The Cinema of Spain: An Overview

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The Cinema of Spain: An Overview

In the 100-plus years since cinema was introduced to Spain, Spanish filmmakers and producers have faced staggering adversity. The climate was turbulent from nearly the beginning; Spain lost the last of its colonies just two years after the first motion pictures were shown in the homeland. In the next half century, a monarchy-approved dictatorship would rise and fall, the authority of the monarchy itself would collapse, a civil war would ravage the country, and a repressive Fascist dictatorship would rise. Spanish cinema has never quite equaled the output or influence of other western European nations like France or Italy, but in recent years, film scholars and critics have taken a greater interest in the study and appraisal of Spanish film. Since the 1970s, Spanish films have benefited significantly from increased international attention, culminating in recognition by premier festivals and the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. In spite of extreme political, economic, social and other pressures, the Spanish film industry has proved resilient and artistically relevant. The artistry and cultural significance of films as diverse as *Un Chien Andalou*, *The Spirit of the Beehive*, the work of Pedro Almodóvar, *Torrente*, *The Dumb Arm of the Law*, and *Biutiful* will be of particular interest in this essay.

Spain was among the first countries visited by Lumière employees. In 1896, the royal family stated a preference for the Lumière's Cinématographe over Robert William Paul's Animatograph. Soon after, the employee representing the Lumières, Alexandre Promio, filmed *Plaza del puerto en Barcelona*, generally “acknowledged as the first film actually made in Spain” (Pavlović 3). Promio's output in the region followed the Lumière pattern, consisting mostly of “actualities” and short humorous films. Later in that year, Eduardo Jimeno Correas shot the first film made by a Spaniard, *Salida de la misa de doce del Pilar de Zaragosa*. Many Spanish innovators and trailblazers followed, such as the prolific Segundo de
Chomón, whose emphasis on adventure and illusion mirrored in some ways that of Georges Méliès. Many of the early fiction films fell in line with genre trends elsewhere in European cinema; literary adaptations, comedies, and vaudeville acts were among some of the most popular films. As film scholar Marvin D’Lugo notes, “the formative history of Spanish cinema during the early decades of this century was not substantively different from that of other emerging national cinemas in Europe” (1). Unlike other European countries, however, many Spanish films that closely mimicked theatre were also quite successful at the time.

Though Spain was officially neutral during World War I, the conflict only added to the mounting economic stresses plaguing the nation. The monarchy as an institution was losing its grasp, and several awkward and short-lived attempts at solving the problem culminated in the Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939. At its conclusion, the Nationalist general Francisco Franco seized authoritarian rule of the country. His regime was to last into the 1970s. Much has been written of the limits on free speech imposed by the Fascists, which of course extended to film. Sexuality in film was regulated and suppressed in much the same way as it was in day-to-day life. As Susan Martin-Márquez writes, “Couples who kissed on the street might be hauled off to the police station and fined for immoral behavior” (117). Though Franco was more heavy-handed in his approach to censorship than most other European leaders of the time, Spanish filmmakers before, during, and after his rule were not so unlike international filmmakers in their use of metaphor to depict and comment upon such matters.

One such subversive filmmaker was the notorious Luis Buñuel. An experimental Surrealist, Buñuel's most (in)famous work was the 1929 short silent film *Un Chien Andalou*, made in collaboration with another important Spanish cultural figure, Salvador Dalí. The film was Buñuel's first. Though made in France, *Andalou* comments primarily on Spanish culture and society, in particular the
Catholic Church and notions of gender identity. The film features gruesome violence, cross-dressing, sexual overtones, and irreverent depictions of clergy, all of which provoked both revulsion and curiosity in international audiences. As noted by Pavlović and others, the film “became a surrealist masterpiece and the movement's cinematic manifesto,” (27) despite being filmed on a shoestring budget, half of which came from Buñuel's mother.

By 1932, the transition to sound was sweeping Europe, and Spain followed suit with the creation of several sound studios, including Orphea and CEA. Though difficult, the “transition from silent to talking films was achieved successfully” (Lera 36). The relative success of the Republican period of the early 1930's was not to last long. During the Civil War of the late 1930s, propaganda films were made by both the Republicans and the Nationalists, and these constituted the bulk of the Spanish films released in the period. The industry was otherwise in shambles, taking years to recover. Through World War II, as in WWI, Spain remained neutral. In both cases, Spanish film production experienced a sharp falloff due to the economic pressures of continental war.

These and other oppressive economic conditions necessitated the advent of co-productions, and many Spanish films in the middle of the 20th century were made with the assistance of the French and Italians. The influence of Italian Neorealism on Spanish cinema is undeniable in this period, though the social commentary is of course more subdued. Spanish cinema progressed along similar lines to other Western European cinemas of the time, though there are interesting counterexamples, perhaps most notably Victor Erice's 1973 El espíritu de la colmena (The Spirit of the Beehive), which in many ways bears more resemblance to the lyrical spirituality and contemplation of Tarkovsky than to any particular European sensibility.

The film is an oft-cited example of embedded criticism of the Franco regime. Taking place soon after the conclusion of the civil war and Franco's rise to power, the
film follows a young girl obsessed with the 1931 film *Frankenstein*. The most obvious parallels between the film and Fascist rule are embodied in the person of a mysterious fugitive the girl discovers in an abandoned farmhouse. The film compares her interaction with the man to the young girl who plays with Frankenstein near the earlier film's climax. In both films, an innocent child is able to recognize the humanity of an outsider whom society is unwilling to accept. Before long, the fugitive is unceremoniously gunned down in the night without warning, a clear comment on the brutal repression of the (soon to fall) Fascists. The film was critically lauded upon its international debut, winning the Grand Prize at the San Sebastián Film Festival, and “was warmly received internationally as one of the most moving and original expressions of opposition to the Franco dictatorship” (D'Lugo 56).

Franco's rule ended with his death in 1975. The tides of change had been churning for some time before Franco's death, but as Spain's government transitioned into a new democratic monarchy, the country's transformation accelerated. The strictness of censorship had been relaxed somewhat in Franco's later years, and the movement picked up speed following his death. This was the perfect environment for a filmmaker such as Pedro Almodóvar to prosper. An openly gay man of many artistic talents, Almodóvar released works throughout the 1980's that were a sensation in more ways than one. His films depicted transgenderism, rape, homosexuality, borderline-blasphemous abuses of Church iconography and leadership, and other such topics with a gleeful camp and irony not lost on the hungry audiences of post-Franco Spain. The director had “shifted from gay underground films to more mainstream productions that fused melodrama, camp, and sex comedy” (Thompson 573). Once Franco was gone, it seemed, the gloves were off.

Despite these achievements, Spanish cinema “remains seriously undercapitalized and dominated by the USA,” as Barry Jordan wrote in 2002 (192). American film saturates the filmic marketplace in Spain, as it does in most of the developed world. But Spain is not without its runaway success stories. Santiago Segura's 1998 debut *Torrente, The Dumb Arm of the Law* became the biggest hit Spain had ever had up to that point, both at home and abroad. Shot on a modest budget provided by several film companies
and a “digital television platform,” Jordan points to the film's American-style marketing and subversive black humor as factors leading to its acceptance, its parodical nature a send-up of American cop films and its “dirty realism” an examination of modern Spanish society.

In recent years, genre films have become more and more popular, especially horror. Jennifer Green writes, “horror film production in mainstream contemporary Spanish cinema rose in a boom that reached 'a peak in 2004 when seven of the top 25 local grossers were horrors’” (qtd. in Lazaro-Reboll 65). Guillermo del Toro is perhaps the most famous crossover success in the genre, having made popular, critically acclaimed films both in Spain and Hollywood.

Alejandro González Iñárritu is one of contemporary Spanish cinema's best known and critically adored filmmakers. His unique brand of resonant intertwining narratives and variously warm and joyful moments in otherwise bleak, tragic lives has garnered much international attention, as in his 2010 drama Biutiful. Javier Bardem received a rare Best Actor nomination at the Academy Awards, despite the film being a Spanish-Mexican co-production. The film has much to say on the topic of the immigrant experience in Spain, but it says it quietly, organically, without fanfare or grandstanding. Two of the major storylines involve Africans and East Asians struggling through excruciating circumstances to get by. Iñárritu, like del Toro, has enjoyed a certain measure of Hollywood crossover success, with his earlier Babel featuring acclaimed performances from Hollywood stars Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett.

There have been many more examples of Spanish films that have succeeded locally and internationally despite substantial pressures from within and without. Many filmmakers from Spain have risen among the ranks of international filmmakers lauded by critics and audiences. Though not as prolific as other European industries, Spain's cinema is critical to understanding the context and landscape of both European film history and
film history as a whole. It is all too true that “Film historians have generally neglected the study of Spanish cinema... Rather, it is often implied that Spanish cinema has been a relatively inconsequential and imitative cinema, constrained by the weight of its history and politics” (D'Lugo xi). It becomes clear upon further study, however, that the emphasis should be on the successes of the industry in the face of adversity, rather than on its perceived shortfalls.
Works Cited


