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No Man's Land: The Hybrid Stance of the Cinema of J.A. Bardem

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NO MAN'S LAND: THE HYBRID STANCE OF THE CINEMA OF J.A.

BARDEM

By the 1950's, Franco's conservative and authoritarian policies already affected cinema in its totality. Films were subsidised by the State and there were no avenues for experimentation or total expression. Films were censored at all stages of production and even distribution. Spanish cinema became dull, formally archaic and ideologically controlled, and obtained very little international recognition. Being a committed communist and lacking stylistic and ideological models in his own national cinema J. A. Bardem turned to the immediate past of foreign national cinemas, not to 'the past of dead styles', as Frederic Jameson would put it, but to the immediateness of alive styles: in his cinema we rediscover aspects of Italian, French(neo)realism, Soviet montage, and the conventions of genre-oriented Hollywood blockbusters. We might argue that his cinema resulted in a virtuoso exercise in the assimilation of modes of representation and ideological views that originated in foreign cinemas.

The majority of the films by Bardem, especially during his golden years as an auteur, are directly inspired by the immediateness of the social and moral narratives of Italian Neorealism, and at the same time intoxicated by Hollywood conventions of genre films, and the constructive pillars of what we may call the Wellesian style: deep staging, death of field photography, the use of the long-take combined with a decoupage montage and pan focus photography, multiplicity of shots, fast and

rhythmical editing and transitions, crane, dolly and travelling shots, meaningful frame compositions, over-the-shoulder shot reverse shots, filling the planes of the shot with objects or characters on the foreground, expressionistic lighting. In other words, the so called ‘bag of tricks’ that helped enhance the moving image and the telling of the story.

The conjunction and collisions of Spanish and foreign ideological and cultural frameworks, and the integration of distinctive formal or stylistic discourses, open up an analysis of his works in terms of what Marsha Kinder labelled as “transcultural reinterpretation”, which is concerned “with the ideological reinscription of conventions that are borrowed from other cultures and set in conflict with each other, a process of hybridization that is capable of carving out a new aesthetic language”. Similarly, a complementary analysis of his work will focus on imitation and combination of styles: intertextuality, homage, reference, allusion, which clearly draws on theories of pastiche, especially when dealing with the imitation of a type of work, which is intimately related with the appropriation of genre conventions. These conventions are directly reinscribed in the cultural, social and political arena of Francoist Spain. Therefore, in Bardem we can see how the local, the regional and the national merged with aspects alien to his own culture. We can read his cinema as process of continuous cross-dialogue between aesthetics and conventions absorbed from foreign cinemas and the cultural, social and political specificity of Spain at a given moment in history. When we analyse Bardem’s work we reach to the ultimate conclusion that his cinema is a hybrid monster where ideologies, aesthetics and eventually styles merged into one: a cultural and aesthetic hybrid, a work of works, which eventually would lead to another hybrid.

To exemplify the creative process of film hybridization in Bardem, I have selected 4 of his earlier films, in which the amalgam of styles and conventions from different and contradictory sources emerge as a new aesthetic language of problematic classification.

His first film, *Esa Pareja Feliz/ That Happy Couple* (1951), co-directed with Luis Garcia Berlanga, was a combined product that joined non-Spanish film references and the theatrical *sainete* [a farce, vernacular in style that used scenes of low life] extracted from Spanish playwright Carlos Arniches, a sort of pastiche of previous foreign films with a Spanish literary influence. The film itself is manifesto of the possibilities of the film medium. It was intended to both entertain and denounce in the manner of the objective criticism of some Neorealist comedies, and at the same time it acquired the form and narrational style of a Capraesque comedy. The film was indebted primarily to *Antoine et Antoinette* (1947) by French director Jacques Becker, but according to Luis Garcia Berlanga “ the closest idea to [their] film had to be sought in Preston Sturges’ *Christmas in July*, and also in the farces of Arniches”. ”In fact, as Bardem declared, “I think that *That Happy Couple* was a calculated transposition of *Christmas in July* to our country”. In both *Christmas in July* and *Antoine et Antoinette* love, and the conjunction between happiness and money are the core themes of the films. They both deal with struggling couples in a big city, going through difficult financial situations, who see hope for their future after winning a prize.

That Happy Couple deals with a working-class couple, Juan and Carmen, who struggle to survive during hard and uncertain times in Madrid, merely ten years on after the Civil War. The underlying theme of the film is the pursuit of happiness and the erroneous bourgeois or capitalist belief that happiness can only be achieved with money. One day they win a prize, and they become “the happy couple” for one day, they have one day to buy as much as they want. After going on a shopping spree around town, in the end, they realise they have got products or commodities that they won’t be able to use, given their social and financial situation. After being detained in a local police station on account of Juan’s misbehaviour in Copacabana Club, they end up in the middle of the street, loaded with useless wrapped presents. Finally they leave the presents to the street hobos that are sleeping on street benches and kiss, although, we only see a shot of their feet as they kiss, since they knew censorship would have cut it.

The film follows similar structural patterns found in Frank Capra’s moral tales in which American capitalism is put at stake by one of the characters. Similarly it points out the Sturgesian attack to the American consumerist society, as seen in *Christmas in July*. Bardem and Berlanga exchanged Sturges’s attack to American consumerism for a veiled attack to Franco’s openness to capitalism, and they did it with humour and entertainment, disguised in a highly stylistic comedy, thus avoiding the scissors of the censor. The ideas for the slogans used in *That Happy Couple* are directly taken from Sturges’s film. “If Dick Powell wins a slogan’s contest for a coffee brand saying” “If you can’t sleep, don’t blame it on the coffee, it’s your bed,” in *That Happy Couple* we get “Get happiness via electronics” and “A happy day for a happy couple”, slogans

that are repeated numerous times in the movie, highlighting the absurdity of the promotion of consumerism.

The film also digs into a certain European (non-Spanish) tradition of moral and political films like those by Becker, which already expressed certain contempt towards the post-World War II emerging materialism. It also made symbolic cross-references to Italian Neorealist films, even to *Bicycle Thief* (1946). “Luis and I had prepared Juan’s returning home imitating very openly *Bicycle Thief*, when Antonio Ricci leaves his workplace after his day’s work”. Moreover, all exteriors were shot on-location, using real people and traffic, thus rendering a less artificial representation of the exterior scenes, which clearly differ from the Becker’s and Sturge’s treatment of the exterior scenes.

The directors never denied their enthusiasm for the way in which they had extracted ideas from various films,

“We had the chance to see *Antoine et Antoinette*, which had a sort of freshness... So we decided to make something like that; that’s not copying but a venerating gesture to cinema itself, a state of humbleness if you want. Perhaps you do it to assure yourself that that is what you want to do”

Therefore, as Dyers believes, we can’t speak of plagiarism: “artists may reproduce, quote or sample other’s work but as long as this is acknowledged we can’t talk of plagiarism”. It is a case of transcultural reinterpretation, which hybridised foreign cultural conventions that entered in conflict within the Spanish specific cultural, social and political framework.

Respecting the formal aspect of the film, Bardem and Berlanga joined efforts to demonstrate that a light comedy could be highly aesthetic. The shooting and editing techniques were carefully designed and measured before hand. They followed Pudovkin's concepts of *the iron script* and a *priori montage*, which was the preferred working method of Hitchcock and many Hollywood filmmakers. This way of preparing for the shoot opposed the *emotional script* and a *posteriori* montage of Eisenstein, which was to be followed by many Neorealist directors like Visconti, for instance.¹ They concentrated on framing, editing transitions, dolly shots and crane shots combined with a variety of still and panoramic shots of different sizes and heights in order to convey different meanings. The film also made use of *analipsis* or flashbacks, synchronicity of dialogues, off-screen voice over.

In his first solo film, *Comicos* (1954) Bardem will abandon comedy for melodrama, in which he displayed a versatile and baroque use of Hollywood filmmaking techniques and conventions of melodrama. It was the reading of Mankevic's *All About Eve* screenplay what directly influenced *Comicos*, and the references to the original American blockbuster are obvious in the story. In *Comicos*, Ana, a young secondary actress is given the chance to step into principal roles within a travelling theatre company, thus making her dream come true. However, the director of the company blackmails her. If she wants to keep her glory she must abandon her boyfriend, and fellow actor, and become her lover.

¹ In Cerón Gómez (1998), p.83.

Still within the ideological limits of a certain neorealism, for this film Bardem lessened the political and social criticism in favour of visual baroqueism, in other words, he faithfully adopted the so-called Wellesian style: numerous cuts, fast-pace editing, decoupage cutting, long takes with pan focus photography, over-the-shoulder shot reverse shots etc.

Traits and tendencies of both Neorealist and Hollywood cinema were balanced his next two films. *Muerte de un ciclista/Death of a cyclist* (1955) and *Calle Mayor/Main Street* (1956), are both directly influenced, inspired or adapted from Italian Neorealist narratives. Antonioni's *Cronaca di un amore/Story of a Love Affair* (1951) is the seed for *Death of a Cyclist*. Bardem would use Antonioni's as the main nutrient for his ferocious attack to the Francoist bourgeoisie of his time. Robert Koehler points out

Bardem could presumably engage in his own game of making a film as a political weapon – for that was his expressed, militant purpose—a game played by hiding that weapon under the cloak of metaphor, narrative forms and, in the case of Bardem, a kind of postneorealism dovetailed with melodrama.

Juan and Maria José run over a cyclist as they returned home from an illicit meeting in a road motel. Maria José is married and was driving the car. She has a lot to lose. Although initially Juan wants to help the dying cyclist, Maria José persuades him not to. The couple return to Madrid and decide to live as if nothing had happened. With this premise Bardem was able to unfold the imperfections of a country, whereby the

victors of the civil war control the industry, the public institutions, and hypocritically attend charity rallies. By hybridising conventions of film noir, melodrama and traits of a baroque and stylised cinematography – in part indebted to Antonioni’s poetic compositions but also to the Wellesian style – Bardem joined spectacle and controversial moral and political content, drawing on the critical point of view of Neorealist films.

Death of a Cyclist is probably one of the clearest examples of pastiche in the career of J.A. Bardem:

(1) Bardem makes extravagant use of *decoupage* combined with pan-focus long takes, widely used in Hollywood after *Citizen Kane*. This combination of the long-take and decoupage editing is used continuously in the film.

(2) Depth of field photography with characters or objects in the foreground is also reminiscent of 1940s Hollywood compositions, especially in the party scenes. Camera movement with the subsequent pan-focus that Welles and Gregg Toland “developed” accompanies the depth of field photography.

(3) Parallel editing is used to intensified suspense and narrative rhythm.

(4) Bardem, in a sort of mockumentary style, inserts a recreation of newsreel footage to introduce us to the lifestyle of the Spanish bourgeois class we are dealing with in the film. The newsreel – once again reminiscent of “News on the March” newsreel in *Citizen Kane* – is in fact imitating the No-Do, Spanish Francoist newsreel.

(5) Soviet-style editing is introduced to create emotional tension and affection.

When Juan reads in the papers that a cyclist has been killed in a hit-and-run accident, Bardem edits the scene with extreme close-ups of Juan's eyes; detailed extreme close-ups of the newspaper cutting to wide-angle shots of the students in the auditorium and medium shots of Matilde, a student explaining a mathematical problem on the blackboard.

(6) Film noir generic devices serve Bardem to disguise the film's anti-Francoist nature: Juan is both villain and detective as he investigates further the death of the cyclist and Maria José acts as a sweet and cruel *femme fatale* often seen with white gloves and luxurious party dresses; the characters smoke whenever there is a chance; the smoke is even used as a transitional motif between scenes; there is a road motel where lovers meet clandestinely; there is chiaroscuro lighting, reminiscent of the expressionist lighting used in film noir narratives.

(7) Non-diegetic music and sound are used to increase suspense and tension. The original score has a clear melodramatic purpose. Unlike *Cronaca*, the music shapes the characters' psyche and motivates action's perception. In the classroom scene the diegetic sound of a student reciting her mathematical problem blends with low cello chords of original score as if the music was inside Juan's mind. This device intensifies tension, modulates the narrative intention and leads to an unexpected situation; Juan fails his student for no reason.

Calle Mayor is perhaps the film where the author finds a perfect balance between aesthetics and content. His subversive use of melodrama generic devices both regarding mise-en-scene and story-content make it a pastiche of the so-called Hollywood women's film of the 1940s and early 1950s. The film makes direct intertextual allusions and references to many other cinematic and discursive sources: Fellini's *I Vitelloni* (1953), Delbert Mann's *Marty* (1955), and presumably René Clair's *Les Grandes Manoeuvres/The Grand Manoeuvres* (1955). It is also a melodramatic version of a comic farce by Carlos Arniches, *La Señorita de Trevelez/The Lady of Trevelez* (1916). *Calle Mayor* tells the story of a group of well-to-do provincial men, who decide to play a prank on a local spinster, Isabel – played by Betsy Blair, in a similar role as in Delbert's Mann's Oscar winning *Marty*. The narrative evolves into a tragic conclusion as the spectator realises that Isabel's hope for a married life with a husband, kids, and a house of her own are blown up by the cruel truth behind the joke.

Calle Mayor clearly exemplifies Dyers definition of pastiche as imitation of a kind of work, in this case melodrama or the women's film. Although the film has other influences and sources, the main element of pastiche is the generic conventions of melodrama that supported aesthetically and ideologically the construction of the film. At the same time, the notions of genre evoked are twisted and reinterpreted to attack a certain trend of Hollywood melodramas, since the deployment of generic devices proper of the so-called women's film not only to enhance the telling of the story but also to denounce the falseness of certain women's films. Mise-en-scene and story-content lived up to the genre conventions, but only to a certain degree. Bardem places Isabel (Betsy Blair) in the world of melodrama, in a world of fancy, as if her illusions and hopes were lived in a 1940s Hollywood melodrama. She dreams of marriage,

children, a house with the 'whitest kitchen', and Juan (José Suarez) act as the 'intruder/redeemer' who is supposed to enter her in the socially accepted heterosexual relation. The ending of *Calle Mayor* blows out all of Isabel's expectations and ours too. The interior spaces of the house, the church, the ballroom, and the walks up and down the *calle Mayor* (Main street) anticipate the necessity for love and subsequent social acceptance within the moral conventions of men and women in 1950s Spain. The carefully modulate diction of the characters, the exaggeration of feelings and passions, their costumes, the symbolic objects that point to that need, and the use of dramatic orchestrated music to accompany the feelings and desires of characters, all account for a typical American melodrama. However, all these conventions are crushed down in the end when reality or, rather, 'realism', the cruel realism of Italian Neorealist cinema, destroys the anticipation of a happy ending signalling society as the ultimate responsible for the tragedy.

Bardem recurred to non-Spanish cinematic traditions in order to formulate his own vision of Spain, which was denied by the Francoist regime. In his cinema there is an apparent contradiction between his foreignness and his Spanishness. His cinema is a discursive act rather than a national discourse of Spanishness, since the political circumstances didn't allow for a total interpretation of national life. One cannot understand his cinema by just exploring previous instances of realist cinema in Spain. What defines his cinema is the appropriation of all these multiple influences of different sort in order to bring out the true face of his country. The questions of Spanish identity and cultural transpositions of life in Spain are usually given in little doses. However, they are enough to make the universal part of the local, and vice versa. The accusations of the lack of national sentiment or style in his films are not all

together wrong. There exists a degree of detachment, of distance, but strangely enough there is also an approach to Spanish culture, traditions and intra-historical life from a new perspective. This is the perspective of dissidence. The contradiction played out by the act of rejection and the act of embracement of Spanishness (and of other foreign cultural frameworks like a certain part of American cinema) reflects the psychological and intellectual confusion that took place in the moment of creation. Whether closer to Hollywood cinema, European realism or Spanish cinema, Bardem, in filmic terms, seems to me like a stateless filmmaker, a no-land's man, a filmmaker whose identity in cinema can only be defined by other identities.