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Metafilm in the Spanish Post-Civil War Period: Cinematic Self-reflection in Berlanga's *Bienvenido, Mr. Marshall* and Bardem's *Calle Mayor*

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Abstract

The focus on the self-referential as a means of destabilizing reality and calling attention to the artificial nature of life may be noted in a number of films of the Spanish post-Civil War period, among them José Antonio Berlanga's *Bienvenido, Mr. Marshall* and Juan Antonio Bardem's *Calle Mayor*. Through their use of metacinematic devices such as distancing techniques, parody, and the incorporation of performance and cinematic models, the constructed nature of provincial life and Spanish identity is exposed, ushering in a new era of Spanish cinema.

Since Lionel Abel's identification of the basic postulates of *metatheatre* in the 1960's (61) and William H. Gass' coining of the term *metafiction* in 1970 to describe the self-reflexive novel (25), numerous critics have sought to further delineate this mode with respect to its themes and techniques. In a Special Session of the 1981 MLA convention entitled "Metaliterature and Recent Spanish Literature", Robert Spires proposed two categories of metafictional works, those which "foreground the fictional code system on which they are constructed" and those which "violate the very modes or laws of fictions" (Persin et al. 307).¹ The definition proposed by Patricia Waugh in her now seminal study *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984) appears to solidify the term's meaning as "fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). Such attempts to pin down the nature of the metafictional text have proved elusive, however, as evidenced by both the identification of a seemingly endless array of metafictional devices and the application of the prefix "meta" to other artistic disciplines. Cinema is a case in point, with its corresponding terminology "metafilm" and "meta-cinema". The introduction of the first of these, "metafilm", can be traced to one of Abel's contemporaries of the early sixties, Norman Holland, in his analysis of the "un-film" (407). Explaining "meta-cinema" as a "broadening of the ancient trope of the world as stage to include the world as screen", Kenneth Rothwell notes: "[...] as the idea of the screen as screen takes its place alongside the idea of the play as play, so 'meta-cinema' emerges alongside metatheatre" (1).

As with the case of metafiction, the use of metacinematic devices preceded the introduction of the terminology used to describe them. Thus, though cinematic self-reflection may be identified as a salient feature of many postmodern films, and particularly those of the new millennium, the focus on the self-referential as a means of destabilizing reality and calling attention to the artificiality of life can be noted in films of the Spanish post-Civil War period, as well. Among these are two classics of 1950's Spain, Luis García Berlanga's *Bienvenido, Mr. Marshall* (1952) and Juan Antonio Bardem's *Calle Mayor* (1956). Members of the first class of the regime's official film

school, Bardem and Berlanga were strongly influenced by the ideas of Italian Neo-Realism and directors such as De Sica and Antonioni, whose films they first viewed in Madrid during the Italian Film Week sponsored by the Institute of Italian Culture in 1951. They thus began their professional careers as collaborators in a new type of cinema which rejected the cardboard sets and melodramatic plots of the historical epics and folkloric extravaganzas produced by Cifesa, the film company which monopolized the industry in the forties through its ideological support of the regime. Instead, they shot their films in the streets and addressed the real issues of post-war society, laying bare the myths of Francoist Spain (Besas 34 and Higgenbotham 44). Through their use of metacinematic devices, which include distancing techniques, parody, and the incorporation of films and play-acting, the constructed nature of provincial life and Spanish identity is exposed, ushering in a new era in Spanish cinema.

From its opening sequence, *Bienvenido, Mr. Marshall*, employs numerous techniques to distance the viewer from the provincial town depicted and from its inhabitants, breaking with the traditional identification between character and spectator which had characterized the heroic melodramas and folkloric films of the post-war period. The spectator thus begins his/her acquaintance with the village from a position on the outskirts of town, viewing from a distance the approach of a bus down the dusty road.² An outsider, like the visitors who are arriving, he maintains a physical distance from the action throughout the film by means of a primarily objective camera. As the camera follows the bus into the village of Villar del Río, we are made fully aware of the cinematic product that will be witnessed through the use of an ironic voice-over narration. The constructed nature of this experience is emphasized by the playful voice of Fernando Rey, a leading actor in the Francoist cinema parodied by Berlanga, who addresses us directly as he begins his omniscient narration with the fairytale introduction “Erase una vez”. We are now situated in the voyeuristic position of captive audience to the visual images before us and the story spun by the charming Rey. This narrative voice also aligns itself with the power of the camera, as illustrated by its ability to not only freeze the action of the scene, but make the characters disappear completely so that we might better view the village’s component parts. The narrator’s ability to control our experience throughout the film, by entering the characters’ homes – and their dreams – or by sharing with us his reflections on provincial life, never allows us to forget our separation from the screen (Peiró 13).

An additional means of distancing the viewer from the village, underscoring its status as scenario, is the presentation of each component of the physical space as representative of any Spanish town and as a parody of the ideal Castilian village proffered by Franco. The narrator first leads us through the frozen scene, pointing out the essential features of Villar del Río, which, he explains, “no tiene nada de particular”. We see from the perspective of the objective camera the requisite fountain in the center of the town square, the set upon which all of the town’s important events take place: “los mercados, los bailes, las corridas de toros, las noches de luna”. The church, the town hall and the school complete this picturesque image. However, qualifying the significance of each of these markers of Spanish cultural identity is the teasing voice of Rey, who reminds us of the reality that underlies the idyllic façade of the Spanish village. He thus notes that the

fountain's water is always fresh, "cuando sale"; and the church is "viejísima", though he stumbles as he tries to recall its period of construction, assuring us that "los entendidos aseguran que tiene un gran mérito . . . sabrán por qué". Similarly, it is not 3:10 in the afternoon, despite the indication to the contrary on the town hall's broken clock, which cannot be repaired until sufficient funds are available; and the Austro Hungarian empire still reigns on the school map, whose description as "dulce y optimista" underscores the post-war penchant for living in the glorious past. In fact, this village is so typical that it is easily confused throughout the film with the neighboring Villar del Campo, though it lacks the latter's link to civilization and economic prosperity represented by the railroad. As Nathan Richardson has observed, the conflation of these two stereotypical towns becomes a "metaphor for the village of Spain, or Spain as village" (3), contrasting in their barrenness with the imagined Castilian village of Franco's "celebrated mythic Spain".

As the scene unfreezes at the bidding of our narrator, we are introduced to the players who fill not only its stage, but that of any other provincial town. We meet a cast so stereotypical that their description recalls the aesthetics of estrangement through caricature first defined by Valle-Inclán in *Luces de bohemia*. As Camila Segura notes, "nos evocan las marionetas valleinclanianas y nos resultan esperpénticos pues terminan siendo tan prototípicos que son prácticamente predecibles y, por lo mismo, ridículos" (4). The mayor, don Pablo, is the owner of half the town – the tavern, the bus, and even Genaro, the bus driver. However, undercutting his position as representative of political and economic power within an authoritarian Spain, is his presentation as an aged and bungling comedic figure who uses a primitive hearing device to communicate with his constituents, creating a sense of ineptness and general confusion. The village priest, "una de las figuras más principales", is similarly stereotypical, as is don Luis, the local aristocrat, "ninguna mancha, ningún dinero". The female characters play the roles of school marm ("muy mona, muy lista y todavía soltera"), visiting folkloric singer (máxima estrella del canto andaluz") and gossiping matrons who dedicate themselves to church beneficence and identifying "quién irá irremediamente al Infierno".

The most striking metacinematic device employed by Berlanga is the use of play acting and film referents to call attention to the false nature of Spanish identity, as delineated by the Francoist apparatus for the purposes of both national and transnational consumption. When the typical provincial day to which we were introduced in the opening sequences of the film is interrupted by the arrival of a governmental delegation announcing the upcoming visit of American representatives of the Marshall Plan, the result is the staging of a full-fledged *españolada* directed by the mayor and Manolo, agent of the visiting folkloric singer. Convinced by Manolo that the Andalusian version of Spain is the only one recognized by the Americans, don Pablo determines to transform the entire town into the image that the money-bearing North Americans will surely delight in seeing, a clear reference to Franco's desire in the fifties to present a cleaned-up and charmingly false image of Spain to the outside world, particularly to the United States.³ Gone are the dilapidated buildings of the central square, as the clock hands on the town hall begin to rotate, powered by the men hidden behind their façade. Likewise, the cardboard walls of a whitewashed and geranium-laden Andalusian town

conceal the dusty, Castilian reality. The village's Juan's and Rafael's come in from the fields to assume their new roles, appropriately costumed as bullfighters or serenading guitarists, while the women leave their washing in the nearby river to learn the correct vocabulary for their new flamenco attire. The entire town then participates in a dress rehearsal for the American's visit, complete with welcome signs, patriotic bunting, and ironic theme song.

Berlanga's incorporation of play-acting and cinematic references to foreground the relationship between artifice and reality is not limited to this parodic treatment of folkloric spectacle, but includes virtually all of the film genres popular in post-war Spain, with representatives of the Francoist national cinema as well as American importations. The role of the No-Do (Noticiero Documental) in official propaganda as the only source of international news is highlighted when the villagers gather on Saturday night to view the American western that arrived with the most recent mail delivery. Answering the priest's highly critical query in the previous frame, "¿Qué pensáis que nos va a dar América?", the No-Do answers with images of farm machinery being unloaded from a ship in a foreign harbor. The villagers' image of American largess is thus established by reels of celluloid that contrast the technological prosperity of the outside world with their own primitive agricultural tools, the ox and the hand-plow, revealing the truth behind the Francoist myth of the rural paradise.⁴ The next night we are led into the homes of representative villagers and are made privy to their dreams, each inspired in a film genre that reveals the fears of change and dependency prompted by the imminent visit, as well as the hopes of material gain.

The first consciousness examined is that of don Cosme, the village priest, whose dream begins with a familiar scene from *Semana Santa* in which Nazarenos march in procession accompanied by traditional drum rolls. However, as the penitents round the corner, they are transformed into Ku Klux Klan members who, to the sound of New Orleans jazz, drag don Cosme into an interrogation room that blends elements of the American detective film with a checkered floor reminiscent of *Alice in Wonderland*. A high angle shot in which the priest is spotlighted beneath an interrogation lamp, immersed in the cigar smoke of the beefy mobster-like detectives who surround him, underscores his sense of victimization at the hands of his captors. Found guilty of public condemnation of American values, don Cosme now appears seated before a judge of the Anti-American Activities Committee, who strangely resembles both the devil and the Wizard of Oz. The use of a low angle shot to reveal the perspective of the priest creates a terrifying, enlarged image of an authoritarian presence whose censorial power parallels that of the Catholic church and Franco himself. The subtle intertextual reference to *Alice in Wonderland* further underscores this interrogation of authoritarian control. Similarly, the judge is implicitly compared with the Wizard of Oz himself, as suggested by his mechanically garbled speech and the lever he manipulates to activate a recording of the priest's voice, thus revealing the false nature of such displays of power.

In his dream the aristocratic don Luis appears as the protagonist of an historical epic which recalls popular extravaganzas of the day such as *Alba de América*. Wading to

shore through cardboard waves, don Luis plays the heroic role of a conquistador who extends his friendship to the primitive inhabitants of a newly discovered land. His innocent enthusiasm soon turns to horror, however, as he is captured by the natives and immersed in a pot of boiling water. This dream outcome reiterates don Luis' previous references to his many ancestors who were literally or figuratively "eaten" by savage Indians or by the Americans who stole their lands following the wars with Texas or Cuba. The oneiric movie scene thus serves the function of parodying the propagandistic films of the fifties in their quest to rewrite Spanish history and create a heroic national identity, as well as emphasizing the autarchy's fear of change and the unknown "other" as represented by the United States.

Befitting don Pablo's role as the supreme political and economic power of Villar del Río, the mayor's dream is the most elaborate of all. Reflective of his love for the Hollywood western, his movie debut features him in the title role of sheriff. From barroom brawl to can-can dancers, virtually all the motifs of this popular genre are included in Berlanga's spoof of the American version of the Andalusian *españolada*. Here don Pablo confronts in a duel the threat to his power represented by Manolo, the traveling empresario who proposed and directed the construction of Andalucía in Villar del Río. As Annabel Martín has proposed, "al contraponer el exotismo americano con el español muestra lo que de artificial hay en la construcción de ambas identidades" (78).

The final dream sequence presents the desires of Juan, the "everyman" of Spanish village life, who is seen standing with his family amid the plowed furrows of his field as a circling airplane flown by Santa Claus and the Reyes Magos rains gifts from above. The poverty represented by the arid field and ox-drawn plow, as well as the primitive manual labor seen throughout the movie, is countered by fairytale figures that appear from nowhere to regale the needy with tractors. The dreamed-of Hollywood "happily-ever-after ending" is signaled when the entire family climbs aboard the tractor and drives off into the figurative sunset.

This "happy" ending proves, however, to be as false as the *españolada* staged for the Americans by the people of Villar del Río and Franco's regime. When the designated lookout signals from the bell tower of the church the arrival of the eagerly awaited guests, the townspeople begin their musical production – only to discover that the entire spectacle was based upon a false interpretation. After the American have rolled through town without stopping, we discover the slippery nature of linguistic and cultural signs – in this case the confusion by government officials of Villar del Río with Villar del Campo. As rain falls upon the weary villagers, who must present gifts "al revés" to pay for the ill-advised farce or "carnival", the ironic voice of the narrator insists that all is well. A final long shot focuses on one of so many Juan's as he pauses his ox and plow to look hopefully up at the sky as the tale ends: "Colorín, colorado, este cuento se ha acabado". Unlike the melodramas and *españoladas* of post-war Spain and Hollywood, this neorealist film allows for no tidy ending. As the narrator has already noted, "pudiera ser que este cuento no tuviese final. En general, las cosas nunca acaban del todo ni tampoco salen como uno se había imaginado."

Though Berlanga collaborated with Juan Antonio Bardem in the early stages of *Bienvenido, Mr. Marshall*, financial constraints led Bardem to sell his interest in the film and take a different approach to the development of neo-realist films with a critical bent (Stone 45). The international success of his *Muerte de un ciclista* at the Cannes Film Festival of 1955 was followed by yet another analysis of Spanish social behavior in *Calle mayor*, an ambitious co-production with France which boasted a cast of international stars (Besas 39-42). Based on Carlos Arniches' *La señorita de Trevélez* (1916), a tragicomic farce by one of the most popular writers of sainetes and other light theatrical fare during the early decades of the last century, Bardem's socially and politically engaged script appears light-years away from both the work that inspired it and Berlanga's humorous take on village life. Despite the apparent difference in tone, however, we may note Bardem's use of some of the same meta-devices used by Berlanga as he unmask the constructs of provincial life as defined by National-Catholicism.

As in Berlanga's *Bienvenido, Mr. Marshall*, the opening sequences of *Calle mayor* introduce us to a provincial town. Accompanying the objective camera which pans over the countryside and rooftops is the sound of a train whistle. Like the dusty road connecting Villar del Río with Villar del Campo's train station, this auditory sign is representative of the progress and technology which lie outside the space depicted. A voice-over narration describing the scene alerts us to the fact that the setting of this "pequeña ciudad de provincias" is not specific, but "una ciudad cualquiera en cualquier provincial de cualquier país"; "no tiene unas coordenadas geográficas precisas". Imposed by the censorship board to counter the film's critical take on Spanish provincial life, this disclaimer nonetheless has an ironic effect contrary to that desired by the government by suggesting that the actions and lifestyle about to be presented are typical of all Spanish towns. As Asunción Gómez has noted, "al rodar la acción en distintos lugares y mantener el nombre de la ciudad en el anonimato, el espacio . . . adquiere una dimensión alegórica (47). This allegorical rendering of characters and events serves to reinforce the viewer's role as spectator, paralleling the distancing effect achieved by the voice-over narration in *Bienvenido*. The focus upon the film's constructed nature is further emphasized by the image of a painting of the Calle Mayor as the opening credits roll, which then transforms into a live scene of the main street.

Serving to emotionally distance the spectator from many of the characters and their actions is the use of provincial types, who approximate the grotesque figures drawn by Arniches in his original farce. A difference between the two, however, is that the group of men who devise the prank which motivates the film's main plot line are never funny. As Stephen Roberts has observed, "we are repulsed by their grotesque laughter and behavior" (5). Asunción Gómez notes their relationship to Valle-Inclán's esperpento and the manner in which Bardem's camera replicates "los espejos cóncavos del 'Callejón del Gato' of *Luces de bohemia*" (49). Their actions are distorted both visually and auditorially as we see them pressing their noses against windows to oggle the women outside or stumbling through the darkened and deserted street as they sing together in drunken, slurred voices. Also unlike the original play, these bored men who seek entertainment in a series of absurd pranks, the most recent of which is pressuring one of their members to stage a false relationship with the town spinster, are not young,

but balding professionals: doctor, lawyer, journalist, banker, merchant. Their behavior is, therefore, all the more incongruous, which assures that the spectator is never able to identify in any respect with these caricatures of provincial life who hang out in all of the typical venues: the billiard room of the local men's club; the bars and cafés of the Calle Mayor; and the seamier clubs of the Barrio Viejo with their requisite prostitutes.

Play-acting assumes a central role in Bardem's film, as the plot revolves around the fictitious courtship between Juan, one of the town's few eligible bachelors, and Isabel Castro, who at thirty-five is considered past marriageable age. Played by the strikingly handsome José Suárez, Juan is assigned the role of galán. His job in this melodrama is to woo the naïve Isabel, played by an attractive and sympathetic Betsy Blair, and convince her that the dreams of marriage and motherhood she shares with all Spanish women of the period are about to be realized. We thus see the development of the primary components of dramatic structure in Juan's initial overtures to Isabel, the complication as he becomes conflicted by his responsibility for the tragedy that is unfolding, and the gut-wrenching climax when Isabel learns the truth: that her upcoming nuptials are a farce created for the entertainment of bored, middle-aged men.

The themes of play and play-acting are not limited, however, to the role-playing of Juan, but constitute a motif woven throughout the film. Just as Norman Holland identified in 1962 the use of "games and play" (408) as key components of metafilm, so we see the group of childish pranksters engaged in play from the opening scene of the movie when they simulate the death of the local intellectual by sending a coffin to his home. In other scenes they are shown playing billiards or forming a circle in the darkened street to engage in an inane ritual of song and dance. One of the most striking scenes that underscores the hollowness of the games these adult men play features a night-time match of kick-the-can, filmed around the contours of carousel horses that stand eerily still on their pedestals beneath the shadow of the cathedral towering over them. Later, when Juan and Isabel's cruel melodrama needs a suitable resolution, they all rehearse their parts by literally role-playing an invented, farcical ending in which they will pretend that Juan cannot marry Isabel because he is already engaged to one of their sisters.

Yet another device of metafilm mentioned by Holland in his early piece is that of the "ritualized and prescribed life", which along with requisite dress and recurring play performance "defines a world in which all possibilities have been marked out" (408). Such is the case of this provincial town traced by Bardem in which ritualistic behaviors define the inhabitants' lives. Foremost among these are the religious procession and the daily stroll down the Calle Mayor. Asunción Gómez refers to the former as a summary of "todos los demás paseos que forman la base estructural de la película" in its representation of "la situación de toda la España franquista, con la permanente presencia opresiva de su clero y su ejército" (48). Significantly, it is during this ritual "act" that Juan inserts himself into the procession of grotesque old women and "solteras" to declare his love to Isabel. It is the promenade down Main Street, however, which serves as an emblem of Isabel's imprisonment within the monotonous social conventions of Spanish provincial life. Motivated by the fear of never marrying, a stigma referred to in the commonly-used expression voiced by one of Bardem's pranksters,

“Esa se queda para vestir santos”, Isabel continues to participate in the choreographed ritual of the paseo long after society has deemed her presence inappropriate.⁵

Isabel’s dreams of marriage and a “happily-ever-after” ending are also fueled by the films of Hollywood. Through Bardem’s insertion of references to the gleaming American kitchens which communicate marital bliss and economic prosperity to a Spanish society just beginning to taste the tempting fruits of consumerism, we learn that Isabel longs for this imagined happiness – even if it does prove to be false. Roberts has noted the manner in which Hollywood films have influenced Isabel’s dreams of her future home when she and Juan visit the new apartment building under construction on the outskirts of town (70). As she plans the layout of its rooms, she acknowledges the role of film censorship in the representation of the master bedroom, which always features twin beds.

The fictitious nature of the melodrama in which Isabel has unwittingly played the starring role is revealed in the climactic scene of that drama (and the film) when she enters the ballroom in which her engagement is to be announced later in the evening. Elaborately decorated with paper chains and streamers, this empty space underscores with its shiny dance floor and the stiff chairs lining its walls the false nature of the performance to be represented. The dissonant notes of a piano being tuned combine with high shots of Isabel, who appears to be imprisoned by the paper chains which surround her, to create a visual and auditory metaphor for her victimization by both the pranksters and society. Her longed for happily-ever-after ending will not be realized; instead, the setting which was to serve as a backdrop for the official announcement of her engagement and new roles as wife and mother is revealed to be the scenario of a farcical resolution planned by Juan and his friends.

Just as the villagers of Villar del Río must dismantle the movie-set-within-the-movie in *Bienvenido, Mister Marshall* and return to their respective roles in post-war society, Isabel Castro must relinquish her starring role as “novia” in the melodrama created for her in *Calle Mayor*. However, unlike the many Juan’s and Juana’s who return to their fields in Berlanga’s work, unconscious of their position as pawns in the game of nationalistic myth-making, Isabel has become fully aware of the constructed nature of Spanish provincial life as she surveys the rainy Calle Mayor from the confines of her second-floor window. Though Luis García Berlanga and Juan Antonio Bardem were unable to directly question the conventions of a highly structured and censored Francoist Spain, through their use of the metacinematic techniques of parody, caricature and role playing, they distance the viewer from the provincial reality depicted, underscoring the artifice that informs it. The spectator thus becomes a “critical outsider” (Robert 9) who joins *Bienvenido’s* omniscient narrator and the now self-conscious Isabel, ushering in a new era of Spanish cinema.

Notes

1. See Robert Scholes' definition of "metafiction" (100-115) and Robert Alter's description of the "self-conscious novel" (X).

2. For an analysis of the spectator's position, see Nathan Richardson 8.

3. See Pavlovic's treatment of this sequence as a questioning of the very notion of a "true" Spanish character 170-171.

4. Triana-Toribio applies the elements of nationalist identity to post-war film, among them "eulogizing of the Spanish peasantry" 38-41.

5. See Carmen Martín Gaité's discussion of the existential limitations of the post-war "soltera" 37-53.

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