◆ Chapter 2

Cinema of Dissensus: Cultural Crisis and the (Re) Emergence of Spanish Neo-Noir

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> The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.
>
> –Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*

Gramsci's frequently cited observation certainly applies to crisis in Spain, particularly if we consider the political upheaval triggered by the Great Recession. Yet, as Manuel Artime astutely observed in 2016, what began as yet another economic crisis, one with particularly dramatic political effects, became a cultural crisis that has permeated all aspects of Spanish life and consciousness:

> De un tiempo a esta parte la palabra "crisis" se ha convertido en expresion recurrente entre nosotros. Casi cualquier juicio emitido sobre el presente, desde el más ponderado al más trivial, va a estar dominado por un mismo diagnóstico, una misma conciencia; la de estar precipitándonos hacia el final de una época, a un proceso de ruptura con el pasado inmediato. De lo poco que nos atrevemos a aseverar con certeza en este momento de

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> incertidumbre, es que aquel orden social y de valores en que hemos estado habitando, ha dejado de resultar aceptable para el futuro. (15)
>
> (For some time now the word "crisis" has been converted into a frequent expression between us. Almost any opinion voiced about the present, from the most pondered to the most trivial will be determined by the same diagnosis, the same consciousness: that of being plunged into the end of an era, a process of rupture with the recent past. The little that we're willing to risk affirming with conviction in this moment of uncertainty is that the social order and the values with which we have been living have stopped being acceptable for the future.)

As Artime makes clear, the social order and corresponding values that characterized Spain before the crisis no longer constitute cultural common sense, resulting in the widespread feeling of living in a sort of end times. This is the point of departure from which I would like to consider the (re)emergence of Spanish neo-noir, which, following Gramsci, I consider a morbid cinematic symptom of a cultural crisis provoked by neoliberal catastrophe.

I use the phrase "(re)emergence of Spanish neo-noir" to signal two things: first, that there is a previous body of Spanish neo-noir that emerged shortly after Franco's death in 1975 and, second, that after a period of limited production, Spanish neo-noir has returned as a notable movement in Spanish cinema during a period of cultural turmoil.[1] This new wave of Spanish neo-noir cannot be understood in isolation from the recent boom in Spanish thrillers, not least because of the slippage between the two terms when it comes to common usage and cinematic classification but also because of the mixing of cinematic modes and genres and the general instability of film categories, as Rick Altman and other genre theorists have pointed out. Despite issues of generic overlap and hybridity, I follow Jo Labanyi and Vicente Rodríguez Ortega's distinction between film noir and the thriller. They claim, "what most clearly distinguishes *noir* from the thriller is its focus on the dark side of human subjectivity, trapped in a downward spiral, without the relief of a morally satisfying ending" (261). While two of the three films I examine below may be commonly thought of as thrillers, all three of them fit this grim definition of distinction. Additionally, if—following Tzvetan Todorov's theory of narrative structure—equilibrium is established, disrupted, and reinstated by the end of each of these films, the equilibriums depicted are profoundly unsettling.

While horror films such as *The Others* (dir. Alejandro Amenábar, 2001), *The Orphanage* (dir. Juan Antonio Bayona, 2007) and *[REC]* (dir. Jaume Balagueró

and Paco Plaza, 2007) dominated the first decade of twenty-first-century Spanish cinema and remain three of the highest grossing films in Spanish cinema history, Spanish thrillers such as *Marshland* (dir. Alberto Rodriguez, 2014), *Retribution* (dir. Dani de la Torre, 2015), *To Steal from a Thief* (dir. Daniel Calparsoro, 2016), and *The Realm* (dir. Rodrigo Sorogoyen, 2018) have reshaped the direction of Spanish film production during this century's second decade. Alongside the popular TV series *Money Heist* (dir. *Álex* Piña, 2017–present), each has granted Spanish cinema an even greater international recognition due to their presence on Netflix. The shift in the production of genre films in Spain from horror to thrillers and neo-noir (and thrillers deploying noir elements) can be interpreted as corresponding to the displacement of a cultural consensus that effectively repressed challenges to the dominant ideology during the 1990s and early 2000s and the shift to cultural turmoil, which has resulted in an explosion of dissensus in the wake of the Great Recession and the state-imposed austerity that provoked widespread indignation in Spain.

Thus, if, in 2005, Spanish cinema scholar Ann Davies could earnestly pose the question, "Can the contemporary crime thriller be Spanish?" (in an article that conflates thrillers and film noir), concluding that "in the thriller, Spain may not be as sharply defined but remains always already as a flickering presence," there is no question that the specific problems of twenty-first-century Spain are foregrounded in recent Spanish thrillers and neo-noir. However, Davies is prescient when she observes that "the thriller acts as an ambiguous site of any national identity where not only do cultural fault lines cross but where they also become points of tension and potential conflict," which "implies the endangering of a national social order that is underpinned by law" (178). What has become evident in Spanish thrillers and neo-noir produced after the Great Recession is that Spanish law has been exposed as corrupt and the social order rendered as perilous.

Put in Lacanian terms, while Spanish horror from the first decade of the 2000s staged encounters with a traumatic real that threatened to destroy, or at least disrupt, the smooth functioning of the symbolic order established during the "Transition" that followed Franco's death, the shift in Spanish genre cinema to thrillers and neo-noir during this century's second decade portends a preoccupation with the breakdown of that very symbolic order and the absence of symbolic authorities who can guarantee social welfare. Thus, I posit that the (re) emergence of Spanish neo-noir signifies the degree to which the symbolic order in Spain has become fractured by cultural crisis, resulting in what is experienced as a new monstrous disorder.[2] Such an argument rests on the claim that trends in cinematic production are, at least in part, expressions of a political unconscious that embody aspects of the structure of feeling of a particular historical period. It furthermore posits that film noir is the cinematic mode *par excellence*

for representing cultural turmoil and ideological crisis. This leads me to claim that the (re)emergence of Spanish neo-noir represents a "cinema of dissensus," one which is at odds with the culture of consensus that dominated Spain before the crisis—or, more precisely, that dominated until May 15, 2011, when the 15M *indignados* movement flashed up to threaten the hegemony of consensual politics.

In this essay, I trace the contours of such a cinema before analyzing three examples of Spanish neo-noir: *Magical Girl* (dir. Carlos Vermut, 2014), *The Fury of a Patient Man* (dir. Raúl Arévalo, 2016), and *May God Save Us* (dir. Rodrigo Sorogoyen, 2016). While each of these films draws upon different noir traditions—the femme fatal, the noir western, and hard-boiled detective fiction, respectively—they share one thing in common: the representation of a precarious masculinity and the attempt to restore it by any means.[3] This particular type of "gender trouble" has a long tradition in film noir and the iteration of such a generic formula within the context of crisis in Spain can be understood as the conspicuous deployment of a cinematic trope that signifies the breakdown of (phallocentric) symbolic law and authority within a precarious symbolic order. This breakdown is achieved through performative representations of symbolic impotence and castration anxiety that interrogate the legitimacy of the Name-of-the-Father, which in the context of post-dictatorship Spain might be best formulated as "the Spirit-of-the-Transition." This fundamental signifier first came under public scrutiny when the historical memory movement began exhuming the horrors of Spanish fascism, in defiance of the prohibition by the Spirit-of-the-Transition on reckoning with the grave injustices upon which "democratic Spain" was founded. Such scrutiny has only intensified since the 15M and the birth of Podemos, with their respective critiques of "the Regime of 1978" and the neoliberal society it engendered. Ultimately, representations of precarious masculinity within the shadowy worlds of film noir serve to expose the lack in the big Other. With each step these troubled male protagonists take down the dark moral spirals in which they are trapped, Spanish cultural fantasies of a just and benevolent symbolic order are stripped of substance. As we anxiously watch them traverse such fundamental fantasies on screen, a cinematic space is created in which dissensus can emerge.

Cinema of Dissensus

The term "cinema of dissensus" as I use it here draws upon several strands of scholarship that span film studies, Spanish cultural studies, political philosophy, and economics. From film studies, the phrase intentionally inverts

the concept of a "cinema of consensus," which Eric Rentschler introduced in a landmark essay within German film studies to critique the commercial turn of German cinema during the 1990s. For Rentschler, the shift away from New German Cinema after the fall of the Berlin Wall marked a radical change from a national cinema that self-consciously dealt with complex historical and social issues, especially the United States and Hollywood as objects of love and hate, the shameful Nazi legacy, and the post-war political malaise challenging "the nation's willingness to forget the past and get on with business as usual" (271). In contrast, the "Cinema of Consensus offers tableaux of mobile young professionals, who play with possibility and flirt with difference, living in the present and worrying about their future, juggling careers, relationships and lifestyles" (272), often within the context of comedies by directors who "aim to please, which is to say that they consciously solicit a new German consensus" (264). Although Rentschler doesn't specify it as such, the consensus these directors sought was a neoliberal one (with characteristics specific to the German context) that became hegemonic throughout much of the post-wall world, including Spain, which also featured a national cinema dominated by its own peculiar culture of consensus during the same period.[4]

Within Spanish cultural studies, Luisa Elena Delgado has expertly examined the culture of consensus in Spain during the 1990s and early 2000s in *La nación singular*, and her work is informed by that of Guillem Martínez and other Spanish critics who developed the concept of the "*Cultura de la Transición*," or CT, to name "the hegemonic cultural paradigm in Spain" since Franco's death in 1975 (11), with its roots in the so-called transition to democracy alluded to above.[5] Both Delgado and Martínez make it clear that what I prefer to call Transition ideology, or simply Transitionism, served to discipline Spaniards recently liberated from nearly four decades of military dictatorship into obedient neoliberal subjects whose coordinates of desire were structured by free market values and the imperative to repress historical memory, political dissent, and cultural antagonisms.

In the field of political philosophy, Jacques Rancière has made clear distinctions between the politics of consensus and dissensus. For Rancière, Transitionism does not qualify as politics at all but rather represents what he calls "the police" by regulating political speech and action and eliminating dissent from the status quo. In contrast, dissensus represents the presence of politics in public life, and it is often marked by the eruption of political speech from sectors of the population that have been marginalized or rendered invisible, like the Spanish precariat that made itself heard through the 15M and other mobilizations, such as *las mareas ciudadanas*, that disputed the implementation of harsh austerity measures predicated upon neoliberal logic.

Building upon the work of the economist Karl Polanyi, Roger Foster has recently argued that we can understand neoliberalism as a cultural catastrophe that involves the "forcible destruction of the pre-existing cultural frame of life and work" (124). Echoing Artime's observation about the Spanish crisis, with which this essay began, Foster concludes that "those who lack the economic, social and cultural resources to profit from social change, will experience the transformation as a catastrophic event that up-ends their settled expectations and beliefs about social existence" (125). Following Foster, we can take the dismantling of the already relatively weak Spanish welfare state through the acceleration of austerity as an attempt to establish a new regime through the exploitation of economic crisis.[6] But what is important to note for our purposes here is how the negative effects of neoliberal precarization pointed out by Guy Standing—i.e., anger, anomie, anxiety, alienation, social disorientation, and the ethical vacuum they produce—are precisely the substance of film noir (22–25).

In this regard, it is worth comparing the (re)emergence of Spanish neo-noir to the explosion of South Koren neo-noir during the early 2000s. Taking Chan-Wook Park's noir revenge trilogy as an example, film scholar Hyang-jin Lee has related *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2001), *Oldboy* (2003), and *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (2005) to "the late 1990s IMF crisis which resulted from rapid, state-led economic growth without any safeguards from civil society, and which led to huge social problems, including nationwide unemployment, the consequent dislocation of families, and a rise in the suicide rate" (115). Such social problems mirror the catastrophic effects of the Great Recession in Spain a decade later. If, according to Lee, Park's trilogy illuminates "the privatization of power and violence" in crisis-ridden South Korea (115), then we should expect to see similar patterns in recent Spanish neo-noir. As Jennifer Fay and Justus Nieland argue, "film noir is best appreciated as an always international phenomenon concerned with the local effects of globalization and the threats to national urban culture it seems to herald" (ix), with the caveat that the (re)emergence of Spanish neo-noir has less to do with perceived threats than it does with the all too real violence produced by neoliberal catastrophe in Spain.

Magical Girl

Economic precarity, cultural crisis, and neoliberal catastrophe saturate the austere mood of *Magical Girl*, directed by Carlos Vermut and released to critical acclaim in 2014, winning Best Film at the 2014 San Sebastián International Film Festival and garnering the Bárbara Lennie a Goya Award for Best Lead

Actress, among other prizes. The twisted plot of this fragmented narrative is set in motion by the plight of Luis, an unemployed literature teacher who is forced to sell his private collection of novels by the kilo in order to support Alicia, his twelve-year-old daughter who is suffering from terminal leukemia. In a misguided and ultimately tragic attempt to make her happy, Luis unwittingly triggers a nightmare scenario that exposes the social fractures, alienation, and immorality that characterizes Spain during this period of crisis.

Out of work and unable save his daughter, Luis's symbolic castration is compounded by the absence of a spouse or maternal figure within the central family unit. Particularly in terms of the latter, such a conspicuous absence—conspicuous precisely because it is left unexplained—signifies the lack of what the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott calls "the holding environment": the safe, nurturing space that mothers traditionally provide for the psychosomatic development of babies, which can serve as a metaphor for various types of care, such as the psychoanalytic therapist–patient relationship and even the welfare state.[7] This void of maternal care is filled by Bárbara, played by Bárbara Lennie in a rare apparition of a *femme fatale* in Spanish cinema. Notably, in one of the film's many disturbing scenes, Bárbara laughs uncontrollably about the reaction she would provoke if she were to throw a guest's baby—that she is holding precariously—out the window of her high-end apartment. The scene stages an imagined encounter with what Julia Kristeva termed the abject, or that which "disturbs identity, system, order," highlights the "fragility of the law" (4), and results in a reaction of disgust or horror to the threatened breakdown in meaning. This is exactly what occurs, as the scene is cut abruptly in a way that is reminiscent of Lacan's use of the variable-length psychoanalytic session, which serves to punctuate a sense of abhorrence and underscore that there are no "good enough mothers" here, to cite Winnicott again.[8] Read in sociopolitical terms, *Magical Girl* foregrounds the lack of a compassionate holding environment in the bleak world it depicts through such maternal absence and narrative excess, and the film is evocative of the destruction of the Spanish welfare state as a consequence of neoliberal catastrophe. Notably, such wreckage produced several high-profile suicides involving homeowners facing eviction, jumping out of their apartment balconies, making Bárbara's joke all the more perverse.

Bárbara is the most clear-cut example of the *femme fatale* in recent Spanish neo-noir, a genre that nonetheless utilizes elements of the thriller, horror, and, perhaps most notably—as Maureen Tobin Stanley has expertly analyzed—the *españolada*. Bárbara is, by definition, a transgressive figure that threatens patriarchal order through her flaunting of traditional domesticity and sexual norms.[9] Her character can also be seen as the projection of abject cultural anxieties during a period of acute cultural crisis, which *Magical Girl*

self-consciously references via explicit dialogue about the crisis and its tragic consequences. For example, the comment "*No sé dónde vamos a parar*" (I don't know where we're going to end up) appears twice in the film, drawing attention to its thematic importance and deployment as a narrative frame through which to interpret the depravity in the film, much of which is centered upon Bárbara's tortured body, itself a symbol of the calamitous nature of the crisis that bears the scars of hysterical masculine violence. Furthermore, the appearance of a *femme fatale* within Spanish cinema highlights how *Magical Girl* is in conversation with Spanish literature produced during a previous period of crisis, which also provoked masculine anxieties. As Marina Cuzovic-Severn has pointed out, "the representation of *femme fatale* in Spanish literature culminates at the end of the nineteenth century, when the crisis of Spanish masculinity deepens and when the loss of the colonies becomes a traumatic domestic reality for the once powerful former empire" (28). Thus, Bárbara—who also shares many of the monstrous, dictatorial character traits associated with Doña Bárbara, the protagonist of Rómulo Gallegos's 1929 Venezuelan novel—should be historicized in the Spanish context as the cinematic return of a powerful literary trope that always already signifies anxieties tied to cultural crisis.[10]

Repeating the crisis-laden metaphor of abject projectiles falling from the sky, Luis's introduction to this twenty-first-century *femme fatale* involves Bárbara vomiting on him after swallowing pills in an aborted suicide attempt following the baby tossing scene. The shock stops Luis from throwing a brick through the window of the jewelry store below her apartment, which he sought to rob to purchase what he tragically mistakes as the object of his daughter's dying desire. In addition to surviving long enough to celebrate her thirteenth birthday, Alicia is obsessed with the costume of the titular Japanese anime character Magical Girl Yukiko. The singular dress costs 7,000 euros, an absurd amount for an unemployed literature teacher. Luis's encounter with Bárbara results in a sexual act that he records without her knowledge, setting him on a treacherous path of blackmail and deceit and converting a bizarre one-night stand into an unforeseen reckoning with an antagonist whose destructive power is not revealed to Luis until it is too late.

At first, Luis successfully procures the 7,000 euros from Bárbara to purchase the dress for Alicia without consequence, but Luis later falls victim to her destructive power when he blackmails her once again to buy the matching (phallic) wand to complete Alicia's costume fantasy. This repetition of unethical decision-making marks Luis's undoing and is reminiscent of Julio Coll's 1958 noir film *Un vaso de whisky* (*A Glass of Whiskey*) because of how it illustrates a domino effect of deceit and destruction. In their discussion of that film, Labanyi and Rodríguez cite Antonio José Navarro's analysis of

how the urban atmosphere "reveals the greyness of characters whose evil has more to do with the drastic cultural and economic deprivations of Spain at the time than with their inner personae" (265). The same holds true for *Magical Girl*, which dramatizes the grey zone produced by *la crisis*.[11] This ambiguity makes it difficult not to empathize with Luis, as his actions are motivated by misplaced paternal love driven by pitiful desperation, even as they help Luis overcome his symbolic castration through the (re)assertion of masculine dominance. Crucially, Luis is completely unaware of how Bárbara gets the money he demands, providing him with an emotional alibi of ignorance to the degree of injury his blackmail engenders. Bearing witness to such pain, in turn, elicits empathy for Bárbara in viewers who are confronted with an abyss of violence that she has little choice but to endure to maintain her privileged social position. Luis misinterprets this privilege as a permanent function of her class, when in fact, it is a precarious condition of her tenuous marriage.

Unbeknownst to Luis, Bárbara suffers from mental illness and lives under the strict control of Alfredo, her well-to-do psychiatrist husband, who manages her finances as well as the psychotropic pills he administers to her on a regular basis. To pay Luis and avoid provoking Alfredo's suspicion, Bárbara furtively returns to her previous life of elite sex work as Bárbara Asunción, a legendary submissive within Madrid's elite BDSM underworld.[12] This decision results in the extreme brutalization of her scarred body by sadistic patrons, which, in a masterfully sadistic directorial stroke by Vermut, occurs completely offscreen, forcing viewers to privately fill in the black space on the screen with their own disturbing imaginations. Bárbara seeks revenge by emotionally blackmailing Damián (played by José Sacristán), a former math teacher under her (magical) spell, who recently completed a prison sentence for an unexplained crime he previously committed on her behalf. Asserting that Luis is directly responsible for the damage that resulted in her placement in a full body cast, covering her head and almost all of her face, Bárbara knows her fabulation will incite her guardian angel to kill Luis, which he does. But, he also murders a pair of bystanders and Alicia in the process. Thus, as is typical for *femme fatales*, Bárbara is physically punished for her flaunting of traditional notions of female domesticity and transgressing sexual norms, while, at the same time, she subverts the patriarchal symbolic order through the dark powers of seduction and destruction she wields.[13] The disturbing implication of *Magical Girl* is that, if equilibrium is reinstated at the end of the film, it rests upon a monstrous disorder that leaves no character untouched by extreme violence: there is no limit to the abyss of the crisis, no safe word to stop neoliberal catastrophe.

It is significant that money, or rather the unequal distribution of it, is what drives the plot of *Magical Girl*. Economic precarity in a land of concentrated

wealth has produced widespread misery in Spain from the days of Lazarillo de Tormes to today. Yet, here the picaresque is replaced by tragedy. As such, Luis's error of judgement, which leads him to conclude Alicia values a designer dress over spending time with him during her dying days, results in their mutual murder at the hands of Bárbara's willing executioner. This is a tragic mistake, one which is made clear to viewers who are privy to a radio message that Luis does not hear and in which Alicia expresses gratitude for her father's companionship during her multiple hospital stays. Luis's descent into the grey zone is mediated as much by his lack of financial resources as it is by the alienation provoked by his unemployment, which is further compounded by his anguish at the imminent loss of his only child. The absence of any sort of social holding environment is palpable. Luis has no romantic partner, close friends, or family on whom he can depend, and, before his entanglement with Bárbara, he lives a life of quiet desperation in a version of Madrid that is clearly divided between the haves and the have nots. In the somber world of *Magical Girl*, Spain's capital is uncharacteristically cold, quiet, and desolate, and this depiction is created by the staging through the use of austere, white interiors, pale skin tones, and low-key lighting, as well as by a hauntingly sparse soundtrack periodically interrupted by the dramatic use of *La niña de fuego*, which reinforces many of the film's central themes.[14] The violence to which Bárbara submits herself is also produced by her lack of access to money, even as she enjoys her husband's wealth, which she does not want to lose. That violence, including the bloodshed she manipulates Damián to carry out on her behalf, is neither glorified nor redemptive, and the film ends on an even more profound note of sadness than the one with which it begins, suggesting that, if *Magical Girl* opens *in media res* of neoliberal catastrophe, it closes deep within the depths of the crisis that catastrophe has produced in Spain.

Consensus is nowhere to be found in the bleak emotional landscape of *Magical Girl*. On the contrary, the film is marked by a cultural dissensus conjured by the fractured social relations that permeate the film. It is also made explicit in a monologue about bullfighting spoken by Oliver Zoco, the owner of the secluded mansion where Bárbara submits to her sexual torture:

> Do you know why Spain is a country in eternal conflict? Because we cannot decide whether we are a rational country or an emotional one. The Nordic countries, for example, are cerebral countries. However, the Arabs or the Latinos, have accepted their passionate side without complex nor guilt. They all know which side dominates. We Spaniards are on a balance that is suspended precisely in the middle. That is how us Spaniards

> are . . . like the bullfights. And what are bullfights? The representation of the struggle between instinct and technique, between emotion and reason.

This taurine iteration of the myth of "las dos Españas," (the two Spains) destined to be eternally at odds with each other, is a perennial manifestation of cultural dissensus in Spain that contains none of the transformative political potential implicit in Rancière's formulation of the term. Rather, *Magical Girl* tragically reproduces the privatization of power and violence, which is seen in much of the neo-noir that has emerged in other national contexts in response to the destructive effects of neoliberal globalization. Here, such privatization takes the form of two alienated individuals lost in the grey zone of *la crisis*, who alternatively exercise power over one another by indirectly inflicting brutal violence on the other in an attempt to avenge their own particular misery. The loss of the holding environment of the Spanish welfare state—an underdeveloped but essential anchor for sustaining the myth of the Transition—is reflected by the virtual absence of the state in the film. Notable exceptions are the prison from which Damián is released before murdering Luis and Alicia, and the library where Luis instructs Bárbara to leave the money for which he has blackmailed her, transforming a cultural space of public knowledge into a transactional space of private misery. The fact that Luis asks Bárbara to leave the money in a copy of the 1978 Spanish Constitution, because he's convinced that nobody reads it, is more than one of the few humorous moments in the film. Converting the most potent signifier of the Transition and the cultural consensus it once symbolized into a joke—as well as an envelope of corruption—suggests that symbolic law is defunct and the insurance of symbolic order has become obsolete. To drive home this point—also via black humor—at one point earlier in the film, Alicia tells her father that she'd like the King to order Spaniards to turn on each other and kill themselves. Incidentally, King Juan Carlos I, the imaginary embodiment of "the Spirit-of-the-Transition" for decades, abdicated the throne a few months before the film's release amid scandals that have continued to haunt the Spanish monarchy restored by Franco's orders upon his death in 1975. While Juan Carlos is the target of Alicia's parodic royal declaration, it uncannily recalls Franco's bloody claim to legitimacy—the Spanish Civil War—of which the Bourbon monarchy is but one corrupt legacy.

The Fury of a Patient Man

Another example of Spanish neo-noir that hinges on the breakdown of symbolic law is *The Fury of a Patient Man*, the celebrated 2016 directorial debut

of Spanish actor Raúl Arévalo, which won four Goya Awards, including Best Film, Best Original Screenplay, Best New Director, and Best Supporting Actor. Mixing film noir with the Western, Arévalo's film also traffics in deception, revenge, and privatized power and violence. Set firmly in a gritty, working-class, "*cañí*" Madrid, the film opens with an armed robbery of a neighborhood jewelry store. The robbery goes wrong, resulting in a car chase that ends abruptly with an accident and the arrest of the getaway driver. Eight years later, we meet José, the film's reticent protagonist, played by Antonio de la Torre—the face of the recent Spanish thriller boom—who is a regular at a bar in Usera, located on the blue-collar side of the Río Manzanares that divides central and south Madrid. We later learn that José has been patiently waiting for the getaway driver's release from prison. The getaway driver's name, Curro, recalls Curro Jiménez, a popular 1970s Spanish television show set in Andalucía in the nineteenth century that followed the exploits of the *bandolero* whose name gave the show its title. Furtively infiltrating Curro's life while he is behind bars, José draws the attention of Ana, an attractive waitress and Curro's long-time girlfriend with whom she has a young son, and befriends Juanjo, Ana's friendly brother and the owner of the bar who has a young daughter who spends much of her time doing homework at an empty table. Just before Curro gets out of prison, Ana and José have sex after a party celebrating the first communion of Juanjo's daughter. When tensions flare between Ana and the hypermasculine Curro shortly after his release, José offers to take Ana and her son to his country house so they can escape Curro's violent outbursts. When she accepts the offer, Ana and her son unwittingly become bait in an elaborate trap José has meticulously set for Curro, who is completely unaware of the violence that ties them together and how José's desire for revenge will affect him.

Faced with the sudden disappearance of Ana and his son, Curro is forced to accept José's proposal in order to be reunited with them: Curro must track down the three others involved in the armed robbery that resulted in José's father's coma and the death of his wife. The rest of the film entails the search for Curro's estranged partners, all of whom escaped justice and have left their lives of crime since the botched robbery. Once discovered, José executes them all through brutal acts of violence that Curro is forced to witness. In the film's unexpected finale, José shoots Juanjo with a shotgun in the back of the café while his daughter is the lone person inside. The scene is striking in its resemblance to the climax of *Magical Girl*—although, in this case, José spares the life of the innocent child, who is sleeping when he kills her father—and it is notable that these acts of privatized violence take place in relatively empty Spanish bars, which, like British pubs, have traditionally functioned as vibrant public meeting spaces. Both films employ this culturally specific space

to signal a sort of neoliberal tragedy of the commons in which the working-class communities they represent have been destroyed through austerity. Thus, the murders that take place in these brightly lit bars in the dark of night might be seen as stand-ins for the structural violence that has occurred within Spain.

If money, and its scarcity, is the invisible hand that shapes the plot of *Magical Girl*, revenge, and its abundance, is what drives *The Fury of a Patient Man.* This results in three grim murders before José returns Curro safely to Ana and their son by dropping him off at his country house at the end of the film before driving off into the sunset, like the hero of the Western who reestablishes order in an imperiled town through an exterminating violence that eliminates the threats to it before riding his horse further west at dusk. This genre symbolism is unmistakable in the rural setting of the film's dénouement, but its mixture with neo-noir undermines the reinstatement of equilibrium and restoration of the symbolic order characteristic of Westerns. Like in *Magical Girl*, the vigilante violence in *The Fury of a Patient Man* is devoid of redemption and full of despair. Even if audiences are sympathetic to José's suffering—and the film builds such sympathy by showing José caring for his hospitalized father and having Ana discover photo albums in the country house full of pictures of him and his wife, whom her brother Juanjo unknowingly killed during the robbery—the cold-blooded way in which José carries out his revenge mitigates against an unambiguous identification with his character and prevents an easy enjoyment of the murders, which might be possible in other types of revenge fantasy films, such as *Dying Beyond Their Means* (dir. Isaki Lacuesta, 2014), which eschews noir for *esperpento* (the grotesque) as a way to address the crisis. Therefore, like in *Magical Girl*, audiences have little option but to alternate their sympathies between characters who victimize each other within a monstrous disorder. Such an immoral morass sets the emotional tone of *The Fury of a Patient Man*, which overrides any romantic connotations implicit in its final shot, rendering it an ironic gesture to a genre that, however problematically, has been emptied of its redemptive power.

Furthermore, the fact that José is forced to investigate the crime that killed his wife and put his father in a coma for eight years suggests the failure of symbolic law. While Curro was caught and convicted, and he served a sentence for his involvement in the robbery as the driver of the getaway car, the three others involved in the crime managed to escape the same fate, setting José's revenge scenario in motion. Within a context of impunity, vigilante justice serves as a morally ambiguous correction to suffering caused by a lack in the functioning of symbolic law. The relative ease with which José is able to track down the others involved in the crime once Curro is released from prison suggests a degree of incompetence on the part of the Spanish police

and judicial system that is not entirely believable in a film that otherwise exploits the cinematic potential of realism—particularly with its depictions of the working-class neighborhoods that make up a large part of Spain's capital city—but nonetheless suggests how the symbolic order in crisis Spain has been shattered. Just as in *Magical Girl*, we see very few symbolic authorities on screen, aside from the police officers that chase down Curro at the beginning of the film and the prison guards who open doors for Ana's conjugal visit and his bittersweet release.

If the loss of a sociopolitical holding environment is signified by the lack of a maternal presence in *Magical Girl*, then its absence in crisis Spain is confirmed in *The Fury of a Patient Man* by a lack of justice, which motivates the film's protagonist to take matters into his own hands. While doing so cannot bring his wife back to life or pull his father out of a coma, José's privatized violence nonetheless perversely restores his masculinity, which was thrown into crisis by his inability to protect his loved ones from harm. However morally ambiguous, the three revenge murders have the effect of reversing the symbolic castration José experienced during the robbery that rendered him a fatherless widower by reinscribing his character with agency. This leads to the unsettling conclusion that the equilibrium reinstated vis-à-vis José's restored masculinity has authoritarian or fascist undertones because the film suggests that privatized violence is the only solution within the monstrous disorder of neoliberal catastrophe. This is the same logic that motivated the tragic robbery that triggered the plot in the first place, rendering the film susceptible to conservative interpretations. Yet, here it is important to note Ann Davies's observation that "the restoration of order at the end of the thriller does indeed tend towards the maintenance of the status quo, which is after all one of the witting or unwitting functions of the law. *However, the thriller simultaneously questions this law even as the characters within it may strive to re-establish it*" (178, emphasis mine). I would argue that this is because thrillers and film noir—which Davies conflates in her analysis—dramatize cultural dissensus, exposing the perversity of law that is in the service of a monstrous disorder.

May God Save Us

As if to further pull the curtain back on the dysfunctionality of Spanish law and the criminal justice system responsible for spurring on acts like José's spree of vengeance, *May God Save Us* depicts the impunity of a fractured symbolic order from the inside. Also released in 2016 and directed by Rodrigo Sorogoyen, the film won Best Screenplay at the San Sebastian International Film Festival and was nominated for six Goya Awards. In contrast to *Magical*

Girl and *The Fury of a Patient Man, May God Save Us* focuses on a pair of mismatched Madrid detectives, Javier Alfaro, played by Roberto Álamo, who won the Goya for Best Lead Actor, and Luis Velarde, again played by Antonio de la Torre. This odd couple find themselves in conflict with their colleagues and superiors while investigating a series of murders involving the rape of elderly women in Madrid's city center at the same time as the Papal visit that took place the summer after the 15M indignados movement occupied the Puerta del Sol in an eruption of dissensus à la Rancière. This example of Spanish neo-noir employs the classic noir convention of the troubled but brilliant detective or private investigator that uncovers corruption within the system of which he is a part, while investigating crimes that threaten the social order he is meant to protect.

In *May God Save Us*, this formula is doubled, as Alfaro and Velarde are the epitome of a pair of dysfunctional men forced to work together as partners. For his part, Alfaro, a particularly muscular and explosive iteration of the "*macho ibérico*" (Iberian macho) stereotype, has anger management issues that mask his difficulty handling emotions, which has had deleterious effects on his standing both at work and at home in a textbook case of toxic masculinity. In the film's backstory, Alfaro attacked and partially blinded a fellow detective, whom Alfaro casually refers to as a "*polaco*," slang for *catalán*. This detail subtly references the specter of the Catalan independence movement—the biggest source of cultural dissensus in Spain (and Catalunya) in recent years—and suggests the impossibility of a pluri-national Spanish *convivencia* (co-existence), signaling the film's accent on dissensus before it even begins. Similarly, Alfaro's family life is marked by emotional distance, distrust, and a marital affair initiated by his wife that he discovers halfway through the film. On the other end of the spectrum of masculinity in crisis, Velarde's character is dominated by his status as a severe stutterer, a condition that provokes frequent commentary and disdain from Alfaro and others, has interfered with his sexual development, and has contributed to his alienation at work and at home. Velarde lives alone, listening to melancholic *fado* records with lyrics he doesn't understand but that express the sadness of the emotional soundtrack of his life. His inexperience with women, which is alluded to in several scenes—including a joke about visiting prostitutes that Alfaro takes seriously—is best reflected in his clumsiness in approaching Rosario, the wide-eyed, lonely cleaning woman of his apartment complex, which, like his interior life, is completely devoid of other people and the human warmth whose loss *fado* laments. Slatted blinds, sharp angles, and the creative use of mirrors add noir elements to the staging, mirroring Velarde's stunted character and the development of this precarious romantic relationship after he slips and falls on the tile Rosario has just cleaned.

The film's antagonist, Andrés, does not appear in full frame until the end of the third act, ensuring that the audience has plenty of time to absorb the atmosphere of dissensus that pervades the film, which is alluded to in the film's opening shot of the Puerta del Sol from an uncanny aerial perspective as it is being hosed down with water by cleaning trucks during the scorching summer of 2011. This suggests the aftermath of the 15M *indignados* occupation of the country's most emblematic square—literally "kilometro zero," or the geographical center of Spain—that still haunts it, at least from the perspective of the system it targeted. This shot encourages audiences to identify with this perspective, as the camera angle replicates that of the police helicopters hovering over the square during its occupation. The generational and political divides that explosion of dissensus exposed is referenced again as we eavesdrop alongside Velarde as Alfaro tells a joke about a police officer in riot gear beating a 15M protester with his baton. The punchline is that the protestor, whose mother the cop vulgarly insults as he beats him, is his own son. Later in the film, archival images of Pope Benedict XVI's polemical visit to Madrid recall the demonstrations organized to protest the significant expenses of the papal visit incurred by the state at the same time austerity measures were being implemented. Throughout *May God Save Us*, which deploys a similar realism as *The Fury of a Patient Man*—although the latter's use of grainy 16mm film and exclusive focus on working-class environments makes it the far gritter of the two—we see groups of people in the streets sporting flags for the pope's visit. While clearly celebratory in intention, within the sociopolitical logic of the film, the flags seem to signal not a sea of consensus but a cacophony of national identities that mirror tensions around regional nationalisms within Spain, particularly when it comes to Catalunya, the Basque Country, and, to a lesser extent, Galicia, which is figured prominently in Alfaro's main rival within the force, Alonso, played by the Galician actor Luis Zahera.

The plot of the film, which follows the twists and turns of Alfaro and Velarde's investigation of the string of sexualized murders, is not simply set against a background of cultural dissensus in order to adorn the film with a historical veneer. The imperative to suture such conflicts within the symbolic order and protect the image of the city while it is on the world stage during the papal visit requires that the murders remain a secret. This command is articulated by Sancho, the slick chief of police, to the two sets of detectives in charge of the homicide unit in a soft-spoken monologue full of pathos during a fancy dinner at a dimly lit, empty restaurant full of dark wood. The staging evokes similar dinners in mafia films, with Alfaro and Velarde seated on one side of the table and Alonso and his partner Bermejo on the other—and the association fits the theme of the police carrying out their dirty work in the shadows of

society, which is subjected to violent forces that remain unacknowledged in the light of day. More specifically, the ability of Sancho to keep the murders out of the press reflects not only the state's possessive investment in the Cultura de la Transición, which seeks to keep social conflict out of view—as well as the Spanish media's complicity with CT—but it also serves to preserve the integrity of "la Marca España," or "the Spanish brand." This neoliberal marketing initiative to promote Spain internationally as an ideal place to do business, while continuing to stress the cultural differences that make Spain unique, is a carryover from the iconic "Spain is different" tourism campaign of the late dictatorship. But, as Alfaro and Velarde discover, protecting the image of the country comes at the expense of protecting its vulnerable female pensioners, upon whom Andrés preys with impunity, as they are unaware that they are a population at risk, victims of a culture of consensus that, in this film, is exposed as an accomplice to murder.

In a further indictment of such a monstrous symbolic (dis)order that defends the interests of a neoliberal state over its citizens, the origin of Andrés's violence toward elderly women is revealed to be the symptom of a traumatic relationship with his mother, a deeply religious woman of frail health for whom Andrés cares dutifully even as he rapes and kills more agile women of her same age. The discovery of a key piece of evidence—Andrés's first communion necklace—links him to an enormous Catholic church located in the conservative, upper-class Salamanca neighborhood after he kills Alfaro in an aborted attempt to recover the necklace from a crime scene. Following the clues suggested by the psychological profile he's developed in conjunction with a psychologist assisting on the case, Velarde learns from the church's head priest that Andrés and his mother had a "special" relationship when he was a child. While the details remain obscure, what is made clear is that Andrés's mother was a strict catechism instructor who disciplined her students with a heavy hand. The suggestion is that she also regularly raised her hand against Andrés.

This type of abusive behavior on the part of authoritarian Spanish mothers is echoed in the film's last scene, when Velarde tells Andrés that his stuttering is the result of a beating he received from his own mother, linking the two characters through a shared childhood trauma in an unexpected way that is foreshadowed by their similar taste in flowers. In this way, *May God Save Us* reinscribes "the Spanish oedipal narrative," a recurrent cinematic trope of maternal repression theorized by Spanish film scholar Marsha Kinder, in which tyrannical mothers stand in for the Francoist dictatorship and its repressive legacy. Additionally, the film also echoes the absence of the holding environment in *Magical Girl* through its perversion of the mother–child relationship, as well as that of the good enough mother, because *May God Save*

Us presents us with a maternal figure who clearly failed Andrés in unmanageable ways, resulting in his violent psychological split.

The revealing last scene of the film takes place three years after Andrés kills his mother and her immigrant caretaker before managing to escape from Madrid as Velarde is hot on his trail. An economical sequence quickly establishes the fact that, like the bank robbers in *The Fury of a Patient Man*, Andrés has given up killing and embraced the quiet life of a solitary repairman in the rainy, industrial north of Spain with a passion for classic literature, with which he occupies his free time. It seems as if, having killed his mother, his own conflicted masculinity has been resolved, and he appears to have achieved a degree of equilibrium in which his violent impulses are under control. At the end of the sequence, Andrés is sitting in his van eating a sandwich after finishing his shift while parked on a hilltop overlooking factories below. Suddenly, Velarde emerges from the trees behind the van, walking through the rain. Pretending to be lost, Velarde asks for a ride to town and Andrés reluctantly allows him into the van. After a conversation in which Velarde shares the traumatic origin of his stuttering and how it has caused him problems with women—suggesting that it was the cause of the demise of his relationship with Rosario—Velarde addresses Andrés directly by name and makes it known that he's been searching for him since he disappeared from Madrid and that he traced him through his purchase of a vintage edition of classic literature. A struggle ensues between the two in the cab of the van, with the violence reminiscent of the intimate murders committed in cold blood by José—also played by Antonio de la Torre—in *The Fury of a Patient Man*. Velarde first strangles and then beats Andrés to the point of death before placing his body in the back of the van and closing the door. Clearly operating outside the purview of the law, Velarde takes justice into his own hands, and the film ends with Velarde occupying Andrés' place in the driver's seat, gazing at nightfall through the rain-speckled windshield, and waiting for Andrés to die a slow, agonizing death, while his own masculinity—which had been in question the entire film—is now safely confirmed.

Like the other examples of recent Spanish neo-noir already cited, *May God Save Us* concludes with a morally ambiguous murder that unsettles the precarious equilibrium that seems to have been reinstated after Andrés killed his repressive mother and goes into hiding. Such an ending would be far from happy, but, just as in *Magical Girl* and *The Fury of a Patient Man*, things go from bad to worse during the climax as the conventions of film noir demand: Velarde's act demonstrates the degree to which his own moral character has become corrupt as he exercises a Schmittian form of sovereign power—i.e., the right to decide on the state of exception—through the application of extrajudicial violence. This violence is enacted not in his capacity as a detective

but as a private agent of justice in an act that will not be officially registered as such. In the dialectic between brains and brute force, which constitute the essence of a law that is animated by a monstrous disorder, what we end up with is a synthesis of the two. In the film's climax, Velarde, the epitome of the rational, restrained, symbolically castrated detective, assumes Alfaro's emotional, violent, hypermasculine tendencies. Such a resolution would not surprise Oliver Zoco from *Magical Girl*, whose meditations on bullfighting and his rather essentialist view of "the Spanish character" could—however problematically—also be applied to *May God Save Us*.

Conclusion

As in *Magical Girl* and *The Fury of a Patient Man*, a monstrous disorder is restored at the end of *May God Save Us* through an act of privatized violence—and this time by the hands of a symbolic authority. These acts of privatized violence render all of these films susceptible to conservative interpretations, and for good reason. However, I would argue that the political implications of the (re)emergence of Spanish neo-noir are highly ambiguous because they simultaneously deploy cultural dissensus as the dark canvas upon which noir storylines with violent endings are projected. In each case, it is impossible not to notice how Spain is figured amidst crisis, either directly through dialogue or indirectly through a highly suggestive staging and vis-à-vis the depiction of fractured social relations and a broken symbolic order. Thus, despite its political ambiguity, this new wave of Spanish neo-noir offers an implicit critique of neoliberal catastrophe and its deleterious effects on Spanish society, including gender relations and masculine identity. Masculinity in crisis is a noir theme that should be taken both literally, due to the increase in unemployment, evictions and child poverty, all of which threaten traditional notions of masculinity as an identity based primarily on the ability to provide economically and offer security to one's (heteronormative) family, and allegorically, as an indication of the crisis of symbolic authority and lack of a holding environment within a corrupt (patriarchal) society that can neither provide for or protect its citizens, let alone nurture them.

In this sense, recent Spanish neo-noir constitutes a new cinema of dissensus that translates cultural crisis into the cinematic language of film noir. From its Hollywood beginnings, film noir has been associated with periods of cultural upheaval experienced in distinct national settings, along with the (gendered) anxieties they produce. Spanish noir is not different. Its (re)emergence from the ruins of neoliberal catastrophe is consistent with how global iterations of film noir have depicted the corrosive effects of capitalism and

how its perpetual crises have wreaked havoc on local cultures throughout its own dark, brutal history.

Notes

1. For an analysis of the first wave of Spanish neo-noir see Davies.
2. For a discussion of the perception of the establishment of a new monstrous disorder within the context of revenge, see Neuman.
3. In contrast, much recent Spanish horror features a maternal crisis that frequently hinges on the loss of a child. The protagonists of these films attempt to restore their compromised motherhood through the search for their disappeared children, which often brings about tragic results. See especially *The Orphange*, *Hierro*, and *The Nameless*.
4. For example, see much of Pedro Almodóvar's oeuvre. Tellingly, Luisa Elena Delgado begins the first chapter of *La nación singular* with an insightful analysis of how Almodóvar's *Live Flesh* (1997) and *All About My Mother* (1999) illustrate the culture of consensus within postdictatorship Spain. For a critique of postdictatorship Spanish cinema analyzed through the lens of the "*Cultura de la Transition*," see Jordi Costa in *CT o la Cultura de la Transición* (Martínez).
5. As José Colmeiro has argued, in addition to being a discrete historical period typically dated 1975–1982, "la Transición" has served as "a foundational myth of Spanish modernity" that has been criticized by many cultural critics for its failure to deal with the traumatic past related to the repression that took place during the Spanish Civil War and the Francoist dictatorship.
6. See the work of Vicenç Navarro related to this topic, as well as Naomi Klein.
7. Winnicott first introduces his concept of the holding environment in the influential 1953 essay, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena."
8. Lacan's controversial use of the variable-length psychoanalytic session was intended to emphasize an important point or interpretation by ending sessions unexpectedly. Winnicott uses the term "good enough mother" to describe the process by which a mother (or other caretaker) responds to the needs of a baby over time. At first, the mother adapts almost completely to meet the baby's demands, sacrificing her own needs, and then gradually begins to let the baby experience frustration in small quantities. See Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*.
9. For an insightful feminist reading of *Magical Girl* that emphasizes the film's indebtedness to the *españolada*, see Maureen Toby Stanley's essay. In it, Stanley connects the film, quite appropriately, to *Embrujo*, the 1947 *españolada* starring Lola Flores. However, Stanley limits her analysis of Bárbara's character to a modernized version of the Carmen myth, never considering her as a *femme fatale* linked to film noir. Such an omission may be indicative of the lack of examples in Spanish cinema. While Stanley

is correct to make connections between the characters of Bárbara and Carmen, the culturally specific reference does not preclude an engagement with this archetype of film noir. Indeed, the generic hybridity of Bárbara's character and *Magical Girl* itself is part of what makes her and the film so compelling.

10. I thank Diana Aramburu for pointing out the resemblance of Bárbara's character to Doña Bárbara, which, interestingly, was adapted into a soap opera by Telemundo that debuted in 2008, the year the Great Recession began.
11. Primo Levi coined the term "the grey zone" in *The Drowned and the Saved* to indicate the moral ambiguity present within Nazi concentration camps, particularly victims who collaborated with their oppressors in exchange for privileges. The concept has been broadly applied to describe various contexts in which it is difficult to judge human behavior due to extreme situations that overdetermine actions that would not occur under "normal" circumstances. Such is the case of both Luis and Bárbara, as they attempt to survive the grey zone of "la crisis" with their relative freedom curtailed by neoliberal catastrophe.
12. Bárbara makes two visits to the mansion of Oliver Zoco in order to comply with Luis's two demands for payment. During both visits, Bárbara consents to pass through the "Door of the Black Lizard" as a submissive. The first time, she is given a safe word to end the session at her will as well as the promise of no penetration. The second time, she is granted neither condition.
13. Notably, Bárbara's seductive and destructive energies are released shortly after she smashes her forehead into a mirror. The self-inflicted wound resembles a bleeding bindi that recalls the opening of the third eye of Kali, the Hindu goddess of death. I would like to thank Morgan Smith for articulating many of the implications of this iconography, as well as her perspective on how contemporary iterations of the *femme fatale* tend to subvert a phallocentric symbolic order in contrast to their nineteenth-century predecessors who reestablished that order through their own murder or domestication. She shared this insight with me during an invited visit to a graduate seminar at University of California Davis on the Spanish crisis taught by Diana Aramburu, in which she and the other seminar participants helped me think through many of the issues raised by *Magical Girl*.
14. For an extensive analysis of the use of *La niña de fuego* in Magical Girl, see Stanley.

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