

## ◆ Chapter 3

### **Melodrama and Visual Archives of Madrid in *Las chicas del cable***

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The historical melodrama *Las chicas del cable* premiered as the first Spanish drama financed by Netflix in April 2017. *Las chicas del cable* is a co-creation from Bambú productions, the entity responsible for two other highly successful programs that originally aired on the privately owned Spanish network Antenna 3—*Gran Hotel* (2011–2013), set in a luxury hotel in the beginning of the twentieth century, and *Velvet* (2014–2016), set in a 1950s fashion house. The formula that worked so well for these two series was also employed in the latest endeavor from Netflix: gorgeous costumes, romantic triangles, double-crossing mothers, kidnapped babies, and people resurrected from the dead. The particular plot points of *Las chicas del cable* include transgender love triangles, criminal enterprise, and an attempt to kidnap the Spanish King, Alfonso XIII, and force him to abdicate the throne. The first four seasons of *Las chicas del cable* center on the turmoil and the potential of the 1920s, differing from the majority of domestic Spanish narratives that, at least since 2000, have been laser focused on the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and its aftermath.

The center of *Las chicas del cable* is the working lives of women and how female solidarity overcomes personal and public crises. To this end, this paper will analyze how Madrid as an urban center is carefully curated as a visual archive, one which builds female solidarity through their status as workers and then, through the protagonists' attempts at both personal and community justice, by breaking societal and governmental laws. The protagonists' position as capitalist subjects in the late 1920s takes precedence over their status as Spanish women under a particular national historical moment. They are not so much *españolas* in 1928 (the year of Season One) but women entering the commodified labor market and navigating a life that does not have men as the emotional or financial center. Moreover, these women build their limited legal

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and personal personas, as well as their greater private or community power (sometimes illegally achieved), through their positions as both capitalist subjects and unlikely criminals. It is no coincidence that some of the other most promoted Spanish series on Netflix in 2018–2019—*Elite*, *Casa de Papel*, and *Alta Mar*—all deal in some way with underdogs who appropriate control of an unfair system to change their fortune.<sup>1</sup> In the post-2008 economy, crime sells, especially if it is in the name of economic or social justice.

Since the 2017 launch of *Las chicas del cable*, Netflix has invested in many more shows, resulting in a veritable boom in Spanish-language programming on the platform. María Ferreras, Vice President (VP) for International Business Development at Netflix, is a *madrileña*, and the company is speculating on the serialized television market around the globe, where the UK and Spain are the two biggest international venues. The *Hollywood Reporter* detailed the investment, commenting that “the company hopes to nearly double its employment on productions from 13,000 in 2018 to as many as 25,000 this year” (Green). Netflix is notoriously wary of releasing its viewership numbers for its own content (Alexander) and numbers about how and where the viewers of *Las chicas del cable* consume the show are not available. However, there are important indicators of the show’s popularity with an international audience, the first being the investment and influence the show has already enjoyed. Indeed, Diego Ávalos, Netflix’s VP of Original Content in Spain and Portugal, commented that “global demand for the top 20 Spanish-produced TV fiction titles grew 30.2%” over the last year (de Pablos). Netflix is investing capital in *Las chicas del cable* and in Spanish-language programming from both Spain and Latin America. Moreover, following Netflix, the online streaming platforms of Amazon, Apple, and HBO are planning to increase their presence in Spain and their offerings of Spanish-language television.

Seasons One through Four of *Las chicas del cable* take place a year apart, beginning in 1928, during a time period marked by economic growth despite the political instability of Alfonso XIII, the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, the Second Republic, and the military’s movement to overthrow the government. The social and artistic responses to these situations included the Generation of ’27 and surrealist painting, labor protests in Barcelona and Madrid, and an incipient women’s movement spurred in part by women entering the work force. Each episode lasts roughly fifty minutes and forms part of an over-all narrative arc, rather than being self-contained episodes. As opposed to a traditional melodrama that takes place primarily in the home, the women’s positions as paid laborers take the action out of the domestic sphere and into streets, cafés, and work spaces.

The first scene in the pilot episode begins on the street outside the Telefónica building, the first skyscraper in Madrid. The cold open orients us

to the time and space of the protagonists, while Lidia (Blanca Suarez) narrates the situation of women in 1928: “las mujeres éramos algo así como los adornos que se iban a las fiestas para presumir de ellos, objetos sin poder ni decisión. Ser libre era algo inalcanzable” (“Sueños” [Dreams]) (we women were something like accessories that went to parties to be shown off, objects without power or agency. To be free was something unattainable). The opening montage introduces the viewer to essential glimpses of the lives of the other four protagonists: Carlota (Ana Fernandez), Marga (Nadia de Santiago), Ángeles (Maggie Civantos), and Sara (Ana Polvorosa). Although the women are from different parts of Spanish society, the montage unites them as the viewer jumps from shots of the women in their private homes to their public lives in different city spaces. The camera foregrounds that all the women exist in state of potential danger from the men who surround them, and each woman craves her own individual financial freedom. The central figure of the series and narrator is the orphan Lidia (who changes her name from Alba in the first episode), who arrives at the telephone company to steal a large sum of money that she needs to pay off a dirty cop who is blackmailing her. Upper-class Carlota wants a job despite the wishes of her father, a general in the army who wants to maintain the religious and aristocratic status quo and does not want her working outside the home. Marga has just arrived in Madrid to find work and send money back to her economically strapped family in Almería. Middle-class Ángeles is a working mother whose abusive husband tries to force her to quit her job to focus on the family. Finally, Sara is one of the head telephone operators who, as viewers discover throughout the season, helps the owners of the Telefónica commit espionage against key political figures. By Season Four Sara has become Óscar, a transgender man who is fighting for political and social acceptance.<sup>2</sup>

### **Historical Perspective, Contemporary Focus**

Netflix produced *Las chicas del cable* at a time when audiences were hungry for stories of empowerment outside of the traditional cis-gendered heteronormative romantic relationship. Women’s movements are commanding news headlines and social media hashtags like #MeToo or #Cuentalo (a Spain-specific hashtag and website where everyday women tell their stories) have grown into international movements, leading to real political and social change. Bambú and Netflix’s return to a progressive era from the past, the 1920s and 1930s, allows *Las chicas del cable* to capitalize on this particular moment in history in a way that uses history, politics, and geography to draw an international audience and give historical legitimacy to contemporary issues.

Although they are not alone in this media strategy, *Las chicas del cable* is compelling because of how it centers female friendship within a newly commodified female labor market and because of the relationship that the series draws to the present, nearly one hundred years later.

*Las chicas del cable* was released in the political, social, and economic aftermath of the housing mortgage bubble that burst in 2008 and crashed markets around the world. Its effects in Spain were and continue to be disastrous. While big banks received financial forgiveness and bailouts, everyday citizens were left in the streets. Austerity programs pushed by the government, along with widely reported unemployment rates that rose to staggering levels (26 percent overall, with 50 percent youth unemployment at the height of the crisis in 2011), left people homeless or moving back in with parents and grandparents, many of whom were still receiving government pensions. In response to the criminal behavior of the financial sector and the government, Spaniards took to the streets in mass to protest. The *indignados* camped out in La Puerta del Sol in Madrid and in public spaces throughout the country. They marched and they formed new political groups. Although Spain is slowly crawling out from under its debt and severe unemployment, more than a decade of constant crisis has taken its toll on public health and national identity.<sup>3</sup> For example, the *American Journal of Public Health* published a study detailing the increase in the mortality rate since the start of crisis (Cabrera et al. 1091). Integrated into this economic and political crisis are heightened instances of domestic abuse and crimes against women in general. In 2017, there was a 17.7 percent increase in intimate partner violence from the year before, and there had been a 16 percent increase in the previous year (*The Local*). One case that brought Spaniards to the streets and caught international attention was “La Manada,” or the Wolf Pack. During the San Fermín festival in 2016, a group of five men followed, sequestered, and raped a young woman. Despite the evidence that the men themselves provided—they filmed the event on their cell phones and shared it via the social media messaging application WhatsApp—and the fact that the court found the woman “credible,” the men were only sentenced to the lighter charge of abuse rather than rape. There were massive protests in all parts of Spain after the 2018 verdict, with online protesters using the hashtag #YoSíLaCreo to give support to the victim. Later courts changed the verdict, and the men were ultimately given a nine-year prison sentence.

The public outcry surrounding this case was not solely a reaction to this singularly horrible event; rather, it was also part of the growing anger of Spanish society against the increase of intimate partner violence and domestic abuse across Spain. Where judicial and political means have failed, film, novels, and serialized television have responded in a myriad ways to rectify in fiction what is so wrong in reality. *Las chicas del cable* is one such

example. Through the first four seasons, the women learn to build their own community, direct their own lives, and seek their own justice when the system refuses to do so on their behalf. To make this happen, the women relish legal prospects to find freedom and greater equality but also seize opportunities outside of official politics and the regulated market to capitalize on a broken system. In this way, the show itself is seizing the opportunity to rework the narrative of women as object–victims of an unjust system, turning them into subject–heroes via the same system that perpetuated the crimes against them. The crises the characters face in the show are a result of legal, religious, and cultural forms of immorality, and the crimes committed by the protagonists are a subversive reordering of society itself. To fully comprehend the impact of the series, we must look at the intersections between the urban space, visual culture, and nostalgia, and how the program celebrates women’s agency in the public and private sphere through historic melodrama as a genre.

The historical part of the melodrama is essential. In the series, the period of 1929–1931 is used to mediate current feminist debates by focusing on issues that are shared between then (the 1920s) and now (the 2010s and 2020s): domestic violence, transgenderism, economic insecurity, and drug addiction, just to name a few. This juxtaposition of historical fiction with contemporary flair gives a legitimacy to women’s lives and struggles. While the melodramatic plot line is moved, in large part, by the affective levers of male–female romantic relationships, what forces each personal crisis to reach its climax is an economic or political threat that forces everyone to act beyond their own economic, romantic, or political interests. Each crisis, revelation of true identity, or personal redemption is ultimately resolved by female friendship and working class solidarity, where crime pays as long as its goal is to move the system forward. Moreover, by placing these stories in Madrid and on the international platform of Netflix, the city is feminized for the viewer; we experience the city through the emotions of women in their daily lives as they move through their places of work, home, and leisure. The city is likewise cast as a site of progressive politics and radical feminist potential. This analysis, then, understands the city as more than a backdrop but as an active agent in the construction of the female and transgender characters.

### **Affect, Melodrama, and Nostalgia**

As Henri Lefebvre analyzes throughout *The Production of Space*, the urban space is a process. Essential to that process is how both affect and spatial practices condition spatial realities. I follow Brian Massumi and Steven Shaviro’s distinction between emotion and affect: affect is the raw corporeal reaction

to things and happenings, while emotion is how it is filtered and understood (Shaviro 8). Nigel Thrift explains the importance of understanding how affect works:

[f]irst, systematic knowledge of the creation and mobilization of affect have become an integral part of the everyday urban landscape: affect has become part of a reflexive loop which allows more and more sophisticated interventions in various degrees of urban life. Second, these knowledges are not only being deployed knowingly, they are also being deployed politically (mainly but not only by the rich and powerful) to political ends . . . Third, affect has become a part of how cities are understood. (58)

Expanding this idea in *Non-Representational Theory*, Thrift acknowledges the importance of “practices,” which he understands as “material bodies of work or styles that have gained enough stability over time, though, for example, the establishment of corporeal routines and specialized devices, to reproduce themselves” (8). Thrift furthermore explains that these practices work to distract us and normalize the constant state of crisis in the spatial, political, technological, and social landscapes. In agreement with Thrift, Brian Massumi understands cities and their cultures as “continually in breakdown,” where practices are the only stable feature that allow us to understand the world (8). Film scholar Steven Shaviro extends this analysis to film and music videos. Borrowing from a range of theorists, including Félix Guattari, Massumi, Giles Deleuze, and Fredric Jameson, Shaviro describes spatial representations in audio-visual productions as “affective maps” (10). He defines these maps not as “static representations, but tools for negotiating, and intervening in, social space” (10). Therefore, films, pop culture videos, and a series such as *Las chicas del cable* “do not just passively trace or represent, but actively construct and perform, the social relations, the social relations flow, and feelings that they are ostensibly ‘about’” (7). With this in mind, *Las chicas del cable*, as a cultural product, produces a partially real, partially invented, totally melodramatic history of Madrid that allows the viewer to witness and understand how a community working together to break cultural, spatial, and legal practices is a productive tool of progressive activism. In agreement with Laura Mulvey’s analysis of melodrama, *Las chicas del cable* is a series that acts like a valve to release pressure, as well as a paradigm that emphasizes a community outside of the

nuclear family, one that works for the benefit of other women and gender non-conforming people.

In “Notes on Sirk and Melodrama,” Mulvey describes Hollywood melodrama from the 1950s and 1960s as a “corrective” to the “pent up emotion, bitterness and disillusion well known to women” and as a “safety-valve for ideological contradictions centered on sex and the family” (39), where melodrama has an “ideological *function* in working certain contradictions through to the surface and re-presenting them in an aesthetic form” (43, emphasis in original). Annabel Martin extends this definition in *La gramática de la Felicidad*, where she explores how Francoist melodramas from the 1950s, like *¡Bienvenido! Mister Marshall* (dir. Berlanga, 1953), deconstructed the creations of a national imaginary (17). *Las chicas del cable* uses melodrama to center the frustrations of women under an unjust patriarchal system that is both international and specific to Spain.

In each episode, the protagonists must transform themselves to overcome a crisis that threatens to unjustly persecute one of the members of their chosen community. The first season revolves around the transformation of Alba, the petty criminal, into Lidia, the legitimate commodified laborer. In the pilot episode, the five women’s incipient friendship is tested and ultimately solidified through their involvement in the first Transatlantic call between world leaders, which took place, as in history, in 1928 between King Alfonso XIII and President Coolidge. The narrator, Lidia, comments on the importance of the event: “el mundo en manos de una mujer: una telefonista” (“Sueños”) (the world was in the hands of a woman: a telephone operator). Following the example set in this first episode, throughout the first season, the women fight to break free of their patriarchal environments and mentalities, choosing between old traditional love and new romantic interests that break social, religious, and state laws. More importantly, they realize that solidarity with a chosen community is a legitimate place from which to build a community of support and, ultimately, resistance.

The series walks a line between local and global, history and invention, often sacrificing precision to suit the narrative and to make Spanish history easier to digest for a wider, international Netflix audience. For example, Season One begins in 1928, and the Telefónica building is already completed and fully staffed, when in reality it was not officially opened until 1930. While the first intercontinental phone call between world leaders did occur in 1928, the narrative elements in the episode do not anchor us to a Spanish past. While the King is held up as a head of state, there is no reference to this complicated era of Restoration history and the role of Primo de Rivera. To this end, the series creates a “close enough” version of history that prioritizes the melodrama of the interpersonal relationships between woman over the national politics of a



historically accurate Spain. However, this strategy to attract a more universal audience also allows the producers and writers to avoid the trap of romanticizing the 1920s or pandering to a melancholic loss of the Spain that existed prior to the Civil War. Paul Julian Smith comments on the dangers of nostalgia:

Thus, on the one hand, nostalgia can be read in a mournful or sentimental TV context as ‘a symptom of loss of faith and interest in the present and the future’; but, on the other it is a key site for the interrogation of the relationship between the individual and collective. (17–18)

*Las chicas del cable* avoids the mistaken sentimentalism for a lost time while also using the details of that time period to imagine the future. What bridges the ninety years of difference between then and now are the enduring themes of love, friendship, and hope. The women work together in the face of tragic social and legal injustices, which were common in the 1920s and 1930s but which have not yet disappeared.

The historical time period represented in *Las chicas del cable* was a moment of intense societal change, and many hoped it would bring more rights to women. But hope is tricky. David Harvey writes, “hope is a memory that desires,” both to harness the potential of a previous moment and to revitalize the present (55). While Harvey employs this idea in relation to the novels of Henri de Balzac, which dealt with the relative immediacy of the failed promise of the restoration of the French monarchy in the early 1800s (55), *Las chicas del cable* calls upon a selective memory of the Spanish Restoration and Second Republic both to “break the myth of modernity” (54–55)—or the myth that we are fundamentally different in the present than we were in the past—and to direct emotion and action to realize movement towards a more radical progressive politics now. The use of melodrama is important because it allows for a visualization and catharsis of the ways that Spanish women navigate labor, friendship, and agency both then and now.

Since the early 2000s, Spanish fiction has tended to center historical memory and nostalgia. The series *Cuéntame cómo pasó* has run since 2001 on the public channel TVE 1, focusing on one middle class family and how they lived during the final years of the dictatorship and the transition to democracy. Abigail Loxham’s understands *Cuéntame* as a way to address contested memories and “mediate and remediate a difficult period in the country’s past” (710). The show itself “locates the complex process of narrating memory within the domestic sphere and situates the media, particularly television, as a transitional device which links private and public space” (715). Loxham



adapts the idea of “dynamic memory” to analyze how the show epitomizes “an ongoing process of remembrance and forgetting in which individuals and groups continue to reconfigure their relationship to the past and hence reposition themselves in relation to established and emergent memory sites” (3). Paul Julian Smith analyzes the historical memory boom on television and argues that television and films are “cultural resources that crystallize the relationships between popular memory and professional history” (20). Likewise, they “aid the purposes of group creation through a perception of shared experience.” Echoing Margaret Smith, Smith writes that they “(negatively) may be containers for grievances that can be utilized for contentious purposes in post-conflict situations. Conversely, once more, those same memories can be made to serve the purpose of reconstructions and the prevention of future conflict” (14). And, essential for my reading of *Las chicas del cable*, Smith writes that the “[t]he legitimization of ‘today’ is thus based on an ‘anachronistic’ manipulation of ‘yesterday’” (183). While the visuals are an homage to an earlier era of fashion and architecture, the audio diffuses an overly nostalgic take by employing a soundtrack of contemporary international artists. *Las chicas del cable* is less interested in specific historic grievances and instead wants to upend contemporary issues that have their roots in a Spain that existed well before the Civil War. Indeed, by returning to this moment before the Second Republic and the Civil War, the series paints a scene of the late 1920s and early 1930s as a moment of massive potential for women’s and LGBTQ rights and then points directly to the western patriarchy as the root cause of why this potential was not realized. *Las chicas del cable*, through its use of melodrama, reveals that these practices are historically ingrained and fundamentally unjust. The series rallies the audience around female solidarity, ingenuity, and bravery, as the women fight to live their “authentic selves” despite the political and social institutions holding them back. Crimes are committed, but the affective drive of each episode and narrative arc is to see some “practices” as crimes and certain “crimes” as necessary to push Spanish society in the right direction. This interaction between crime, female solidarity, and community building is perhaps most clear in the storyline of Ángeles and her relationship to her abusive husband.

In Season One, Ángeles tries to take her daughter and leave her abusive marriage, but her husband catches them boarding a train to Barcelona and forces them back home. By allowing for a very explicit discussion about divorce and domestic violence laws in Spain, the show reminds the viewer that, in the 1920s, women had few official recourses to leave an abusive marriage without also losing their children. Once Ángeles is home, her husband Mario (Sergio Mur) becomes more and more violent. At a New Year’s Eve party hosted by the owners of Telefónica, Mario takes Ángeles to the roof of the

building and mentally and physically terrorizes her. The other women in the friend group sense the danger at the party, follow them up to roof, and are witness and accomplices when Ángeles ends up killing Mario in self-defense.

Parallel to this story line and as the community works together to protect Ángeles from jail and possible capital punishment, we also see Sara (Óscar) move from peripheral character to a more central role. Sara and Carlota explore romantic love, and this allows Sara to admit their long-held desire to be a transgender man. To better understand himself, Sara checks into a clinic run by nuns that promises “psychological therapy.” After weeks of sparse contact, the friend-group decides to investigate and ends up having to break Sara (Óscar) out of the hospital. Through this, the protagonists and the audience are witness to the horrific and barbaric conversion therapy Sara was undergoing. When Sara is freed from the hospital, it is a declaration that the old social order, which previously kept women and trans people trapped in shame and a cycle of religious and political violence by the family, the church, and the state, can be upended through female solidarity.

Season Three is more transgressive, as Carlota and Óscar (Sara)—now an official couple—become advocates for feminism and sexual liberation. At the same time, the widow Ángeles becomes romantically involved with Inspector Cuevas (Antonio Velázquez). He is a policeman and knows that she killed her husband but will protect her if she helps him infiltrate criminal elements in Madrid’s nightlife. All the various story lines of Season Three come to a head in the final two episodes, when King Alfonso XIII visits the Telefónica and a terrorist group takes the building hostage to force the King’s abdication. As the women fight for their lives and the lives of their lovers, Ángeles realizes that her relationship with Inspector Cuevas, like her marriage to Mario, was always secondary to his career. After the terrorist threat is averted, Ángeles finally stands up for herself and leaves Cuevas behind, rising from her timidity and fear to become a criminal mastermind known as “El mirlo” (The Blackbird). With the money she earns from her new enterprise, Ángeles funds a vocational school for girls.

Season Four begins a year later, in 1931, with a party to celebrate the group’s progressive dreams. In this season, Carlota runs for mayor, the first woman to do so, and attempts to decriminalize homosexuality. However, after the retrograde, socially conservative party, a clear recreation of VOX, threatens Carlota with “embarrassing” photos of her with Óscar, Carlota is framed for the murder of her political opponent. The friends must work to find the true killer and free their friend. In a melodramatic turn of already melodramatic events, Óscar frames himself for the murder to free Carlota and is incarcerated. In the final episode, the friends hide with a troop of actors performing at the prison to try and free Óscar, who is being held in solitary confinement.

The group is performing Pedro Calderón de la Barca's Golden Age play *La vida es sueño*. At the end of the third act, the prisoners are rapt in the story. As the war begins between Seigsmundo and the King, the actors chant, "¡Viva nuestra libertad!" (Long live our freedom) The prisoners, half following the plan imagined by the women and half following the inspiration of the play, begin chanting for their own freedom. The prisoners start a riot, and, in the chaos, the women liberate Óscar. However, as they flee the building, Ángeles is shot and killed.

One of the most transgressive aspects of *Las chicas del cable* is that the community, instead of ending up victims of their time and its laws, finds ways to overcome these obstacles through legal and extra-legal methods. The story of Ángeles, who goes from being a victim of legal crimes to the mastermind of illegal offences in the name of furthering feminist causes, best illustrates how feminist solidarity can overcome patriarchal structures that hold women back. Although she dies in the crossfire of a shooting match at the end of Season Four, Ángeles's death was less a plot point devised by the show than a decision by the actress, Maggie Civantos, to start new projects. Moreover, whereas in the traditional melodrama the resolution of the plot is based on the family, in *Las chicas del cable* the tie is friendship. Lidia overcomes her past as Alba not through romantic love but through friendship. Óscar finds himself through a transgressive romantic love with Carlota, as well as through platonic female alliances. Carlota uses the privilege of her aristocratic inheritance to finance the progressive ideology via protest groups and to run for Mayor of Madrid. Ángeles rejects her male lover for a project of self-realization that allows her to circumvent a legal system that refused to protect her in order to help other women. Marga realizes her sexual and intellectual potential—she wants to move from *telefonista* to accountant—through her friends' support and by breaking the vows of marriage, albeit on accident.

### Madrid as Visual and Affective Archive

Through all these episodes, Madrid is both background and complicit in the women's suppression, while also providing spaces for them to try on new identities and seek extra-legal avenues of justice. Sara (Óscar) is first victimized for being transgender in a state-funded religious hospital and then later validated as Óscar while walking through public spaces, such as the Atocha train station. Ángeles is abused on the city streets of Madrid and brutally attacked by her husband on the rooftop of the Telefónica building. But, this space of her self-directed capitalist labor is also where she kills her husband

and frees herself. In the first episode of Season Two, “La decision,” (The Decision) the city and the viewer are witness to her abuse and her crime. The women, however, hide their crime by disposing of the body in the Manzanares river.

Although much of the particular history of Madrid is de-charged of its political voltage, not all is erased. Historical names and spaces appear in detail shots, as aesthetic background, or as part of the plot, and this visual archive lends legitimacy to the series and the dramatic emotions elicited by the melodrama. For example, in Season One, Carlota and Óscar (Sara) meet in the Lyceum while listening to a talk by the Spanish Republican and lawyer Victoria Kent. In Season Two, Lidia is seen descending a staircase and is styled in a way that mirrors propaganda posters of the Second Republic. In Season Four, Carlota is running for mayor as part of the fictional PDR party, whose colors are purple, yellow, and red, the same as those of the Second Republic. Throughout the series, the characters mention specific popular places, or there are detail shots of nomenclature specific to Madrid in the 1920s. For example, the characters hide out in places like the Hotel Florida on Callao, which was later used as a base for foreign correspondents during the Spanish Civil War before being destroyed in the 1960s. And, of course, there is the primary location of the action throughout the series: the Telefónica.

The heart of the visual and symbolic archive of Madrid is the Telefónica building. As a site of progressive potential around architecture, technology, and labor, the Telefónica is an ideal choice.<sup>4</sup> The architect, Ignacio de Cárdenas was always loyal to the Republican cause and spent most of his architectural career outside of Spain, in exile. According to the Fundación Telefónica,

In 1930 it accommodated some 1,800 employees, the bulk of whom were made up of the telephone operators, who covered peak periods in shifts of up to 150 young ladies, as well as supervisors and other telephone connection services. At that time, when there were few women in the workplace, they helped to give a modern image to the company, not to mention the urban landscape of the Gran Vía Avenue and the whole of Madrid.

Even though the series modifies the history of the building by having the women begin working there two years earlier to the real opening, the Telefónica retains its progressive and Republican ideology aesthetically, in a way accessible to viewers in the know. This is one of the ways that the viewers of *Las chicas del cable* in Spain and internationally consume Madrid not as a specific

European capital but as an urban site and as a visual archive of progressive politics and female solidarity.

Throughout the first four seasons, the Telefónica is mostly viewed from the interior. There are few establishing shots of recognizable places in Madrid, and street shots are in medium frame, making it impossible to get a context of the Gran Vía or the actual buildings surrounding the Telefónica. Much of action happens on the *azotea* (rooftop), like the murder of Angeles's husband, but even the shots here are more of a "general cityscape" rather than a discernible Madrid. Apart from the women's place of work, the drama happens, as in a traditional melodrama, in interiors: homes, the pension where the single women live, doctor's offices, and cafés. Many exterior spaces are represented in interior *mise-en-scène* configurations, where particular—or not-quite but almost—sites particular to Madrid or Spanish history are represented. For example, in Season Two, when Óscar (Sara) visits a professional to "help" understand his transgender identity, there is a small statue of horses carrying a chariot that figures prominently in the back and forth of the scene, as Óscar discusses the situation with the doctor who ends up directing his horrific conversion therapy. It is highly reminiscent of the iconic statue by Hignio Bastera that sits on top of the Banco de Bilbao Vizcaya, another building from the same era as the Telefónica on Calle de Alcalá ("Secretos").

Through all these situations, which explore traditional and transgressive friendships and love, Madrid is consumed not through site-specific nostalgia but through an audio-visual manipulation of female-specific affect. Through each season and within each episode, women and how they attempt to actualize their own economic and sexual agency is what moves each story forward. This female-driven affect is what also drives the viewers of the show to continue watching. Indeed, it is essential to understand how *Las chicas del cable* is consumed as an audio-visual cultural product. In Gillian Rose's *Visual Methodologies*, the author builds on previous scholars to create meaningful criteria for the understanding and interpretation of visual culture. From Hal Foster, she takes the definition of "visuality" to refer to how visions are constructed, "how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing and the unseeing therein" (qtd. in Rose 6). From John Berger, Rose takes the idea that visual analysis must take into consideration the ways of seeing and how we are always looking at the relationship between the things and ourselves (12). And from David Harvey, she takes the idea that capitalism in postmodernity "is organizing itself in ways are indeed compressing time and collapsing space" (20–21). These ideas all coalesce around the idea of modalities of the image, especially how it is produced and its "audiency," a term from John Friske that refers to "the process by which a visual image has its meaning renegotiated,

or even rejected by particular audiences watching in specific circumstances” (25).

As opposed to traditional serialized television shows, Netflix is viewed asynchronously, and audiences often binge the programming. Each season of *Las chicas del cable* is released at one time, and there are many who watch all eight episodes in one or two sittings. Bingeing implies a type of physical and mental commitment, a gluttony of content that is socially acceptable to consume all at once. *Las chicas del cable* harnesses a technology—Netflix—and the intersection of two moments—the late 1920s and the late 2010s—to create a conversation about female agency and empowerment by controlling space and time. David Harvey, taking from Henri Lefebvre, understands that “[t]he created space of society is also . . . the space of reproduction” (186). Harvey continues, “[t]he power to shape space then appears as one of the crucial powers of control over social reproduction” (187). Although Harvey is talking about the power of the state to command construction of actual space, the ability to control “cultural production time (including the time of others)” (188) is the ultimate power of media platforms such as Netflix. Not only does Netflix control time via episode length, but it also creates and directs the use of space. This can be understood both as the space of the story and the space of the viewer. The viewer, while not necessarily contained in the home, is generally watching on a private screen, such as a home television, laptop, or cell phone. What they are consuming in *Las chicas del cable* is how women use, manipulate, and defy space and spatial expectations, starting from the basic notion of how different public and private spaces are used and how they help construct identity. When *Las chicas del cable* uses Madrid as a space of feminist potential, the city becomes a symbol in the imaginary of an international audience. The caveat in this previously analyzed “historically adjacent” approach is that Madrid can lose much of its specific history and architecture in the desire to attract a wider audience.

Remembering Paul Julian Smith and the conversation about the push and pull between a nostalgic past and a hopeful present, the show sacrifices site-specific details to harness the potential of affect produced by female-specific agency. In so doing, the series defies the patriarchal order through melodrama, which acts to destabilize the everyday public and private practices that keep women from realizing their full potential. However, this present study is not a wholly naïve reading of the show. Each personal and political crisis that presents itself as a shadow of reality—the Lyceum club, architecture and progressive ideology, the terrorists, Alfonso XIII—misses the opportunity to delve deeper into the show’s own goals of female solidarity beyond the structure of commodified labor. For, if we include the Lyceum Club itself and a name, Victoria Kent, why not also include more faces and voices of some of the other famous women who participated? And, in terms of Madrid as a visual archive of this solidarity and

of progressive values, it is not enough to only show isolated spaces in the city where these strikes and demonstrations for worker's rights took place. If the series were to show the connections between places and emphasize the growth of the city at this time, it would only strengthen its position in fighting for women's rights in an unfair system and using the relationships between spaces to achieve justice. In reproducing the daily lives of women as both part of a social construct and pertaining to certain spaces, by isolating these spaces—the home, the office, the café—and not showing the connections between them, the series undermines through its own editing process its potential to model a way out.

## Conclusion

While the effects of *Las chicas del cable*, as well as of the slew of other shows based in Madrid, has yet to be determined, Netflix has no plans of stopping production in Spain anytime soon. An article from *The Hollywood Reporter* notes, “CEO Reed Hastings said the choice of Spain for the company’s first European production hub indicates ‘that we’re going to be a part of the Spanish creative ecosystem forever. We’re not just experimenting and trying something. We’re investing for the long term.’ A statement from the firm underscored ‘a multi-million dollar investment in content in Spanish’” (Green). David Harvey states that “[c]apitalism consequently creates a more and more universal sense of . . . ‘historical time.’ Cyclical rhythms of prosperity and depression integrate into periodic revolutions in the labor process” (190). *Las chicas del cable* brings together two similar moments of time, the late 1920s and the late 2010s, where economic depression caused not only a revolution in the working lives of men and women but also a heightened sense of potential for progressive movements to take hold. With a Civil War looming in Season Five, we can hope that this same history is not repeated again in an ever-more gridlocked Spanish government and polarized society.

## Notes

1. These shows in English are titled *Elite*, *Money Heist*, and *High Seas*. While Netflix won't reveal the viewing numbers, several articles report that these shows are among the most popular. In September 2019, *Refinery29* included all among the shows that “Everyone Will Be Bingeing.”
2. Throughout this paper, I will use both names of Sara and Óscar (along with their respective pronouns). I will preference the female name Sara (Óscar) when the character's



- female identity is essential to the narrative and will likewise preference Óscar (Sara) after he transitions.
3. Although there are a plethora of articles and books about the 2008 economic crash and its far-reaching effects in Spain, one of the best new publications on this subject is Weiner and López.
  4. The construction of the building started in 1926 and was completed in 1930 at 28 Gran Vía—so the show is anachronistic in that the women begin working there in 1928, prior to construction.

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