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The Imaginative Gateway into a Psychological Realism: A Study of Carlos Saura's 1970's Films

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This article, which is part of a wider work on Carlos Saura's realist aesthetics evolution during the 1950's-1970's, explores the Spanish director's work during the last decade of Franco's dictatorship when censorship became more severe than ever. Generally, the censors would focus on capturing any controversial political, religious and moral issues, but the lack of a regulated set of norms brought about an illogical system in which one might not be able to show a couple kissing, but a witty experimental narrative could allow one to pass a sharp depiction of a rotten and worn out Spain onto the big screen as we will see in the analysis of Carlos Saura's case.

Following the years of the regime's social and economic openness in the 1950's and 1960's, an authoritarian period of severe censorship originated in the 1970's. For cinema directors, if realism was still an option, it was psychological. The filmmakers had to get into their characters' thoughts and feelings and explore the complex world of the metaphor to come across with stimulating films that, even when making the most ferocious criticisms of the dictatorship, managed to pass the regime's censorship. Surprisingly, this was one of the most prolific periods in Carlos Saura's career.

Focusing on three of the films the director made during the 1970's – *El jardín de las delicias*, *La prima Angélica* and *Cría cuervos* – while considering the director's wider work, we are going to dissect narrative and images in order to analyse the multiple layers of time and reality through which Saura creates surrealist-like situations directly tied to well-known realities of the time. This cinematographic style, we argue, was developed as a direct consequence of the Francoist censorship restrictions on critical expression and was influenced by both the Surrealist movement and the Spanish realist tradition.

To understand the context in which Saura's 1970's style evolved, we are going to introduce his previous cinematographic work. Saura's first feature film, *Los golfos* (1959), presented a simple and realist story in a direct documentary style. The on-location shooting, use of non-professional actors, non-ornamental *mise-en-scène*, black and white film, post-synchronised sound, natural light and a free mobile camera connected Saura's work to Italian neo-realism. However, the narrative freshness and the innovative and experimental editing of open sequences, jump cuts, juxtapositions and continuous ellipses that broke the logic of the narration flow places *Los golfos* as an excellent predecessor of the *nouvelle vague*'s narrative style.

Saura then moved towards an explorative naturalistic method with *La caza* (1965). In a documentary-like style, Saura explores the body's degradation and the aggressive nature of the human being. As he did in *Los golfos*, the director kept the dramatic narrative elements to a minimum and shot in black and white film with a direct flattened light. The flow of the lineal narration is broken by the meticulous and explorative camera, which hangs around characters and objects showing its most subtle details. This extreme observation of the real leads to the hypertrophy of the look, allowing the surrealist to come to surface.

It was in 1966, just a year after shooting *La caza*, when Saura shared his idiosyncratic definition of reality in his next film *Peppermint frappé* (1967):

Reality is what one can perceive directly, immediately; reality is also what one dreams, what one wants to happen and does not, the past and the future,..., everything is intermingled (Saura quoted in García 2009, p.360).¹

In this statement Saura expresses his vision of reality and imagination as a unique entity, appealing to the unconscious as a maker of reality. Here, the director places himself further away from the conventions of the documentary and realist style he first worked with and stands closer to a metaphorical and surrealist cinema. Besides allegory and metaphors, Saura borrows surrealist techniques for his new films such as symbolism and shock, infusing objects with meaning beyond their function or purpose, and dream-imagery (Stone 2007, p.25). As we will later discuss, Saura's style imitates that of the surrealist filmmaker *par excellence*, his Spanish contemporary Luis Buñuel, as it introduces themes such as the critique of social roles and morality, the breaking of the narrative logic and the confrontation between daydreams and material reality. Both directors crafted a cinematographic style which shows 'the actual way thought works', what André Breton (quoted in Edwards 2005, p.28), considered the father of the Surrealist movement, said Surrealism should express.

In Breton's *Manifesto of Surrealism* (cited in Edwards, p.23), he expressed his belief that artists should aim to give expression to the unconscious which is normally repressed. Working under a repressive regime, Carlos Saura explored surrealist elements such as the interplay between memory and fantasy, which became a gateway into an unconstrained expression.

¹ All Spanish translations are my own.

The integration of these different levels of reality – memories, dreams, fantasies, sensations – provided the director with an infinite range of possibilities to enrich the film's narrative. Deeper into Saura's metaphorical style we find the possibility of discovering complex meanings and interpretations, secret and hidden, not to be reached by Francoism.

The Struggle for Expression Under Repression

For many years under Francoism, all of us who made movies and painted and wrote were searching for a way to make our medium more effective, not only at the personal level but also at the level of Spanish society. I believe that when Franco was still alive, I had a moral obligation – maybe more for myself than for society – to do everything that was possible within my form of work to help change the political system as quickly as possible. That was in no way an imposition on me as an individual, for I was living in a repressive society that did not allow me to express many of the things I wanted to express (Saura quoted in Kinder 1979, p.16).

The Spanish director's words condensed the key concepts that moulded his 1970's cinematic works: a more politicised cinema that emerged from the conscious use of the cinematic expressive means, even when created under the constant censorship's surveillance. A need for dealing with the facts subtly and indirectly, but without losing sight of them, moulded the symbolic narrative style characteristic of Saura's films in the last years of the dictatorship.

In 1970 Saura presented *El jardín de las delicias*. It tells the story of Antonio Cano, a businessman who loses his memory and physical mobility after suffering a car accident. A series of scenes representing some of his most important life memories are performed by Antonio's family. By these theatrical grotesque means they intended to bring Antonio's memory back, specifically a bank account and safety-deposit box numbers. The director reflects here on the putrid values of the

Spanish Francoist bourgeoisie through an allegorical depiction of the regime's decadency and corruption while emphasising the literal debilitation and paralysis of the General Francisco Franco himself.

Two years later Saura presented one of his most symbolic films: *Ana y los lobos*. The director created a fantastic crude isolated atmosphere, which worked as a canvas where Saura represented his critical view of what he identified as the three powers of the current Spanish society: the military, the religious and the sexual. His next film, *La prima Angélica*, was released one year later and it was considered the first film that dealt directly with the reality of the Spanish Civil War from the point of view of the defeated. Saura built the intimate story of Luis, a man who returns to the town where he spent the Civil War years as a child in order to bury the remains of his late mother. In his trip, Luis re-enacts traumatic episodes of his childhood as well as the innocent love story he had with his cousin Angélica.

In 1975 Saura shot what was to be his last film during the dictatorship: *Cría cuervos*. Once more on childhood, Saura explored the contemporary society under the scrutiny of an 8-year-old child, Ana, who is fascinated by the mystery and power of death. The death of Ana's father, which stands as a representation of the eminent Caudillo's death, opens the film to a variety of sociological and political interpretations of the uncertain future that the country was soon going to deal with.

El jardín de las delicias, *La prima Angélica* and *Cría cuervos* are the chosen films for our study of the development of Saura's realistic style since these three cinematic symbolic narrative texts are all rooted in the character's inner psyche, which transports us to an imaginative time beyond reality.

La prima Angélica

‘Personal images in the form of war memories and invented images, projections of (his) consciousness and dreams’, was the material through which Saura conceived the idea for his first autobiographical film *La prima Angélica* (Saura quoted in Brasó 1974b, p.17). Nonetheless, the director did not share the classic idea of an autobiography as a recollection of one’s life events in a sort of visual diary. ‘What interests me – he explained – is the imagination working in one’s own life’ (Saura quoted in Kinder, p.20).

Not only was *La prima Angélica* the first film to deal with the war from the Republican side, but it might also be the first in which the same actor was to interpret both the adult and the child character. The actor José Luis López Vázquez was the one in charge of performing this challenging role that had its origins in a peculiar reflection of the director:

When I’ve tried to reconstruct my past, I don’t do so with the mentality of a child. Mostly I see myself as I am now, but going back 20 or 30 years. That was one of the fundamental ideas that made me make this film – that you cannot see yourself as a child (Saura quoted in Kinder, p.20).

Saura’s aforementioned reflection on memory and time evokes French philosopher Henri Bergson’s theory of time and consciousness. He defined space as immobile and measurable, and time as mobile and incomplete. Following this observation, he differentiated between two possible durations (times): the ontological and the psychological duration. Ontological duration is immanent to the universe and independent of our psychological experience, which we can call real time. Psychological duration – consciousness and memory (or the unconscious) – is a heterogeneous and qualitative continuity, an *inner* time that is also our point of contact with the ontological duration. Because we have memory we can understand our surrounding systems,

our external world. In addition, Bergson wrote about the split of the self, identifying ontological duration with the social self, the conscious, and psychological duration with the deep self, the unconscious (Moulard-Leonard 2008, p.13).

In *La prima Angélica* the adult Luis enters into a heterogeneous psychological time in which he searches his past memories, looking to access his childhood and meet his deep self. However, these memories belong to his social self, the adult Luis who remains tied to an ontological time and space.

Luis interrupts his journey to Segovia to stop in the middle of a vast, empty field. He is observing the town's skyline when he suddenly hears the noise of a car door opening. He looks back to contemplate the image of his parents in a distant 1936. His mother tries to calm him while he insists on staying with them. Luis is re-enacting the moment when the war separated his family.

The Luis we see as a child is the same Luis we have seen before, the adult of 1973. The latter appears now in front of a mirror while shaving. Seemingly lost in some deep thoughts, he caresses his forehead in the same way we have seen his mother do in his previous memory. The visual image of Luis as an adult meeting his own virtual childhood image, which is no more than a duplication of his present image, reinforces the idea of a past that coexists with the present and that cannot be separated.

This concept connects with Bergson's thesis of time, which is based on the idea of the past and present coexistence. According to the French philosopher, the past remains in our memories but not in a chronological order. Time is constantly splitting into a fleeting present and a remaining past (Moulard-Leonard, p.38). Indeed, Luis confesses to himself that he is confused by his own memories that appear to be slightly inaccurate. As he checks old photographs with his cousin

Angélica to shed some light on his memories, he recalls Proust's *madeleine*. As the French writer did in his novel *Le temps retrouvé* (1927), Luis interrogates his own consciousness in order to represent his distorted past experiences and finally understand his immediate present.

The smooth shifting between times in Saura's film suggests that the time of 1936 and that of the 1970's has suffered almost no alterations. The familial milieu appears as a closed and claustrophobic space which is emphasised by the fact that Luis' grandmother keeps the room exactly as it was 40 years ago and by Luis' insistence on seeing Angélica's husband as the representation of her authoritarian father. Indeed, he is living in a sort of constrained and unchangeable eternal present: Franco's dictatorship (Quintana 2008, pp.83-96).

The French film critic Claire Clouzot (cited in Sánchez 1991, p.86) identified Saura's narrative formal development with the psychoanalytical process in which the patient re-enacts his screen memory, a remembrance of something which is unconsciously used to hide an associated distressing memory. The patient reconstructs this memory at the same time in which the recollection emerges to the conscious being, the present, and not in the period the memory belongs to. The strength of the adult's memory, Clouzot remarked, is what gives the adult-child fusion such a powerful connection. In this sense, *La prima Angélica* could be identified as the psychoanalysis of an entire Spanish generation traumatised by the Civil War.

Carlos Saura was a 4-year old child when the Civil War broke out. Such a terrible event left the director with powerful traumatic memories. The protagonist of *La prima Angélica*, Luis, stands as a sort of alter ego of Saura in which he reflects on the impact the war had on him. The last two films that Saura made during the period that we are discussing are focused on the childhood world and on a specific generation: 'the children of Franco', those who grew up in the first

years of the regime (Kinder 1983, p.57). In his review of the film *La prima Angélica*, Alfonso Sánchez (cited in Sánchez, p.85) suggested the subtitle 'the depiction of a generation'. The critic sees in Luis the representation of a tired and distressed generation that does not seem to hold many hopes for its future. Indeed, Luis is a man trapped in his past and the contemporary political and social atmosphere did not seem to give many reasons for Saura to foresee the desired liberalising change.

Cría cuervos

In his 1975 film, the director introduced direct visual connections with his former work; the most remarkable is the image of a mother combing her daughter's hair before a mirror. *La prima Angélica* closes with the mirror image of Angélica's mother combing her daughter's hair while the child is crying; the image stands as the representation of a re-encounter between the two split egos: the traumatised child and the astounded adult. When this image appears in *Cría cuervos* its power is not fully discovered until one of the children, Irene, lets the spectator know that their mother is dead. Clearly, the image must have been a product of Ana's hallucination. Marsha Kinder (1983, p.65) intelligently placed it as a reconstructed memory from the identification mirror phase, when the child recognises her own Imaginary Signifier, different from her mother's. However, there is a last twist when the adult Ana, who in complete mother-child identification is played by the same actress that plays her mother, is identified as narrator and the subject who remembers the images we are seeing. Accordingly, this evocative fantasized image is shown as a reconstructed memory that already comes from a previously recreated remembrance. Saura experimented with the idea of time and its cinematographic coordinates, presenting a story as a *mise en abîme*, a play within a play.

Past, present, real and imaginary converge in Ana's mind. As a child, she used her rich imagination to fantasize about a utopian world

where she could free herself from the isolation and boredom she was trapped in. Ana spent her holidays stuck in a huge and cold mansion in the middle of the frantic city of Madrid. The boredom could be tackled by using her imagination: Ana flies over the city, materialising her desire to escape from the prison that the familial mansion represents. One again, Saura portrayed the familial milieu as an asphyxiating institution led by obsolete authoritarian traditional values. And unluckily for Ana, the director does not seem to foresee any substantial liberating change. The film closes with Ana and her sisters going back to school after the holiday period. The nuns greet them in the patio; a new course of authoritarian traditional education starts for the young girls. This was the environment in which a whole generation was educated in; a generation overwhelmed by the weight of religion, tradition, myths and moral taboos that controlled every single aspect of their constricted lives.

El jardín de las delicias

Double and metaphoric readings are common in the author's *oeuvre*. *El jardín de las delicias* was a film specially conceived to be read from a symbolic point of view. Theatrical scenes representing past experiences, documentary images, flashback memories and illusory visions work together to create a sense of confusion that invades both the protagonist and the spectator. The film opens with Antonio's family carefully preparing every little detail needed to perform one of the traumatic childhood memories of the absent-minded protagonist. Every single stage element works here for the sake of memory and the family's aim to open the 'safe box' of Antonio's memory (Colmeiro 2001, p.284). In a surrealist-like scene, they re-enact a distressing moment in Antonio's childhood: as a punishment for his inappropriate behaviour they locked him with a pig in a dark room. Once Antonio had been locked in, part of the family reproaches Antonio's father, Pedro, for the

cruelty of the method chosen to bring back Antonio's memories. Pedro then accuses them of not understanding the importance of the symbols. D'Lugo (1991, p.99) rightly pointed out Pedro's words as the starting point of a series of connections that allow the spectator to identify Antonio's father's actions in correlation with the process of the ideological oppression that the Spanish regime imposed over the Spanish citizens through its farcical cultural apparatuses.

Antonio watches a documentary film that shows the victorious national troops coming back after winning the Civil War. In the middle of these images that constantly praise the glories of the national side, the elder Pedro tears the screen and appears dressed in an old military uniform proclaiming his victory. The effect of the real is broken in a fake attempt to trick Antonio's mind. The famous NO-DO (News and Documentaries) shown in the Spanish cinemas during the dictatorship are one of the best examples of this false and manipulative propagandistic culture. The Spaniards, as Antonio, were the passive spectators of a tragic farce: the Francoist regime. *El jardín de las delicias* reveals not only the bourgeois hypocrisy but the manipulation of the real carried out under Franco's dictatorship (Colmeiro, p.284).

Don Pedro Cano was right when saying that symbols are everything, especially if we think of Saura's cinematographic allegorical world. When asked about the reason why Angélica's father's character walks around with his injured arm in a sling, Saura (quoted in Rentero 2003, p.30) answered that nothing in his films was accidental: 'you can be sure that [...] the smallest details have a meaning', he clarified. We have pointed out already some critical readings of the familial authoritarian institution, religious education and the regime's propagandistic practices. Establishing parallels between his fictional characters and well-known Spanish attitudes or figures was also a

common Saurian practice. The protagonist of *El jardín de las delicias*, for instance, was created from the combination of two important Spanish figures: the millionaire Spanish businessman Juan March and the General Francisco Franco himself. From the first, Saura captured the profile of the businessman that gained most of his influence after the Civil War and profited from the Franco regime (Brasó 1974a, p.273). The latter, who had just started to experience the painful symptoms of the Parkinson's disease he suffered from, appears as an alter ego in Antonio Cano as the despotic, decadent man from whom everybody was now trying to profit because he was ill. Consequently, the director creates symbolic fictional worlds in which the real history hangs in the background. His images, as Joaquín Aranda (cited in Sánchez, p.91) remarked, work both as a symbolic and as a powerful realistic description of Spain and its society while uncovering its hidden reality.

El jardín de las delicias was considered by Kinder (1979, p.18) to be the closest of Saura's works to the symbolic and surrealist Buñuelistic world. Indeed, Saura's Dantean depiction of the Spanish bourgeoisie is not far away from the surrealist Buñuelist vision of a primitive and brutal bourgeoisie in *El ángel exterminador* (The Exterminating Angel, 1962). However, Saura claimed that even if their works did share common concerns, this was not a product of a direct influence from Luis Buñuel but a consequence of their common origins. Their concern with the dialectic between daydream and material reality, myth and history, fantasy and satire – Saura argued – came from the imaginative original force of the Hispanic culture found in figures such as Quevedo or Calderón (Kinder 1979, p.18). Besides, the meta-theatricality of the narrative which uncovers the illusory nature of the cinematographic representation – Colmeiro (p.278) observed – goes back to the Hispanic tradition of the baroque disillusion and the self-reflexive conception of the multiple mirror realities that form part of

excellent works such as Cervantes' *El Quijote* (Don Quixote, 1605/1615) or Velázquez's *La Venus del espejo* (Venus at Her Mirror, circa 1650).

By the 1970's the Spanish director already stood as an essential figure in Spanish culture. The films released in the first half of that decade were not exempt from criticism, polemic and censorship. Nonetheless, these were familiar vicissitudes for a director that had fought back against the regime's authority in all the films he made.

The last years of the dictatorship were identified by Saura as a period in which a process of devastation and demolition was taking place. The Spaniards were uncertain of what was going to arise next. *Cría cuervos*, as Saura (cited in Kinder 1983, p.64) remarked, worked as a visual document of that period of destruction and death. This 'exploration of a Spain beyond the shadows of the Caudillo' was released shortly after the death of the dictator that had tormented the country for almost 40 years (D'Lugo, p.127). Fortunately, for the Spaniards, the Spanish Democratic State was to come in 1978.

Conclusion

The following is Carlos Saura's reflection on the development of his poetic realist narrative during his early filmmaking career. The director's words support our study of his realistic aesthetics in direct connection with the socio-political changes we assume had an influence on both the director and his work:

I feel unable to analyse my work especially because I have not seen my first films for ages. If there is an evolution in them, a different approach regarding the realism and the way to approach reality, it is because I have changed, the circumstances have changed, everything has changed. Even though they may have not changed as much as we think they have. What matters is that things work differently now. I am an extremely realist man and I have always maintained that fact. I consider realism to be an

extraordinarily complex issue and I have always said so (Saura quoted in Galán 1974, p.160).

His cinematographic style moved from a direct documentary realism in the 1950's towards a more explorative naturalistic narrative during the period when Spanish society was experiencing important transformations both in economic and sociological terms during the 1960's. The mild years of the openness culminate in an authoritarian period of severe censorship and it is here that we find the most imaginative and poetic of Saura's films. It was in the 1970's that the director approached the real in its more complex meaning. Reality was for him the sum of different levels of time and experience. Past and present, the real and the imaginary, met to create a new dimension of the real; this was what we identified as psychological realism.

Nonetheless, in spite of the aforementioned differences, Saura's notion of the real always remained the same. The director always shared the conception of a reality that lay beyond the object's surface and the subject's consciousness and immediate present. The constant alterations of the repressive socio-political system set the conditions that forced the director to push his expressive realist model further in each of his new cinematographic works under the Spanish dictatorship.

The Spanish realist tradition appears as the starting point from which the director developed his realist style. The love for Valle Inclán's grotesque trademark, a construction of a new dimension of reality not far from the delirious world of Don Quixote and the exhibition of a Buñuelist surrealist black humour were just some of the traces that the cultural Spanish tradition left in Saura's cinematographic work.

Carlos Saura was one of the brave audacious directors that struggled to make cinema under adverse complicated circumstances. In the words of Fernando Fernán Gómez (López 2004), the Spanish

dictatorship was a period in which 'cinema was the means through which a man was able to express how he was or how he wanted to be'. Without a doubt, Saura imbued the films produced under the dictatorship with an enraged feeling and a rebellious spirit that culminated in an imaginative powerful cinematographic work of 'masterpieces of repression' (Kinder 1979, p.17).

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