

Spain, Reincarnated: Julio Medem's *Caótica Ana* and New Spanish Media(tion) in the World

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The obsession with birth and death that figures so prominently in Julio Medem's work is perhaps only trumped by the Basque filmmaker's dramatic narratives of rebirth. Medem's cinematic landscapes are riddled with symbolic holes that are as likely to swallow up sentient beings, presumably for all eternity, as to expel them into the world anew. While his characters seek desperately to rescue life from the grave, Medem's viewers, too, may find their own fantasies of resurrection fulfilled in his works, as protagonists are snatched from death, only to venture off into sun-drenched futures.¹

However, none of Medem's films features an endless cycle of death and rebirth as insistently as does *Caótica Ana* 'Chaotic Ana,' 2007, whose eponymous heroine is presented as the reincarnation of countless women, all of whom have died, tragically in the flower of youth, and violently at the hands of men. Although she may occasionally have drug-induced visions of her past abusers, Ana has remained largely ignorant of her former lives. Abandoned by her mother, she has been raised by her German father in a cave in Ibiza, where she leads a carefree life selling colorful pastels in a local market. All that will change when Ana's work catches the attention of Justine, a French art connoisseur, who invites Ana to join her artists' colony in Madrid. There Ana meets Linda, a feminist video artist, and Said, a Saharawi painter, to whom she is irresistibly attracted. After a hypnosis session draws out one of Ana's previous incarnations, however, Said mysteriously disappears. Ana subsequently undergoes numerous past-life regression sessions with a hypnotherapist named Anglo, but it will not be until the end of the film, after

journeying across oceans and centuries, that Ana will discover the full complexity of her relationship with Said, and will seek to intervene in the endless cycle of violence.²

The ostensibly crude treatment of gender politics in *Caótica Ana*—men are repeatedly characterized as rapists by Linda, and are responsible for the horrific deaths of all of the women channeled through Ana—has troubled critics and fans alike.³ Yet the film's negotiation of these issues is considerably more nuanced than most accounts suggest, as I will endeavor to show here. At the same time, however, debate over the excoriation of male violence effected through the film's storyline of feminine reincarnation has distracted attention from a second, interrelated, and equally interesting, narrative of rebirth. Indeed, *Caótica Ana* is an intriguing, albeit problematic, contribution to what I see as a new cultural and political discourse that works to figure Spain's renaissance on the world stage, by conceiving a new national identity as a post-imperial community of peaceful warriors for global justice.

From Gender Wars to Global Wars

Caótica Ana's allegorical credit sequence opens with a close-up of a dove in flight as the name of the actress who plays Ana, Manuela Vellés, appears underneath, establishing a visual link between the bird and the film's female protagonist. This image is followed by a cut that transports the viewer to the ground below, where a tracking shot circles around a hooded hawk perched on the glove of a servant who gazes proudly down at the bird. An all-male hunting party approaches, and the hawk's owner proceeds to enumerate the anatomical features that contribute to the bird's unparalleled prowess as a hunter, while he and his servant act out the sounds and gestures of an attack. As the servant removes the hood, the owner notes that the hawk's greatest asset is his vision. There is then a cut to an unusual overhead shot of the hawk—recalling Medem's celebrated animal point-of-view shots, in this case corresponding to the perspective of the flying dove—and the camera tracks down toward the hawk, tracing out the path of the doveshit which will land on its head. The moment recalls the ending of Medem's 1993 film *La ardilla roja* 'The Red Squirrel,' in which a squirrel in a tree defecates

on the head of Jota, the male protagonist; the scene symbolizes the way in which the female protagonist Sofia, allied with the squirrel, “turns machismo against its perpetrators,” in Rob Stone’s words, as she strategizes for more equitable gender relations (92; see also Antonio Sánchez 155-59). Here, however, the gendered animal allegory plays out quite differently. After the servant wipes the dove shit from the hawk’s eyes, he releases the bird, and a quick montage portrays its pursuit of the dove, which falls to the ground in a bloodied heap. The (female) dove’s scatological maneuver might be read as a “tactic of the weak,” in Michel de Certeau’s terms (36-39), yet the film’s prologue suggests that faced with an indomitable (male) killing machine, the dove may only effect a temporary subversion of power hierarchies.

Ana will continue to be associated with the ill-fated dove throughout the remainder of the film, as she is haunted by images of birds of prey. Her joyful contact with humanity while traversing the crowded streets of Madrid—sensually filmed through a series of subjective and objective traveling shots featuring Ana’s hands as she brushes against the other pedestrians—is briefly interrupted when she catches sight of a woman in a hat adorned with dark feathers. With her long dreadlocks and native-chic outfit, Ana looks the part of a poster-child for PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) and her distress—signaled through a slow-motion point-of-view shot of the hat as the woman rushes past Ana, and a reaction shot of Ana’s dazed expression, accompanied by Jocelyn Pook’s evocative non-diegetic music—appears perfectly in character. Yet the resonance of Ana’s voiceover comment during this scene, “*parezco una indígena fuera de la reserva*” ‘I look like a Native American just off the reservation,’ will later be amplified.⁴ Indeed, towards the end of the film, when Ana travels to Arizona to encounter her most “primordial self” through hypnosis, point-of-view flashbacks reveal that her life as a Native American woman was snuffed out by a man dressed in a ceremonial bird-of-prey costume. Similarly, when Ana first meets Said in the studio of the artists’ colony, she is drawn to the image he has rendered through thickly-applied oil paint in tones of ochre and gold, an abstract arc of a bird’s wing that echoes the one she herself has sketched out in vivid pastels. As the rustle of wings is heard along with Pook’s signature mix of female

voices and mournful English horn on the soundtrack, we see a quick aerial shot of desert sands, and Ana reacts with astonishment, tears and joy, embracing Said. Another mixed-media piece glimpsed in a group show several scenes later, in which the smeared phrase in English, “afraid of being in love,” is superimposed over a large black and white photograph of a woman’s arm outstretched in a wing-like arc, suggests that Ana has simply been overwhelmed by her first significant romantic relationship. But a series of hypnosis-induced flashbacks will reveal that the obsession she shares with Said is tied instead to the tragic history of a previous life in which she perished in the desert alongside her husband, attacked by birds of prey.

Moreover, in the last of these flashbacks the dove is also subtly tied to Ana’s reincarnated “soul”; an overhead shot of the lifeless figure of Saida, Ana’s previous North African incarnation, lying on the desert sands, is immediately followed by an image of a dove soaring over dunes, as if to suggest that the bird will carry Saida’s spirit into a new body: Ana’s.⁵ When Ana meets and then makes love with Said, the soundtrack features Cesaria Évora and Pedro Guerra singing “Tiempo y silencio” ‘Time and Silence,’ whose lyrics refer to “una alondra en tu pecho” ‘a skylark in your breast.’ The provocative representation of their lovemaking includes a point of view shot from Ana’s perspective in which Said’s hand seems to penetrate her body, somewhere just beneath her breasts. Ana subsequently produces a painting of herself and Said dressed in brightly-colored Saharan robes, and Said’s hand again disappears into her body (figure 1); the painting is later converted into a brief animated scene that shows Said reach toward and bury his hand in her chest. This same painting also figures prominently in the scene in which Ana first learns from Anglo (who is played by Asier Newman) that she has experienced past lives that may be accessed through hypnosis. Indeed, it is only as a consequence of her relationship with Said that the dove/lark that she carries within—her reincarnated soul—will be drawn out.

In case we have missed all of the visual references in the film, Ana’s friend Linda will call her “mi amiga pájaro” ‘my bird friend’ in a video missive that Ana watches towards the end of the narrative. However, Ana’s relationship with Linda ultimately enables her to construct an alternative avian identity for herself: that of the

“hawkish dove,” as I shall detail in a moment. Here, it should be emphasized that Ana fails to embrace Linda’s unique brand of militant feminism. Critics have tended to view Linda, played by the feminist pop artist Bebe, as a clear authorial alter-ego, and have taken her pronouncements (which echo Bebe’s own) as at one with the film’s overarching message.⁶ Yet Ana in fact pokes gentle fun at the inconsistency of Linda’s diatribes, including her inability to resist the attraction of men, which she explains away by characterizing women as “putas” ‘whores.’ Ana exchanges a bemused look with Anglo when Linda declares, “de verdad que no soporto a los tíos” ‘I truly can’t stand guys’; in another scene, she demonstrates scant enthusiasm for Linda’s mantra that “all men are rapists.” Moreover, after her own father dies, Ana even hitches a ride across the Atlantic on the “Linda,” the sailboat of her friend’s much-maligned father, and as she works through her grief, she seems anxious to discover a core of goodness in the man.



1. Ana's self-portrait with Said

If Ana's pronounced father-love impedes her from adopting Linda's anti-male rhetoric, her conflicted relationship with motherhood forces her to seek out alternative ways of fashioning a life-affirming feminine identity. Ana insists that she is not interested in becoming a mother herself, and notes of her relationship with Said that she does not wish to have children with him, because she prefers not to share his love (a statement later revealed to be terribly ironic). Having been abandoned by her own mother, Ana is also suspicious of maternal gestures. While she is initially flattered by the attention of Justine (played by Charlotte Rampling), she quickly comes to bristle at her controlling nature. The full significance of Ana's characterization of Justine as a "madre superiora" 'mother superior' emerges when Justine cruelly insists that it is her duty to re-experience all of her previous lives—and horrific deaths—through hypnosis, so that she might discover models of feminine strength. Their divergent views of motherly solicitousness are figured in a brilliantly shot scene set in a Native American museum in Arizona towards the end of the film. As Ana contemplates the figure of a mother with a baby in her arms in a scale model on display in a glass case, the point-of-view camera briefly maintains the focus on the figurines, which almost seem to come to life under her gaze. When Justine appears behind Ana at the museum door, however, there is a racking focus, and Justine's reflection in the glass case is now superimposed over the mother and child, obliterating their image.

After rejecting Justine's mandate of feminine vindication, Ana will return to a reconsideration of Linda's, as the narrative also circles back to rework the opening allegory. At one point in the film, while the American president George Bush discusses the Iraq war in a televised speech, Linda pointedly tells her friend, "hay que mandar a la mierda a este mundo de machos que nos tiene a todos podridos por dentro. Nada más quedamos las tías para poner un poco de conciencia" 'to hell with this world of macho men who have made us all rotten inside. Only we women are left to make a call to conscience.' In the film's final climactic scenes, Ana will follow Linda's recommendation to the letter. While working as a waitress in an upscale restaurant in New York City, Ana serves a meal to one of the architects of the Iraq war, a character who, with his rimless glasses, combed-back salt-and-pepper hair, and U.S. flag lapel pin,

is clearly modeled on Bush's Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, commonly referred to in journalistic treatments as a "hawk" (and indeed, in the film's credits he is listed as "Míster Halcón" 'Mr. Hawk'). After two kitchen workers, a Mexican immigrant couple, identify the man as responsible for sending their son to die in the war, Ana finally attends to the voices of her past. Although her actions mirror those of the film's opening dove, Ana's attitude is decidedly "hawkish" as she relentlessly pursues her prey, seducing the man in order to trap him alone in his hotel room. Ironically, while Ana channels Linda when she tells Hawk that "wars were invented by men like you," she sarcastically counters his own echoing of Linda's assertion that "all women are whores." Instead, and despite her earlier rejection of motherhood, Ana takes a stand for all mothers when she squats over the man's face, adopting the traditional birthing posture...and shits on it.

From Global Wars to Global Justice

It is no coincidence that, as is indicated in the first subtitle after the allegorical bird prologue, the events of *Caótica Ana* begin in September of 2001. The final version of the film omits several opening scenes called for in the published script, in which Ana cries as images of New Yorkers in mourning after the 9-11 attacks on the World Trade Center are shown on the television set of a hotel bar in Ibiza (31). Yet the portentous date resonates early on in the film, albeit in more oblique fashion, as Justine, Ana and her father Klaus discuss history while sharing a meal together. While Justine insists that all humans are made up of a larger history that they carry in the deepest recesses of their memory, and Klaus laments that the history of mankind "es una cadena de atrocidades, crueldades e injusticias" "is a series of atrocities, cruelties and injustices," Ana claims that history is her weakest subject ("es más fuerte que yo" 'it is stronger than I'). Justine's offer that Ana join her artists' community in Madrid thus functions to draw Ana out of the "prehistoric" cave she shares with her father: Ana's move will plunge her into historical time. Similarly, while Klaus and his daughter, who eschew governmental efforts to circumscribe their freedom, have sought to live "off the map," Ana comes to discover that the past lives she channels

have been anchored in geographical specificity, and delimited by the violence of territorial dispute.

Ana's temporal and geographical explorations will lead her to seek out a new life in New York ("Nueva York, nueva vida" 'New York, new life'), a city she describes as "la más abierta del mundo" 'the most open in the world.' Yet the symbolic valence of the American city is called into question when Ana first enters New York Harbor on Linda's father's sailboat. Multiple images of the city's skyscrapers come into view, but it is only at the end of the scene that Ana fixes her gaze on the now-transformed skyline of lower Manhattan, and a deafening off-screen roar begins to dominate the soundtrack. A quick subjective pan reveals that a NYC police helicopter has approached the vessel, and the slow fade to black that follows may lead us to believe that Ana is about to be turned over to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The following fade-in, however, signals a narrative ellipsis, to show a seemingly carefree Ana on dry land, wandering the streets of Manhattan. Similarly, when Said suddenly reappears in New York, Ana sardonically asks him about his stay in Guantánamo (America's infamous off-shore detention center)—given that he disappeared from her life without a trace—but Said fails to acknowledge the joke, and the subject of the conversation immediately shifts.

While these references to controversial post 9-11 U.S. security measures are fleeting, the sailboat arrival scene introduces a more persistent meditation on the decline of an iconic American symbol. As Ana exults at the sight of the Manhattan skyline, the sailboat passes by the Statue of Liberty, and a series of shot-reverse shots reveals that she is instantly transfixed by the image. Because we hear Pook's signature music, so often associated with Ana's past lives, on the soundtrack, we might assume that in a previous incarnation Ana was also an ill-fated immigrant to America who once had occasion to contemplate the statue. Yet the strangeness of the moment is magnified by the use of a unique visual strategy that Medem employs sparingly in his films, and only once in *Caótica Ana*: the contra-zoom, in which the camera zooms out while tracking in (or, alternatively, zooms in while tracking out). As Ana stares at the statue, with the rolling waves of the harbor behind her, the contra-zoom appears suddenly to detach her from her environment as she floats

forward towards the camera (and thus towards the statue). It is eminently significant that a film technique that thoroughly challenges our traditional perception of spatial relationships functions here to suggest that Ana is capable of direct communion with a symbol of freedom, normally associated with the United States. After this arresting shot, Ana is shown shaking her head as if emerging from a trance, before directing her gaze towards lower Manhattan.

Ana will continue to be associated with images of the Statue of Liberty. In her own artistic work, the statue emerges in a painting modeled on her earlier self-portrait with Said (seen in figure 1). In the newer painting, the statue now occupies the position of her lover (figure 2). Ana has chosen shades of gray for the statue, and indeed the tonality of this painting differs dramatically from the vivid coloration of her previous work. The background is an inky black, which is explained in the internal logic of the painting by the fact that the statue's right arm is cut off at the top of the canvas, and the famous torch does not appear: "Liberty" no longer "lights/enlightens the world." The somber tones of the painting mirror the film's overall change in palette in the last two narrative segments set in New York, leading up to Ana's final climactic encounter with Hawk, when her gesture of rebellion will be punished with a merciless beating. Ana herself now dresses exclusively in black, and her long blonde hair has been cut and dyed into a jet black bob. Funereal shades of black, dark brown, and gray dominate the sets as well as other characters' costumes (with the exception of the immigrant kitchen workers who are dressed, perhaps symbolically, in chefs' whites). The bleak grayness of the atmosphere is again linked to the Statue of Liberty: in the dark gray-tiled hallway outside Hawk's hotel room, a gray-scale photograph of the monument—once more bereft of the torch—hangs on gray walls (figure 3).

In Ana's painting, the artist's relationship to—and Said's replacement by—the Statue of Liberty lends itself to an allegorical reading. In much the same way that the pseudo-maternal Justine blots out the image of true motherly love in the Native American museum scene discussed above, here the "dis-enlightened" Statue of Liberty obscures the figure of Said, a Saharawi man who, as we shall see in a moment, is the film's iconic representative of the "huddled masses yearning to breathe free" (as in the Emma Lazarus poem in-



2. Ana and her self-portrait with the Statue of Liberty



3. Funereal tones surround the dis-enlightened Statue

scribed inside the monument's pedestal). *Caótica Ana* suggests that the United States has turned away from its vaunted mission on the world stage, and as a result that mission must be passed on to others. While in the first version of the painting it is Said who reaches out—indeed reaches in—to Ana, whose own arms are invisible beneath her robes, here it is Ana who appears to gesture, tentatively, towards an embrace. We have already seen that from her first encounter with the statue, shot dramatically with the contra-zoom, Ana experiences a profound identification with the traditional symbol of liberty. Ana's painting may reflect her desire to restore the statue's original charge, to bring the now deathly-hued statue "back to life."

Together with the film's post-9-11 discourse, the back-story of the Saharawi Said is the geopolitical center of *Caótica Ana*. That story is presented in the film's most didactic moment, in the history lesson, complete with pedagogical visual aids, that Said presents to Ana, as well as to the film's viewers. After Ana contemplates the map of the República Árabe Saharaui Democrática (RASD; Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic) that Said has tacked to the wall of his room, she asks him what his country is like.⁷ Said replies that, since Saharawis are not allowed to live there, he has only "seen" his country on the map. When Ana expresses surprise, since the territory was once a Spanish colony, Said explains that thirty years ago Spain "nos entregó a Marruecos" 'turned us over to Morocco.' Said details how the Moroccans invaded the territory and expelled the Saharawis into the hostile desert of Algeria, the *hamada*, where the refugee camps that he grew up in were established. The camera first provides close-ups of the map as Said uses the eraser end of a pencil to trace out the flight of his people to Tindouf, Algeria, and then scans across a series of photographs of the refugee camps, also tacked to the wall, as he describes the harsh conditions of the desert. When Ana scrutinizes the photos for images of Said and his parents, Said shows her a framed black and white photograph of a woman with a baby in her arms and a rifle slung over her shoulder: a portrait of himself and his mother.

Caótica Ana contributes to larger Spanish debates concerning the nation's colonial legacy in the Western Sahara (and elsewhere on the African continent). Postcolonial guilt for the terrible plight of the Saharawis is frequently assuaged by shifting responsibility away

from Spain's failed attempts at decolonizing the territory at the end of Francisco Franco's dictatorship, to Morocco's subsequent invasion and bombing of the Saharawi people (Martin-Márquez 330-33). Medem's film joins in the widespread Spanish effort to condemn Morocco's appropriation of the Saharawi homeland, as well as its abysmal treatment of Saharawis. Said's narrative, and a series of flashbacks to one of Ana's previous incarnations, reveal that when he was a baby Said was snatched out of his mother Saida's arms by Moroccan soldiers, who subsequently shot his father Yasir in the back and chased the couple into the desert, where they both perished. Said shows Ana photographs of Saharawi children flashing peace signs who are all war orphans, just as he is. But *Caótica Ana* shifts blame for the Saharawis' expulsion from their homeland and their infernal life in the refugee camps even further away from Spain, by signaling an additional culprit: the United States. When Said familiarizes Ana with the map of his country, the camera follows along as he traces out the lengthy mined wall built by the Moroccans "con la ayuda de los Estados Unidos" 'with the help of the United States' (figure 4). In the original script, Said goes further, indicating that the U.S. "ahora está sacando petróleo de las costas de mi país" 'is now extracting oil from the coast of my country' (66). Though the film itself avoids such an explicit articulation of the relationship between U.S. oil interests and the Western Sahara conflict, the point is suggested in more subliminal fashion later on through montage. Directly after a hypnosis session in which Ana flashes back to Saida's traumatic separation from her son, as well as the shooting of Yasir and her own death, the film cuts to televised footage from the U.S. war in Iraq. Spain's own colonial history is left on the cutting room floor, edited over by images of the consequences of Moroccan and American imperialism.

As I have detailed elsewhere, Spain's postcolonial meditations tend to be intimately related to a longer-term negotiation of the significance of the "African legacy" to modern formulations of national identity: since the Enlightenment-era "rediscovery" of the Iberian Peninsula's medieval ties to the African continent, Spaniards have alternatively rejected and embraced their presumed "African-ness" (Martin-Márquez). That discourse on national identity is presented in significantly diffused fashion through *Caótica Ana's* narratives

of reincarnation. In the previous incarnation of deepest personal interest to her, Ana was a North African woman passionately engaged in the Saharawi struggle, and here the film seems to effect a curious literalization of Spaniards' "African heritage." For most of the film we are led to believe that Said and Ana are destined to be lovers, since they were husband (Yasir) and wife (Saida) in previous lives (indeed, in Ana's point of view flashbacks Yasir is played by Nicholas Cazalé, the same actor who plays Said). Late in the narrative, however, Ana learns from Said that he is in fact her/Saida's son, rather than a reincarnation of her Saharawi husband. With the incest taboo constraining their relationship (even the free-spirited, clothing-optional Ana hides under the bedcovers after Said's revelation), Ana may only look upon Said with motherly concern, while Said, plagued by impotence, flees for a second time. Ana's final gesture of protest against American imperialism is prompted by her newfound understanding of the terrible pain of a mother's loss, and, as we have seen, is effected through a subversion of the traditional birthing posture; the film suggests that the struggle on behalf of the world's "huddled masses yearning to breathe free" must now be conceived of as a maternal militancy, engaged in by "hawkish doves."



4. Said's lesson on the Saharawis' colonial history

Although Ana herself is most preoccupied with her earlier incarnation as Saida, her hypnosis sessions with Anglo reveal that she has been (or is somehow channeling) a multiplicity of women, ranging from a Native American “goddess” to a pioneering French-speaking mountaineer. Ana has come “out of Africa,” but she also carries within her a profound connection to women from all corners of the globe. In this sense, she embodies current scientific advances in DNA research, which have been popularized by geneticists such as Bryan Sykes, author of *The Seven Daughters of Eve* (who traces female ancestry through mitochondrial DNA) or Spencer Wells, whose book and documentary film *The Journey of Man: A Genetic Odyssey* (published/broadcast in Spain under the title *La travesía del hombre*) also track the origins of humankind back to the African continent through the Y chromosome. Ana’s “deep ancestry” (in Wells’s terms) exposes the “monumental truth” that Wells demonstrates: “that everyone alive today [is] related” (*Journey*). Medem’s most recent film thus could be characterized as the latest “incarnation” of a contemporary trend identified by Marvin D’Lugo, according to which Spanish cinema has sought to reconsider “questions of Spain’s place in the world” (81). D’Lugo focuses on Pedro Almodóvar’s efforts to re-establish Spain’s ties to Latin America (in *All About My Mother*), and Medem’s project to situate Spain within a larger European genealogy (in *Lovers of the Arctic Circle*). If Medem’s earlier film demonstrates, as D’Lugo argues, that “the true relations among members of family and community can no longer be contained by the monolith of national space” (82), then *Caótica Ana* effects the ultimate dispersion of Spain’s familial relationships.

By expanding out from the notion that Spaniards are in some sense Africans (or Latin Americans, or Europeans), to the much more capacious idea that Spaniards are related to all people on earth, *Caótica Ana* does indeed reflect a significant recent shift in Spain’s larger efforts to conceive anew its position in the world. That shift is perhaps best represented by two high-profile public figures, Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, now in his second term, and Judge Baltasar Garzón, investigating magistrate for Spain’s National Court, both of whom have prioritized issues of social and civil justice on local and global scales. After his initial election in 2004, in the immediate aftermath of the March 11 train bombings in Madrid,

Zapatero quickly turned his attention to “the expansion of freedoms” within Spain, achieving legalization of same-sex marriage and governmental support for care of the elderly and disabled. He has pushed for salary equity and parity of opportunity for women, who now comprise more than half of his own cabinet members. Zapatero also strengthened laws against domestic abuse, which claims the lives of dozens of women each year—of particular interest here given *Caótica Ana*’s emphasis on the endemic problem of violence against women (“Zapatero’s Gambits” 3-4; David Mathieson 27-28). With respect to international relations, Zapatero raised the ire of President Bush by immediately complying with his campaign promise to withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq. In his first official address to the United Nations, in September of 2004, Zapatero insisted that terrorism is bolstered rather than defeated by strategies grounded in military intervention and human rights abuses, and he called for the creation of an “Alliance of Civilizations” that would seek to counter extremism and foment global understanding through the promotion of education and cultural exchange. Within a year of the speech, Zapatero’s “big idea” had been implemented by the UN, and the AOC currently focuses intensively on youth and media outreach initiatives (Isaías Barrañeda 99-102; Paddy Woodworth 72; *Alliance*). For his part, Garzón is viewed on the international stage as a “superhero in the defense of human rights” (David Sugarman 107). Since his initial efforts in 1998 to extradite the notorious ex-dictator of Chile, Augusto Pinochet, Garzón has endeavored to establish the Spanish National Court as a new center for the pursuit of global justice, based on the notion of universal jurisdiction: that “crimes against humanity ... can be prosecuted universally,” as the court indicated in a 2005 ruling against an Argentine military officer accused of kidnapping, torture, and murder during the “Dirty War” (Renwick McLean 4). In November of 2008 Garzón filed a criminal complaint against the former president of El Salvador and fourteen former members of the Salvadoran military for their involvement in the 1989 killing of six priests, their housekeeper and her daughter (Victoria Burnett A10). It’s not inconsequential that many of the regimes under investigation by the Spanish court were supported by the United States. Garzón has also spoken out against the U.S. detention center in Guantánamo, Cuba, reflecting, as Elaine Sciolino

writes, the concern that “the United States has abandoned its core values.” Moreover, while it had been rumored that an ongoing war crimes suit filed against Donald Rumsfeld in Germany would be transferred to Spain, in March of 2009 Garzón instead took steps to open an investigation into six other powerful figures from the Bush administration accused of violating international law by promoting torture at Guantánamo (“Legal Fight;” Marlise Simons). The move prompted nervous debates in Spain over the principle and practice of universal jurisdiction that have resulted in an ongoing legislative effort to limit the reach of Spain’s National Court.⁸ Ana’s gesture of revitalizing the values represented in the Statue of Liberty thus reflects an ambitious yet controversial Spanish effort to serve as a beacon for global justice, and claim the moral ground that presumably was ceded by the United States.

Amnesia and Spain’s “Reincarnation” on the World Stage

Although *Caótica Ana* harmonizes well with other political and cultural discourses that champion Spain’s revival in the international arena, the film’s negotiation of the past-life regression theme also suggests that unsettling remnants from the past may hobble the nation’s newest incarnation as a force for global justice. Ana suffers from a peculiar form of amnesia, and despite the enthusiasm with which others explore her former existences through hypnosis, she generally prefers not to “see” them for herself. On several occasions she insists that she desires only to live in the present, and ultimately she looks with suspicion upon those who would seek to dredge up her “past.” Similarly, many Spaniards have struggled with mandates to remember and confront their own past. While Garzón has spent the last decade pursuing the prosecution of foreign dictators for crimes against humanity, he has had little success bringing the (now dead) Franco and his henchmen to justice in the Spanish National Court; in November, 2008, he was forced effectively to withdraw his own case against Franco once he realized that there was no support for it among his colleagues (Manuel Altozano and José Yoldi). Even Zapatero refused to back Garzón’s initiative, insisting that the 2007 Law of Historical Memory, which provides for symbolic reparations to Franco’s victims but eschews prosecution of the perpetrators, was

more than adequate, and celebrating the fact that Franco was falling into “el olvido más profundo de la memoria colectiva de la sociedad española” ‘the most profound oblivion in Spanish society’s collective memory’ (Fernando Garea and Miguel González). At the same time, Garzón’s sustained efforts to bring to justice the military regimes of Latin America in particular—sometimes circumventing local legal circuits—could be viewed as neo-imperial maneuvers (Sugarman 119). Spain’s current relations with Latin America—including the intensive imbrication of Spanish multinationals in basic services throughout the region—frequently discount or ignore the legacy of the Iberian nation’s colonial past, and may reduplicate former abuses. Elena Delgado has highlighted “la negación, por parte de España, a asumir su papel colonizador en América y África” ‘Spain’s refusal to acknowledge its colonizing role in America and Africa,’ noting that even when Edward Said was awarded the 2002 Prince of Asturias Peace Prize, Spaniards failed to recognize that his acclaimed work on colonial systems of representation and control might apply to their own history (325).

Nevertheless, while they seek to maintain their gaze firmly upon the present, Spanish citizens may find, as Ana says of herself, that “[la historia] es más fuerte que yo” ‘history is stronger than I am.’ Indeed, the film’s problematic treatment of Said and other subaltern subjects suggests that Spaniards’ efforts to portray themselves as contemporary champions of global justice are seriously compromised by their studied amnesia concerning their own imperial past. Said is first “unveiled” in Linda’s video in which his face emerges as his Saharan *chech* is unwrapped, yet throughout the film he will continue to be an enigmatic figure swathed in exoticism (figure 5). Despite the history lesson that he presents to Ana and his claim that “todo lo que hago es para algún día saber cómo ayudar a mi pueblo” ‘everything I do is so I’ll know how to help my people one day,’ Said is not granted political agency in the film. Instead, he is twice “disappeared,” symbolically flushed down the toilet that represents his existential anguish.⁹ Said is also effectively infantilized when Ana is revealed to be his “mother,” and in this way, *Caótica Ana* falls in line with other Spanish cultural texts that imbue support for the Saharawi cause with a motherly or sisterly valence, that nonetheless bears the paternalistic residue of earlier colonialist discourses

casting Spaniards as “elder brothers” who must provide guidance to their African siblings (Martin-Márquez 333-34). Moreover, it is not clear why Said is presented as the son of an Amazigh (Berber) woman, a detail that is carried over from script to screen, despite the fact that the black and white photograph Said shows Ana of his mother and himself is an iconic image of a Saharawi mother and baby shot by the celebrated war photographer Christine Spengler (reproduced in Spengler 85). The script makes no mention of Hassaniya, the language of the Saharawi people, and as she channels Saida, Ana speaks Arabic with some Amazigh words (80); when this is “corrected” in the film, Ana speaks Hassaniya, but there is no indication that the language would likely be incomprehensible to the Lebanese woman artist who translates during the hypnosis session (played by the real-life artist Ginou Choueiri, whose work is featured in this scene).¹⁰ While both script and film refer to the marginalization of the matriarchal Berbers by Arabs, the term “Arab” is nonetheless employed throughout *Caótica Ana* to refer to all of the North African and Middle Eastern characters (54). The film’s collapsing of a diverse range of identities into a generic “Arabic” category is particularly surprising given Ana’s insistent condemnation of Hawk’s inability, or refusal, to distinguish among “Hispanics.”



5. The “unveiling” of an exoticized Said

Ana's special relationship to other "Hispanics" is indicated by the fact that her final rebellion against Hawk occurs immediately after she learns of the death of the Mexican kitchen workers' son in the Iraq war. Her act is thus most directly an avenging of the suffering of the Mexicans, who ceremonially usher her through the kitchen doors as Pook's female vocals and the voice of the Native American woman she once was, Osdad Ciaca, also spur her on. In this way, the film subtly conflates the Mexicans with the Native Americans of the U.S. Southwest who are referenced in the film's final past-life regression scenes. By focusing so intensively on the plight of indigenous communities in the United States, the film once again shifts attention from the Spanish to the North American imperial legacy. At the same time, *Caótica Ana*'s representation of Native Americans is shockingly different in tone from the film's treatment of other subaltern groups. After her hypnosis session at the Anasazi historical site (exteriors for which were shot at Betatakin/Navajo National Monument in Arizona), Ana joins up with Anglo and Justine in a local bar, which is filled with Native American men drinking to excess and playing pool. There she views the video missive from Linda, but flees when Anglo begins showing the filmed images of herself channeling Osdad Ciaca at the moment of her death. Although Justine chases after Ana, both women are stopped short at the bar's threshold, which has been obstructed by an obese customer who has passed out in the doorway. As they argue over the transcendent meaning of Ana's past and present lives, each of them is forced, awkwardly, to step over the prostrate man (figure 6). For his part, when Anglo attempts to exit the bar, he stumbles over the man and lands head first in the dust.

As Anglo tumbles to the ground, in an uncharacteristically slapstick moment that depends for its effect on the mobilization of the "drunken Indian" stereotype, the film literally appears to collapse under its own weight. Medem originally conceived of *Caótica Ana* as a comedy, and a generous reading of the Native American scenes (and other oddly "humorous" moments in the last quarter of the film) might characterize them as unfortunate vestiges of the script's previous "incarnation." Medem claims that "me pareció que debía conservar la superficie naïf de la primera idea de comedia de Ana" "it seemed to me that I should maintain the naive surface of the

initial idea of a comedy about Ana' (Medem, *El País* 39). In fact, the film's self-conscious meditation on artistic production grapples with the tension between lightness and weight (or surface and depth, as it is more commonly figured in *Caótica Ana*), a tension that characterizes many of Medem's films.¹¹ When Ana first arrives at the artists' colony, Justine suggests that she shift from pastels to oil paint, which she claims will enable her art to achieve greater depth, but Ana insists, "no quiero profundidad" 'I don't want profundity.' On the walls of her cave home in Ibiza and her Madrid residence Ana paints closed doors, a metaphor that recurs throughout the film. Ana informs Said that because she never dreams she must have a "closed door," but she also tells him that there is another door she hopes to open by falling in love. After Said disappears, Ana senses knocking at the door, and decides to trust in Anglo to open for her, which he will do via the hypnosis sessions. Later in the film, a stunning animated sequence based on her paintings shows that Ana's colorful doors are all now ajar, revealing the gruesome deaths of her prior incarnations. Yet the transition from single-plane two dimensionality to three-dimensional depth in this sequence is essentially illusory: the images of the past remain stubbornly "flat," as the dead women are all abstracted from any historical context—including regimes of colonization—that might open the film out onto a more profound meditation on (gendered) power structures. Curiously, when Anglo tells Ana "llevas dentro un abismo," "you have an abyss inside,' he hints at the void at the center of the film's largely ahistorical treatment of systemic violence. Medem's own inability to engage with the consequences of the colonial past emerges from the anecdote he recounts concerning his brief preparatory trip to Arizona: detailing his unsuccessful efforts to persuade Hopi leaders to meet with him, Medem confesses—and even appears to celebrate—the fact that the video he shot while traveling through the reservation was "vacío" 'empty' (Medem, *El País* 40).

Paul Julian Smith has suggested that in Medem's fiction films, resolution of the tension between lightness and weight usually functions to undermine persistent forms of nationalist and gender violence, yet I would argue that, despite its many brilliant moments, *Caótica Ana* ultimately fails in that endeavor (*Vision* 128-45; "Between" 11-25). While it transfers culpability for imperialist depreda-

tions onto the United States, the film works to establish Spain as a new beacon for global justice, reflecting potentially salutary shifts in Spanish foreign policy initiatives. Yet the film also mirrors many Spaniards' reluctance seriously to address their own history, particularly their nation's colonial legacy, and as a result *Caótica Ana* falls into forms of discursive violence that linger on from a traumatic past, and debilitate the otherwise hopeful image of a revitalized Spain.



6. Stumbling over colonialist stereotypes of subaltern communities

Notes

1 The seductive quality of Medem's resurrection narratives is evident from the fact that few critics acknowledge that central characters may have died in the last scenes of his films. As far as I am aware, Jo Evans is the only critic to propose that Peru and Cristina are dead at the end of *Vacas* ('Cows,' 1992), and that Otto is also dead in the final sequence of *Los amantes del círculo polar* ('Lovers of the Arctic Circle,' 1998) (20). The same could be argued of Ángel in the clos-

ing scenes of *Tierra* ('Earth,' 1996). In his more recent *Lucía y el sexo* ('Sex and Lucía,' 2001), Medem's self-conscious meditations on art (effected through his writer-protagonist Lorenzo) suggest that one of the greatest "advantages" of literary/cinematic narrative is its capacity to bring characters (back) to life.

2 The film's representation of Ana's hypnosis sessions with Anglo resembles the therapeutic past-life regressions conducted by the American psychiatrist Brian Weiss, among others. Medem claims that before he began working on the film, an anonymous female fan sent him a number of Weiss's books, which sparked his imagination, even though he was disinclined to believe in reincarnation (Medem, *El País* 39). The narrative segmentation of *Caótica Ana* is also inspired in the trope of the hypnotic countdown from ten to zero; by film's end, viewers may or may not find themselves "entranced."

3 Critic and theorist Paul Julian Smith, who expresses some ambivalence about this film but nonetheless seeks to defend it from its numerous detractors, notes that this aspect of *Caótica Ana* "does seem at first sight unusually crude" ("*Chaotica*" 32). With respect to fans, the threaded discussion *foro* on Medem's web site features many complaints about the film's gender politics (*Julio Medem: Sitio web*).

4 Translations from Spanish are my own; my rendering of dialogue from the film sometimes diverges from the English subtitles on the DVD release.

5 This interpretation is also suggested by Ana's voiceover musings as she floats in the Atlantic ocean, awaiting rescue by Linda's father: "el alma de los muertos no va a ningún sitio, ¿verdad? Solo puede volar, para entrar en los vivos" 'the souls of the dead don't go to any place, do they? They are only able to fly, in order to enter into the living.' This is one of two moments in the film in which viewers might be led to believe that, like so many of Medem's characters, present-day Ana has died but then returned to life (the other is Ana's final encounter with Hawk, who viciously attacks her after she shits on his face).

6 Conflation of Linda's declarations with the film's meaning is also facilitated by the fact that in the "Making Of" video that appears on the DVD release, Bebe explains her understanding of *Caótica Ana* by repeating her character's description of men as "unos putos cabrones, unos putos violadores" 'fucking bastards, fucking rapists.'

7 I will use the term "Western Sahara" to refer to Said's homeland, which is known by a wide variety of names, including "RASD" (preferred by many Saharawi nationalists) and "Southern Provinces"/"Moroccan Sahara" (the only monikers the Moroccan government currently accepts). For more on Spaniards' (and some Saharawis') treatments of the Western Sahara conflict, see Martin-Márquez 323-39.

8 The principle of universal jurisdiction was upheld by Spain's Constitutional Court in 2005, overturning a ruling by the nation's Supreme Court that indicated that only cases in which there were Spanish national victims could be pursued in Spain ("La justicia"). On June 25, 2009, however, the Spanish Congress voted to limit the National Court's jurisdiction to cases involving Spaniards, prompting protests from Garzón and others who accused Spanish lawmakers of ceding to pressures from "powerful nations" ("El Congreso limita"; Carlos Espósito). As this article goes to press, the issue still awaits consideration by Spain's Senate.

9 We first witness Said's angst—"a veces, veo el final, y entonces es cuando no veo nada" 'sometimes I see the end, and that's when I don't see anything'—after he makes love with Ana, when he runs off to his bathroom, where he has painted an inky black blot on the wall directly over the toilet. The bathroom is seen again as Ana recounts in voiceover that Said has disappeared; the black blot over the toilet is now all that remains of him. Similarly, at the end of the film, when Ana wakes up from her re-encounter with Said in her New York apartment, she hears the sound of the toilet flushing, but when she goes to the bathroom—where the walls above the tiles are painted black—Said is no longer there. Ana sits on the toilet and lets out an ear-piercing scream. This is perhaps the most explicitly symbolized of the (e)sc(h)atological holes into which Medem's characters tend to disappear.

10 The pastels of Ana Medem, Julio Medem's younger sister, an artist who died tragically in a 2000 car accident on her way to a gallery showing of her work, stand in for the protagonist Ana's work in the film; Julio's other sister Sofia created additional pieces for *Caótica Ana*, inspired in Ana Medem's style. The remainder of the many other artworks seen throughout the film, particularly in Justine's artist colony, were supplied by currently active artists, many of whom are based in Spain. Medem's web site includes a link ("El arte en *Caótica Ana*") to a series of pages featuring their work (*Julio Medem: Sitio web*).

11 There are many other fascinating aspects of the film's self-reflexive meditation on surface and depth—including the foregrounding of digital technologies, and the occasional privileging of spatial over temporal montage—that I will not be able to address here.

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