La sirena negra (Carlos Serrano de Osma, 1948)

Styling models in postwar Spanish cinema (1939-1962)
Introduction

In a recent study (Castro de Paz, 2013) —and based on a detailed historical analysis of a large number of preserved films conducted over the course of more than two decades of research and publications (Castro de Paz, 2002 y 2012)—we proposed a theoretical and historiographic articulation of certain stylistic models for Spanish cinema in the period 1939-1950, resulting from the diverse and aesthetically productive intersections between the narrative and visual norms internationalised by that time by Hollywood and Spanish cultural traditions (in theatre, literature, art and music) that had constituted the most fertile material—transformed upon contact with the new medium—for Spanish cinema since the silent era, but which in this period came under the pressure of a particularly gloomy and complex historical and political context. These models are merely methodological instruments that attempt to give a discursive order to elements that nearly always appear blended together in the films studied (Sánchez Biosca, 1991: 29), and to contribute to a deeper understanding of a wave of anguished cinema that is at once humorous and devastating, Costumbrista and melancholy, reflective and spectral.

There are four models that we have been able to identify and characterise in the Spanish cinema of the period, marked, as noted above, by the complex hybridisation after the Civil War of the international institutional mode of representation (to use the now clichéd and debatable term coined by Burch) with cultural traditions that had fed Spanish cinema since its origins: a

"[T]he supremacy of love over knowledge leads to the creation of a new delusional reality where the departed beloved returns in the form of a ghost."

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LOVE, LOSS, MELANCHOLY, DELUSION: AN OBSESSIVE-DELUSIONAL STYLISTIC MODEL IN SPANISH 1940S CINEMA*
The films that would comprise the ODSM would be those formally structured around a gaze obsessed with and wounded by the loss of the love object, incapable of dealing with the grief, and depressed to the point of delusion.

The Obsessive-Delusional Model is, without doubt, the model most clearly marked by the historical moment in which it arose, having been employed almost exclusively in the period studied and disappearing in the following decade, when—with the possible exception of the extremely interesting ¡Buen viaje, Pablo...! (1958)—it becomes extremely difficult to identify examples of any of its defining characteristics. Moreover, many of this model’s most representative films—Las inguiéndes de Shanti Andía (1946) and Obsesión (1947) by Arturo Ruiz-Castillo; Embrujo (1947) and La sirena negra (1948) by Carlos Serrano de Osma; Cuatro mujeres (1947) and El huésped de las tinieblas (1948) by Antonio del Amo; La fiesta sigue (1948) by Enrique Gómez; Vida en sombras (1948) by Lorenzo Llobet-Gracia; and Ha entrado un ladron (1949) by Ricardo Gascón (Paz Otero, 2013)—also belong to the mythical period of the Civil War, so that the film’s structure convincingly links the loss of the love object (Ana) with (at another significant level) the death of that character during the first skirmishes of July 1936 in the streets of Barcelona, later directly identifying the bleak post-war period with the wound, the scar borne by the subject. A single shot, while at the same time serving as a transition between the two parts of the film (which itself is divided in two by the brutal conflict elided from the action), masterfully encapsulates what we are describing. In the midst of the war, and after resigning from his position as a film reporter on the conflict, a close-up of Carlos Durán captures—in Fernando Fernández-Gómez’s meticulous performance—all of the pain that the simple reference to a camera causes him. Then, with the close-up of his face still superimposed, we see documentary fragments of the combat that give way to the appearance, in the lower right corner of the screen (while the clouds over the battlefield are still visible), of Ana’s name etched on her gravestone. The music and the soundtrack accompanying the images of war continue, but are gradually transformed as the scene lights up and the camera pulls away. It is the soundtrack that informs us of the end of the war. Franco’s peace (dramatic music mixed with the unmistakable sound of a few chords from the national anthem imposed by the new regime), a peace of graveyards, founded...
upon the death of innocents, thus coincides with the final frame: Ana’s grave, with the shadow of a cross violently looming over it. Then, Durán comes into the frame to place some flowers there. And it fades to black.

Almost always set in a heavily charged urban night-time, films associated with the ODSM are also notable for their search for extreme visual formulations of a space (and atmosphere) that is dense, unwholesome, stifling and painfully unbreathable, with clear psychoanalytical resonances. Complex sequence-shots and highly visible camera movements and/or positions, montage sequences, overlays and all kinds of attention-grabbing visual effects pushing beyond all classical constraints connect the Model—even if some of its admitted references are found in the work of the most “experimental” (and nearly always European) filmmakers in Hollywood, like Orson Welles, Alfred Hitchcock, Fritz Lang or Robert Siodmak—with the visualist traditions of the 1920s and ‘30s avant-garde (German expressionism, Soviet montage, or French “impressionism”). Indeed, the narrator appears to share with his wounded and deeply melodramatic character a certain passionate agitation so that, even while he attempts to disassociate himself from the character’s emotional instability, he ends up irremediably caught up in it.

These films are generally associated with melodrama—although even comedies as important as Huella de luz (1942) or Eloísa está debajo de un almendro (1943), both directed by Rafael Gil, or films with a historical setting like the extremely dark Inés de Castro (1944, two different Spanish and Portuguese versions, directed by Leitao de Barros and M. A. García Viñolas), with the madness of the king and his necrophiliac act of love for the woman’s corpse, present its more serious constants in some of their scenes, and even anticipate formal solutions developed in the Model—and always present, in one or more moments of their development, the filmic formalization of a male subject who experiences delusions of his lost love object, sometimes through photographic, cinematic or pictorial representations of the beloved. The first two cases occur, once again, in Vida en sombras, a film in which everything revolves around cinema, as a realm with which the desire of the subject (filmmaker, protagonist and spectator) is essentially concerned. Fascinated with a female image, only through his amateur films (and after the ghostly shot-reverse shot with Mr. de Winter from Rebecca [Alfred Hitchcock, 1940], in which he fully recognises himself) will Carlos Durán, the film’s protagonist, be able to understand, though no longer evade, the limits of his imaginary passions. Delusional after being directly confronted with the living face of his dead wife and seeing her smile in the photograph.

Figures 1 and 2. Vida en sombras (Lorenzo Llobet-Gràcia, 1948)
(figures 1 and 2), he can then show his first opus, not because of the patient help of Clara (an inadequate substitute for the beloved, unrelated to the cinema; “What am I doing here?” she asks while Carlos and David talk about their project), but because it is the (only) means in his reach to achieve a precarious balance: to commit the absence to celluloid and thus to return, in a misshapen circle, to the beginning, to his own birth.

But even in the case of stories set in the 19th century—El clavo (Raúl Gil, 1945); La sirena negra, El huésped de las tinieblas, Las inquietudes de Shanti Andía—or set outside Spain and apparently unrelated to the armed conflict—Cuatro mujeres, Obsesión—the female presence/absence (as the ghost of the dead or vanished woman continues to be forged in fire on the subconscious of the subject) and, in short, the impossible nature of the fulfilment of the desire are inextricably linked, more or less explicitly, to the painful present of the post-war period when the film was shot, to speak to us, metaphorically and to varying degrees, of the sexual misery of Francoism. Arturo Ruíz-Castillo’s extraordinarily unique Obsesión, for example, with radical virulence and beyond its colonial setting, narrates the progressive and irremediable mental degradation of the engineer Sánchez del Campo (Alfredo Mayo) from the moment of his solitary and forlorn arrival in Equatorial Guinea, oedipally disturbed after abandoning post-war Spain, which appears to be home to the origin of the absence that operates as a narrative gap—although clearly insinuated—of his real anguish. His obsessive anxieties will grow more intense after he marries a woman he has known only by letter, but whom he confuses with the one who appears in the photograph accompanying the correspondence (Lidia, the stunning woman, an imago pedestral) but who is not in fact the writer of the letters. A productive blend of melodrama and film noir, the story begins in extremis in the moments of the protagonist’s total psychological breakdown, so that from the beginning—his figure being initially constrained by the oppressive absence of deep focus, forced foreshortening and gloomy lighting—we witness the representation of his delusions, firstly through the viewing of the photograph of the Woman he loves—the unattainable object of desire—which ends up vanishing (figures 3 and 4), and immediately thereafter with the gloomy sounds of his wife’s ghost (we will later discover that she drowned in a swamp and he failed to intervene to save her, in a potential act of homicide) drawing him powerfully towards death.

As can be seen, the gap or yawning abyss between desire and reality...
can also affect the narrative structure, as tends to occur in the Model, often concealing (the diegetic presence of) the primordial scene, either situating it prior to the beginning of the plot (although it completely determines the plot’s outcome), or eliding it brusquely through the use of ellipses that are both distressing and puzzling, and often cleared up by the apparent resolution and false healing of a flashback.

Some good examples of this formula are the urban, dark and mournful thrillers written by Miguel Mihura and directed by his brother Jerónimo—Siempre vuelven de madrugada (1949)—or by Rafael Gil—La calle sin sol (1948), Una mujer cualquiera (1949)—which always include a brutal elliptical fracture (only explained in the final flashback), a growing narrative black hole that turns the film into a sickly and tangled web of evasive glances, tensions and fears between the characters.

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In any case, partly continuing the openly demonstrative tendency of Spanish cinema since the silent era, partly to avoid resemblances to the Hitchcockian subjectivity of Rebecca, harshly judged to be morbid, materialist and heretical by the most powerful official film criticism of the day, the most restrained and least radical filmmakers would seek alternatives to the “dangerous” orthodoxy of the POVs through a treatment of the space of the shot (size, “pictorial” composition, lighting, highly stylized sets, etc.) that continues it with a delirious dolly shot towards Her, bringing the gaze up to the female body in a significantly similar way to that which—as discussed below—will be used by Serrano de Osma in certain scenes of La sirena negra (and revived by Buñuel in Él [1952] and Hitchcock in Vertigo [1958], each in his own way, in the following decade). A gaze that is “composed” and spliced, obsessive and delusional, multiplied and expanded from one eye to another, as a kind of metastasis of the longing search for a phantasmal figure which the sailor will identify directly with the “prostitute-mother”. On the other hand, in El huésped de las tinieblas (“The Guest of Darkness”, whose title is taken from an expression used by Rafael Alberti to refer to Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, the great poet of Seville whom the film portrays), Bécquer sees his lost Dora (who reproduces another earlier, eternal loss, represented symbolically in an extinguished oil-lamp that can only be lit intermittently) reflected in the water, and will then imagine her in a beautiful central fragment, festive and sinister, the fruit of his anguished mind, until the narrator finally gives up his arms to the lovers so that they can melt together in an impossible double close-up of unprece- dented beauty.

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imbued it with a metaphorical charge associated with the character’s melancholy, without actually being from his perspective. Strictly speaking, this peculiar atmospheric subjectivity—which the triumvirate made up of the director Rafael Gil, cinematographer Alfredo Fraile and set designer Enrique Alarcón would take to its most sublime expression in the “dance” scene of the Judge (hallucinating) with Gabriela in El clavo (1945)—was characterised more by a focus on the character and an indirect free point of view than by the (very restricted) use of the POV shot and, at the same, interacted with the notable and constant presence of a narrator who participates in and comments on the narrative events, sometimes giving the sensation—as noted above—of a torment equal to or greater than that of the protagonists.

**La sirena negra**

Finally, we will turn our attention, as an outstanding example of the Model analysed here, to La sirena negra, directed in 1948 by Carlos Serrano de Osma, the godfather of the group that called themselves the “Telúricos”, whose work today is well-known thanks to the research of Asier Aranzubía (2007). A filmmaker of exposition—as defined by José Luis Téllez, to whom we also owe some brilliant analyses of his work—and of point of view, his films of the period “integrate the inheritance of Eisenstein or Pabst into a dense corpus of native literary or iconic references, creating an essentially poetical narrative style of exacerbated Romanticism with a strong psychoanalytical quality” (Téllez, 1998: 814-815), which, however, have another of their main external points of reference in the (no less passionate and innovative) films of Orson Welles. Dense and masterful, La sirena negra, which would suffer the repression of censorship and would not be shown in Madrid until 1950, is an adaptation of one of the last novellas (of the same title) of Emilia Pardo Bazán—a writer who was certainly not favoured by Franco’s regime, but whose literary prestige would have made it seem ludicrous and counterproductive to ban her—that sets to images the passionate and melancholy wanderings of Gaspar de Montenegro (magnificently portrayed by Fernando Fernán-Gómez in a register very close to the no less exemplary Vida en sombras), marked like many other protagonists in the ODSM by the wound of lost and essentially irretrievable love that would lead to an obsessive and vain search in which the (very restricted) use of the pov

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his "Contributions to the Psychology of Erotic Life" (Freud, 1967). Here, the "prejudice of the third party" would be embodied—fully clarifying the oedipal origin of the choice—by the paternal prohibition of the consummation of the relationship with the young Galician girlfriend, as well as Rita’s condition as a mother. Otherwise, she is not only “sexually suspect” and of doubtful “purity and fidelity” (a single mother), but also needs to be saved and, as she is identified with the lost “mermaid”, she must be rescued from the water (and, Freud tells us, “when a man dreams of making her a mother, his mother”). Rescue and birth would thus be joined in this appearance of water, whose presence in the film it does not appear necessary to overstate, given the obsessive repetition of the Imago in which the delusional Gaspar sees the black mermaid reflected in the water from which “he could not save her.”

But in spite of the obvious interest of the extremely unique reading that the filmic text La sirena negra gives of its literary source, drawing it towards the heartrending and moving “reflection on the jurisdictions of desire projected onto an object with no features other than those conferred upon it by the delusions of passion” which, in the words of Pérez Perucha (1995: 90), had given his previous film Embriego its extraordinary filmic density and historical transcendence, had to come from the extreme meaningful brilliance of its visual resolutions, from a structure of gloom and asphyxiating opaqueness, constructed through a portentous exposition unmistakably influenced by the films of Orson Welles, but also by Alfred Hitchcock or even Robert Siodmak.

Serrano de Osma himself, many years later, would confirm these stylistic influences with respect to Welles (“...[in La sirena negra] I tried to create camera experiences, to play Welles in The Magnificent Ambersons, to shoot the film in 175 shots and things like that; there were a series of technical issues that I brought up as we worked: the third dimension, the infinite shot; subjective composition...” [CASTRO DE PAZ, 1974: 406]), but just as eloquent were his passionate words at the time of making the film, at a conference in which, in addition to pointing to the topic of the Civil War as one of the core themes of the cinema of the period, he asserted that the sequence shot, depth formal solution that Hitchcock came up with for Vertigo in giving shape to the male gaze which, recognising the body that he cannot help but be drawn to, pounces upon it, attracted and fearful. Both Serrano and Hitchcock make use of a semi-subjective shot from the POV of the protagonists in order to pan over the face of the woman; then, leaving the eyes behind, a dolly shot signals the beginning of that irreversible process of assembly between the chosen body and the fragments of pri-mordial images that weave together our unconscious desire to give new (and no less fleeting) life to the ghost. Only then is her face (con) fused with that of the black mermaid. And although, unlike Hitchcock, Serrano de Osma never tries to construct the rigid process of protagonist-spectator identification developed in Vertigo through the hypertrophic use of the POV of James Stewart’s character, this does not stop him from resorting repeatedly to the POV of Gaspar de Montenegro, thus drawing us closer to the protagonist’s anxiety by forcing us to share his gaze. However, unlike the Hitchcockian resolutions, Serrano always anticipates (whether through camera movements or through ad hoc shorts) the centre of dramatic attention of each scene, even before turning to the delusional gaze of the protagonist. By dissolving the sole point of view in this way, the tension and density of the text is taken to unprecedented extremes. Romantic(s) to the point of exhaustion, protagonist and expositors constantly interweave gazes which, however, never converge. Both pass through the diegesis, sometimes brushing past each other, other times diverging, always in search of that longed-for infinite shot. It is not surprising when Gaspar, forced by the censors to marry the bland Trini (for whom of course

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he feels no desire), that the narrator should use his camera and his power to escape in a painful, and metaphorically fatal, drop to the rocks.

Final coda
In short, as we have observed above, the Obsessive-Delusional Stylistic Model owes its singular specificity to the conjunction of certain universally melodramatic themes with concrete solutions of mise-en-scène through which certain filmmakers after the war addressed the formal problems that such themes entailed in the context of the Spain of their day. Its formal unorthodoxy, the influence of the avant-garde (and of the latest Hollywood cinema) and its consequent eccentricity in relation to the IMR, shaped the strange network of a fabric on which the wound to the IMR, shaped the strange net-works and its consequent eccentricity in relation to the IMR, shaped the strange network of a fabric on which the wound of the Spanish Civil War achieved what was perhaps its most relevant, striking and sublime stylisation. ■

Notes

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2 Although we are aware that delusion is closely associated with psychosis and is extremely rare in obsessive neurosis, the terms are not used here in their strictly psychoanalytical senses. Nevertheless, there are many cases of non-psychotic hallucinations and acute delusions also due to symbolic castration anxiety which, therefore, could be clarified by the hypothesis of foreclosure. In our Model, the recurring representation is still a representation of the ego, symbolic in nature, while in psychosis denied and recurrent representations are profoundly heterogeneous (NASIO, 1996).

3 A universally melodramatic thematic core but also significantly present in many other films of the decade that are only partly “affected” by the Model, such as the remarkable and very different El frente de los suspiros (Juan de Orduña, 1941), La casa de la lluvia (Antonio Román, 1943, based on a story by Wenceslao Fernández Flórez) or the first film by Manuel Mur Otí, Un hombre va por el camino, shot in 1949.

4 Conference given at the Cúpula Coliseum in Barcelona, January 1947.

Bibliography


