

REVIEW ARTICLE

Spanish film criticism: diverse, haptic and embodied voices

Spain on Screen: Developments in Contemporary Spanish Cinema, Ann Davies (ed.), London, Palgrave/ Macmillan, 2011, 168 pp., £59.50 (hardback), ISBN 97802302363202

The Films of Elías Querejeta: A Producer of Landscapes, Tom Whittaker, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2011, 240 pp., £60.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780708324370; £12.99 (paperback), ISBN 9780708324387

Queering Buñuel: Sexual Dissidence and Psychoanalysis in his Mexican and Spanish Cinema, Julián Daniel Gutiérrez-Albilla, London and New York, Tauris Academic Studies, 2008, 256 pp., £59.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781845116682

The title of the first of these books, *Spain on Screen: Developments in Contemporary Spanish Cinema* is slightly misleading, because it is not really about the representation of Spain on screen, nor (with the exception of contributions by Rob Stone and Julián Gutiérrez-Albilla) is it really about developments in contemporary Spanish cinema. It is, though, a useful and diverse collection of essays from major scholars in the field that opens with Barry Jordan on debates surrounding the ratification of the 2007 *Ley de cine*. Jordan has an acute eye for industrial concerns and although his subtitle ‘the death of Spanish cinema’ seems slightly premature, the fact that government funding should be monitored is an important point well made. Rob Stone **provides** a welcome antidote to Jordan’s pessimistic view of the funding and quality of Spanish film, with an essay focussing on short digital film that is cheap enough to make to be able to circumvent the need for government funding. Moving fluidly from close analysis to economic crisis, Stone explores the way the Deleuzian time image appears in films by Saura, Erice and Medem then reappears in digital shorts by way of American directors like Linklater and his comment, the “time image is a slacker” (50), now reads as nicely prescient of the ensuing “mindfulness” boom. Always innovative,, Paul Julian Smith compares the TV (1984) and film (2007) versions of the life of St Teresa. Noting the lack of equivalent work on the biopic in Spain, Smith uses G.F. Custen’s (1992) study of the American biopic for his theoretical framework, taking Leo Loewenthal’s suggestion (cited in Custen) that the biopic functions as a modern version of the lives of the saints as an elegant segue to discussion of the way Loriga’s exploitative tactics (publicity shots of a half-naked Paz Vega caressed by the hand of Christ) compare with the intellectual rigour of the TV series (directed by Josefina Molina, scripted by Martín Gaité and overseen by historical consultant Professor Víctor García de la Concha). His

surprising conclusion—that an expert film crew ensures Loriga’s version is no “less historically accurate or theologically reverent” (73)—offers a thought-provoking point of departure for further trans-medial studies of this kind. Ann Davies combines Kinder’s (1993) work on the history of the phallic mother in Spanish film with contemporaneous studies of the representation of femininity by Clover (1992) and Creed (1993) to re-examine a neo-conservative turn in the representation of women in recent Spanish horror films. Conscious that the three films she cites (*Los otros*, *El orfanato* and *Ausentes*) may not constitute an entirely new Spanish horror genre, her persuasive description of the way the protagonist’s suicide in *El orfanato* sets the stage for the return of the happy nuclear family is suitably chilling. If Davies draws our attention to a certain *plus ça change...* in the representation of women in contemporary horror, Fouz-Hernández inadvertently performs the same task for Bigas Luna. This author writes compellingly on Bigas Luna, but his attempt here to salvage *Bambola* for the feminist and queer spectator is doomed – for this non-hegemonic reader at least-- by detail on the director’s toxic relationship with actresses, views on masculinity, and habit of comparing women to food. The problem with *Bambola* may just be that narrative cinema, unlike pornography, generally requires some suspension of disbelief, but Fouz-Hernández provides a useful introduction to theories of visceral spectatorship, and raises the important, and topical issue of how we discuss the fact that the body may be taken up by images “that conventional readings have yet to come to terms with” (110). Moving to the transnational, Chris Perriam takes Javier Bardem’s speech at the 2008 Oscars as the catalyst for discussion of his performance in *No Country for Old Men* (2007) and *Goya’s Ghosts* (2006) providing a model for close analysis of acting style and a useful reminder of the acting dynasty to which this now internationally acclaimed actor belongs. The edition concludes with a stunning psychoanalytical archaeology of film moments in Jaime Camino’s documentary *Los niños de Rusia* (2001) by Julián Gutiérrez-Albilla. Camino’s film—a documentary about exiled children who became trapped in Russia after the Civil War when Stalin’s refusal to return them to dictatorship Spain—provides a haunting case study of the ethics of filming trauma. Effortlessly combining close formal analysis with complex psychoanalytical theory, and establishing a meticulous theoretical framework that ranges from Freud, Lacan and Kristeva to Williams, Mulvey and Hirsch (to mention but a few), Gutiérrez-Albilla examines the way the broken Spanish of one of the interviewees functions as an “audible, haptic scar” (141) of the trauma of exile, and leaves us firmly convinced of his gentle reminder that the foundations of psychoanalysis were based on Freud’s experience of the collective trauma of World War I (131) and that the psyche is still, therefore, a social issue. The collection as a whole does show signs of overly rapid copy-editing, but the errors are minor and do not detract from this interesting and wide-ranging introduction to the diverse approaches that can now be taken to Spanish screen studies.

If the reference to *Spain on screen* was slightly misleading in the above case, it is the central focus for Tom Whittaker's study of the producer, Elías Querejeta whose work, Whittaker claims, provides not only a history of modern Spanish space but "a *spatialization* of modern Spanish history" (147). This is a confident and lucid introduction to the man and his methods, and an eloquent introduction to a wide range of Querejeta productions. The study of landscape and political resistance begins in Chapter 1 with the 1960s, looking at narratives of modernization; the establishment of a regular crew and experimental film language in *A través de San Sebastián* (1960); metaphorical use of sport in *A través del fútbol* (1962); rural tourism in *El próximo otoño* (1963); Madrid gangs, Marcuse and foreign *femmes fatales* in *De cuerpo presente* (1965) and at Lefebvre's "espace perçu," "conçu" and "vécu" in a careful re-reading of *La caza*. Chapter 2 focuses on Castille and economic policies from 1939-59 that perpetuated the feudal system; the tightening of regulations following the departure of Escudero in 1967, and the violence located at the geographic "heart" of the Regime. Deleuzian time and impulse images are used to theorize the way that (censored) references to Regime violence erupt through moments of diegetic stasis closely analysed in the case of Alfredo Mayo's murderous "macho ibérico" in *Los desafíos*; Ana's "freezing" of Isabel over the bonfire in *El espíritu de la colmena*; the various murderous familial fantasies in *Elisa, vida mía* and *El desencanto*, and, finally, murder-suicide in *Carta de amor de un asesino*. Chapter 3 engages with global economic crisis and the environment, using Levinas as a theoretical framework to explore the representation of rural Galicia and Raymond Williams's point that the countryside is just "land" for those who live there (rather than "landscape") as the point of departure for a close analysis of *Habla mudita*. Chapter 4 focuses on *Tasio* (1984), regional autonomy, ecology, nostalgia, and resistance to city immigration. As with each chapter, the historical and theoretical framework for discussion is carefully contextualized (here the rise of the PSOE) and the representation of land is linked, theoretically, to the return to Heidegger in Bates's *Song of the Earth* (2000). The contrast with the number of films addressed at speed in Chapters 1 and 2, makes the focus here on one film slightly surprising, but the space gained allows for elegant close analysis and productive creative links are made with Pasolini, Schrader and Ozu. Chapter 5 moves to urban space and close analysis of *Deprisa, deprisa* (1980). Useful background material on rural migration is provided and effective use is made of Homi Bhabha's view that the delinquent is a useful medium – not yet "fixed" – for examining the way that national identity is split between the "pedagogical and the performative," that is, between an elusive "essence" we are educated to believe in and a process that is always being acted out. Chapter 6 extends the focus on the marginal to *Los lunes al sol* and *Las cartas de Alou*. In the first, Bardem's performance of Amador is linked to Bordieu's "consumptive body" and the "redundancy of male strength within a post-industrial landscape" (136), while the picaresque narrative of *Cartas...* is examined with reference to well-

informed statistics on migrant workers in Almeria. Once again, the theoretical approach and the links between Foucault, Bourdieu, Massey and Kevin Hetherington are meticulously outlined. This is intelligent, thoughtful work, although on occasion the discussion can seem oddly gender-blind. In Chapter 3, a reference linking Laura Mulvey to the statement that the “landscape is similarly aligned as spectacle” (76) is left unexamined, as is the remark that in *Los lunes al sol*: “in the absence of a wife to care for him his [Amador’s] flat has degenerated into a state of squalid disrepair” (134). In Chapter 3, the discussion of Levinas and the preservation of the gap between the self and other works well, but would have benefitted from reference to a more contemporary, post-Lacanian theorist like Rey Chow. In Chapter 4, the link noted between the idealization of rural life and the Falange is an important one that might have been examined in more depth along with the accusations made by some critics that *Tasio* is overly idealistic. Finally, the division of chapter headings/ topics means that there is an imbalance in the number of films addressed. However, these are minor quibbles and this is an excellent book on one of the key figures in twentieth-century Spanish film history.

Queering Buñuel: Sexual Dissidence and Psychoanalysis in his Mexican and Spanish Cinema, is film scholarship at its finest: complicated, thoughtful, difficult, challenging and always generous towards its precursors. There are many ways of reading films of course, and highly sophisticated psychoanalytic readings will not be to everyone’s taste, but for anyone who is concerned by the unconscious drives that control the canon, psychoanalysis seems to me to provide the only real way in (no pun intended). There is no space in a review of this length to do justice to the theoretical scope of this reading, so I will just note that Gutiérrez-Albilla also provides an excellent introduction to major psychoanalytical theorists from Freud onwards and a valuable lesson for anyone who wants to be able to do more than throw in the odd reference to a “missed encounter with the Real.” Particularly worth highlighting is Gutiérrez Albilla’s definition of transgression as less ‘the concept of the limit, which constitutes a line that cannot be crossed than [...] a fold in which the stability of the relationship between the inside and outside gives way to a limit that exists only when it is crossed’ (6). This detailed introduction is followed by a *tour de force* of close formal reading that draw our attention to what emerges from the “folds” and “fragments” in the five films selected for close analysis. Chapter 1 focuses on *Los olvidados* concluding that the infamous “egg-on-camera-lens” shot functions not only a reminder of the formlessness of the Real, but of hidden traces that return (linked here with Jaibo’s aggressive heterosexuality, his pre-oedipal desire for the lost mother (and child) and, of course, to *los olvidados* themselves). Chapter 2 reads *Viridiana* in light of the Kristevan abject, unfolding the attempted seduction that is generally read as an abuse of patriarchal power to reveal a blurring of gender boundaries between an uncle and niece who share masochistically driven desires. Chapter 3 re-reads the crawling guests and horizontal spaces in *El*

angel exterminador through ecstatic abjection, noting the way the carnivalesque “loss of verticality” (107) underlines the link between the guests’ unexplained entrapment, the compulsion to repeat, and the death drive. The blurring of gender distinction—an over-arching theme in this re-reading of Buñuel—is also important to the reading of *Ensayo de un crimen* in Chapter 4. Reminding us that our first view of the spoiled brat, Archibaldo, is of him as a child emerging from his mother’s closet to witness his nanny killed by a stray revolutionary bullet, this and Archibaldo’s series of frustrated attempts to kill doll-like women are read here, not as straightforwardly pathological misogyny, but as an unconscious response to gendered “excess” that turns the women (who do, of course, always escape) into parodic signifiers of Archibaldo’s fantasy of gender re-alignment. This illuminating reading of murderous compulsion as masochistic wish-fulfillment certainly helps to explain why a film that appears so misogynist can also be so comical. This insight is more difficult to achieve with the narrative of poor Gloria in a close study of *Él*. Adapted from an autobiographical novel by Mercedes Pinto, the Spanish wife of a paranoic, *Él* is the film (according to a letter Buñuel wrote to his friend and co-writer, Luis Alcoriza) that Lacan saw twice and cited in lectures as a case-book study of paranoia. Perhaps because of this link to an actual case and to an actual psychoanalyst, at times this chapter appears to analyse Francisco as flesh and blood rather than as a cinematic creation, but the range of reference is always inspiring (in this case reading paranoia from Freud on Judge Schreber via Robert Mapplethorpe and Munch). Gutiérrez Albilla concludes by noting that his approach will have “blind spots” for other writers to uncover, but only two come to mind, the first being that I wonder whether we can still assume that the pre-oedipal stage is always one in which gender difference is not recognized, and the second is that, for me, the representation of the female body was slightly to one side in this excellent analysis of transgression, which suggests this outstanding study would be an excellent point of departure for a similarly sophisticated reading of the representation of the female body beyond the *punctum*: an excellent study, highly recommended.

Jo Evans
University College London
Email: Joanna.evans@ucl.ac.uk

