ERICE, MEDEM & LUNA, CINEMATIC
“SONS” OF PASOLINI’S THEORY ON ‘A
CINEMA OF POETRY’?

By Lucía Burbano
1. Introduction

In which way can three filmmakers that belong to different backgrounds and periods be related to a same style? Which is the basis that makes their way of expressing their view of the world universal, even outside the Spanish borders? Víctor Erice, Julio Medem and Bigas Luna are indeed pretty personal in their approach to reality, understood as the social and economic space (Spain) in which the stories of their films take place. Is it the theory on a “cinema of poetry” that Pasolini developed in the 1960s the most accurate link between them? If it is so, then we will be talking about unifying the three of them through a matter of style that combines the subjectivity of the filmmaker with that of the characters. Maybe, the matter that connects them with the Italian filmmaker is in the way they have to portray reality, which, on the one hand gathers reality with memory and dreams and on the other, it requires of two points of view to tell the story.

However, and before looking for the answers to these open questions we can establish, in wide terms, that Erice is more intellectual than Medem and Bigas; that Medem’s use of visual and cinematographic language is more pregrammatical than Erice’s and Bigas’, and that Bigas represents reality within reality in a more direct and harsh way than Erice and Medem. To this puzzle, we have to add a new name; Pier Paolo Pasolini, whose theory will try to be the key start that sets the similarities and differences between all three. This dissertation will try to find the real value of their “poetic” connection and the possible answers will be given throughout this text and sumed up in the final conclusions.

The method chosen to establish this approach will be by looking closer to each of them individually, remarking the stylistic and intellectual aims that these filmmakers have as “auteurs” (in the sense that the three of them have total commitment to their artistic beliefs), trying to underline their adscription to the poetic style.

To achieve a practical understanding of the subject, it has been chosen to start by Víctor Erice and his two features, *The Spirit of the Beehive* (1973) and *El Sur* (1983). *Dream of Light* (1992) will be left aside due to its documentary style, which does not correspond to the treatment of the fictional space that this essay tries to explore. Moreover, and using the similarity of style as a way of conexion, the same kind of analysis will be made of the three films by Medem that summarize his creative world; *Vacas* (1991), *Tierra* (1996) and *The Lovers of the Artic Circle* (1998). Finally, the first
period of Bigas Luna’s career (in my opinion, his only valuable work belongs to his beginnings) will be the one in which we will focus our attention, looking closer to *Bilbao* (1978), probably his most paradigmatic film of that period.

Before going into this subject in greater detail, a cultural and filmic context will be traced to understand a matter that they all definitely share; the rareness (in qualitative terms) of their filmic universe in a country which is isolated of the rest of Europe in production and artistic proposals. Furthermore, an analysis of Pasolini’s text on “a cinema of poetry” will be the theoretical start to set a common basis between Erice, Medem and Bigas Luna.
2. Cultural context

It is well known that in cinematographic terms Spain has been a silent, foreseeable and archetypical country over the decades, situated far away from other industries that made constant innovations in film technique and narrative.

This lack of productivity can be explain, firstly, due to a lack of tradition, where only some exceptional names can be mention to decorate a desolated picture, not only in artistic terms but also in economical facilities.

The nearly forty years of dictatorship and the consequent censorship limited the means of expression to the official ones and banned other possible discourses. Moreover, the Spanish production seems to focus on the national market, being practically non-existent outside the borders. Only few subtle and smart attempts that reflected what the authorities wanted to undercover (the state of misery and lack of freedom that the majority of the citizens was suffering) attained a general release.

However, it was during Franco’s regime when an alternative language started to emerge on the Spanish screens. The difficulties produced by the lack of the right to express themselves freely forced the filmmakers to look for alternative ways of communicating their ideas, finding the solution in a more ambiguous narrative and stressing some elements like the use of sound, mise-en-scène or montage to complete a critical but subtle discourse.

The “neorealism” of Luis García Berlanga and Juan Antonio Bardem in the 1950s and 1960s, inherited from the Italian manners, marked the start of this variation in storytelling. The use of irony as the vehicle to uncover the hidden truth became the most effective one, based on everyday life stories that act as a parable of the general situation. Later on, in the 1970s, the name of Elías Querejeta emerges as a producer who stood up to the last years of censorship and opened the door to the international circuit for the first time. His company was, in fact, one of the few that got special funds from the Administration, an organization which was pressed by its own enclosed nature and which, due to the international demands, had to show an image of development, permitting the exportation of films which were ellipticaly critical with the Francoist regime. This pretended openness brought up bizarre situations, like the international release of some films before they saw the light in Spain. Despite many scripts never got the censors’ committees approval, two of the beneficiaries of Querejeta’s fearlessness
where Carlos Saura and Víctor Erice, which stand out above other names for their lyrical style.

With the end of Franco’s regime, freedom and economic funds were restored (although the government investment in film is still, nowadays, far away from reaching the European average). However, in artistic terms the situation was as worse as it was during the dictatorship. The low quality in productive terms and the lack of ideas or innovations dominated the market, and only few exceptions can, again, be mention as an intellectual and challenging option to the commercial standards.
2. A cinema of poetry

When Pier Paolo Pasolini wrote his essay entitled “Il cinema di poesia” (A cinema of poetry) in 1965, he introduced, among other ideas, the term “poetic” to point out a way of filmmaking which differs linguistically from the predominant classical style. He rejected the influence that the 19th century novel had in the conception and structure of films. The general use of a lineal plot, continuity in the montage and its “naturalistic” intentions, where the failed attempts of a limited language based on imitation, which is more descriptive than real. By this mimetic use of word, an entire communicative universe was being ignored and its possibilities of development trapped in formalistic devices that did not adjust to the rich nature of film.

The 1960s brought the arrival of semiotics in film and the means of establishing a cinematic code, a filmic language that could only be found in the media. As a young art, film had to develop this step to distinguish and remark its own nature, far away from other forms of expression, as its qualities presented other complexities. At the time where Pasolini, along with other theorists, introduced his thesis, film was somehow suffering from a crisis of identity. Regarded as an entertainment, the “purity” (the immediate nature of film, its raw representation of reality) achieved in its first decades was lost. The lack of history (only decades, as Pasolini points out) provoked the functional imitation of the use of word in literature, that is, the creation of a visual prose in order to adapt literary canons which had already set an institutionalised tradition.

However, and as Pasolini claimed, film had to search for its own grammatical codes based on the particularities of the image and other units that compose a film. The system of visual signs (“im-signs”) forms part as word does, of the human universe and it is necessary to assume its function in order to complete the gaps that spoken language leaves in daily communication. Image as in film was able to offer a wider range of communicative layers, entering into what Pasolini refers as “pregrammatical”, that is its irrational, elementary and symbolic nature, which, according to the author, makes them universal. This last point could be discussed as, although in general terms all human beings share understanding in some gestual signs (the meaning of tears as being sad, for example) we cannot forget that the specific background of each society creates its own coda which is meaningless for other societies (for example, the different ways of greeting; hugging, kissing, shaking hands, etc.). Therefore, the key must be to select the
images that can be related by everyone through dreams or imagination and linking them to the real; images that we already have in our memory (the pregrammatical codes), and that we unconsciously recognize when seen.

The effectiveness of the images (its communication with the others) depends on the selection that the filmmaker makes and whose choice becomes a fact of style as he or she makes the choice according to subjectivity, that is, his/her vision of reality. This subjectivity is technically expressed in what Pasolini called “free indirect point-of-view shot” (POV). Expressed by analogies, this stylistic device works, first of all, by the slight juxtaposition of two points of view of the same image. That is, by framing the same image from different angles to show “the myth of the actual, distressing, autonomous beauty of things”. Secondly, by making the characters enter and leave frame in a way that the picture remains pure. By this, the picture keeps its significance independently of the presence of characters that, although invading the picture, they adapt themselves to that “purity” instead of profaning it. By not making the characters the main focus of attention but by focusing on their vision of the world, the matter of style comes out again in the sense that two views are achieved; that of the character (who, we could say, founds himself/herself in that reality) and the artistic representation that the filmmaker does of the character and his environment.

Style becomes the key that makes possible the representation of reality by the filmmaker, the medium that frees him from the social milieu of the character. Style itself, as Pasolini proclaims, is the protagonist of the cinema of poetry.
3. The birth of a Spanish “poetic” way of filmmaking

Outside the commercial circuit we can find a not so popular number of filmmakers that started technical, visual and narrative initiatives that revolutionized the artistic field. Theses were limited in terms of distribution as their aim was not achieve a national market, but the sector of what in Spain was called “cine-clubs” (small filmhouses that projected independent and experimental works that even the Francoist censorship did not regard as politically dangerous).

Leaving Luis Buñuel aside, the most outstanding craftsman was José Val del Omar (Granada, 1904-Madrid, 1982) whose interest in improving technical devices brought him to develop various inventions like the first microfilm used for teaching and other innovations in the electroacoustic field. He also filmed a series of short films where he plays with the use of light and, for example, the water falls of the different fountains found at the Alhambra (Granada) in Aguaespejo granadino (1955). His style is mainly visual, where combined with a quick montage, he experimented with concave mirrors to create different shapes using the reflexion of water. His style, for the juxtaposition of technique and a certain mysticism could be considered late avant-garde. In Fuego en Castilla (1960) and A cariño galaico (1961) he uses other natural elements like fire and earth, constituting the three of them a metaphysical study about the interrelation of men with nature.

The second name which is worth to be mention is the politically anarchist Antonio Artero, who escaped from the formalistic, academic ties to transmit, also through film technique, a criticism of the abuses derived from an excessive power. Adopting the form of parable, films like Adolescentes en el trabajo (1963) or Doña Rosita la soltera (1965), an adaptation of a play by Federico García Lorca, took him to make an interesting fusion between surrealist literature and film semiotics to express his view of an unfair world.

These names, along with others like Javier Aguirre, Ivan Zulueta or Frederic Amat, started a small rebellion, aiming to offer a variation on the classical stucture that film language inheritated from literature. Val del Omar and Artero could be considered poets of the image, while Zulueta or Aguirre’s work focuse, in terms of narrative, on showing reality through characters that fit on the category of outsiders, whose way of looking is certainly disturbed and marginal.
4. Victor Erice

“Perhaps the cinema is the language that realises one of humanity’s oldest dreams: to invent a system capable of reproducing the appearance of reality. All the literary and fine arts, in general, are able to capture the passage of time, but only cinema is able of containing time as if it were a receptacle.” (Víctor Erice, 1998)¹

Despite having only directed three films since his debut in 1973, Víctor Erice (Carranza, Vizcaya, 1940) is probably the most renowned Spanish filmmaker. Erice is the paradigmatic representative of an auteur, with his passionate compromise with the intellectual and artistic devices that make film an art form. His quest is one that searches for the purity of the medium through a lyric style that hits on the complex layers of reality.

Grounded on the basis of a critical realism in his years as a film critic in the 1960s in Nuestro Cine and Film Ideal, a young Erice embraced the left-wing thesis of Lukács. The ideological programme of Nuestro Cine shows the critical position of the magazine established in four points²:

1. Impose, as a model, a critical realism, taking as a starting point the achievements of the left-wing Italian Neorealism.
2. Think of film not as an isolated aesthetic movement but related to the historical, social and cultural context of each time.
3. Define style as inseparable of the concept of world that determines it.
4. Fight the lack of moral in Spanish films and look for a cinema which is realistic and possible.

This choice was less a matter of style than the vital need of showing the reality that the Francoist regime was hiding. As we can see, they impose the content to the

² Carmen Arocena, “Víctor Erice”, Ed. Cátedra, Colección Signo e Imagen/Cineastas. Madrid, 1996. p.13-14: “1. Imponer como modelo el realismo crítico tomando como punto de partida los logros del ala izquierda del neorrealismo italiano. 2. Concebir el cine no como un movimiento estético autónomo, sino dentro de unas coordenadas históricas, sociales y culturales. 3. Definir el estilo como inseparable de la concepción del mundo que lo determina. 4. Luchar contra la falta de moral del cine español y buscar un cine español realista y posible.” (N.A. Unless it is indicated, from now on all the translations from Spanish into English will be mine).
form (style), as their major concern was to support a cinema more interested in reflecting
reality in depths than in the ways that this is portrayed. Moreover, they emphasise in the
fact that this content cannot miss out the context where it is set, therefore, this means
the avoidance of the search for the truth. According to these group of critics, critical
realism opens the door to a faithfulness concept of reality by giving clues to an audience
that has to solve them, needing to adopt an active attitude. The goal is to stimulate the
intellect of a lethargic public and approach the truth behind the appearance of things.

However, this concept of reality seems more compromised with politics than
with art. In their quest to find ways that tried to cure the blindness that the population
was suffering, these defenders of critical realism seem to dismiss other realities, that is,
they forget that subjectivity exists also to express reality. They closed themselves in
persuing the objective (as historical), the rational, not worrying about the artistic
representation of the real and its different layers.

Following this rational thought, Erice believed that “art, either compromised or
alienated, has a social repercussion; which will be a method of knowledge and
communication; in which the form will represent a moral attitude, but style will be
determined by the content.”3 Taking Georg Lukács’ writings and marxist aesthetics as
his reference as a critic, he affirms that film must be taken in mind according to the
social and historical context, not the individual, highlighting the active and necessary
participation of art in reality. This idea of conceiving society as a community, not as
individual members, reminds us of Lukács’ idea of “totality” or historical perspective.
That is; the social system that works through the elements that compose it, where form
as such, only reinforces this unifying idea.

However, Erice’s line of thought varies and although keeping his fidelity to the
social concerns inherent to realism, he develops an interest in form that will somehow
freed him from the strict application of the points mention above. Still working as a film
critic, he affirms in one of his articles that realism needs to wide its formalistic
expressions as reality itself is “wide, varied and plenty of contradictions”.4 Therefore
realism, due to the diversity of ways in which it can be seen or read, cannot be subjected
to just one form, as there is not only one reality. He then will discover that a more

3 C. Arocena:1996, p.17: “Nosostros mantenemos que el arte, comprometido o alienado tiene una
repercusión social; que será método de conocimiento y comunicación; que la forma significa una actitud
moral, pero que el estilo estará siempre condicionado por las ideas que se manejan y, en definitiva, por el
contenido”. Originally in Víctor Erice “Responsabilidad y significación estética de una crítica nacional”
Nuestro Cine, No. 15, December 1962.
4 C. Arocena:1996, p.24 “La realidad misma es amplia, variada y llena de contradicciones”. Originally in
lyrical, poetic way of filmmaking embraces the matters of form and content, where the subjective point of view becomes the key that dictates both. Later on, when he starts his career as a director he will find in the poetic language developed by Pasolini the perfect vehicle to express his view of reality. About the use of language that “a cinema of poetry” proposes he affirms that “it is a form of cinema that, in general, speaks in first person and that contemplates the world through a substantially irrational inspiration”. He then transforms his idea of realism from a collective, lukácsian one to an individual one, set no in the rational premises but in the world of the irrational; that is, the world of dreams and memory.

One of his most famous works as a critic is the analysis he made of Nicholas Ray and his films. In this monographic, he says that “the art of Ray achieves the feeling that makes us experiment the realisation of that portion of the absurd that underlines some of our most quotidian actions. In his films, we do not see great actions nor we listen to a clever dialogue, but instantly we feel concern with what we are seeing: transparency has been achieved, from feeling we have been transported to reflection.”

In this quotation, as in the commentary of Ray’s work, Erice emphasises the way he uses rational and irrational elements, which are personalised in the most paradigmatic role of his films; the rebel character who is, at the same time, the hero and the victim in a violent universe. This subjectivism of everyday life and the combination of rationality and irrationality to show the complexities of reality will be one of the keys of his first feature *The Spirit of the Beehive* (*El Espíritu de la Colmena*) in 1973. In this film, little Ana’s imagination will make her live a trip that will awake her sense of reality. The film also represents the proof that Erice has chosen a lyric style and a subjective point of view as the language that constructs his view of reality.

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4.1 The Spirit of the Beehive (El Espíritu de la Colmena), 1973

Synopsis

Once upon a time, around 1940 in some village in Castille, the itinerant cinema arrives to project Doctor Frankenstein (1931) by James Whale in the town council. Two sisters, Isabel and Ana, aged ten and eight, assist to the projection, where little Ana gets mesmerised by the monster and his murdering of the girl. Isabel, the older one, tells her that the monster is a spirit which will communicate with her if she looks for him. Meanwhile, their parents, Fernando and Teresa, are closed in themselves. The father, through his passion for raising bees and the mother by writing letters to an unknown man who never replies. Their relationship is marked by the lack of communication. Isabel shows Ana the place where the spirit lives, an abandoned country house beside the railway track, where a republican fugitive finds shelter in his escape from Francoist authorities. Ana discovers him and starts to believe in the power of the spirit. One afternoon, she goes to the country house and finds her father instead of him, starts to run and dissapears. While the inhabitants of the town are looking for her she sees the face of the monster of the film reflected in a lake. The monster approaches Ana from her back and then hugs her. They finally find her and from that moment she will adopt a silent attitude. At the end of the film, one night Ana opens the window of her bedroom and whispers: “I am Ana.”

Analysis

This is a rough summary of the film, shot in the last years of Franco’s dictatorship. The subject is, precisely, the emotional consequences that the civil war has had for the characters and their shifts between reality and irreality. The elliptical style conceived by Erice which dominates the narrative of the film, made that its critical leit-motiv avoided censorship. Reality is the historical and social space of the postwar years, represented by the incommunicativeness, the silence and the repression suffered; whereas irreality is the space from where each of them escapes from it. The memories of the mother, the bees that Fernando takes care of and the imagination and faith of Isabel and Ana are shared with the feeling of loneliness despite being on the winner’s side.

The film is a fable about repression. It starts as a tale with the phrase “once upon a time” and the title credits show pictures drawn by children and which illustrate
different parts of the story. The story is viewed through Ana’s eyes and her awareness of harsh reality represented by the murder of the Republican that hides from the authorities. His death sums the girl into a silence that expresses the awake of her conciousness, her knowledge about the truth; the situation which the country is living in. Ana’s sensations are expressed through her eyes and represent the point of view of a child who feels that freedom can only be achieved though imagination, iniciated by her believe in the spirit.

In a clime of isolation, we never get to see the town in its totality, just the country house in the middle of nowhere and the girls’ home, separated from the rest. Even the characters are isolated individuales, placed in this community where communication between human beings has disappeared. This feeling is intensified by the general shots that Erice uses in the exterior, which reduce human beings to small individuals, lost in the inmensity of the land that surrounds them.

This fact, along with the hexagonal windows of the house and the warm, orange colours of the inside, remind us of the structure of a beehive, of a closed system, in definitive; Spain. If we follow this parallelism, Fernando, who is always looking at his window and owns a beehive, would be a kind of guard of the rules to follow, keeping the rational order. For Ana, he will be responsible of the dissapearance of the spirit, as she realises having dinner with her family, that her father has got back the clock that was inside the jacket she gave to the fugitive. She also finds him (the father) instead of the republican on the last time she goes to the country house. Fernando, as the rest of the adults that appear in the film, will represent this social space, broken into pieces by the consequences of the civil conflict.

The country side world has been, traditionally, the place where imagination is built, where myths are created. In the film, the space outside the house will be where the search for the spirit will take part, but the root starts with the projection of Doctor Frankestein. The monster of Mary Shelley’s novel is a criature created and banned from society for his hideous aspect who ends up murdering a little girl. Ana finds herself in the monster, as a criature that does not belong to the rest of the community.

Showing poetic manners, Erice expresses his view of the Spanish postwar years (concretly, the film is set on the year of his birth, 1940) contrasting the silent, dead world of the adults with that of the imaginary of the children. In a kind of heroine, Ana will follow the irrational path (the one that believes in spirits) that will take her to understand that she belongs to the spirit, not to the beehive. This will be traumatic as she realises that she is alone, different from the rest. For two reasons, the image where
Ana is found after running away from her father is definitive to understand the step that Ana takes. First, when they find her she seems dead. When she wakes up, her attitude changes in a kind of resurrection; she has closed into herself. Second, as Carmen Arocena points out; “they find Ana in a place plenty of useless ruins, outside the town. Ana becomes now a group of fragmentary pieces which cannot be reconstructed; a complete ruin for the beehive.”

The story is set in the present. Despite Erice’s initial idea was to start with a 32 year old Ana who returns to her home town to assist to the father’s funeral and narrates her childhood from her memories. He finally declined this option, as he believed that the story was to be told from childhood’s imagination. The film is not constructed as a memory and we, the spectators, receive the impact of the storytelling at the same time that the little girl does. This immediacy is one of the particularities of film, as it differs from written and spoken language in its major resemblance with reality, as it reproduces its sounds and images. In a poem, the impact is equally immediate, as instantly hits in the reader’s emotions.

In The Spirit of the Beehive the emotions converge not through words, but through what is called a lyrical style. This is the atmosphere that Erice creates to say more that what it seems, using light and sound to suggest that different layers of reality exist. For example, the light inside the house is a warm, were yellow and orange shades transmit the feeling of warmness but also of uniformity and lack of passion, as no changes in light are shown. These colours enter the house through doors and windows, invading the darkness and dyeing the interior of a honey-like shade that reinforces the idea of the familiar space being a honeycomb.

Sound is the other channel from were Erice establishes parallelisms between the story and history. There are two scenes that exemplify this. The first one is when Fernando, at home, is looking at the window and at the same time we hear the sound of James Whale’s Doctor Frankestein, which is being shown at the town council. This contraposition of two different channels (he could not possibly listen to the film’s dialogue from his house) could signify the contrast between the rational guard in charge of keeping the order in his community and the gestation of the myth, of Ana’s imagination which is taking part at the same time.

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7 C. Arocena:1996 p.138: “…las ruinas donde la encuentran. Ruinas fuera del pueblo, que ya no pueden ser reconstruidas ni aprovechadas. Ana ya es un conjunto de fragmentos que no podrán ser recompuestos; para la colmena, una ruina.”
The second one is the final scene, when Ana wakes up at night ready to invoke the spirit. In that moment she hears the sound of a train (that reminds us of the mother posting the letter in the train station and looking at a soldier that maybe recalls her of the anonymous man to who she adresses and of the two sisters listening to the railway line) and Isabel’s voice. Two external elements that will be present in her mind when she embraces the spirit.

Erice’s debut as a filmmaker confirms his choice of a poetic language that communicates its content through style. His awareness of the inmediat impact that the filmic elements create in the spectator reinforce his belief in transmitting reality, not in a naturalistic way but bearing in mind the presence of subjectivity. Moreover, his choice of giving the point of view of the story to a child makes even more clear this subjectivity, which never forgets its fidelity to its critical content. It also makes possible the use of Ana’s character to introduce imagination and mythical elements to reflect his own view of the Spanish postwar situation.
4.2 *El Sur*, 1983

Synopsis

Based on the novel written by Adelaida García Morales, the story develops in the North of Spain, where an adolescent Estrella discovers that her father has died. Situated in the 1950s, the film explores the relationship of Agustín and Estrella for approximately six years. Agustín, due to his fight with his father for their political differences leaves the South to start a new life in the North. The film focuses on how Agustín teaches her daughter the magic of his pendulum and how the mystery that surrounds him will be the reason of their increasing silence as she grows up. The story is told by an adult Estrella and what we see are her memories of those years. These travel back from the moment of the elliptical awareness of Agustín’s death (the pendulum under Estrella’s pillow and her wife shouting his name are the clues that indicate that he is dead) to the train that takes the family to the North. Taken from his first film, the characters of *El Sur* are lonely people whose only form of support are their hidden dreams in order to deal with the social conditions in which they live.

Analysis

*El Sur* is not exactly the film that Víctor Erice planned to shot. His desire was to film the trip of Estrella to the South, her father’s homeland. However, due to a problem with the budget, Elías Querejeta, the producer, cancelled the shooting arguing that in the first part there was already enough material to send the film to the Cannes Film Festival. In the missing part, Estrella travels to Seville to discover more about Agustín’s past and falls in love with her unknown brother, born from the relationship of Agustín with the actress Irene Ríos.

Whatever happens in the second part and maybe because the film is uncomplete, *El Sur* leaves the audience with the feeling that this magic story continues somewhere else, that this abrupt end can only be completed with our imagination. In contrast with *The Spirit of the Beehive*, where at the end we understand that Ana embraces the spirit and rejects the social reality that her family lives, in the case of Estrella we cannot tell if

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8 C. Arocena: 1996. pgs. 190-194
she follows the world of magic that she has inherit from her father or if she, with her lost, adapts herself to the catholic discipline of her mother.

In this film, Erice repeats some of the themes that he has already dealt with in his first feature. Family incommunication, the wounds created by the civil war in the background and the initiation to powers that distance oneself from reality.

The point of view is again, the one of a child and then adolescent girl. The story, based on her memories, is not totally partial, as there are some scenes that the girl did not live (like the moment when the father is reading a letter sent by Irene Ríos) but which are important to understand the secret that provokes Agustín’s sadness and isolation. In these moments, Erice will appear as the narrator that objectivises Estrella’s memories. As Jose Enrique Monterde points out, the narration “is constructed by the addition of brief sequences and moments, by notes which are insignificant and decisive at the same time, as the ones in any personal diary.”

This subjectivity, which characterises all memories, goes from a complete admiration and devotion for her father to their separation.

The film starts with an adolescent Estrella being woken up by the dog’s bark and the loud voice of her mother calling her husband’s name. The action takes places off-screen, and despite not seeing the search for Agustín or the causes of his death we immediately know, for the girl’s reaction and the immobility of the pendulum, that something tragic has happened. From the knowledge of this death the film goes back in time. In another bedroom Agustín predicts, using his pendulum on a pregnant Julia, the sex and name of the child. It is a beginning that will explore the causes that take Agustín to commit suicide. The film ends with his elliptical death, which Erice never shows us. In both scenes, the light that enters through the window will gradually illuminate the bedrooms. In a symbolic language we can interpret it as the arrival or increase of knowledge, as in the first case is at dawn when they discover the death and in the second one, the light could mean the inheritance of Agustín’s power to the child. The use of light in this film is based on the chiaroscuro, that is, in the contrast between darkness and light. The fall of Agustín and his magic nature will be emphasised, as we will see further on, by the light, or lack of, that surrounds him.

Estrella’s (which means “star” in Spanish) curiosity for her father’s talent and her progressive iniciation into the powers of the pendulum become the link between

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9 José Enrique Monterde, “Erice, diez años después”, Dirigido por, No. 104, May 1983, “…construcción por adición de breves secuencias y momentos, de anotaciones a la vez insignificantes y decisivas, como las de cualquier diario”.
them. In her reminiscence, the adult Estrella relegates her mother into a second level; into a passive house wife that hardly has any impact in her development. In *El Sur*, though, the relationship between father and daughter surpasses at some points the strict meaning of family relationships. The possible suggested incest is born, not from sexual attraction, but from the master-apprentice nature of the same. The admiration of Estrella for the irrational force of her father and the means of Agustín in creating an alike figure of himself in Estrella will ground the especial connection. The distance between them starts when Estrella leaves her childhood back and becomes an adolescent, as if growing up meant the incorporation and adjustment of the individual into society and a subsequent lost of mythological faith. Furthermore, the discovery made by the young girl of the secret passion that Agustín has for the actress Irene Ríos and the adolescent attraction that a classmate will have for Estrella awakes the jealousy in both. This discovery will make Estrella realise that her father has secrets that he is not going to share with her, but she remains loyal to him by not revealing anything to Julia.

Estrella’s isolation is similar to her father’s, who spends much of his time closed in his office, where he makes experiments and protects himself from the outer world. Estrella’s loneliness (we never see her with other children) though, is due to the reason that she never assisted to school; as Julia, a teacher in the times of the Republic, was in charge of her education. Her contact with reality (the social one) and her catholic initiation produced in her First Communion will make her realise that another existence is possible. The contrast between the mother’s catholic beliefs (although she is never shown as a devoted catholic) and the special, irrational powers of her father are clearly stated in the preparation and celebration of Estrella’s First Communion. Agustín, who broke all relationship with her father due to a discussion provoked by his lack of religious faith, remains apart in the whole process. His mother and childminder arrive from the South to assist to this important moment of her grandaughter’s life. Agustín shows a cold attitude towards his mother, although or maybe because of she was not involved in their argument. The morning of that day, he goes to a field to shoot with his rifle, showing that he self-controls himself by expressing, until then, an unknown aggressiveness. He only assists to the ceremony to prove his fidelity to Estrella, although he remains in the back and appears, from the darkness, when the girl has received the sacrament.

In the last scene they have together, a lonely Agustín takes Estrella for lunch at the Gran Hotel. Agustín tries to communicate his suffering to his daughter, but she does not seem to see his effort. Their relationship is every time more dominated by the
silences and even when Agustín asks Estrella if she remembers the “pasodoble” music that arrives from the wedding next door (played at her First Communion and which they dance together) she says that she has forgot about that. In her memories, Estrella seems to regret her lack of help, as after that scene Agustín commits suicide shooting himself beside the river (as a symbol of his journey to another world), an action that we never see but after it has happened.

Cut, as we said before, by economic disagreements, *El Sur* leaves some questions in the air that, although not being fundamental to sense what Erice wants to transmit, it does stop the argument in an abrupt way. The film looks like a continuation of *The Spirit of the Beehive*, for the similarity of themes and the treatment he does of the story. He stresses once more, in elements like the point of view and light to introduce a magic reality that develops within the social space.
5. Julio Medem

Following the subjective representation of reality initiated by Víctor Erice, Julio Medem (San Sebastian, 1958), another Basque filmmaker, goes even further in the use of a subjective point of view that contrasts with the objective. The basis of his work is grounded on what Pasolini called “pregrammatical images”, one of the premises of the im-signs. These, as autonomous symbols, suggest a world which does not follow the signs of reality but which are found there. The Basque filmmaker is probably the most remarkable example of making his intimate obsessions universal, emphasising on the creation of a visual world which corresponds to the view that his characters (which are in permanent conflict or desajustment with reality) have.

The themes of his films are focused on both the psychological side of the human being and the role of luck and chance that interfere in life. His characters suffer from duality dilemmas and schizophrenia, and at the same time they search for love and a profound, meaningful sense of life. Irrationality is both presented as an illness or as the primitive instincts that make the characters’ reaction an extreme response to the rules of reality.

The scenery where his films take place (the forest of Vacas, the campsite in The Red Squirrel or Finland in The Lovers of the Artic Circle) have a decisive influence in the psyche of the protagonists and in their interaction with reality. The scenery is sometimes presented as claustrophobic or desertic, and this will be either conditioned by the mental “illness” of the characters or it will be the cause of it. This connexion between the characters and the place where their stories develop is one of the strongest ever seen in Spanish cinema. The desire to escape from the established borns from a non conformity with the rules of society, which are personalized in the rutines of the city. About the reason why he chooses to set the stories in non urban landscapes Medem says that “I feel closer to my instincts when surrounded by nature. Open spaces give more freedom to create stories that escape from the realist ties inherent to the city, as the rules of city cannot be impose there (in the nature).”

These spaces are presented as mythological and intimate, acting as a fundamental role that must be analysed to

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understand Medem’s own view of the world. Moreover, these locations are ideal to introduce the symbolism that characterizes his work and which complement the universe that he creates. For example, the meaning of the names that he gives to the characters is one of the ways he has to introduce their personality, to let us know something fundamental about them even if the film has not started yet. Medem takes care of every detail to construct stories which cannot be transported outside the screen. They represent a universe which has its own autonomy and rules.

As Erice, he approached cinema through film criticism, working at La Voz de Euskadi. Before that, he finished a degree in Medicine, choosing psychiatry as speciality, although he never worked as such. As an adolescent, he experimented with a Super 8mm. camera. He learnt how to converge time and space through montage. It is then when he realised that film is the ideal medium to recreate a world based in the subconscious, the one that interests him the most.

A sector of film criticism accuses him of being more concerned with creating complex and dream-like visual atmospheres than with narrative. This criticism is quite accurate, as Medem himself, when talking about how he conceives his films he affirms that “I do not start from an idea or speech, but from an interior image in which the form appears by itself. This image can be a dream that I had or something that, for any reason, attracts my attention. This image establishes the atmosphere of the film.” From his words we see that he conceives form and content as something which cannot be separated in order to succeed in materializing his vision of the world. He then, persuades a language of poetry, where the teller is equally important as the telling. The territory that he tries to explore is influenced by the fusion of emotions, instincts and rationality, where the form in which he introduces them acts as the door which leads to the deepest and complex nature found in human beings.

The subject of his films, despite being treated from the point of view of a character that refuses reality, are universal, as they part from irrationality. Probably, his success is due to his ability to transport these primitive and oneiric feelings to everyday life situations. The language of poetry, as being pregrammatical, makes possible its visualization.

11 C. F. Heredero:1997, p. 561: “No parto de una idea, ni de un discurso, sino de una imagen que está muy interiorizada, pero que surge de una manera estrictamente formal. Puede ser una imagen que haya soñado u otra que, por cualquier razón, reclame mi interés. Esa imagen me crea ya, de antemano, una atmósfera”. 

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To approach his work the best way is to introduce us to his universe. Therefore, we will look closer to three of his features that summarize his intentions as a filmmaker; *Vacas*, *Tierra* and *The Lovers of the Artic Circle*.
5.1 *Vacas* (1992)

**Synopsis**

Divided into four parts, *Vacas* follows the relationship between two families from 1870 to 1936. It begins at the end of the Second Carlist War, where Manuel Irigibel and Carmelo Mendiluce, two Basque men that fight for the same party find themselves in a situation where, the brave Carmelo dies and where Manuel saves his own life because of his cowardly actions. Manuel returns home, where his family lives beside the Mendiluce’s. The film skips thirty years on, to the Basque countryside, where an old Manuel paints pictures of Cows. His son Manuel Ignacio is an “aizkolari” (a man who hacks trunks with an axe, very popular in that part of Spain) in love with Catalina, a member of the neighbouring clan. Juan (Catalina’s brother) shares this love, creating a rivalry that will be solved in an “aizkolari” contest. Manuel Ignacio and Catalina get together and ten years later we see her with her son Peru, born from their secret relationship. The last part of the film takes place at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, where Peru, a press photographer, falls in love with Cristina Irigibel. Paradoxically, it will be Juan Mendiluce, now old, who saves his rival’s son from getting killed in the war. In the end, Peru and Cristina head together for France.

**Analysis**

The film follows the relationship of the Irigibel and the Mendiluce family from 1875 until the Spanish Civil War. The film is the only work by Medem where the action takes place in a historical context. Set in the countryside, this mythological landscape awakes all kinds of passion in the members of both clans. Violence, incestuous desires and oneiric images mark the tension of a relationship that begins between a brave man and a coward in war time. The aim of the film is, however, not to analyse contextual reality but to focus more on the individual, whose nature and fate is established in the first encounter between the two men. The fact that these two men fight on the Carlist side shows that Medem is more interested in distinguishing through their reactions under conflict rather than establishing political differences. Both behaviours are inherited by the sons and grandsons of Manuel and Carmelo, unifying the development of the individual with that of the family.
The film opens with an “aizkolari” (Manuel’s profession) hacking a chunk of a tree. The violence contained in the scene indicates that conflict that will mark the argument, not only due to the two wars that will take place but also between the families. From this brief start we quickly shift to the first chapter of this story, entitled “the coward “aizkolari””\(^\text{12}\), it links the idea of violence by showing Manuel throwing his gun and rejecting to die for a “historical” conflict. In his escape, he covers his face with Carmelo’s blood, who has been injured in the battle, pretending that he is dead. He is carried, along with the other dead bodies, to a truck from which he jumps and heads home. This start is an ironic one, as Medem juxtaposes two terms, “coward” and “aizkolari” which do not correspond to the respected, heroic image that surrounds this figure of Basque culture.

The only witness of his shame is a cow, who stands quietly and harmless. The image of this animal (which gives its name to the film) will be the observer of the evolution of Irigibel and Mendiluce’s actions and it represents the point of view of the camera. It is interesting to see how Medem uses an animal to establish his own, non harmful, passive view. He puts himself on the side of nature. These cows do not make judgments on the events they appear to witness. The cow will be present in the crucial moments of the film and sometimes its function will be underlined by close-ups of its eye. Medem has then set two points of view to the argument; his personal one and the one of the characters.

The second chapter is linked with the first one, precisely, through the image of the cow. An old Manuel is painting one which is held by a bunch of men. This aggression towards the animal is the reaction of Manuel’s anger with himself, who somehow punishes the figure who has witness everything. He, however, has decided to dedicate his life to a contemplative task, to paint the rural environment in which he lives. He protects himself from the external violence by refusing to participate in it.

“The axes”\(^\text{13}\) is the title of the continuation of this family saga. The rivalry between families will be the protagonist of this chapter set in 1905. The love that Manuel Ignacio Iringibel feels for Catalina Mendiluce will provoke the clash with Catalina’s brother Juan, who is also secretly in love with her. This clash will be solved in an “aizkolari” contest, where violence and sexuality are suggested in the scene. The trunk represents a phallic symbol, through which Juan and Manuel Ignacio will try to


\(^{13}\) R. Stone: 2002 p.163. Originally, “II.Las hachas”.

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gain Catalina’s love. The axe, however, could represent the castration of both, as Catalina, although intimating with them, will remain as a single mother. We know that Manuel Ignacio is the father of the child when a piece of wood that he has just hacked flies in the air and arrives to the girl’s lap. As the winner, he receives his price and from the close-up of an axe we pass to their sexual encounter, which leads, (as we find out at the beginning of the third chapter) to the conception of a child.

“The burning hole”\(^{14}\) starts with a cow giving birth and the apparition of Catalina, ten years later, with her son Peru. Although the identity of the father remains in secret, Peru is the first child that carries both the blood of the two clans. More than that, he has inherited the cowardy and the bravery that characterises the families. “The burning hole” refers to a tree-hollow which lights when an animal (this case a mouse) is throw to the inside. This tree is in the forest and represents the mythical side of the countryside. The hole, which reminds us of a woman’s uterus, symbolizes the Earth, the living nature where the Irigibel’s and Mendiluce’s saga keeps on reproducing. It is the primitive, animal-like side present, depite being on a second level, in all human beings. In the film it symbolises the passion, violence and sexual clime in which these relationships take place. Peru’s belonging to both clans and the incestuous relationship between his mother and her brother “reinforces the metaphoric dimension of the endogamic nature of the Basque society.”\(^{15}\) The last chapter, “war in the woods”\(^{16}\) takes place at the start of the Spanish Civil war, in 1936. Peru comes back from South America, where he is living, as a press photographer to cover the war. He falls in love with Cristina, his half-sister, who falls in coma and remains safe from the battle that takes place in the forest. The genetic cowardy inherited from the Mendiluce’s side appears when he lies about his real surname to avoid being shot by Francoist’s soldiers. At the end, they leave Guipuzca riding a horse, in a kind of Adam and Eve, to go to France and continue the Irigibel and Mendiluce’s saga.

In his first film, Medem introduces the style that will characterise his filmography. Firstly, the creation of oneric atmospheres that awakes the primitive instincts of the characters which are psychologically disturbed. Secondly, the use of symbols and metaphors that complete the reading of the film. Moreover, he establishes two points of view, objective and subjective, which, on the one hand implicates him in the story and on the other it allows him to express his opinion in a subtle way.


\(^{15}\) Carlos F. Heredero:1997, “…refuerza la dimensión metafórica sobre el carácter endogámico de la sociedad vasca…” p. 571.

5.2 Tierra (1996)

Synopsis

Ángel, who works fumigating crops, suffers from schizophrenia. He arrives to Cariñera to eradicate a plague of beetles. His illness makes him believe that he is half-human, half-angel. This duality provokes him a loving dilemma; his human side feels the attraction for the sexual and lusting Mari and his angel side falls in love for the caring and sweet Ángela. Her marriage with the aggressive, animal-like Patricio, will confront the mystic protagonist with the brutality of the Earth. The red tone of the landscape where the story develops, plenty of vineyards, will emphasise the contrast between his two personalities. At the end, Ángel chooses Mari as a soulmate and gets rid of the angel, who decides to stay beside Ángela.

Analysis

The illness that the protagonist suffers is an excuse used by Medem to expose two confronted sides which are present in all human beings; the mystic, genuinely good nature with the instincts and sexual appetite. During the film, we will see how the mystic part gives in to the terrestrial one; not only in the choice he makes about the women but because he develops instincts like desire, revenge or anger. His transformation is not a rough one, but due to the experiences he lives.

The film opens with the clowds and blue colour of the sky, where an omnipresent voice describes the creatures of the Earth. With an aerial shot, we descend from the sky to the red vineyards of La Rioja, which, due to the color and the lack of human presence, looks like hell. The same voice that spoke before says that “I am the part of you that has died. I am talking to you from the cosmos”. Then we see Ángel, who looks like an angel who just fell from the blue sky to accomplish some kind of mission. He finds a sheep who has moved away from the flock (which reminds of the story about a lost sheep collected in the Bible), he catches it and takes it back to the owners. Then he sees a shepherd who has been burned by a lightning (it started to rain heavily before he “descended from the sky”) and talks to him. The man speaks to Ángel like making a confession to a priest. When talking, the camera is situated from the point of view of the man, who sees the infinite sky above Ángel. This scene could
be interpreted as if the shepherd has resurrected, as Ángel, when the man says that he feels desoriented, he says to him that “you are returning from the darkness”. Immediately after the man dies. The scene has been followed by the gypsies, which are known by their superstitious beliefs. At this point, the viewer might think that Ángel is certainly an angel, who has fallen to the desertic, red landscape and has the sensitivity and to understand the inexplicable forces that govern the universe.

In the next scene, we discover that Ángel is in this land to exterminate a kind of beetle that is making the wine taste like earth. He goes to all the houses of the town (which is not exactly a town, as the houses are separated from each other by the land) to offer himself to fumigate the vineyards. As it happens in Vacas, Medem has created a scenery in which the characters are in a straight relationship with nature, or in this case, the contrast between the red land and wine, which matches with Mari’s hair colour and the blue, peaceful sky with the blonde Ángela.

Visiting one of these rural houses, he meets Ángela (the feminine name of Ángel, which could imply that fate is wanting them to get together) and falls in love with her sweet character. She lives with her father, an old man who has not overcome his wife’s death and thinks that she is still in the Earth. He will develop a close relationship with Ángel, due to that he will be the only one that won’t treat him as a mad man. When he leaves the house, the same voice that we hear at the beginning says “live with Ángela”. He has expressed his desire of loving this woman. Patricio, Ángela’s husband, represents the opposite pole to her loving nature. His behavior is the one of an animal, jealous, sexist, always shooting warthogs with his rifle and acting aggressively toward others. He disturbs the peace of the land. He is Mari’s lover, the other characters that breaks Ángel’s harmony. Riding a motor-bike, her adolescent freshness and use of tied, black, leather clothes scare Ángel, whose mystical side warns him about the danger that this girl represents. She is also related with the night, as Medem films a close-up of her bum and then links it with a close-up of a full moon.

Ángel will visit Ángela more often. He confesses that he was hospitalized in a psychiatrist, as he suffers from an overexcitable imagination. Ángela rejects, at the first instance, his madness, although in one of the last scenes she tries to gain him back. His interest for Mari will increase, falling into her sexual provocation. On one occasion he spies her and Patricio having sex, showing a voyeuristic side which is driven by his human part. Later on, Patricio is hit by a lightning (Ángel’s work?) and it is Ángel the last person that he speaks with. He carries out his last desire, that her daughter must not see his dead body.
Ángel’s decision starts to take form at Alberto’s (Mari’s brother) bar. Mari is playing pool and Ángela is at the bar, looking for him. His angel asides from him to choose Ángela while him leaves with Mari. In bed, instead of showing passion, Mari acts romantically, and she is proud to say that it is the first time that she “has not come”. He goes to the shower and finds Ángela there, who has spent the night with Alberto. They have passionate sex, just the opposite of what might be expected. Then he has to choose between the two women and he decides to leave alone. When he is in the landscape, one of gypsis that was working for him in his fumigating tasks throws a stone to his head (the gypsies are scared of his madness), making him fall into earth. He seems dead, however, he wakes up in a hospital bed. This moment is explained by Medem as Ángel getting rid of his angel and borning again, in hospital (in a kind of resurrection), and suprisingly, the woman who has stayed beside him is Mari (he asks the doctor what is the hair colour of this woman). He leaves with her to the seaside, while the angel stays with Ángela and the last words of the film belong to Mari: “how nicely smells the sea”.

In this dualism between the man and the angel, Medem seems to situate himself beside the man, rejecting the profound, mystic nature of the angel (Medem himself confesses that he does not believe in the existence of another world after death). It is the choice of an earthly existence, which is, at the end of the day, the one in which we are now living, in present tense. At the beginning of the film it looks like the story is about the clash that a fallen angel has to face with the red landscape of La Rioja. The confession that Ángel makes of his schizophrenia, shifts the mystic, supernatural tone of the film to a more realistic one, as he then appears to be just an ill man. The use of a schizophrenic allows Medem to use a character that does not fit into the world. He then presents a view which is distorted, permitting him to establish an open criticism of the rational attitude of Ángel’s angel.
5.3 *The Lovers of the Artic Circle* (Los Amantes del Círculo Polar), 1998

Synopsis

Two kids, Otto and Ana, find each other in a forest when the boy runs after a football and Ana is running to escape from the death of her father. From this encounter, borned from casuality, the two kids will see how their lives keep on meeting. First, the marriage of Otto’s father with Ana’s mother brings them together to same family home, where, as they reach the adolescent years their love consummates emotionally and physically. The semi-incestuous nature of their relationship and the death of his mother makes Otto leave home to be trained as a messenger pilot, flying between Madrid and Finland to deliver post. Chance will make them meet up again, this time in the Artic Circle, where Ana finds the place to escape from the void she is living in Madrid. Fate will also provoke the non reunion of the characters, as Ana is knock down by a bus when she is going to, at last, meet Otto in his aparment.

Analysis

*The Lovers of the Artic Circle* could be described as a fable about the power of love and the role that chance has to make love happen. In terms of narrative, this is possibly the best film by Medem, constructed through two points of view which are superimposed. These are the eyes of Ana and Otto, narrators, in their own way, of the circumstances that surround their love story. Titles are used to indicate which point of view are we contemplating, although they should not be necessary, as Ana’s ways are closer to imagination, while Otto is more attached to reality. The film will go back from the present to the past, in which different symbols that appear throughout the story act as the revival of memories and suggested fantasies.

The story is geometrically constructed into circles. For instance, the characters’ relationship gets closer and far away, to become closer again and finally separated by the dramatic ending. This drifting has also much to do with the northern midsummer sun, where the sun moves in a circular way but never hides. The Basque filmmaker defines Otto and Ana’s relationship as “spherical”, where imagination becomes the space where this two spheres get together. Moreover, other mannerisms help to support this geometrical structure. The name of the characters are palindromes (they can be read

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from both beginning and end) and the bus that knocks Ana down is red, the same colour of the bus that Alberto bumps into driving the car with the kids after school. Everything is planned to make the circular structure work, and in my view, Medem achieves his intentions with success.

The film starts with Otto reflected in Ana’s eyes and a newspaper flying in the air; it is Ana’s death. However, the viewer does not know, at this point, who are the characters or what has happened to them. From this short, quick introduction, the film rewinds to the chase that an eight year old boy seems to do of a girl, outside the limits of a school in which boys and girls study in separate buildings. The boy gets impressed by the girl, initiating a serial of shy but imaginative attempts to call her attention. In one of this, he will write a note on a paper (where the content of the same remains, even after viewing the film, an enigma) that he will transform into an airplane and throw it to the window. The note arrives to Olga, Ana’s mother and a recent widow, who smiles and assumes that the author of the same is Alberto, Otto’s father. Before that happens, we see an adult Otto, piloting a plane, whose memory has evoked the way that he became, through coincidence, Ana’s brother.

Medem introduces, once more, the polarity between city and natural landscape. Madrid is the place where Otto and Ana refuse to live, trapped by the superficiality of relationships (one night stands in Otto’s case and Ana’s affair with an older professor) and by the faint of their instincts. One example of this is the scene at the Plaza Mayor, where both are sitting at the same terrace but with their backs against each other. In this situation, none of them feels the presence of the other, while on the contrary, they are able to connect in a remote place like Finland, where fate seems to act more wisely.

The mise-en-scène and the blue light that dominates the tone of the film transmit the cold, weak line that separates and unifies a love which seems more intellectual than passionate, marked by the uncertain touch of a fate which has been already written.

In terms of the camera, we can notice two variations. When the film takes place in the city there is a predominative use of close-ups of the characters, indicating their insolation and differentiation within the urban surroundings. On the other hand, when the film carries on in Finland, the shots are wider, indicating the importance of the landscape where the lovers are reunited.

With this film, Julio Medem defines his style, once for all, as a creator of visual atmospheres, where the narrative, despite being subordinated to the clime, reveals an innovate improvement in respect of his past work. Subjectivity continues to be the key
in the point of view of characters who are more influenced by imagination and memory than by reality.
The way in which Josep Joan Bigas Luna (Barcelona, 1946) conceives filmmaking is similar and at the same time differs him from the work by Víctor Erice and Julio Medem. This can be summarised in a matter of style, as Bigas’ work is presented less subtly and in a more brutal, irrational form. With the filmmakers mention above, he shares the fact of having a personal trademark that situates his work with the one of those whose efforts are shaped to explore the obscure side of human nature. Probably, his vision of subjectivity is more similar to that of Medem’s than to Erice’s, as the point of view of his characters is due to the result of their distorsioned minds which find in fantasy the way to escape from a reality that does not adjust to them. Moreover, his work is, as Medem’s, more visual than narrative, and his scripts are often criticised for the weakness of its structure.

The savage way in which he presents the universe in which his protagonists live in links him with Pasolini’s harsh, sacralized moments of representation, where embellishment speaks the language of fetishism. His films are based on primary impulses, on a sexual and obsessive imagery which is perpetuated in open, explicit images. The characters of his films are hardly integrated into society or they just pretend to be, hiding their obsessions to the rest. They live in their world of fantasy that they have created, to where no one else seems to have access. They have no social skills, rejecting the patterns that reality demands (having a job or forming a family) to be one of its members. Their view is a subjective one, marked by these obsessions that make them asocial, where the exterior has no interest for them. Bigas situates his stories in inside spaces like flats, rooms or cinemas. This claustrophobic atmosphere acts as a temple where the rituals take place, evoking a meticulous and even religious existence.

Objects are a constant and key referent in his films, which spring from his confessed fetishism. These are inspired in a surrealist and onieric nature that evokes imagination and provokes the detachment with the real and objective. His characters have an obsessive behaviour towards possession (especially of sexual instruments, luxurious standards that pretend to mark them socially and even of people and animals), where these objects play a basic role in defining the character’s qualities.

This basic, primary instinc is constructed around the maternal figure present on his films. This figure exerts a dominant control over his male characters, whose fight is to free themselves from their dependant relationship with this mother and at the same
time sexual icon. The journey initiated in his work has a straightforward direction; the idyllic return to the female uterus, considered by Bigas Luna (quoting Salvador Dalí), as the “paradise” to where every male desires to go back. He shares Dalí’s idea of return and also his symbolic way of representing this child-alike universe in which sex forms a vital part. In words of Bigas Luna: “In my view, sex represents a symbol. A man that wants to gain access to a place where he does not fit anymore through a hole that is too small. This is because the best place where a man has been is in the mother’s womb and he wants to go back there.”

The artistic backgrounds of Bigas Luna have no relation with filmmaking. He started as an object designer in the 1970s, where his interests followed the creation of pieces of furniture with a non-pragmatic use. His method was to destroy this furniture with the purpose of establishing a critical view on mass production, hitting into the comforts that society creates to establish class differences and, at the same time, a more passive attitude towards life. He exhibited his work in different galleries in Barcelona, receiving financial support of his burgoise milieu, which made his art a kind of caprice for high-class society. One of his most famous works of that period was Tables (Taules) in 1973, exhibited in the nowadays kitsch, trendy furniture shop Vinçon, situated beside La Pedrera, one of Antoni Gaudi’s most famous modernist buildings.

Moreover, following the idea of the German artist Wolf Vostell he organised a series of “happenings”. In them, human beings which were usually naked interact with broken, useless pieces of furniture to address a critical view to the rational ways of consume. He then started to conceive action and narrative as the way of creating a visual and conceptual impact on the viewers. His influences where based on avant-garde movements like surrealism, Dadaism and Futurism, giving priority to aesthetics and semantic over pragmatism. Alessandro Mendini, the Italian director of the art magazine “Casabella” between 1970 and 1976 defined this style of representation as “lack of utility”, where the use of “quotidian objects in mythological situations makes us aware that our enviroment is constantly in a dramatic condition, as furniture is nowadays consciously banal, extrovert and superficially projected to avoid reflection on human beings. There are a homage to efficiency.”

Bigas’ surrealist manners where a legacy of

what Breton called the “crisis of the objects”, as this have no relation with the interior world of consciousness. In the actual society, objects have become symbols of desire, a way of establishing the social and economic backgrounds of the individual.

His background explains the interest that the Catalan filmmaker has in the representative meaning of the objects, which he uses along his filmography. Furthermore, he was also interested in fine arts as a method of expression, focusing on painting and photography. This formative period explains the reason why his films are mainly aesthetic and less technically and narratively accurate, where montage is, for example, less important for him than the mise-en-scène. It is exactly his obsessive, onieric and sexual settings the ones that transformed Bigas in a cult filmmaker. To approach his conceptual universe the best way is by having a closer look to Bilbao, the film that help him to ground this reputation. This film is his most paradigmatic work about the exploration of the obscure obsessions of a protagonist who is mentally disturbed and denies reality as a social space. It belongs to a “Bigas” regard, as the filmmaker himself distinguishes two paths in his career. The “Bigas” films are dark, focused on the interior of his characters, while the “Luna” are more mediterranean, full of light and based on the exterior (that applies to his Iberian Trilogy: Jamón, Jamón, Huevos de Oro and La Teta y la Luna).

\[\text{R. Espelt: 1989. Breton published this article in the French magazine “Cahiers d’Art” in 1936.}\]
6.1 *Bilbao* (1978)

**Synopsis**

After the death of his mother, Leo’s uncle sends him to live with his mistress, giving economic support to both. Leo establishes a mother-son relationship with María, accomplishing his sexual fantasies and interaction with everyday objects. In one of his drifts around the old town in Barcelona he meets a prostitute named Bilbao, falling in love with her. After having an incomplete sexual encounter Leo will start to follow her in the streets, taking pictures and buying objects that he associates with her profession. One day he goes to the meublé where she works and against Bilbao’s desire he kidnap her, starting a ritual in his flat that ends with the accidental murder of the prostitute. His uncle helps him to get rid of the body stuffing her in the sausage factory that he runs.

**Analysis**

*Bilbao* is a film about a lonely, obsessive young man who views life as a collection of objects that he wills to own. The major metaphor is that he even goes further than the classical fetishistic collector to regard the prostitute as a sacralized possession, inflicting a series of rituals to her. Bigas Luna shot the film in 16mm format to achieve a more underground, cheap style that creates the claustrophobic atmosphere that the story requires. Closed spaces like Leo’s flat, the bus or the uncle’s factory are predominant, where the only contact with the outer world will be through windows and the television (although it is switched off most of the time). His flat is a shelter and a temple at the same time, where electrical appliances have a double dimension; a pragmatic one, which corresponds to the functionality of its use and a mythological, irrationally pleasant one, which gives satisfaction to Leo.

With this premises, we enter into the world of a fetishist, narrated in first person by a protagonist who never justifies his acts but just communicates his thoughts. When he is outside the flat he carries his camera with him, taking random pictures and hiding his glance behind the machine. Sun glasses are also a medium through which he protects himself from the (subjectively) threatening society. He presents the patterns of a character that wants to see but does not want to be seen, that feels curiosity for his environment (this explains why he wanders around the city with a non-practical
intention) but rejects any possible feedback from the same. His thoughts reveal himself as a psychotic and neurotic character, who feels desires of killing the people that annoy him (like in the scene where he is in the bus, following Bilbao), reveling an agressive response to everything (mostly human beings) that he is not able to control. However, these thoughts never go beyond his imagination, as we have already mention that he is not an active character that interrelates with the others. He is practically unable to surpass the barrier of the thinking, as he hardly reaches the stage of action.

His relationship with women follow the same pattern of passivity. For example, his coexistence with María has a sexual nature provoked by her iniciative. They never have a sexual relationship or he never touches her body; it is her the one that masturbates him for his own pleasure, while he is busy with the objects that confer his universe. He feels protected when walking in the street with her, declaring that “the advantage of going with María is that I hardly have to speak.”21 He seems to feel a child-like security with her, also in economic terms, as he is being sustained by his uncle. Further on we will see how he adopts the same attitude towards Bilbao when he kidnaps her, although in this case the passivity won’t be by his lack of action but a lack of interaction.

Objects, as the opposite that with human beings, are used by the protagonist to establish his relationship with the external world. By this, he accomplishes his frustrated fantasies, as the world seems something dangerous for someone who seems incapacitated for social relationships. These objects, on the other hand, are things that he can control and manipulate freely, they do not, apparently, harm him. His lack of communicative skills takes him to kidnap Bilbao, as he does not know any other way to establish a relationship with a woman whose profession makes hardly difficult an emotional approach. He sedates her with chloroform after entering her room without her noticing. He is really excited with “the object that I wanted, the magic toy”22, to who he starts to practise a series of fantasies (pouring milk to her body, tatooing her buttocks or shaving her vagina) that she wont be conscious of, as he administrates her more chloroform everytime she starts to recuperate the sense of reality. Here we see how he resorts to a soporific substance to avoid the participation of the victim in the whole process, remaining, as he likes, as the one who is in control of the situation. This

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process has a liturgic nature, as he ties her to a wire that hangs from the ceiling which leaves the prostitute in a kind of sculpture that he can manipulate.

Antonio Weinrichter, in the book he has written about Bigas Luna has defined Leo “not as an evil fetishist or sadomasochist as he has been usually described but as an artist whose relationship with the object is purely intellectual.(...) Leo reaches the possession of the object through different signifiers (the movement potentially infinite of a signifier towards another one is, according to Lacan, desire ).(...) The table where Leo works ends up being the repository of the “documents” he has compile about Bilbao.”

If the term “artist” applies to the character, then Bilbao becomes a kind of canvas and it will be regarded, not as a woman but as a rough material that Leo can use as the mean of expression of his inner world. More than a canvas, Bilbao seems to me a body which is tortured to such an extreme that ends up with its destruction, as it finally happens. María, again acting as a protective mother, takes the initiative in the process of getting rid of the body, in which Leo does not participate (he is in charge of washing Bilbao’s blood and cleaning the bedroom) and after imposing her solution to Leo’s uncle (she even slaps him on the face to end his disapproval) they take the body to his factory, transforming it into meat. At the end, we see how Leo goes back to the life he had before meeting the prostitute, wandering around the streets of Barcelona with his camera.

In his second film, Bigas Luna enters the world of this alienated character. His view has no prejudices or judgments about Leo’s acts, offering a sharp exposition that does not pretend to be moralistic but honest. The film seems to be constructed on the appealing of a visceral feeling rather than in an intellectually built narrative. The images are stunning due to his desire of not hiding the truth that they involve. They are raw and immediate, awaking the door of irrationality from where they born. Bilbao is less innovative for its technical and narrative options than for the visual atmosphere and aesthetics that Bigas recreates. The predominance of the close-ups involves the audience in Leo’s universe, where the lack of general shots makes the claustrophobic ambiance more intense. Bigas takes wise advantage of the expressive freedom that the Spanish art achieved after Franco’s death in 1975, where not all the filmmakers show the same lack of complex, of embarassment to deal in such an open way with this kind of outsider

characters. His direct way of expressing sexuality and fetishism related with the human psyche, reveals him as a radical author who shows a strong concern in pursuing the truth hidden on a sometimes too discreet (when it comes to these matters) industry.
7. Conclusions

Once having analysed the trajectory and the most emblematic works by Víctor Erice, Julio Medem and Bigas Luna we can relate the three of them with no fear to a poetic style of filmmaking. Throughout this dissertation we have seen how, firstly, they all share the major novelty that Pasolini introduced in film semiotics; the subjective (or indirect) point of view, where their way of portraying reality is beyond the social backgrounds of the characters. Second, their work provides the necessary elements to make their films universal, as their style does not look for barriers but for the common patrimony of the im-signs, which offer an open analysis to the interrelation of men with its environment. Therefore, and despite reflecting their personal worlds on the screen, they achieve the identification with the audience. The nature of this language is based on signs that surpass the limitations of words, as it recalls the irrational side of the spectators. It avoids a simplistic and narrow approach and makes their films immune to the pass of time, as the symbolic elements that they employ have no social or aesthetic restrictions.

On the other hand, their formal variations in approaching reality eliminate any sort of uniformity between them, which makes this connection even more interesting. This becomes positive, as their differences prove that each of them has a rich and distinguishable way of communicating their point of view about universal situations and feelings, making them all equally valid.

We have seen how Erice takes care of every element that configures a film, focusing his attention on condemning (appealing to an elliptical narrative) the isolated conditions and the breakup of all relationships that the Francoist regime brought to Spain. In his films, the world of magic and imagination represents the escape to the loneliness of reality, where the attempts of establishing emotional relationships end up as a failure.

Julio Medem explores reality in a psychological point of view, where the relation with nature being the space where instincts are develop achieves a strong participation. In his films, the historical background is less important (except for Vacas) in favor of supernatural elements like chance, fate or faith that seem to mark the lives of his protagonists, reducing their existence to the role that destiny has planned for them.

Finally, Bigas Luna does not resort to any mannerisms or gentleness, but to a more raw and direct representation of obscure obsessions and marginal underworlds. He
is the less lyrical of the three, but at the same time the more clear in the use of symbols. His criticism points towards the nonsense that surrounds the lives of the bourgeoisie, personalised by the meaningful sense that objects achieve to fill their bored existence.

To sum up, we confirm their adscription to a style that looks for the truth in whatever reality is being portrayed. Both, the personal view of the filmmaker and that of character, along with the use of signs that relate to a path of irrationality that belongs to every human being make them genuine members of the “cinema of poetry”.
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