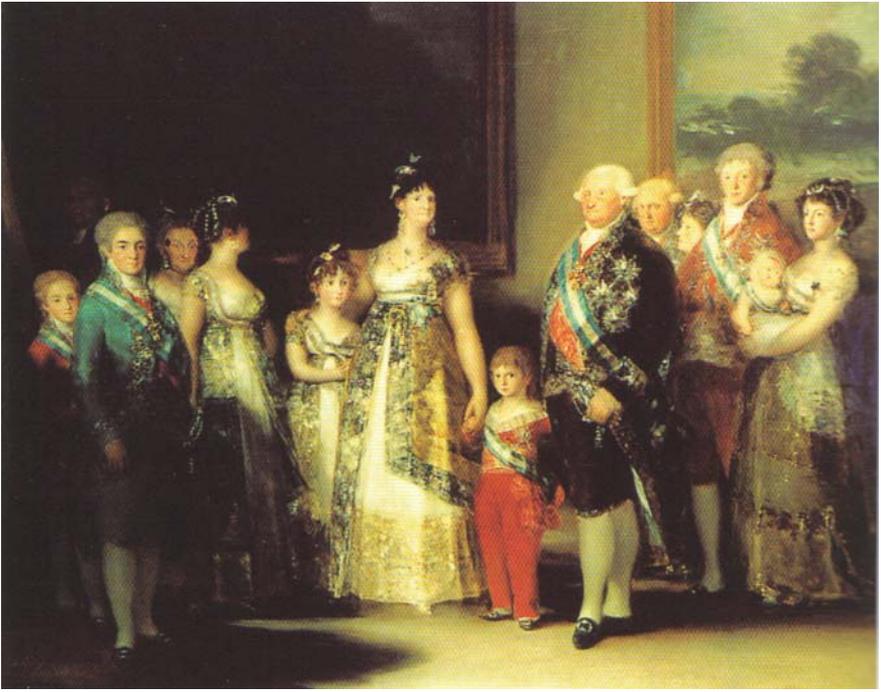


FIGURE 1 La familia de Carlos IV (1800–1801).

She is fourth from the left next to Fernando (second from the left), a mere aside. Her head is turned from the viewer and her figure is only included in the portrait to represent the future wife of Fernando. The retrospective irony of this lies in the fact that if María-Cristina (one of the four women who would go on to fill this rather demure symbolic space) really was the driving force behind Fernando's decision to overturn Salic law, she instigated the wars considered to be a 'foundational moment' of ETA terrorism (Richardson 2002: 195).<sup>18</sup> In view of *Vacas's* spiralling, semi-incestuous narrative structure, it is also worth noting that her daughter, Isabel II, was later encouraged to marry a particularly close first cousin, Don Francisco de Asís (their fathers were brothers and their mothers were sisters). Don Francisco was considered unlikely, on the grounds of suspected homosexuality, to have biologically fathered any of their twelve offspring, including Alfonso XII (who would inherit the throne in 1874), and it seems that this history of powerful women and semi-incestuous encounters finds its uncanny return in the story and in the repressed maternal metaphors of *Vacas*.

*Vacas* takes place between the historical markers 1875 and 1936. It begins with the defeat of a reactionary, misogynist political movement and ends with its resurgence in support of Franco's nationalists sixty years later. The only Carlist to escape alive from the 1875 battle is the film's engaging anti-hero, Manuel Mendiluce, who had

<sup>18</sup> María-Cristina was his fourth wife, and niece, the only one of his four wives to have a child.

been a champion woodcutter, but who is reborn, symbolically, as a coward around the time that the presumed illegitimate son of two almost incestuously linked royals came to the throne and after forty-odd years of what Raymond Carr has described (referring to the Carlists) as ‘a revolution of frustration, a revolution of the inadaptables’ (1986: 185). This ‘revolution’ was provoked by a transgression of the patriarchal order that left Spain overrun, according to the Carlists, by ‘a traitorous crowd of crooks who occupy the best posts in the nation through the weakness of a woman’ (quoted in Carr 1986: 184).

This link between reactionary misogyny, the Carlist wars, and *Vacas* is not arbitrary. The film opens with a sequence establishing a number of foundational moments that set the scene for the rest of the narrative: the opening sequence with the Basque woodcutter; Manuel stealing his neighbour’s blood; Manuel escaping from the dead bodies, and Manuel looking into the eye of the white cow.<sup>19</sup> These are punctuated by a series of smaller foundational reverberations that define the two men with regard to the patriarchal Carlist code (Manuel is ‘outside’, he demonstrates his fear by punching the tin bucket into the air. Carmelo is ‘inside’ celebrating the birth of his son before dying heroically). The trace of Fernando VII’s transgression of patriarchal law reverberates throughout this opening ‘chapter’.<sup>20</sup> The feuding neighbours meet at the Carlist trenches. Carmelo celebrates the fact that his wife has given birth to a son and is shot. Manuel, who was already terrified, screams and throws himself down next to Carmelo, daubing his own face with the blood pulsing out of his dying neighbour’s jugular (Figure 2). This is a direct reversal of warpaint, a mask applied for protection, not in battle, but in flight.<sup>21</sup>

Manuel’s abject, symbolic rebirth as a coward is relevant to the foundational myths and the elision of the women from the film’s maternal metaphors. This powerful visual image of Manuel taking Carmelo’s blood to steal a new life for himself instigates (or perpetuates) the feud between the two families, echoing and reinforcing the metaphorical associations between this small family feud and the cycle of civil wars that led to the formation of the Basque separatist movement.<sup>22</sup>

Goya was mentioned earlier to highlight the irony in his symbolic representation of Fernando VII’s prospective wife in the portrait of Carlos IV’s family, but in

<sup>19</sup> By foundational ‘moments’ I mean those shots or sequences that establish the central narrative concerns (e.g., that Manuel was a champion, that he ‘transgresses’ the patriarchal line by stealing Carmelo’s blood, that he deserts his dead comrades by pretending to be dead, and that he is observed doing so by the cow). What I am calling foundational ‘reverberations’ are brief shots backing these up, that establish Manuel, via close-ups of his nervous gaze and trembling hands, as the coward in opposition to Carmelo the hero, who is not afraid and who dies supporting Manuel.

<sup>20</sup> The film is divided into four chapters indicated by on-screen titles: ‘The Cowardly Woodcutter’, ‘The Axes’, ‘The Burning Hole’, and ‘War in the Forest’.

<sup>21</sup> The symbolic role of blood is so fundamental to the representation of these feuding families that Médem’s representation of Basque conflict seems to echo Jeremy MacClancy’s analysis of the controversial role of ‘blood’ in contemporary debate about Basque national identity, according to which the prevalence of the Rhesus negative gene has been used to argue that ‘the natives of the Basque Country were so haematologically distinctive that they set a new serological extreme’ (2007: 96).

<sup>22</sup> For more on the rivalrous families and valley as a synecdoche of the Basque Country, see Médem’s comments in Ángulo & Rebordinos 2004: 203. See also Rodríguez’s description of the importance of the bloodline to the families (2002: 78).



FIGURE 2 Symbolic theft of the patriarchal bloodline.

the representation of Manuel's symbolic rebirth as a coward Médem makes direct reference to Goya (Figures 3 and 4).<sup>23</sup>

Manuel's escape is structured as a perverse, self-ordained rebirth from the dead bodies of his Carlist comrades (he drags his own naked body out from between the naked legs of one of the dead man on the cart). In Médem's *mise-en-scène*, the Third Carlist war has become a symbolic 'womb', a gruesome, Goya-esque, construction of dead male bodies. And the symbolic midwife to this perverse rebirth is the mysterious cow that reappears over the next sixty-one years of the film narrative (Figure 5). As Manuel looks guiltily up at the cow (whose bell tolls for him) their exchanged gaze circumscribes the field of the gaze to which Manuel will be confined (Figure 6).<sup>24</sup> It is through this cow's eye that the narrative is transported forward thirty years and Manuel is 'reborn' as a disturbed painter and photographer (the actor Txema Blasco taking Carmelo Gómez's place). The character of Manuel is therefore, metaphorically speaking, 'not of woman born'. He is the symbolic offspring of his own theft of the Mendiluce bloodline.

<sup>23</sup> Médem has confirmed the influence of Goya here and of the *Tres de mayo* on the firing squad sequence in a recent interview with BBC4 (not yet broadcast).

<sup>24</sup> Richardson discusses 'an alternative world of bovine imagination that renders all identities "Other"'. He refers to this shot as suggesting 'a never-resolved possibility that the entire film beyond its initial Carlist war episode is the product of cows' vision' (2004: 196).

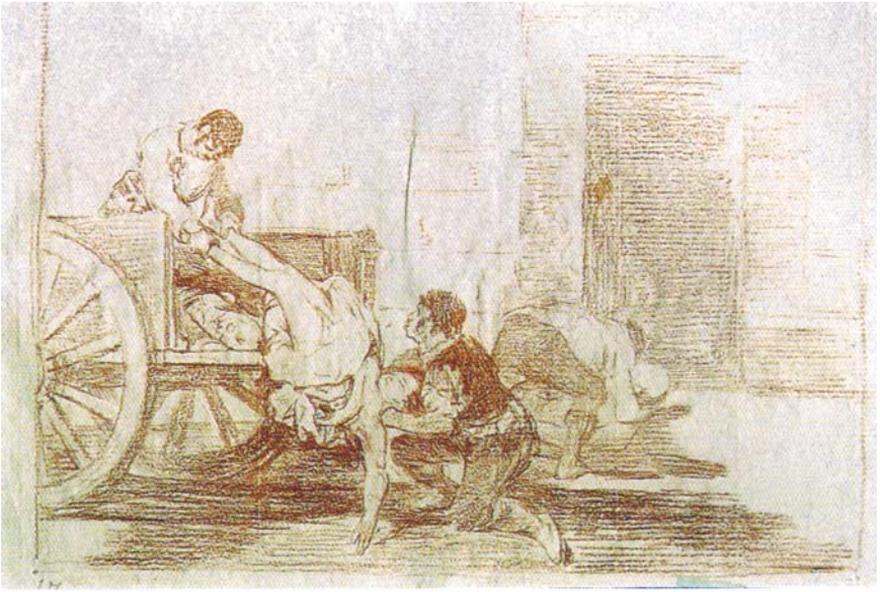


FIGURE 3 Cartloads to the Cemetery: Disaster of War (1812–1815).



FIGURE 4 Cartloads to the Cemetery.



FIGURE 5 Regarding the Bovine Midwife (I).



FIGURE 6 Regarding the Bovine Midwife (II).



FIGURE 7 Foundational Basque Myth.

If the foundational moment of Manuel's story is his perverse, symbolic rebirth as a coward, the film's foundational visual image, according to Médem, was a woodcutter hurling an axe into a forest (Ángulo & Rebordinos 2004: 191–92) (Figure 7).

The vision of a man throwing an axe that Médem says inspired him when writing the script can be traced back to Basque foundational myth. The axe is associated with the legends of Urtzi, the Basque god of thunder and the race of giants, the Basajaun, who were the original inhabitants the Basque Country (Caro Baroja 1971: 291). It is also associated with the ETA symbol of an axe and a serpent (Stone 2007: 29). When the first Basque man stole the grain from the original race of giants, one of them hurled an axe after him, splitting in two the tree behind which he was hiding.<sup>25</sup> In *Vacas*, the character who hurls this axe is Juan, the second-generation Mendiluce woodcutter. He hurls it deep into the wood because Ignacio (who recently beat him in a wood-chopping competition) will not compete with him again. This propels Catalina, Juan's sister, to run into the wood to make sure the axe has not hit her lover, Juan's rival, Ignacio. Catalina's question, 'what have you cut from me?', makes the phallic connotations of the axe clear, and the travelling shot that moves over their bodies comes to rest on the mysterious hollow tree stump and the title of the next

<sup>25</sup> I have discussed this link with the myth of the Basajaun in more detail elsewhere (Evans 2007: 34).



FIGURE 8 Male-assisted birth 'not of woman'.

chapter 'El agujero encendido'. The sinister link made in this sequence between the hurling of the axe, sex, and the perverse maternal metaphor of the hollow tree trunk is then linked directly to the birth of Peru, Ignacio and Catalina's illegitimate son, who, according to Richardson, symbolizes the birth of the Basque race.<sup>26</sup> This symbolic first Basque man will fall in love with his half-sister Cristina, emphasizing the endogamous nature of a Basque country locked in perpetual conflict that is perpetuated, according to Médem's representation, by the men, and is connoted in the intense rivalry between these two families.<sup>27</sup>

What is interesting about Médem's reworking of these foundational myths of Basque identity (the first based on the historical fact of the Carlist wars, the second in the Basque myth of the Basajaun and the original Basque man), is the way they highlight the elision of women. In Médem's reworking, the Carlist wars that 'give birth' to Miguel, and the legend about the axe that 'gives birth' to Peru are central

<sup>26</sup> So that, as Richardson notes, Peru's birth comes to represent the symbolic birth of the Basque nation (2004: 194).

<sup>27</sup> Médem says, 'la metáfora de este viejo odio vasco es la rivalidad entre dos familias' (Ángulo & Rebordinos 2004: 197). Carr also links Carlist rivalry to the traditional Basque family: 'From this defeat Carlism was never to recover. Its strength still lay in the Basque Provinces and especially in Navarre: there it became a family tradition, a piously preserved and persistent enclave in the political map of liberal Spain' (1986: 193).



FIGURE 9 Male-assisted re-birth 'not of woman'.

to the film narrative and the almost neurotic cinematographic returns to the perverse maternal metaphor of the hollow tree stump, suggest the viewer is required to pay particular attention to the way foundational myths repress the maternal metaphor.

Radford Reuther links the sidelining of women in foundational Christian narratives to the liminal male role in human reproduction (cited as an epigraph to this essay). In Médem's metaphorical *mise-en-scène* of recurring male births 'not of woman born', the repressed maternal metaphor runs as a continual thread, both in the recurrent cinematographic returns to the hollow tree and in the way the actresses are sidelined in the *mise-en-scène*. The actresses, unlike the actors, do not recur in subsequent generations and Madalem is asked, literally, to move over to the side and stand next to the cow, when Manuel is staging the family photograph. Although central to the development of the story, Catalina's relationship with Ignacio is a sideline in the representation of the rivalrous tension that builds up between Juan and Ignacio. She is also overtly and comically replaced by the cow, La Pupille, in the metaphorical *mise-en-scène* of Peru's birth. This sidelining of her physical role in Peru's birth was prefigured in the travelling shot that moved from the lovers' bodies (symbolic of Peru's conception) to give precedence to the sinister, repressed maternal metaphor of the buzzing tree stump. Catalina's elision from the representation of Peru's birth is, metaphorically speaking, confirmed when this next chapter opens with Ignacio, Madalem, and their daughters pulling on the rope attached to La Pupille's

unborn calf (Figure 8): another graphic gestational metaphor that juxtaposes the difficult birth of La Pupille's calf with our (the viewers) first sight of Ignacio and Catalina's illegitimate son, Peru, who is already ten years old.

The almost neurotic returns in *Vacas* to metaphorical male rebirths that repress the maternal role could be read as a symbolic trace of the Carlist rebellion. It is appropriate, therefore, that the most disturbing of the film's repressed, and in this case, reversed, maternal metaphors involves Juan, the man who will don his red Carlist beret again to support the Nationalist uprising in 1936. Catalina has eloped with Ignacio, and when Peru discovers she is missing he runs into the wood, shouting that his uncle has killed her. Juan catches him and pushes him into the hollow tree stump (now daubed with the blood of the dead cow La Pupille), shouting that Peru's dead mother is inside and that Peru should join her (Figure 9).

These increasingly violent maternal metaphors are an effect of the theme of paternal anxiety noted by White.<sup>28</sup> Anxiety about paternal inheritance is also indicated when Ignacio laughs off the suggestion that he has inherited the blood of his father, the 'blood of a champion'.<sup>29</sup> Ignacio's laughter is a kind of Cixousian symptom that has echoes of the manic laughter of the 'othered' Mexicans in *A Fistful of Dollars* (Leone 1964). In her famous essay, Cixous's image of the laughing Medusa is a metaphor for female defence against marginalization (1991), and when Ignacio laughs in *Vacas* it is also to ward off the threat that he might have to follow his now marginalized father to the edge.

Manuel's flesh sacrifices to the hollow stump act out the repression and fear of femininity common to certain kinds of patriarchal discourse that the Carlist order, with its nostalgia for a sidelined male bloodline, exemplifies. This discourse has, of course, been closely interrogated.<sup>30</sup> Since 1986, Radford Ruether's question whether the foundational myths of Christianity co-opt and repress the maternal ('the great mysteries of gestation and birth') in order to 'transfer power of these primary mysteries to the male' has been much debated. Alice Jardine examines a compulsive 'obligatory return to the mother's body — a female body, no matter how unrecognizable; no matter how hysterical, textual, inanimate, or actual' (1985: 115), and Médem's most overtly repressed maternal metaphor is this 'burning hole', the tree stump that Manuel seeks to appease with flesh sacrifices.

<sup>28</sup> See White's comparison of *Vacas* with *Yerma*, where she notes that Médem's narrative is about the tragedy of a man rather than a woman, 'unhinged by a desperate yearning to produce offspring' (1999: 6).

<sup>29</sup> Rodríguez notes that Manuel's comments when the 'blood of a champion' is mentioned 'rebajan irónicamente cualquier pretensión de seriedad' (2002: 79). The second time the point is made, Manuel says 'talking of blood, has anyone seen my grandson?', tactlessly bringing up the subject of Ignacio's illegitimate son in front of journalists who have gathered to interview and to take photographs of the reigning wood-cutting champion, Ignacio, and his 'legitimate' family.

<sup>30</sup> Feminist theologians have continued Radford Ruether's study of the repression of women in foundational mythologies. Anderson advocates a 'gender sensitive approach to the infinite' influenced by Irigaray (2001: 192). Her comment (2004) about Plato is relevant to Médem's representation of the function of the hollow tree stump in the Carlist social order. She notes that for 'Plato in line with the Pythagorean philosophers "the infinite" was a term of abuse. It was associated with chaos, matter, and femaleness, while the finite was good and associated with order, form, and maleness'. With more space it would also be interesting to analyse Manuel's relationship with the tree from the point of view of Hollywood's discussion of religious ritual and the 'habitus'.

The symbolic 'burning hole' represents the 'dark side' of the symbolic mother that Kristeva elucidates so effectively in 'Motherhood according to Bellini': the tree stump performs the same function for Manuel as the entity Kristeva calls the 'mythical mother' that guarantees 'symbolic coherence' without which 'every speaker would be led to conceive of its Being in relation to some void, a nothingness, asymmetrically opposed to this Being, a permanent threat against, first its mastery and ultimately, its stability' (1981: 238). At the same time, representations of the maternal metaphor of the mythical mother have, paradoxically enough, to repress the bodily maternal because, as Kristeva puts it, 'if we suppose her to be *master* of a process that is prior to the social-symbolic-linguistic contract of the group then we acknowledge the risk of losing identity at the same time as we ward it off' (1981: 238). In other words, it is in order to perceive ourselves as 'whole' that the discourse of foundational myth represses the maternal reminder that we were once nothing at all, and it is this repression of the maternal in foundational myth that the symbolic narrative of *Vacas* exposes so effectively.

If the relationship between Médem's representation of abject masculinity and the repressed maternal metaphors in *Vacas* is clear, in what ways could this film also be described as iconic of the 1990s? Between the death of Franco and the release of *Vacas*, the *permiso marital*, film censorship, and Spain's gender-biased adultery laws were abolished, while divorce was legalized (in 1975, 1977, 1978, and 1981 respectively). These changes would have gradual but far-reaching effects on the construction of gender in Spanish society and on screen that are, to my mind, echoed in the complex representation of heterosexual masculinity in *Vacas*.

Médem's narrative reverberates outwards from a claustrophobic Basque hillside in a way that mimics, metaphorically-speaking, the 'conocida y antigua naturaleza minifundista' of the Spanish film industry at the beginning of the 1990s (Heredero & Santamarina 2002: 45). It fuses the historical focus of one branch of Transition film with the supposedly ahistorical masquerade of the other in an entirely innovative way. It transcends earlier combinations of these 'gazes' in films like *La muerte de Mikel* or *¡Ay Carmela!* by combining a striking psychoanalytical *mise-en-scène* of historical context with an underlying sense of hysteria induced by the fear that individual identity may be subsumed by historical context (a sense of hysteria that was represented metaphorically in *Arrebato* and realistically in *Asignatura pendiente* and *Función de noche*).<sup>31</sup> Most importantly, to my mind, it marks a significant development in the representation of gender in Spanish film. By the time *Vacas* was released, *Mujeres al borde ...* (1988) had (ironically enough) moved its male director centre stage, but the Spanish film industry was in crisis and, as Smith notes, the heterosexual Spanish male did not see himself reflected in Almodóvar's flamboyant self-made women and subordinate men.<sup>32</sup> Almodóvar had broken the boundaries of gender representation by turning his gaze onto women as the objects of a different kind of

<sup>31</sup> Médem speaks highly of Iván Zulueta, describing him as 'un animal salvaje del cine, un verdadero artista con una capacidad para soñar muy poderosa' (Heredero 1997: 555). Rob Stone notes that Médem used actor Joaquín Navascués in one of his early shorts, *Patás en al cabeza* (1986), after admiring his performance in *Arrebato* (Stone 2007: 30).

<sup>32</sup> Cited in Pavlović (2005: 105).

desire, but *Vacas* breaks new boundaries by turning its gaze so effectively to their repression in the straight-male adapted gaze.

In *Vacas*, Médem has created a *desengaño* narrative that is deliberately inconclusive and deliberately hybrid. It combines the empirical, the mythological, and the psychological in a way that, perhaps for the first time in the work of a Spanish male director, fully reflects the projection of women in the male gaze. Pilar Miró had been 'the victim of deep-rooted professional misogyny' (Jordan 2000: 181).<sup>33</sup> However, her brief stint as Director General of Film from 1982 to 1985 at least marked the beginnings of a belated institutional recognition of women. *Vacas* represents this complex process of gradual recognition, not in its characterization of women, but in its representation of a paradoxical nostalgia for and aversion to out-dated myths of gender.<sup>34</sup> Médem combines Almodóvar's lessons about masquerade with Eloy de la Iglesia's conviction that 'una de las formas más válidas de estudiar la sociedad es a través de sus enfermedades, de sus traumas'.<sup>35</sup> He also updates Zulueta's avant-garde approach to the cannibalistic aspects of *mise-en-scène* in the emphasis on point of view and in the increasingly stagnant way his self-consuming men reproduce themselves in subsequent generations as 'three-in-one' men (Stone 2007: 45).

In *Vacas* the extrovert passions of the immediate Transition period are subdued.<sup>36</sup> Postmodern attention to masquerade takes on more subtle, more minimal expression in the return of the same male actors in different parts, the influence of feminism can be perceived in the self-reflexive representation of the male gaze (as a gaze that reflects itself), and Fuentes's 'fear of the void' (in the symbolic form of the repressed maternal metaphor of the hollow tree stump) takes centre stage. The *mise-en-scène* of *Vacas* is then iconic both for its representation of post-Transition *desengaño* and for the fact that its success marked the rebirth of Spanish film, a rebirth that would take on gradual momentum from the mid-1990s onwards and that would finally turn international attention not just to male directors like Médem and Bajo Ulloa but, for the first time, to a generation of new women directors like Icíar Bollaín and Isabel Coixet.<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

In *Vacas*, foundational myths and femininity are represented as part of the psychological process that makes up the heterosexual male. Historical trauma is not, therefore, something that can only be represented through the 'other', as it was in earlier ground-breaking films like *Flor de otoño*, *El diputado*, *Mi querida señorita*. Médem links this historical trauma directly to out-dated myths and metaphors perpetuated

<sup>33</sup> She famously resigned in 1985 after accusations of corruption and favouritism.

<sup>34</sup> Stone notes that 'the film culminates in an accumulation of transgressive acts and violent impulses directed towards females that accelerates the infection in the forest' (2007: 63).

<sup>35</sup> In the interview with Antonio Castro included on the DVD copy of *El diputado*.

<sup>36</sup> See Pavlović's comment that, during the Transition, 'Franco's subdued era with its disdain of any excess was replaced by the exteriorization of passion' (2005: 97).

<sup>37</sup> See Camí-Vela (2005) for interviews with women directors less well known internationally, such as Chus Gutiérrez, Graci Querejeta, Rosa Vergés, and Silvia Munt. See also Barry Jordan's analysis of the development of Spanish film during this period in Jordan & Morgan Tamosunas 2000: 179–92.

by heterosexual men.<sup>38</sup> The foundational Basque Man is a puppet. Carmelo Gómez bends from the hips in the opening sequence like a mechanical doll, and his actions are imitated by the figure Manuel sets up in the wood to catch his non-existent wild boar.<sup>39</sup> This is the generic Basque man with no future. His alter ego, Manuel's straw man, has no prey to catch and the last of the men in the family line, Peru, does not even learn how to use the axe. The myths Médem interrogates are, of course, fundamentally masculine, but what is, to my mind, iconic of the 1990s is the way the film highlights the anxiety at the repressed heart of masculine foundational myth systems. Monterde notes that despite the need to use the new Transition freedom to search for 'lo prohibido' (a past repressed by the Franco Regime), beyond the surface replacing of the slogans of the Right with those of the Left, the *mise-en-scène* barely changed (1993: 153).<sup>40</sup> This is perhaps why Spanish film in the 1980s appears to be dominated by the figure of Almodóvar, who broke national and international boundaries with his mainstream application of Baudrillardian simulacra and his reapplication of Riverièrian masquerade to masculine and feminine identity. *Vacas*, with its *mise-en-scène* of civil war as the 'return of the repressed' and of history as a process of neurotic repetition, represents the preoccupations of the next decade. It has become, therefore, an iconic reflection of a more widespread desire to renegotiate the past that would gain momentum during the 1990s and lead on to the ratification of the 'ley de memoria histórica' in 2007.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Perriam's analysis of Gómez's performance in *Tierra* argues that 'here again the deconstruction of such mythical and misogynistic discourses, it can be argued, goes on around and not in the figure of Gómez who ends up being iconic, strongly ambivalent — moody and dependable; sensitive and intrusive; philosophical and lust-driven — but not polysemic enough to move beyond these binaries or to match up the representation of Ángel's character with the undecidability of the film' (2003: 74).

<sup>39</sup> For more on the function of the boar, see Paul Julian Smith's comment that *Tierra* reworks traditional elements of Basque mythology linking 'misogyny and anti-Semitism with classic locations such as the boar hunt' (Smith 2000: 151).

<sup>40</sup> Monterde is reiterating the point made in the preface that for the most part, the *mise-en-scène* of the Transition was 'un simple "espacio de reconocimiento"' (1993: 23).

<sup>41</sup> I am grateful to the British Academy for funding research towards this essay in 2007.

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En este artículo se examina la representación de los mitos de origen y las metáforas maternas reprimidas en *Vacas* (1992) con referencia a Kristeva, Irigaray, Cixous, y las teólogas feministas, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Amy Hollywood

and Pamela Sue Anderson. Se plantea que *Vacas* puede considerarse un filme icónico del desencanto, que mezcla la máscara de la 'movida' con el enfoque nostálgico del 'cine de reconocimiento' (Monterde 1993: 23), y que anticipa, al mismo tiempo, las preocupaciones y el desarrollo de los años noventa. *Vacas* se estrenó en medio del desencanto post-franquista, cuando la industria cinematográfica se encontraba en crisis, y representa un importante punto de partida en la representación tanto de los mitos que la máscara frenética de la movida esconde, como de la profundidad de su mise-en-scène histórico, y de la influencia del movimiento feminista sobre su tratamiento de una mirada cinematográfica tradicionalmente masculina.

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