

## Alberto Rodríguez's *La isla mínima* (2014):

### Visual Intertexts and Spain's Ecosystem of Violence

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Un torturador no se redime suicidándose. Pero algo es algo.  
-Mario Benedetti (1983: 239)

Alberto Rodríguez's 2014 film *La isla mínima*, crowned with nine Goya awards, is a compelling portrait of the Spanish Transition to democracy that operates on many different levels of fact, allegory and emotional involvement—a layering that reflects how the film itself was conceived in stages. Surprisingly, the historical context was the last major element added to the mix. Rodríguez and co-scriptwriter Rafael Cobos were first inspired by Atín Aya's photographs of underdevelopment in the Guadalquivir marshlands (2000) and Héctor Garrido's aerial photographs of natural landscapes in the same area (2009). Both offered views of hidden worlds located less than fifty kilometres from their native Seville: Aya's black and white photographs capture the precarious conditions of those who live and work on the marshes; Garrido's shots reveal the uncanny beauty of the fractal geometry that shapes them. But Rodríguez and Cobos struggled to complete the script, working on it intermittently over a number of years until 2010, when they saw the two-part documentary *Después de...* (1983), filmed by Cecilia and José Juan Bartolomé in 1979 and 1980. They were struck by how closely the turbulence of those years reflected post-2008 Spain. As Rodríguez remarks in the 'Making of' extra feature on the DVD: 'tiene mucho paralelismo con el momento actual, con la España del momento. Había una crisis galopante, había mucha tensión, nos parecía interesante darnos cuenta de que había como una cara B a

la transición' (2014b). They decided to locate *La isla mínima* in 1980 and, in the words of Rodríguez, the Transition context was 'lo que completa el marco, lo que completa la fotografía' (2014b). Like many of their generation in the years following the 2008 crash, Rodríguez (b. 1971) and Cobos (b. 1973) sought to peer behind the dominant image of a clean and seamless Transition, intuiting that the roots of the present crisis could be found in the conflicts of that era.

This connection has not gone unnoticed by critics. Tom Whittaker analyses the role of photography in the film as a physical trace of the political violence that was hushed by the Transition's 'pact of silence,' resonating with renewed public debate on the era and its legacy (2018). Valeria Camporesi and Jara Fernández Meneses study *La isla mínima* within a trilogy of 'quality thrillers' made by Rodríguez between 2012 and 2016, which aim to 'captivate a public that was increasingly taking in an unsettling vision of its past' (2018: 200).<sup>1</sup> Both these insightful articles demonstrate how the film's narrative of crime and punishment (or lack thereof) operates as an allegory for the Transition's unresolved contradictions, which taint the democratic structures of contemporary Spain. While the killer is discovered and his last victim saved, photographs and testimonies point to additional criminals that are ingrained in a wider ecosystem of violence, perpetrators that the justice system is unable or unwilling to pursue.

The present article builds on these allegorical readings and further investigates the film's dialogue with the intertexts named above, each of which provides a different spatial and temporal frame for the narrative. The Bartolomé documentary, shot mainly between April and December 1979, constructs a living tableau of political tensions

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<sup>1</sup> The other two films are *Grupo 7* (2012) and *El hombre de las mil caras* (2016).

manifested in multiple social sectors and locations over a short time period. It informs *La isla mínima*'s characterization of the detective protagonists, as well as its representation of the highly conflictive social-political context. Aya's and Garrido's images—in contrast to the Bartolomé's investigation of a narrow time period of accelerated change—focus on the complexity of localised spaces that have been slowly carved out over time. Aya's black-and-white photographs of life on the marshes helped shape the film's cinematography, as Whittaker shows, revealing a world 'where time has ostensibly stood still' (2018: 44). However, the film's theme of disappearance underlines the fact that the way of life depicted in these images is fading, leaving behind unresolved tensions and ghostly spaces that pervade post-Franco Spain. Garrido's marsh landscapes offer an even wider temporal framework, suggesting the deep psychological, social and natural structures that subsist through historical change. These aerial views are associated with the omnipresent birds that often seem to be watching the older detective Juan (Javier Gutiérrez), who is fatally ill and facing a moral reckoning with his Francoist past. By extension, the birds-eye views are also associated with his victims, who a clairvoyant woman says are waiting for Juan on the other side. Woven together in the film, the three visual intertexts configure a layered archaeology of the recent past that not only superimposes different spatial and temporal frames but also intertwines social-political processes with emotional, natural and even spiritual dimensions. They give depth to the film's ethical questioning of the two detectives and their roles in the world: Juan in terms of the legacy he will leave behind and Pedro in terms of how he will contribute to society going forward.

This complexity also reflects how critiques of the Transition have taken on a broader range of perspectives since the 2008 crash, adding to the ever-present debates

on historical memory and the ‘pact of silence.’ The financial crisis exposed the tenuous and perhaps illusory nature of the economic gains made in Spain over the last decades. Large sectors of those born since the 1960s, who entered the labour market in a context of rampant unemployment and falling wages, had always felt left out of the economic advances enjoyed by their elders. The 2008 crisis and subsequent austerity measures further deteriorated conditions and crystallised a recognisable set of realities through which these generations could articulate their discontent with the post-Franco political and economic order. The 15M movement catalysed this growing dissatisfaction and spurred far-reaching debates on the Spanish democratic system, seeking the roots of present problems in the Transition process. In his introduction to the edited volume *CT, o, la cultura de la Transición: Crítica a 35 años de cultura española*, journalist Guillem Martínez denounces the much-touted consensus of the period as a self-serving accord among political parties and elite social actors. The ‘Cultura de la Transición,’ writes Martínez, hypnotises citizens with false prosperity and limits the scope of the public debates necessary for the functioning of a healthy democracy (2012). The highly varied contributions to this volume sometimes focus on specific political processes but more often extend to a broader and less precise tracking of the origins of present societal shortcomings and malaise, in which rational inquiry is blended with intuition and emotion.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, these essays demonstrate H. Rosi Song’s argument in her book *Lost in Transition* that the time period has become ‘a referent capable of containing multiple significations ... The relevance of the period can thus be multiple and

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that wide-ranging critiques of the Transition have long been pursued by authors like Manuel Vázquez Montalbán (1985), Teresa Vilarós (1998) or Cristina Moreiras-Menor (2002). However, they have become much more common in recent years.

complex, referring to political or historical events in the past and the present or to personal and collective emotional states' (2016: 44-45). It is in this sense, I argue, that the Transition served as the final piece of the puzzle for Rodríguez and Cobos to construct their film about ingrained social violence, corruption and injustice. It is true, as Whittaker demonstrates, that the use of photography in the film as clues and evidence points to the persistent but often concealed traces of violence in the founding moments of Spanish democracy. Photographic images provided Rodríguez and Cobos with visual material for *La isla mínima* and, within the film, they serve as material traces and indexes of silenced realities (2018). However, the superimposed spatial, temporal and visual frames of the different intertexts also alert the audience to the labyrinthine nature of Spain's current reckoning with its recent past, regardless of whether firm evidence of wrongdoings may exist, as historical fact is always embroiled with existential and emotional dimensions.

The film's arresting opening images of Garrido's fractal landscapes anticipate this fractal psycho-social geography. The detectives' investigation of the brutal murders of young women leads them into the maze-like terrain of the marshes as it simultaneously leads them into a maze of interrelated violent acts. What first appears to be the work of one person turns out to be a recurrent pattern tying together two highly different criminals: reclusive sociopath Sebastián (Manuel Salas) and factory owner Alfonso Corrales (Alberto González). Alfonso employs the good-looking local Quini (Jesús Castro) to take unsuspecting victims to a rented hunting lodge, where he playfully ties them up before Alfonso arrives, sexually abuses them and forces them to pose for demeaning photographs. Quini then threatens to circulate the compromising images if they report the crime. Afterwards Sebastián, the lodge caretaker, lures the

shamed and desperate girls to an abandoned house on the estate, promising them work at a coastal hotel. Once they are in his power, he tortures them savagely and chops up their bodies. Sebastián is an extreme reflection of the misogyny and brutality that permeates the impoverished marshes, emblematic of the Francoist past that the Transition's reformers aimed to overcome. Alfonso's cold exploitive violence complements this allegory: he represents the Francoist economic elite, which transmigrated into a new democratic elite during the Transition without repairing the chronic underdevelopment they had created. But a third villain is identified when it emerges that the detective Juan also tortured and even killed dissidents during the Franco regime, crimes that are uncannily echoed in the atrocities he and his younger partner Pedro (Raúl Arévalo) investigate. Pedro is an idealistic pro-democracy reformer, but by the time he learns of Juan's past he has already been pulled into the grey areas of the Transition through a mutually dependent working relationship. He is faced with an ethical dilemma that serves as an illustration of the era's unsettling institutional symbiosis of the old and the new. The Isla Mínima of the film's title—the location where they finally track down Sebastián—suggests a symbolic heart of darkness of Spain's Francoist past. However, the scene that follows this final pursuit makes it clear that the roots of evil do not lie in the hearts of any of the film's three criminals but rather extends out through the fractal social-economic structures of violence and exploitation in which all of them, along with the other characters, are integrated.

The predominance of death in the film, along with the spirits that haunt Juan, connect this wounded landscape to the twin themes of memory and haunting that imbue so much of contemporary Spanish cultural production. Jo Labanyi analyses the

motif of haunting in Francoist and post-Franco Spain from the perspective of Jacques Derrida's hauntology theory: 'ghosts are the traces of those not allowed to leave a trace ... whose stories—those of losers—are excluded from the dominant narratives of the victors' (2002: 7). Juan's political dissident victims are certainly spectral in this sense, as are the marginalised women in the film whose lives are truncated by Alfonso and Sebastián, or stifled by abusive husbands and a repressive environment. Moreover, as I argue below, the entire marshland region appears abandoned and discarded, suffering the fate of many rural regions during the Franco regime and the post-Franco era. Juan himself, formerly on the winning side of history, appears to be rotting away in physical and moral decay, soon to be discarded and forgotten. Pedro, meanwhile, is set to become a winner in the new social order, but the film arguably shows how a part of himself, or at least his principles, will become spectral in the process.

In this sense we can connect the film to Derrida's concern with the post-1989 neo-liberal triumphalism that consigned the spectre of Marxist thought to history's waste bin (2011). *La isla mínima* represents the end of the Franco regime, a very different totalitarian state from the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc governments that fell a few years later. But post-Franco democracy has joined the same globalising tendencies as those accelerated by the end of these communist regimes. Like Derrida's analysis, *La isla mínima* also suggests a landscape of lost futures, forgotten pasts and alternative histories that persist underground, along with hidden problems of social injustice and economic inequality. The film's detective protagonists illustrate Derrida's implication that being (ontology) is being-haunted (hauntology). The integrated fractal landscape is not only connected to a wider ecosystem of violence, but it also reveals itself to Juan as a potential alternative mode of being, based on empathy and

interconnection. He is not redeemed in the film, but he does come to understand his ontological entanglement with others, especially his victims and the similar victims of abuse in the case they investigate. He perhaps catches glimpses of the better man—and better police officer—that he could have been. Pedro likewise recognises his own entanglement with the institutional and social brutality of the past, which is embodied in his corrupt partner. He does not take decisive action to overcome the pitfalls of that inheritance but, when he leaves the marshlands and returns to Madrid, he is much more conscious of the complexity of the legacy of Francoist Spain, which he and his generation will face as they attempt to create a new democratic nation.

*The other side of the Transition: political instability and Francoist influence*

In the film's final shot the detectives' car follows a strikingly straight road into what appears to be the only possible future: the great advancements in social freedoms and economic development of the Transition, which came at the cost of silencing the past. As is ever more apparent, it also came at the cost of embracing a neo-liberal global economic order that is now in crisis. The crisis has brought out spectres that the Transition attempted to bury: ingrained economic precarity, Catalanian independence movements, and now even the lasting Francoist sentiment that has made Vox the third party in the national parliament at the time of writing. Thus the Spain of recent years increasingly offers uncanny echoes of the 1979 context seen in *Después de...*

Released in two parts—*No se os puede dejar solos* and *Atado y bien atado*—the Bartolomé documentary provides a contrasting view of a historical process generally depicted as a miraculously peaceful and harmonious dismantling of the Franco



dictatorship. It covers a wide range of protests and rallies around the country, combining first-hand footage with numerous interviews, often carried out spontaneously during the events the filmmakers attended with their highly portable Arriflex CP 16R camera (Blázquez Carretero 2014: 140). The choral protagonists—to name just a few—are labour union representatives, agricultural workers, business owners, Basque and Catalan separatist party leaders, national politicians and city council members, abortion rights demonstrators and feminist lawyers, extreme right-wing party militants, young people smoking hashish at a bar, and a vast swathe of anonymous citizens on the street who express strong opinions on a range of social issues. The *Bartolomé*s set up a tense counterpoint between clashing views and interests, which is never resolved into a harmonious convergence.

As Song argues, ‘early readings of the transition as a political process fraught with challenges quickly gave way to an understanding of the past that focused primarily on its ultimate democratic success’ (2016: 9). The documentary highlights contentious issues that continue to plague contemporary Spain: the struggle between centralisation and regions like Catalonia, the Basque Country and Andalusia; unemployment, rural degradation and the economic marginalisation of the youth; women’s rights, gendered violence and the law; historical memory and the spectre of continuing Francoist structures and sentiment. Marta Selva i Masoliver thus points out that *Después de...* exposes the often forgotten historical roots of present problems: ‘lo que desde muchos sectores se reivindica en términos de mejoras laborales, sociales, educativas y culturales tienen una tradición que el aquí y ahora televisivo deja en suspensión ahistórica’ (qtd. in Blázquez Carretero 2014: 149).

The documentary's highly charged social-political environment is reflected in *La isla mínima* both in major story elements and the constant reminders of political agitation in the background: a strike at the fish factory owned by Alfonso Corrales, news reports of regional labour protests heard on a car radio, manifestations of the extreme right in public rallies and symbols that pop up in unexpected places. Moreover, the film reproduces the documentary's general atmosphere of conflict and confrontation through fast-paced editing and sparse dialogue. Each shot and phrase spoken conveys key information to the spectator, and the quick succession of events makes it difficult to follow all the details of the police investigation on a first viewing. As Carlos Reviriego notes, the plot is 'algo imprecisa, lo que no afecta ni a su magnífico desarrollo, ni al incesante ritmo ... ni al valor metafórico del período y del lugar que recrea' (2014: 38). *La isla mínima* induces the viewer to focus more on its emotive tone, fast-paced rhythm and allegorical character than the sequence of clues that lead the detectives to the killer. In contrast to this quick pace, *Después de...* overloads the viewer with footage and interviews that are frequently repetitive, but the effect is much the same, directing our attention more to the overall conflictive atmosphere than the structured development of ideas and narratives.

*La isla mínima* also echoes the documentary's preoccupation with the palpable but often indeterminable influence of the far right in shaping Spanish democracy. The two parts of *Después de...* both end with ominous warnings of the continuing presence and power of Francoist forces. *No se os puede dejar solos* covers a rally at the Valle de los Caídos on the anniversary of the dictator's death, finishing with chilling interviews that allude to the inevitability of an uprising to restore the former regime. *Atado y bien atado* concludes with the story of Alcobendas police chief Jesús Merino, sanctioned for

a letter to *El País* criticising General Jaime Miláns del Bosch's declarations against the democratic government in *ABC*. While the general had not been punished for practically inciting rebellion against the government (and he would later participate in the 1981 attempted coup), Merino was removed from his position by the Ministry of the Interior for making political declarations *defending* the democratic government. The film must have seemed prophetic when Lieutenant Colonel Tejero stormed the Congress only six days after the final copy was delivered to the Ministry of Culture. The military rebellion failed, of course, but the fears it stoked might have contributed to the government's decision to refuse financing for the documentary and to block its distribution through numerous legal measures and threats (Blázquez Carretero 2014: 147-48). Premiered in 1981 at film festivals in San Sebastián and Barcelona (where it was awarded the prize for best documentary), *Después de...* was only released for wider distribution in 1983, after PSOE's landslide victory had cemented the fledgling democracy. Even then it had a short run and, in the very different social and political climate, lost much of the immediacy and relevance it would have had two years earlier (Fernández Santos 1983). This blocked distribution validates the documentary's warnings about the dampening effect far right forces had on public debate during the Transition era, operating both in open shows of force and behind closed doors in governmental negotiations and decisions.

In addition to the presence of Francoist symbols, *La isla mínima* represents this more subtle behind-the-scenes influence of the previous regime through the relationship between the two detectives. Pedro's gradual acceptance of Juan functions as an allegory for the Transition's political process, in which young reformers manoeuvred through a hostile and labyrinthine terrain in the company of Francoists

that knew their way around the territory. The film's initial sequence sets up the era's volatile atmosphere through sharp contrasts in sound and lighting, connecting it to the persistence of Francoist elements in the 'new' Spain. After the credits we see the detectives standing in silence by their stalled car on a country road at sundown, as a tractor with a wagon approaches to take them into town. The setting sun casts a warm natural light on the scene with soft shadows; tranquil ambient sounds of birds, cicadas, running water and the wagon's wheels feature prominently. However, the lack of dialogue and meaningful looks between the detectives—and from two men walking on the side of the road with rifles slung over their shoulders—imbue the brief scene with a perceptible underlying tension. This tension seems to burst into the air around them as the detectives are next seen crossing a bridge on foot at twilight, entering a town festival. Gunshots, loudspeakers, music and other sounds of funfair attractions blend into a strident cacophony, while rack-focus shifts bring the bright lights of the fair in and out of focus. This busy setting quickly gives way to the bare darkened interior of the hotel reception where they check in, as a quiet television shows footage of a multitudinous rally sponsored by the far right Fuerza Nueva party (taken from *Después de...*). In their even darker hotel room, Pedro finds a crucifix on the wall decorated with pictures of Franco, Hitler, Mussolini and Salazar. 'Tu nuevo país,' says Juan ironically, standing in front of the window with fireworks exploding behind him. In this way the first four minutes of the film set up a jarring tone with abrupt contrasts in sound and lighting, echoing the convulsive atmosphere of the era represented in *Después de...* Like in the documentary, a sense of instability is conveyed by clashes between the efforts of reformers like Pedro to build a new country (reflecting the activism of unions, workers, feminists and progressive politicians in *Después de...*) and

the pernicious influence of the Francoist past. When Pedro finds the crucifix he quickly shoves it in a drawer, but the social and political structures of the dictatorship will remain even if they are hidden from view.

There is a certain heavy handedness in this first sequence's pointed display of Francoist images. Whittaker remarks that the thumbnail portraits of fascist dictators are a somewhat hyperbolic detail (49). The footage from *Después de...* is itself an anachronism, as the film was not released until 1983 and would not appear on television until years later (though most viewers are likely to assume that the images of the Fuerza Nueva rally are part of a daily newscast). However, these breaks with verisimilitude do not take away from the poignancy of the film's setting. On the contrary, they act as a deliberate signposting, alerting the audience that the violence and tensions in the film should be read within the frame of the Franco regime's legacy. As Maria Delgado points out even the fictional town's name, Villafranco, has great significance, contributing to the sense that the detectives have been sent to a stronghold of Francoism (2015). Throughout their arrival to the town and countryside that will make up the film's setting, the detectives are seen closely observing their surroundings, and as they cross the bridge over-the-shoulder shots give the audience the feeling of entering this unfriendly territory with them.

Drawing on the documentary's telling of the Jesús Merino case, the detectives' first extended dialogue also frames their relationship within the context of the regime's continuing influence. Pedro has been sent to Villafranco—for what initially appears to be a run-of-the-mill missing persons investigation—as punishment for a public letter criticising a fascist military commander. Juan engages Pedro in a debate about the letter, telling him it is not a good time to criticise the military and that the

country is not truly democratic despite the change of government.<sup>3</sup> Pedro is openly hostile, referring to Juan's reputation for extorting prostitutes and bars. However, as Delgado notes, it is significant that they are playing together here at a shooting gallery at the town fair, reinforcing the fact that despite their differences they are partners on a shared mission working within the same institution (2015: 61). They each take a shot after delivering each line, making their discussion appear to be a dialectical exchange of views. But one humorous retort emphasises the fact that they are both also on the margins of institutional acceptability: Juan says 'mira donde has acabado,' as a result of his standing up for democracy, and Pedro responds 'sí, contigo.' Both the former torturer and the principled critic are uncomfortable for the precarious equilibrium of the young democratic regime and have been tucked out of sight, away from the power centre of Madrid. Only when they have learned to work together does Pedro return as a hero, now with his own secrets to hide, as he has torn up incriminating photos of his partner.

Pedro's progressive complicity with Juan begins with him relying on the more experienced detective's skills and knowledge. Pedro is rigid and idealistic, challenging the *guardias civiles* who report to them on the case when they make sexist allusions about Carmen and Estrella, the two missing young women. Juan is more adept at gaining the trust of locals and accessing information. He cosies up to a group at the town fair with a bottle of gin and establishes the detectives' valuable relationship with the poacher Jesús (Salvia Reina), who guides them around the marshlands in exchange

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<sup>3</sup> References to the content of Pedro's letter and the 'fascista' it criticises are vague. *La isla mínima* does not directly acknowledge its debt to the Bartolomé documentary or the other visual intertexts until brief mentions of *Después de...* and Garrido's photos in the final credits. As I am arguing, however, knowledge of these texts adds further layers to our reading of *La isla mínima*. In the last section of the essay I address the partially 'hidden' character of the intertexts.

for cash and cigarettes. He also shows a subtle empathy for the situation of the missing girls' mother Rocío (Nerea Barros), who is living under the shadow of her abusive husband Rodrigo (Antonio de la Torre), and she comes to him with important information about the case that could compromise Rodrigo. As the two ideologically-opposed detectives learn to work together as a team, Pedro's principles are gradually compromised. He leaves the room to let Juan get rough with Rodrigo when it is evident he is hiding information, and he does not object when Juan illegally taps the phone line at the home of Marina (Ana Tomeno), a friend of Carmen and Estrella who appears set to be the killer's next victim. Although the objective is noble in this case, these are methods Juan has honed to squash out dissidence as part of Franco's Brigada Político-Social.

While Pedro's principles begin to falter, Juan undergoes a quiet transformation in the opposite direction. Beneath his surface scepticism, he admires Pedro's idealism and takes care of his younger partner throughout the investigation. Towards the end of the film, when Sebastián has kidnapped Marina and they are hot in his pursuit, it is Pedro that gets rough with the woman that rents out the hunting lodge (Mercedes León), seizing her by the neck to force her to reveal his whereabouts. Juan stops him, sits the woman down and describes how Sebastián mutilated Carmen and Estrella, breaking her sympathy for the killer, who is the son of a close friend. Juan is eager to stop Pedro from repeating his own abusive tactics, and in the process he discovers the effectiveness of his best policing instincts when he is on the side of citizen protection rather than repression. He then saves Pedro in the climactic persecution scene when the younger cop has been shot and Sebastián is dragging his inert body. Allegorically, in these moments the film seems to imply that young reformers and secretly repentant

Francoists need to work together to suppress the evil of the past and lead Spain into a brighter future. Later in the town bar Juan holds up a newspaper article declaring Pedro a hero for leading the investigation, moves his head close to Pedro and says in a quiet tone: ‘no lo pierdas, no lo pierdas, Pedro.’

If the audience is temporarily lulled into feeling that Juan has redeemed himself, the next part of the scene, where a journalist (Manolo Soto) gives Pedro incriminating photos of him shooting a young woman at a protest march, dispels any such illusion. These images puncture through the mood of celebration that dominates the bar scene until that moment: not only has Pedro been made a hero but he has just found out he is to be relocated close to his family (in Alcobendas, a nod to Merino); Juan is flirting with two women that are celebrating the end of the strike at Alfonso’s factory; the breezy 1977 hit song ‘Yes Sir, I Can Boogie,’ by Spanish band Baccara, plays in the background. The Transition has often been likened to a celebration of amnesia and superficial prosperity—ignoring the traumas and structural economic problems inherited from the past—and this scene epitomises such images of the era. As the journalist hands Pedro the pictures, Julio de la Rosa’s eerie soundtrack takes over and the pop song fades into the background, sounding muffled, as if it were coming from a distant room. Pedro looks back at Juan, who is still dancing and chatting up the women, but he is now outside that present moment of celebration, as if the journalist had lifted the rug to show the tortured and dead bodies lying underneath: ‘allí donde lo ves, él solo torturó a más de cien personas. Y lo hacía como nadie.’

*Further undersides of Spanish democracy: economic injustice, ghostly spaces and spectral subjects*



In addition to the impunity of state criminals like Juan, the film also points to the Transition's failure to fully address the inheritance of an unjust and precarious economic structure. As the Bartolomé documentary highlights, the new town councils had little power to combat previous policies that had concentrated wealth and power in the hands of a pro-regime elite. Moreover, wages and working conditions were not improving but in fact deteriorating in the face of rampant inflation, leading to constant strikes and protests. As mentioned above there are continual reminders of this unrest in *La isla mínima* but it remains in the background, just as according to Isidro López the worker demands of the time were distant from the concerns of the political parties negotiating the Transition's accords. López even argues that the 1977 Pactos de Moncloa, in which all the parties and the newly legalised trade unions agreed to cap salary raises in the face of a 40% inflation rate, is a more significant document of the Transition's consensus than the 1978 Constitution. Indeed, Franco's crusade to 'save' Spain had targeted those who advocated for workers and peasant rights, thereby safeguarding the privileges of wealthy landowners and industrialists. Forty years later they were still protected under a democratic government more concerned with political and social freedoms than with economic justice (2012: 79-80).

This further layer of the historical era is reflected in the marshland's impenetrable geography of unmapped roads, rundown houses, gendered violence and chronic poverty, which the detectives navigate with the indispensable help of Jesús. If their arrival to Villafranco stages the film's entry into the historical era represented in *Después de...*, their forays into the back country delve deeper into the temporal layers beneath that moment in time. As Whittaker discusses, Aya's photos of the region served as a major inspiration for the film's representation of the rural setting (2018:

44). Taken in the early 1990s, these images show a radically different world from nearby Seville, whose modernisation was showcased in the 1992 World Expo. In contrast to the transformations of spotlighted urban centres like Seville and Barcelona, the Guadalquivir landscapes and interior spaces Aya captured in that decade could belong without modifications to the 1980 context of the film. For that matter, they had probably changed little since the beginning of the Franco regime, except for the progressive decay of homes and farms, manifested in the film's several abandoned buildings. *La isla mínima's* theme of disappearance reinforces this sense of stagnation and decay. Before Carmen and Estrella two other girls have gone missing in previous years during the town festival, cases that received little attention from local law enforcement. In fact, their father Rodrigo comments that the only reason the current disappearance is being investigated is that their mother Rocío's cousin did military service with the judge instructing the case. If it were not for these circumstances, it seems, the grisly murders of all these young women might never have come to light.

The dark, cramped interiors of the homes the detectives visit are full of traces of these absent persons and others who have migrated to Barcelona or abroad in search of economic opportunities. They have left behind the photographs that Whittaker discusses as well as abandoned belongings that testify to lives truncated or thrown off course. In a particularly ghostly *mise en scène*, the detectives find the family home of one past victim vacated, sunlight shining through the window on the kitchen table, where dishes and food from their last meal there were left behind. As discussed in the introduction, the entire region and its inhabitants appear 'spectral' in the sense Jacques Derrida gives the word, 'history's losers' in Labanyi's formulation of his theory (2002: 1-2). Labanyi points out that Francoism, despite its rejection of

liberalism and socialism, subscribed just as much as these ideologies to capitalist modernity's emphasis on success: 'a view of history based on the notion that those who triumph are necessarily the best' (2002: 7). National Catholicism thus triumphed over the red scourge due to its moral and intellectual superiority, and the economic elite of Spain, such as the character Alfonso Corrales, retained or increased their dominance due to their individual superiority. Impoverished rural regions—even when their folk cultures were held up as the essence of the national character—were allowed to decay and their inhabitants left to scrape together precarious livings or move to the cities seeking better lives. The Transition did little to redress the economic inequalities and rural decline inherited from the dictatorship. Entire regions and social collectives remained spectral, the historical causes of their marginalisation left uninvestigated. The post-Franco order left them struggling to survive in a market-based value system that prized modernization and economic success above all else.

The visual representation of interior and exterior spaces on the marshes creates a sense that this region is impenetrable and that its inhabitants and the history of its underdevelopment are therefore hidden from view. They also create a thematic continuity between the grisly murders, underground Francoist sentiment and economic disparities inherited from the dictatorship era—all spectral traces of suppressed histories. Whittaker points out that outside scenes are 'frequently staged in a sustained depth of field ... an extended horizontality that appears to elude the grasp of the detectives' (44). The thick shadows and mirrors of inside scenes have a similarly disorienting effect. In one scene the detectives inspect an abandoned farmhouse in the dark of night, their flashlights lighting up the crumbling remains of the building. Pedro pauses on graffiti that echoes a right-wing woman's furious rant at

Valle de los Caídos rally in *No se os puede dejar solos*: ‘Viva Franco Vencimos y Venceremos.’ Placed in the empty ruin, where Estrella’s purse and pantyhose are discovered moments later, the hatred contained in these common Francoist slogans is equated with the brutal violence practiced by Sebastián. Later, in the hunting lodge, Pedro recognises the bedroom where Carmen and Estrella were forced to pose in the nude (in an earlier scene Rocío gives the detectives negatives of the images, which she has found disposed of in the *brasero* [brazier]). Pedro’s gaze and the framing of the scene emphasise large wardrobe mirrors and the bed where the girls posed, well-lit by sunlight in contrast to the room’s prominent shadows. By opening a wardrobe door to change the position of the mirror and placing himself behind the bed, Pedro is able to replicate one of the photos. These plays of darkness and light around ghostly objects, images and reflections make the interior spaces, with their hidden histories, just as labyrinthine and ungraspable as the wide-open outside spaces of the marshland.

The continuities between different types of violence and marginalisation on the marshland are reinforced through the character of Alfonso: his impunity in the case is paralleled with his ability to end the wage strike at his factory with small concessions to the day labourers who work there. He appears in one of the photos from the hunting lodge but the negatives have suffered damage from the *brasero*’s coals and his face is whited out. Similarly, Juan sees Alfonso enter the house from behind the day that Quini takes Marina there but he is knocked unconscious by an unseen assailant and is therefore not able to see his face, only the distinctive hat he is wearing. Later, though, he recognises the hat at a public salary negotiation. Speaking through a factory representative, Alfonso ends the strike and halts attempts at further union organisation with an offer of 170 pesetas per day, after which he quickly rises, dons the

hat and walks toward his Mercedes Benz. Juan follows and introduces himself, shaking his hand, and Don Alfonso responds curtly with impeccable manners and the steely confidence of the very rich, before driving away. Juan then sniffs his own hand, presumably remembering that the only identifying characteristics Marina could name were the smell of an expensive perfume and the soft hands of her assailant. Like the economic elite of the Francoist regime in general, Alfonso works behind the scenes and is apparently immune to any investigation or questioning of his privileges. He hires people to speak for him in the messy labour negotiations and his errand boy Quini takes the fall for his abuses of young women. The last time he appears in the film is in this scene, driving away unscathed, leaving only faint traces of perfume and whitewashed images.

Whittaker points out that Alfonso evokes Andalusia's history of *latifundismo*, the economic system in which absentee landlords employed seasonal labourers to work their extensive estates, and he notes that the hunting motif harks back to common representations of atavistic brutality in Franco-era films like *Surcos* (1951) and *Furtivos* (1975) (2018: 44-45, 48). It can be added that hunting estate settings like *La isla mínima*'s lodge were employed to condemn the Francoist aristocracy in Transition-era films like Luis García Berlanga's *La escopeta nacional* (1978) and Mario Camus' *Los santos inocentes* (1984), adapted from the 1981 Miguel Delibes novel. However, in *La isla mínima* the estate is no longer used by the aristocratic family but instead rented out, and Alfonso pays for its use with anonymous deposits, covering the traces of his crimes. Allegorically, the old *señoritos* of the *latifundios* are converted into faceless exploiters in a more flexible and dynamic economy, which is still rooted in age-old inequalities and patterns of violent domination. Moreover, the salary

negotiation scene implies that with small concessions this aristocracy was able to hold onto its privileges in the democratic era—the historical roots of their economic advantages leaving behind only spectral traces. As Derrida argues, the triumphalism of the neo-liberal economic order hides the victims, violence and other material histories that have created current structural inequalities.

### *Fractal landscapes and Juan's internal struggle*

The remarkable aerial images of the marshes in *La isla mínima's* title sequence, with their intricate shapes and patterns, anticipate this complex social geography that blends change and continuity. They also suggest a wider nature-based timeframe for the events depicted, which is connected to a spiritual dimension that haunts Juan throughout the film. The omnipresent birds of Doñana National Park become symbolic manifestations of his victims—further traces of those who were not allowed to leave a trace. Juan seems to be continually surrounded by penetrating gazes: the birds, the clairvoyant woman, the journalist, Rocío and Pedro all spy the guilt and inner torment beneath his cool exterior. Despite the accusing looks, the spiritual aspect of the film points to an interconnectedness of all beings, and in the subtle mutual gazes between Juan and Rocío we can glimpse another type of spectre: a Juan who could have been better than the abusive and hedonistic Francoist cop he has been. His actions cannot be undone, his time is nearly up and, as the Benedetti quote at the top of this article affirms, a torturer cannot be redeemed. However, the ending makes it clear that Juan's spectral memories will continue to haunt the new democratic Spain.

The opening titles incorporate nine photographs taken by Garrido, who documents bird populations in Doñana National Park. His photographs of the marshlands were made public in an exhibition titled 'Armonía fractal,' put together in collaboration with the scientist Juan Manuel García Ruiz. In his introduction to the exhibition catalogue, García Ruiz emphasizes the living quality of the marshlands seen in Garrido's images of 'la propia piel de Doñana' (2009: 15). The bird's-eye views of the landscape show how it is shaped slowly over time by the movements of water and air, which compose 'el sistema respiratorio de la marisma' (16). Rodríguez and his team digitalised the images for the film to add movement to the water, birds and other animals that cross the lush terrain, beings whose lives develop entirely within nature's integrated systems and patterns of natural cycles. The images are also given a sense of foreboding by echoing birdcalls and de la Rosa's soundtrack, which features a mandolin along with 'a low-frequency drone ... whose discordant bass notes produce a discomfiting aura of dread' (Whittaker: 51). The horror that will emerge from the living and breathing water of the marshland when Carmen and Estrella's bodies are discovered is framed as a sickness that rots the intertwined human and natural ecosystems portrayed in the film. In this sense the natural landscapes do not provide a contrasting perfect harmony to the human cruelty represented in the story but rather suggest an entangling of human experience and actions with the larger social and natural landscapes in which the characters move.

The film's social geography also reflects the fractal design of nature seen in Garrido's photos, in which patterns are reproduced on different scales: from the veins on a leaf to the branches of a tree to the rivers and hills that shape the landscape where it grows. Commenting on one of these images, García Ruiz points out that 'El

tamaño de lo que se observa en esta foto pudiera ser el que abarca la mirada de un niño jugando en la marisma, o la mirada del pescador que la atisba desde el puente, o la del flamenco que la vuela cada verano' (2009: 29). Similarly, in the film everywhere you look the same patterns are repeated at all scales of society. Juan's violence is echoed in the violence that Sebastián, Quini and Don Alfonso perpetrate on the young women, and in the violence of Rodrigo, who beats Rocío. Fractal reflections also weave through the various levels of corruption: Juan and Alfonso's impunity, Pedro's punishment for speaking out against a Francoist military officer, the permissive attitude of local law enforcement to the drug trafficking on the marshland canals. As Delgado observes, in some of the images seen during the credits the marshland 'looks like a twisted intestine or the interior of a human brain, a jigsaw of intersecting arteries' (2015: 61). It is as if we were seeing inside Juan's diseased brain and body, which is simultaneously a view of the collective diseased social body that inhabits the landscapes of the dictatorship and the Transition.

As García Ruiz discusses, some of Garrido's images also highlight the contrast between nature's balanced geometry of sinuous curves and the divisive straight lines of human constructions (2009: 16), a contrast emphasised in the film's credit sequence. As opposed to the entirely natural landscapes seen in the first eight images, the last of the aerial photographs shows the Guadalquivir acting as a border between the wild marshes and a landscape dominated by right-angled farming plots. This photograph serves as the establishing shot for the opening scene of the detectives stranded on the country road. In the next shot flamingos are seen from below and a third shot shows Juan looking up at them from the road where the detectives' car has broken down. Immersed in the conflictive historical moment, he and the rest of the



characters are distant from the harmonious natural patterns shown in the aerial views of the marshes. However, this wider timeframe returns later in the film through the gaze of birds who seem to be watching Juan and through aerial views that serve as closing shots for key scenes. These shots are also reminiscent of the credit sequence in that they show characters moving slowly across the broad expanses, enveloped in fractal social geographies.

The clairvoyant woman connects these aerial views and the gaze of the birds to the spectres that haunt Juan and to the film's undergirding spiritual dimension. She is first introduced in the course of the investigation, as a seer that works on a boat that traffics heroin and claims to have heard from her dead mother that Estrella and Carmen were held at the abandoned farmhouse. As she relates this to the detectives she is occupied cleaning a fish but when she glances up and catches sight of Juan her face is transformed into a spooked look that unsettles him. Later her husband Fermín (Juan Carlos Montilla) admits that it was he who actually saw Sebastián acting suspicious at the farmhouse in the early hours of the morning, when waiting to receive a delivery of heroin. But in that scene the woman calls to Juan as he and Pedro are leaving the boat and says 'lo de usted sí que lo veo. Los muertos le están esperando, ya queda poco,' and her penetrating gaze again unnerves the detective. These moments offer glimpses beneath the hardened exterior of a seasoned cop who is quick to use violence and visibly enjoys the pleasures of food, drink and sexual conquests—a brazen physicality that seems to suppress the moral and spiritual dimensions of his existence.

It is thus when he is physically vulnerable that memories of the dead appear in the form of watching birds. The first of these scenes occurs just after Castro (Miguel

Ángel Díaz), a young man, shows up at the detectives' hotel inebriated and tells them that his girlfriend Beatriz disappeared during a previous festival—only her suitcase and a severed foot were found in the river. As Castro breaks into tears at the end of his story Juan looks down at a locket he has brought to show them, containing miniature pictures of Castro and Beatriz. A closeup shows Juan's hands shaking as he contemplates the smiling faces. In the next shot he is alone in his hotel room, urinating blood in a toilet in the corner. After downing a pill with a glass of water, he bends over the sink and sees the image of his suffering face in the mirror. A brightly-coloured object in the background catches his eye and he turns to see a kingfisher perched on a lamp on the other side of the room. The bird seems to be eyeing him sideways, then turns to face him briefly before its head flickers—a movement that appears to be a glitch and suggests that the bird may be a hallucination<sup>4</sup>—and Juan falls to the floor. The glitchy movement and Juan's visibly unsteady state give this scene an oneiric tone, as if seeing Castro's suffering for the murdered girl had brought out his unconscious guilt for the countless suffering his own violent actions have caused. It is also implied in this scene that his disease is partially caused, or at least aggravated, by his suppressed remorse.

Juan's second encounter with a bird, occurring after he has been knocked unconscious outside the hunting lodge, conveys a growing sense of identification and empathy with his victims alongside the guilt. He awakens to the noise of flamingos flying overhead, then gets up and stumbles toward the water where they gather in multitudes. One of these birds is perched on a rock in the foreground, standing out against the countless black silhouettes in the distance, as if it were watching over Juan.

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<sup>4</sup> Whittaker points out that the bird's digitally-produced bright colours also give the impression that it is a hallucination (2018: 46).

A series of shot-reverse shots highlights the mutual gaze between the detective and the flamingo, and the dried blood on the side of Juan's head is echoed in the prominent bloodred hue on the side of the bird. At the beginning of the film we saw Juan as the violent Francoist framed against the festival fireworks, negating the possibility of democracy, representing all the conflicts, injustice and brutality of recent Spanish history. Here he is framed within a spiritual view that all beings are interconnected. The birds are both reminders of his wrongdoing and witnesses of his own suffering.

Likewise, Juan's growing empathy for Alfonso and Sebastián's victims, especially visible in scenes with Rocío, helps him understand and feel the suffering he has caused others. In one particularly emotive scene he meets with Rocío at a remote site called La Cruz de los Carabineros. The cross is a memorial, decorated with old photos and rosary beads, which Juan observes while he waits. Though we do not know who appears in these pictures, the name of the monument is significant, as the Carabineros were a military body that remained mostly loyal to the Republic during the civil war and were subsequently dissolved by Franco. Rocío comes with Marina, who sits on the car's hood in the distance as Rocío tells Juan how she was abused by Alfonso at the hunting lodge. As she finishes and looks directly at him, she seems to respond with empathy to an unseen look on Juan's face and gently places her hand on top of his. Oddly, given the devastating loss of her daughters, she appears to be the stronger one here, offering support to Juan. There follows a moment of silence, with a shot-reverse shot that shows the understated but clearly overwhelming emotions passing between them, cut short when she says she has to go and quickly rises. Juan watches her walk away through tall grass, with Marina in the background, out of focus

but visibly turned towards them. The sight of these two victims of unspeakable horrors, one blurred and the other disappearing behind the overgrown weeds, leaves Juan devastated and desperately reaching into the inside pocket of his jacket for his pills.

Juan's new experience of empathy for others' suffering leads him to use it as a tactic to break the silence of the woman from the hunting lodge, as discussed in the last section. But his journey towards the horror lying in his unconscious culminates shortly afterwards in the Isla Mínima. The suggestive name of this location is symbolic of the hidden seed of remorse that poisons Juan's being and, in a wider sense, of the suppressed histories and repressed memories that poison wider society. Like nearby village Isla Mayor, the name undoubtedly owes to it being surrounded by routinely flooded rice paddies that give it the appearance of being an island ('¿Dónde se rodó La isla mínima?' 2016). In the film the detectives and Jesús arrive hot in pursuit of Sebastián during a driving rainstorm, crossing a flooded field after their car gets stuck in the mud. They are shot crossing the expanse with a wide-angle lens but rather than the open visibility emphasised in earlier scenes the rainfall covers their surroundings in secrecy—linking the spacious exteriors of the marsh to the dark and ghostly interiors discussed in the last section. Sebastián fires at them from an unseen location, hitting Jesús. Pedro and Juan then separate to cross through thick brush and waist-high water surrounding the isolated location. Both detectives are hit by more gunfire but Juan, struggling to remain conscious, manages to reach the platform where Sebastián, dressed in a poncho, is dragging Pedro's body. He stumbles up to this shrouded figure from behind and stabs him repeatedly with a cathartic vehemence; Sebastián falls back into a pool of water, where his body disappears in a whirlpool,

apparently sucked into underwater machinery. There is a clear sense of purging in this fall, reinforced when Juan rescues Marina from the trunk of Sebastián's car, lifting her in a paternal hug, and also reinforced by the scene's closing aerial shot, which shows rain falling down on the Isla Mínima.

However, the evil has not been purged from Villafranco or Spain in general. Sebastián is washed away too quickly, like the Francoist past during the Transition—perhaps the sociopath's death serves as a psychological mechanism for Juan to deflect his own evil onto him. Marina is saved but a trail of victims is left behind, just as the legacy and effects of the dictatorship era will persist in multiple ways. The workers have won a small raise but the Alfonsos of Spain will continue to exploit them at will. Pedro has achieved personal success but Alfonso is beyond his reach and it has come at the cost of collaborating with a Francoist torturer. In the brief scene in his hotel room that follows his conversation with the journalist he rips up the most incriminating photo. As Whittaker argues, this action of destroying evidence is emblematic of the refusal of democratic institutions to challenge the reach of the amnesty law (2018: 50). As the camera zooms in on the broken pieces he leaves discarded on the bed, though, the images also come to represent in a larger sense the persistence of memories and sensations rooted in the Franco era and the Transition, no matter how fragmented and untraceable they may be. The drone of de la Rosa's soundtrack is foregrounded in this scene and in the next scene when the detectives leave Villafranco, highlighting the continuation of an underlying atmosphere of dread, which affects everything in the interconnected social geography that is symbolised by the marsh's fractal forms.

*The Transition on trial*

Juan and Pedro are representative of the context of the Spanish Transition and how it has constructed a nation particularly haunted by its past. '¿Todo en orden?' asks Juan when he notices Pedro glaring at him before they get into the car. Pedro is rendered literally speechless, overwhelmed by the contradictions in his partner's character and his own complicity with Juan that has developed over the course of the investigation. In their silent mutual gaze they return to their relationship at the beginning: Juan has recovered his cool, slightly ironic exterior; Pedro has recovered his distrust and hostility. Nevertheless, everything has changed for Pedro, who will carry his sensation of impotence and disgust with him, even as he and his pregnant wife raise their future child and participate in the construction of the new Spain. While Pedro's accusing gaze is turned on Juan at the end of the film, perhaps our gaze as an audience is largely turned on him, the detective who has just destroyed evidence of his partner's past crimes. This focus reflects recent critiques of the generation that led the Transition, discussed in the introduction to this essay.

*La isla mínima* turns our attention to such issues, but it also encourages the audience to see the Franco and Transition eras as fractal social-political geographies that reach into the present day, reflected in both conscious and spectral memories, affecting us in ways that are both knowable and unknowable. As I have been suggesting, the film's potent weaving of visual intertexts is highly effective at revealing this integrated fractal landscape of brutality and privation. While the debt to these sources is only partially acknowledged in film—and they will only be recognisable to a viewer that is already familiar with them—they are key to our understanding of how *La isla mínima* functions to engage the audience in the complexity of Spain's present

and recent past. Originally, the photographs and film sparked the interest of Rodríguez and Cobos in formerly hidden aspects of their surrounding realities: the conflicts of the Transition represented in *Después de...*, the impoverished marshland society photographed by Aya and the ecological dimensions of the marshes photographed by Garrido. By weaving these highly varied elements together visually, the film constructs a strikingly nuanced historical and geographical texture. Moreover, this largely unacknowledged intertextuality makes *La isla mínima* appear like Spain itself, a landscape full of hidden histories waiting to be uncovered, shrouded origins that could explain the present more fully. In fact, while the film only mentions the Fuerza Nueva rally footage from *Después de...* and Garrido's aerial images briefly in the closing credits, Rodríguez has discussed all three intertexts in interviews and the 'making of' featurette, which is included in the DVD and is also available on Youtube. The film has revived interest in Aya and Garrido's photographs and the Bartolomé documentary—all of which are significant documents for understanding aspects of contemporary Spain.

The film's engagement of diverse visual and audio-visual intertexts is also an exploration of the labyrinthine nature of the recent past—where political, social, emotional and spiritual dimensions overlap. As mentioned above, the film's final aerial view shows the detectives' car riding away into the future on one side of a canal, as farm labourers on the other side work the harvest, which will continue to be carried out in exploitive conditions. The camera, meanwhile, moves backward, as if we were pulled back into sensations rooted in an unseen past. The shot suggests a land that is haunted on multiple levels. The brutality and economic inequality of the Franco era, silenced during an uncompleted Transition, persists in the democratic era. The

landscape is also haunted by the lost potential of a multitude of truncated lives, repressed victims and even ethically corrupted representatives of the State like Juan. Additionally, Spain is haunted by the lost futures of the Second Republic and by the loss of alternative possibilities envisioned by various squashed dissident and opposition groups during the dictatorship. Perhaps it is even haunted by the lost ideals of reformers like Pedro, who felt compelled to compromise their principles during the Transition.



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