

A Vindication of the Spanish Mother: Maternal Images in the Filmic Make-over of the Nation

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At the end of *Camada negra* 'Black Brood,' a young apprentice in Fascism concludes his militant initiation into the ranks by repeatedly crushing his lover's head with a rock while he intones with nationalistic fervor, "Spain ... Spain ... Spain." The movie, directed by Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón in 1977, two years after Francisco Franco's death, tells the contemporary story of a band of ultra-right terrorists organized around a family that operates under the fanatical tutelage of an authoritarian matriarch, widow of a fallen hero of the Francoist crusade. The group's intent is to safeguard the political, moral, and cultural foundations of the dictatorship against the forces of democratic change, as well as to preserve at all costs and through any means the monolithic idea of the Spanish nation imposed by that regime. Arguably this context could help to alleviate the perplexity caused by such a final act of violence perpetrated upon an attractive, though lower class, single mother by an adolescent lover who, by his own admission just before killing her, likes the woman very much. The horrific deed makes up in symbolism what it lacks in practicality or sentimental congruence, since the victim might represent a threatening rival, a menacing alternative, to the biological and political matriarch, that is, to the incarnation of Franco's Spain in the figurative economy of the film. Thus the patriotic litany—"Spain ... Spain ... Spain"—should be understood as the unambiguous identification of the cause and beneficiary of the action, interchangeably the mother and the motherland. However, we cannot discount the possibility of a perverse audience that reads the scene by taking the words of the killer as the compulsive repeti-

tion of the name of the victim: "Spain ... Spain ... Spain." In fact, although seemingly opposite, both readings can—and maybe ought to be—conflated. Marsha Kinder has pointed out that Rosa, the ill-fated lover, "functions as a surrogate for Blanca," the matriarch, and as such constitutes "an object of both incestuous desire and matricide" (*Blood* 206). The resulting nationalist conundrum can be laid out as follows: the young Falangist ends up massacring Spain—old and/or new, past and/or future, as allegorized by the two generations of mothers—on behalf of Spain, to protect Spain, as proof of his passion for Spain.

The final blows of *Camada negra* are an eloquent example of the penultimate chapter in the long series of loving crimes or criminal loves against the dyad mother-nation executed in the battlefields of Spanish culture and, I daresay, although I would hardly venture into that territory, of Spanish history. In this chronicle of unavoidable chiasmus and chasms, the maternal figure *qua* image of the nation has undergone a good share of indignities during most of the modern cultural history of the country. In an exhaustive study, significantly entitled *Mater dolorosa. La idea de España en el siglo XIX* 'Mater Dolorosa. The Idea of Spain in the 19th Century,' José Alvarez Junco has profusely documented the strong tendency in a great part of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to produce a maternal representation of Spain that pathologized and "miserabilized" her, that subjected her to a rhetoric of victimhood and that reduced her to the condition of a powerless martyr. In poems, engravings, political cartoons, essays, newspaper articles, and oratorical pieces, the imagery of the nation is that of a suffering mother, emaciated and anemic, frequently on her knees or lying sick in bed, dressed in rags or mourning garments, decrepit, humiliated and pitiable, occasionally tortured and even nailed to a cross (Alvarez 567-70). The difference with the imposing Germania, the powerful and dignified Britannia, and the handsome Marianne could not be more striking.

At the turn of the twentieth century, a new set of images began to overlap and compete with the previous icons of victimization and malaise.¹ First, Antonio Machado, and later, exiled writers such as Luis Cernuda, in the early Post-Civil War period, and Juan Goytisoló, in the final stages of the Franco regime, identified the nation with growing bitterness with the ominous figure of the stepmother:

“La madre en otro tiempo fecunda en capitanes, / madrastra es hoy apenas de humildes ganapanes” ‘The mother, long ago fruitful in captains, / is today scarcely stepmother of humble laborers’ (Machado 138); “Es ella, la madrastra / Original de tantos, como tú, dolidos, / De ella y por ella dolientes” ‘It is she, the original / Stepmother of so many like you, hurt / On her account and hurt because of her’ (Cernuda 386); “adiós, Madrastra inmunda, país de siervos y señores” ‘farewell, filthy Stepmother, country of servants and masters’ (Goytisolo 88). In the former images of the suffering and martyred Spanish mother, the causes of the nation’s ills ranged from the viral to the cancerous, from external foes to dissident insiders, although oftentimes the latter were systematically deemed anti-Spanish and thus effectively denaturalized, made foreign, especially during the Franco years. However, in other instances, the tormentor of the *Mater dolorosa* was the very same state as constituted by politicians, public officials and bureaucrats, the “bad Father-State” as Alvarez Junco puts it (572). The stepmother trope seems to be the result of an exacerbation in the perception of this malignancy of the state and the power apparatuses. The wickedness of the father-state and all its corollaries and hypostasis grows so outrageous and pervasive that the nation itself, the mother, gets infected, is impregnated by him, becoming evil herself or at least an accessory to the crime and, hence, highly suspicious of foul play. The next development, as any fairy tale will tell, would be the widowing of the new mother, finally alone as the object of blame.

In the final phase of the dictatorship and the first years of the democratic transition, oppositional cinema produced a new avatar of the Spanish mother as hinted by the last scenes of *Black Brood*. In these family tales, so well reconstructed by Kinder, the father was frequently absent and the patriarchal or phallic mother had the bewildering destiny of being the displaced incarnation of authoritarian power, its source of violence, and both the object of desire and belligerent rebellion of her offspring (*Blood* 198-200). Kinder claims that Spanish cinema of that time exceeds just about any other in the number of matricides (232); José Luis Borau, in turn, has told the anecdote that at the wedding of Gutiérrez Aragón, co-screenwriter of his *Furtivos* ‘*Poachers*’ (1975)—which, of course, also comes to a close with one of those matricides—he was confronted by the moth-

er of the groom, widow of a Falangist, with the question, “Dígame, Borau, ¿qué tienen mi hijo y usted contra las madres?” “Tell me Borau, what do you and my son have against mothers?” (qtd. in Inma Garrido 82). In order to answer that query it is imperative to keep in mind the historical fortunes of the maternal images of the nation, particularly the increasingly abhorrent appearance of Spain as stepmother during the dictatorship period. In addition, Kinder provides a second part of the answer by invoking the long-standing tradition of terrible matriarchs, most of them widows as well, in Spanish letters. She mentions Benito Pérez Galdós’s Doña Perfecta from the eponymous novel (1876), Leopoldo Alas Clarín’s Doña Paula from *La Regenta* (1884-5), and Federico García Lorca’s Bernarda from his rural tragedy *La casa de Bernarda Alba* ‘*The House of Bernarda Alba*’ (1936) (*Blood* 199-200). Her list of foremothers could actually be greatly expanded with titles like *Casandra*, novel and play, also by Galdós, (1905, 1910), García Lorca’s *Bodas de sangre* ‘*Blood Wedding*’ (1933), *El adefesio* ‘*The Monstrosity*’ by Rafael Alberti (1944), Carlos Muñoz’s *Las viejas difíciles* ‘*The Difficult Old Women*’ (1961-62), Francisco Nieva’s *Malditas sean Coronada y sus hijas* ‘*Coronada and Her Daughters Be Damned*’ (1978), and even with the mother in a minor role, *La familia de Pascual Duarte* ‘*The Family of Pascual Duarte*’ (1942) by Camilo José Cela, adapted to the screen by Ricardo Franco and released the same year of *Furtivos*’ first screening and the ultimate demise of the other Franco, the dictator: 1975.² Let me draw attention to the fact that a mere intrinsic reading of most of these texts does not always justify the symbolic pairing of the terrible mother and the nation. Certainly Doña Perfecta is a representation of the most reactionary political and religious ideologies in and about Spain. Similarly, Bernarda Alba and the mothers in *Bodas de sangre* and *La familia de Pascual Duarte* stand for a rural atavism that frequently has been either praised or derided as the authentic core of the nation. Nevertheless, it is the considerable parallel flow of images of Spain as mother that propelled a national interpretation of those infamous maternal figures by enforcing upon them a sort of fatal intertext. Notably, the later onset of the negative image of “stepmother Spain” infused the formidable matriarchs of all those texts with an ever-growing potential to be retrospectively read in those national terms, fueling in this way a circular and self-perpet-

uating intertextual movement of maternal characters and images of the nation mostly delineated in dreadfully unfavorable terms.

Obviously, in these textual operations and symbolic transactions there is more than a speck of patriarchal misogyny with its tendency towards scapegoating women. On the other hand, considering that Francoism had so persistently co-opted the image of the mother-nation (Ballesteros, "Mujer" 377, 381), so adamantly enlisted the family as an emblem of the new and eternal Spain (Kinder, *Blood* 238; Ballesteros, *Cine* 272), and so vigorously enacted an all-encompassing censorship that surely would not have tolerated similarly negative depictions of the father, it is understandable that one of the most appropriate avenues in which to channel a subversive filmic discourse was to demonize the mother against the backdrop of the political underpinnings and symbolic connotations of the family drama (Kinder, *Blood* 238). But, then again, let me propose that the situation in Spain reaches a point during the Franco years in which the opposition to the dictatorship apparently sank into utter pessimism and began to perceive a historical contingency, a political regime, as something permanent, inherent, as an ineluctable determinism embedded in the nation itself. In that predicament, the biological and psychological parameters of the maternal image made it more befitting to express the national feeling than that of the patriarch. Fathers and state models might come and go, and could never completely assuage the suspicion of imposture and illegitimacy, but nations and natural mothers are thought to be incontrovertible. The Franco regime managed to shape, appropriate, occupy and taint so many aspects of the nation—language, emblems, culture, history—that Spain and her maternal projections wound up being seen as constitutionally authoritarian, repressive, reactionary, violent, and intolerant. The matricide was therefore absolutely justified, even indispensable, although it never resulted in a joyous liberation but rather in the grim perpetuation of the cycle of violence through the mimicry by the child of the ways of the mother. In the relationship between those Spanish mothers and their sons, love usually became incestuous and justifiable rebellion turned criminal. It would take time until the anti-Francoists would be able to conjoin the democratic creed with the symbols and icons of Spain. Alas, for some, like many Basque and Catalan nationalists for which Spain is an es-

entially fascist country, that marriage still would prove unthinkable almost thirty-five years after the death of the dictator.

The high point of the patriarchal or phallic mother offered as cinematic image of the nation can be dated to 1975, coinciding with Franco's death. That year *Furtivos* and *Pascual Duarte*—both accurately including the killing of the mother—were released and rapidly became the two most important and controversial movies of their time. To a degree, this development had been foreshadowed by some of Carlos Saura's films—*Ana y los lobos* 'Ana and the Wolves,' (1972) and *El jardín de las delicias* 'The Garden of Delights' (1970)—and by novels such as Ana María Matute's *Primera Memoria* 'First Memory' (1960) in which the matriarchal grandmother anticipates from her island domain some of the traits and the political implications of the new articulation of the mother figure in the Spanish movies of the 1970s. Allowing for a greater or lesser degree of variation, after 1975 the trend continued with the documentary *El desencanto* 'The Disenchantment' (Jaime Chávarri, 1976), *Camada negra* (1977), *Mamá cumple cien años* 'Mamá Turns One Hundred' (Saura, 1979), *Siete días de enero* 'Seven Days in January' (Juan Antonio Bardem, 1979), *Bodas de sangre* 'Blood Wedding' (Saura, 1980), *Demonios en el jardín* 'Demons in the Garden' (Gutiérrez Aragón, 1982), and *La casa de Bernarda Alba* 'The House of Bernarda Alba' (Mario Camus, 1987). Curiously, some Basque directors were among the last to keep producing stories that included this kind of motherhood, as proven by *La muerte de Mikel* 'The Death of Mikel' (Imanol Uribe, 1983) and *Alas de mariposa* 'Butterfly Wings' (Juanma Bajo Ulloa, 1991). It is curious because although it would be expected that, given the desire of independence from the Spanish state of a significant part of Basque society, a Basque director might have a greater interest in maintaining a tyrannical, oppressive or spurious image of the nation, Uribe's and Bajo Ulloa's mothers actually fail to function as emblems of Spain, and in the case of the hieratic and probably murderous matriarch of *La muerte de Mikel*, the symbolic referent appears to be, of all things, the Basque motherland.

In spite of the persistence of the figure of the fearsome mother on Spanish screens during the early years of the transition, and regardless of its inertial residues in the succeeding democratic period, the country's cinema of the 1980s ushered in a dazzling transforma-

tion in the presentation of the maternal. In fact, the shift can be traced back to the other major movie of 1975, *Cria cuervos* 'Cria' by Saura, whose film recurs to the old image of the mother-nation as passive victim and martyr, in this case suitably at the hand of a military and unscrupulous patriarch. The mother suffers a life of seclusion, sickness, and frustration in a large house, strangely cut off from the lively activity of the surrounding city, and inhabited by five other women: the servant, the mute and paralyzed grandmother, and her three daughters. The father, who comes and goes at will, reigns supreme over his gynaeceum. The mother, tortured by marital unhappiness and unbearable physical pain, dies from an undisclosed disease that affects the lower belly, in what we might call the anatomical site of motherhood. As in *Furtivos* and *Pascual Duarte*, the mother once again endures a violent death, but here matricide is substituted by uxoricide, at least in the eyes of Ana, the youngest daughter, who afterwards attempts to kill the father by poisoning him and who for a time thinks that she has been successful when he presently turns up dead. The course of action taken by the young Ana and the fact, as also noted by Marvin D'Lugo (*Films* 133) and Susan Martin-Márquez (219), that when she plays house with her sisters she enacts the role of the mother, adding a novel component of strength, rebellion and determination, represent a clairvoyant anticipation of the upcoming fate of the maternal in Spanish cinema. This anticipatory character is further certified by the narrative technique of having an adult and future Ana, played by the same Geraldine Chaplin who portrays the victimized mother, intermittently interrupt the story with an articulate and sophisticated first-person narration delivered while gazing directly at the audience from a close-up shot and against a neutral background. In Saura's 1975 movie, the grown-up Ana, maybe in her twenties or thirties, looks back to the future of the new Spanish mothers of the 1980s, 1990s, and beyond.

By now it is already a truism that, after the end of the Franco regime, one of the most urgent tasks of the new democratic period was to produce a redefinition of the Spanish national identity, sequestered and monopolized for so many years by the ideological patchwork of the dictatorship. The preponderance of far more positive maternal icons in Spanish cinema after the first years of

the democratic transition has also been noted, although with less emphasis and unanimity. What has not been sufficiently examined is the centrality of the maternal figure, of its extraordinary revision and vindication against the dire history of her evil or martyred foremothers, in the enterprise to rebuild, suture, and make over the nation. Barbara Zecchi laments and critiques the socio-political and psychological implications for women of the acute “pronatalist” drift in the Spanish films of the late 1990s: *Puede ser divertido* ‘It Could Be Fun’ (Azucena Rodríguez, 1996), *Secretos del corazón* ‘Secrets of the Heart’ (Montxo Armendáriz, 1997), *Yerma* ‘Barren’ (Pilar Távora, 1998), *Cuando vuelvas a mi lado* ‘When You Come Back to My Side’ (Gracia Querejeta, 1999), *Todo sobre mi madre* ‘All About My Mother’ (Pedro Almodóvar, 1999), and *Solas* ‘Alone’ (Benito Zambrano, 1999), among others (147-49). With a very different outlook but within the same coordinates, Gerard Dapena focuses on the last film and celebrates 1999 as “the year of the mother in Spanish cinema” (26). Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas move the phenomenon back to the second half of the 1980s and early 1990s, but even though they contrast the new “benign” mothers with their phallic counterparts of the past, as described by Kinder, they also gloss over the nationalistic dimension of the maternal figure in favor of issues of gender, indeed truly fundamental but surely not the only ones at play (131-33). Kinder had already underscored the dramatic liberation of “the maternal from the dreaded image of the oppressive matriarchal mother” in some movies (“From” 145). Nonetheless, after heralding the arrival of positive figures of the mother—*Mater amantissima* by Josep A. Salgot, 1980, and *La mitad del cielo* ‘Half of Heaven’ by Gutiérrez Aragón, 1986—in her seminal *Blood Cinema* (213-14), Kinder has circumscribed her range to the films of Almodóvar. Moreover, despite titles such as “Reinventing the Motherland” and forceful statements about the potential metamorphosis “of vengeful patriarchal nations into nurturing motherlands” (Kinder “Reinventing” 22), her studies do not explore systematically in all its scope the symbolic reach of the new maternal figures within the attempts to re-imagine the nation vis-à-vis the wide historical background of the images of mother Spain.

The long and traumatic chronicle of the maternal image as a representation of Spain and the conspicuous historical weight of the

castrating matriarchs mobilized by the oppositional cinema of the 1970s, make almost peremptory the attribution of a national connotation to any subsequent cinematic mothers; all of them carry a heavy intertextual baggage. Sometimes there are explicit though subtle motifs or gestures of *mise-en-scène* that steer the interpretation of the film in that national direction. Since the movie poster, *Todo sobre mi madre* activates a color scheme, a visual coherence, based on the repetition of blue, red and yellow, as already mentioned by Paul Julian Smith (199), but beyond the pure aesthetic effect of this chromatic choice the last two colors are inescapably loaded with symbolic connotations by way of their reiteration of the same palette of the national flag. Incidentally, the expressions “color scheme” and “visual coherence” belong to the cinematic idiolect of Almodóvar himself, which shows his conscious attention to detail in this aspect of his movies (Smith 173; Strauss 67). Another of his films, *La flor de mi secreto* ‘*The Flower of my Secret*’ (1995) displays a political map of Spain in its central scene: its “mother scene,” again in Almodóvar’s parlance (*Patty* 178). The map hangs above the bed where the female protagonist lies down to die after taking a fistful of pills to kill herself. An unexpected telephone call from her old and rustic mother saves her life. Contrary to the interpretation of D’Lugo, who talks about “the confining patriarchal ideology that is embodied in the map” (*Pedro* 90), my contention is that the scene coalesces the visual rendering of the nation with the providential sound of the voice of the mother. As Almodóvar declares, the image above our headboards is the symbol of our beliefs, what gives us shelter and protection, something sacred (*Patty* 177). He also states elsewhere that *La flor de mi secreto* is an unconscious homecoming to his “roots,” to “the mother” (*La Flor* 165). This kind of visual cue can trigger the urge to read plot and characters as ciphers of the nation, its destiny or its dreams, but generally what lends legitimacy to these interpretations, what validates them or required their necessity in the first place, is the vast intertextual web that the Spanish cultural discourse has been incessantly weaving for the last two centuries.

The first and most evident constant in the new treatment of the mother—let us say the maternal *a priori* in the Spanish cinema roughly from the mid 1980s—is an almost unanimous attribution

of sturdy benevolence paired with a sympathetic, even admiring, cinematic rendering. As a complement to and a fulfillment of that goodness, most of these movies observe a strong determination to give their stories happy endings, rarely conventional but happy nonetheless. You could say that these films endeavor to painstakingly correct the sad and terrible summary of the national chronicle that the poet Jaime Gil de Biedma had famously rhymed in his 1967 poem “Apología y petición”: “Y qué decir de nuestra madre España / ... De todas las historias de la historia / sin duda la más triste es la de España / porque termina mal” ‘And what to say about our mother Spain / ... Of all the histories of History / surely Spain’s is the saddest / because it ends badly’ (82). Tellingly these are the most often quoted lines of the poem to the detriment of a later section where, after wondering if the miseries of his people are truly an unshakable curse of the country itself, the poet wills to imagine a different history of Spain in which the decoupling of her corrupted and incompetent governments from the pure idea of the nation comes finally into effect (82-3). Some years later, many film directors would also take upon themselves the task of imagining and shaping that alternative history of the nation through the happy endings of their maternal tales. In exemplary fashion, the two major movies that put a close to the twentieth century, *Solas* and *Todo sobre mi madre*, go to such great lengths to provide an idyllic ending to their heart-wrenching stories that they have been accused of implausibility, utopianism or naïveté. The directors, *Deus ex machina*, respectively fix the problem of a bitter and destitute single mother with the emotional and economic support of an adoptive grandfather, and have a baby end a cycle of death by miraculously neutralizing the HIV virus. As a token of this willful optimism, a significant number of films of this period end with the recent birth of a child or the prospect of a future one: *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* ‘Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown’ (Almodóvar, 1988), *Tacones lejanos* ‘High Heels’ (Almodóvar, 1991), *Secretos del corazón* ‘Secrets of the Heart’ (Armendáriz, 1997), *Carne trémula* ‘Live Flesh’ (Almodóvar, 1997)—framed by two births, one at the beginning and one at the end—or, in a twisted way, *El día de la bestia* ‘The Day of the Beast’ (Alex de la Iglesia, 1997). The valetudinarian mother of the nineteenth century does not stop producing children of hope now.

Not every trait and circumstance postulated about the new mothers of Spanish cinema apply to all of them, and probably there are only a few individual characters that exhibit the whole gamut of these features. Furthermore, sometimes those qualities coexist side by side with the remnants of previous versions of the maternal icon in the representation of the imagined community. Such coexistence, it could be argued, is, in a way, needed, for otherwise it would be impossible to show a degree of continuity within the rupture, and continuities are fundamental for constructing the idea of the nation. In close connection with the bounty of climactic births, one of the most widespread qualities in the new generation of Spanish mothers in film, with clear linkages to the past, is their condition of nurturing matriarchs. After having a baby daughter, the protagonist of the foundational *La mitad del cielo* moves to Madrid from the provinces in the juncture between the 1950s and 1960s to become, successively and successfully, a wet-nurse, a cook, the owner of a semi unlawful food market stall, and the proprietor of a celebrated restaurant. The culinary career as an extension of the more primal breast-feeding prerogative finds later replicas in movies like Almodóvar's *Volver* 'Return' (2006): the protagonist, Raimunda, also opens a restaurant in a certain defiance of the law and, although her daughter is already a teenager, we are constantly reminded of her lactating prowess through overhead shots centered on her breast and abundant cleavage that showcase her as a sort of twenty-first century Spanish variation of the *maggiorata* so prevalent in Italy in the more prosperous 1950s after the food scarcity in war and post-war periods ("Have you always had such big breasts?" asks her own mother on one occasion).³ The story repeats itself with Elena, the oceanic mother in *Lucía y el sexo* 'Sex and Lucía,' by Julio Medem (2001), who is praised as a consummate purveyor of *paella*, that most stereotypical Spanish dish. Two years before Medem's film, Manuela in *Todo sobre mi madre* used to own a small eating and drinking establishment on the beach, and later cooks and feeds everybody around her. In the same year, the old mother of *Solas* is insistently shown preparing and serving food, and when she dies her daughter proudly confides to her in a visit to the cemetery that her just-born baby is devouring her breasts.

It is obvious, but not pointless to remark, that poverty and scar-

city of food stubbornly reappear as an infamous refrain in the discourse of Spanish history. The contemporary cadre of nourishing mothers in these films sets up a stark contrast with that history of deprivation, inspiring a sense of well-being and contentment with the national affiliation hitherto not that common. There is no shortage of problems in the country, they seem to say, but the nation will provide. The distance is immense from the impotent and famished mother Spain of the nineteenth century or from the careless step-mother of the twentieth century. The relationship, though, with the 1970s phallic mothers such as Martina in *Furtivos*, is rather more complex. In this film, written by Gutiérrez Aragón with Borau ten years before his own *La mitad del cielo*, Martina is also the wet-nurse of the governor—allegedly a mocking stand-up of Franco himself—a cook in her own right, and the owner of a rural tavern that serves food to political hierarchs on hunting outings, civil guards, and rangers in charge of keeping an eye in the Spanish forest. Aside from the difference between the locales of the two food outlets—dark and sinister versus elegant and charming—and between the physical appeal of their owners, played by scrawny old Lola Gaos and the ever more attractive Angela Molina throughout the movie, there is also a noteworthy divergence in the way they carry out their nurturing personas. Martina mostly caters to the high and low echelons of the regime, and when she serves her food—pointedly milk with all its boiling cream—to the lover that her son has brought home to her chagrin, the young fugitive woman vomits it in disgust; eventually the mother-in-law will kill her. Martina’s nourishing side is overwhelmed by her simultaneous condition of “devouring mother,” to use Kinder’s expression (*Blood* 233). Borau has confessed that the first idea of the film came to him when he saw Gaos playing Saturna in Buñuel’s *Tristana* (1973); the film would be about a female Saturn devouring his son in a forest (Sánchez 19-20). Getting Martina’s food, Martina’s milk, exacts a heavy toll, a reality visually announced by Iván Zulueta’s publicity poster for the movie: an animalesque Martina stands on her incestuous son’s shoulders with sagging breasts and a big open mouth—*vagina dentata*—emphasized by the lack of any other facial features.⁴ Although Rosa’s food enterprises in *La mitad del cielo* also serve the ranks of the regime, her clientele at the national table is much more demotic than Martina’s. She is

more entrepreneurial too, and becomes the active agent of her own story and of the collective history as well. The theme of the movie could be formulated as the chronicle of the transformation of a rural society into an urban and industrial one, a historical phenomenon that began in the late 1950s and to which can be credited a decisive importance in the economic, political, and ideological modernization of the nation. In Gutiérrez Aragón's movie, the sterling protagonist of that change is Rosa; the mother topples the man—the state—from his historical pedestal. The central axis of Spain in *La mitad del cielo* is food, the search for it, its commerce, distribution and preparation, and in Katherine Singer Kovacs's words, "throughout the movie food is the realm of female power" (36).

La mitad del cielo is exposed to an understandable feminist critique for reducing women to a nurturing role in accordance with the most traditional patriarchal script. In addition, Rosa receives her training in nourishing from the usually conservative rural past, from her grandmother Olvido, who ceremoniously shares with her milk cream spread on bread at the beginning of the story; no vomiting this time. Martín-Márquez defends the movie against this charge with the arguments of ecofeminism (233-34, 238-39), but there is more to be said. First, although in Gutiérrez Aragón's movie the mother nurtures, and offers herself as food, she is never spent. Second, the movie, along with many of the others alluded to here, favors a matrilineal lineage. Third, in *La mitad del cielo* nourishing is not a male imposition on the mother but a female exclusive privilege and an active decision. As evidence, the mother not only nurtures with her food but, as in a Derridean *pharmakopea*, she also knows how to kill with that food those who curtail her agency or try to enforce their authoritarianism on her. Rosa's tutor, grandmother Olvido, feeds milk cream and bread to her and her daughter, but she also seems to poison the husband of the former and father of the latter with, to add to the irony, a suspicious jar of preserves. This is not by any means an isolated incident in the criminal annals of Spanish cinema. Ana had already tried to poison her father and aunt with a glass of milk in *Cría Cuervos*; the same Ana who while rewriting her mother's role still practices breast-feeding with her doll and begs the maid to show her the opulence of her bosom, the common people's breast. A few years later, Almodóvar's Gloria kills her abusive hus-

band in the kitchen with a serrano ham bone dutifully cooked afterwards in *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* 'What Have I Done to Deserve This?' (1984). In *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, Pepa simply contents herself with adding sleeping pills to her gazpacho to knock out a couple of policemen intruding in her penthouse. Finally, in *Volver*, Raimunda does not do the killing herself but assumes the guilt of her daughter who, off camera, has stabbed her stepfather to death with a kitchen knife, which previously and afterwards was seen brandished ostentatiously by the mother over the cutting board or the sink in shots that at times focus both on the weapon and on the mother's breast. Raimunda, as anticipated by repentant romance novelist Amanda Gris in *La flor de mi secreto*, will hide the corpse in the freezer of the restaurant where she has squatted. For the sake of clarity, here the one at fault is the stepfather—no stepmothers in sight—for trying to rape the teenage daughter of his wife, at the time unaware of the lack of blood ties with her attacker. Incest is also the reason why Raimunda's own mother lights a fire to kill her husband.

The killing mother is as much a staple of recent Spanish cinema as her nurturing counterpart, and many times both roles are played by the same person. Again, this is dangerously close to the phallic mothers of *Furtivos* or *Camada negra*. The awesome power remains the same: Gloria's ham bone, Raimunda's knife, grandmother Olvido peeing standing up while she smokes cigars, Manuela crushing Agrado's assailant's head in *Todo sobre mi madre*. But now, through repetition, that force is coded as feminine and its target as masculine, at least the eternal masculine legacy of the arch-patriarchal Francoist state, ritualistically and therapeutically killed in every movie by the new nation. Even when the mother dies, as in *Solas* and *Tacones lejanos*, lets herself die, as in *La mitad del cielo*, or kills herself for the good of the daughter, as the "red" mother of *Nadie hablará de nosotras cuando hayamos muerto* 'Nobody Will Speak of Us When We Are Dead' (Agustín Díaz Yanes, 1995), the strength does not diminish but rather, enhanced, is passed on to the new embodiments of the mother (Jordan & Tamosunas 132), and their deaths are more heroic acts of courage than resigned martyrdom.

The dualities seen up to here in the configuration of mother and motherland in contemporary Spanish cinema—text/intertext,

past/present, tradition/modernity, biology/will, nurturing/killing—finds a narrative correlative in the plot ploy of the two mothers. This double maternal presence is almost universal in all the films discussed. Rather than a simplistic moral or ideological Manichaeism, the slash that articulates the dichotomy is temporal, historic; most of the time we have an old and a young mother. It is true that often the junior mother is placed in the higher hierarchical position within the value system of the film. This is the situation in Iziar Bollain's *Hola, ¿estás sola?* 'Hi, Are You Alone' (1995), *Flores de otro mundo* 'Flowers from Another World' (1999) and *Te doy mis ojos* 'I Give You My Eyes' (2003) or in Almodóvar's *Todo sobre mi madre*. However, occasionally it is the old maternal figure, as in *Solas* or *A mi madre le gustan las mujeres* 'My Mother Likes Women' (Daniela Féjerman and Inés París, 2002), who is the one occupying the preeminent side of the dichotomy. There are still movies where it is uncertain who holds that privilege: *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?*, *La mitad del cielo*, *Tacones lejanos*, *La flor de mi secreto*, or *Carne trémula*. At any rate, the hierarchy is very infrequently presented in absolute terms—there are very few, if any at all, unredeemable villains in the maternal category—and the relation between the two mothers is always quite complicated. In some instances, there is an inversion of established expectations, one of the mothers in the pair taking the qualities conventionally attributed to the other. A case in point is the lesbian mother in *A mi madre le gustan las mujeres*, ironically played by Rosa María Sardá, the Catalan actress who through her roles in *Todo sobre mi madre* and *Te doy mis ojos* might have come to be seen as a specialist at portraying conservative and older maternal figures. Additionally or concurrently, there are all sorts of interchanges and transactions of traits between the two contrasting mothers throughout the story, as Zecchi has observed for example in *Solas* (150). Finally, it is not uncommon that, from the beginning, the dichotomy is already internalized in one of the members of the pair of opposites. In *Todo sobre mi madre*, the old mother has a clear deficit of traditional maternal virtues. Meanwhile, the worldly, mobile, and modern Manuela encompasses many of the features of the proverbial angel of the house, of the abnegated heroine of melodramas, or of the model woman of the Francoist *Sección Femenina*: she is generous and selfless, a domestic nurse and a cook; she is

a mother. Of course, at the same time she is a competent and accomplished professional who with uncanny nonchalance shows her disposition to associate herself with all kinds of dubious—the word is intentional—characters: prostitutes, partial transsexuals like her husband and her protégée Agrado, pregnant nuns, lesbians, forgers, and actresses.

The irregularities, alterations and slippages in the dualistic maternal scheme of these films demonstrate the attempt to get away with a daring balancing act. Taking them heuristically as a whole, as a single cinematic discourse, Spanish contemporary movies about the mother strive to prevent the risk of any old or new monopoly on the idea of the nation, especially if it is imposed by tyrannical decree, while avoiding a fluidity run-amok, a loss of its collective identity in a wholesale and standardized postmodernity. There is a utopian desire to coalesce preservation with break up, historical continuity with a new foundation. These movies show an eagerness to keep exorcizing, clubbing, poisoning, burning and stabbing the phantoms of the Francoist past and beyond, alongside the determination to rescue, appropriate, and maintain entire chunks of that past regardless of political correctness or of accusations, perhaps founded at times, of reactionary historical nostalgia.

The temporal, moral and ideological Janus-like condition of the new maternal representation of the nation in Spanish cinema has a fitting counterpart in the kind of families founded around it. Truly, Protean would be a better adjective and mythical reference than Janus-like to qualify the new mother and her family, of course a female Proteus not only willing to reveal the future but keen on shaping it. Under the sign of the nascent mother, Spanish cinema has indulged in the exhaustion of all possible geographical, economic, and social heterodoxies about the family. In *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* the eventual family unit materializes in the pairing of the mother and the homosexual son who returns home because “every house needs a man.” At the end of *La mitad del cielo*, Rosa plots, orders, and organizes the wedding of her lover with his girlfriend, thus inverting the usual roles of the traditional Spanish tale of the man and his mistress. The official household will only include her and her daughter. After saving him from being killed, Pepa rejects her desperately sought-after lover up to that point, and

decides to have her baby alone in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*. The denouement of *Solas* offers a family made up by the recent Andalusian mother, the baby daughter, and an Asturian adoptive grandfather. Two divorced girlfriends engaged in a maternal-filial relationship improvise a family when the younger one has a child in *Puede ser divertido*. The couple that acts as a happy foil in *Te doy mis ojos* combines an Irishman and the Spanish sister of the battered protagonist. The last scenes of *A mi madre le gustan las mujeres* celebrates the union of a Spanish mother of three daughters and her Czech lesbian lover, with both families cheering and dancing around them. The pregnant double killer of *Tacones lejanos* joins with a male judge who doubles by night as her mother's transvestite impersonator. The family picture of *Flores de otro mundo* includes a Dominican mulatta, her two children from a previous relationship, the Castilian husband and his old-fashioned and rural mother. In *Carne trémula*, the beginning of the movie presents a prostitute mother from Madrid giving birth to the male hero in a public bus, and the end, twenty-six years later, shows the birth of a second baby, fruit of the marriage of an affluent Italian woman and the now ex-convict son of the prostitute. The variations are endless.⁵

Maybe the hyperbolic epitome of this plethora of polymorphic perversions of the ideal Spanish Catholic family consecrated for such a long time as the only one true to the nation, is Manuela in *Todo sobre mi madre*. The national maternal figure in Almodóvar's movie is an Argentine immigrant living between Madrid and Barcelona, the wife of a male chauvinist bisexual compatriot endowed with a natural penis and Parisian prosthetic breasts, the biological mother of a Spanish son whose heart ends up in a Galician's chest, the adoptive parent of the baby of her estranged husband and a Catalan nun, and the cordial apex of a trinity completed by a southern transsexual and a nomadic lesbian actress. All these kaleidoscopic facets of the mother bespeak a vision of Spain under the specter of a militant and programmatic hybridism. The mechanism to achieve such a goal could be characterized as a perversion of eugenics, a process whose objective is not the preservation of some kind of purity or homogeneity but its systematic contamination to produce something better or, as Agrado would ironically have it, something "more authentic." The words of the transsexual in *Todo sobre mi madre* reveal the per-

plexing antinomy of a nation that aspires to the condition of the hybrid without losing its specificity or that ciphers the maintenance of its character in its desire for an unbounded hybridism.

There is an intriguing reversal of historical fortunes in *Todo sobre mi madre*: the motherland, “la madre patria,” is saved by her former colonies, by the daughter nations. For some, this fable might function as an atonement, a parody, or an inversion of the primordial Spanish journey, that of the country’s most famous or infamous maternal feat, the conquest of America. The typical coupling of the conquering nation and its overseas offspring is turned upside down: the transatlantic Manuela is now the redeeming mother of the metropolis of years past. This ultimate confusion between parent and child, between former empire and old subjects, accomplished through the rectification of history, encapsulates the meticulous realignment of traits, categories and taxonomies put in motion by Spanish cinema to push for the rebirth of the mother nation at the end of the millennium.

Notes

1 Alison Sinclair has studied the Spanish “gendered objects of nation,” specially the mother, in writers of this period such as Angel Ganivet, Machado and Miguel de Unamuno (184-89).

2 For a study of the “terrible woman” in Spanish theatre, see María Paz Pintanés’s dissertation on the topic.

3 Peter William Evans has brilliantly analyzed Zulueta’s poster along similar lines (118).

4 *Maggiorata*, short for *maggioratta fisica*, was an expression popularized by Italian actor and film director Vitorrio de Sica in 1952 in reference to busty and curvaceous actresses such as Gina Lollobrigida.

5 The formation of alternative and non-conventional families in contemporary Spanish cinema has been extensively studied in the case of Almodóvar’s oeuvre. See, for instance, Alejandro Yarza (33), Stephen Maddison (281), Manuel Pérez Baena (184), Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz (60), Ann Davies (90), or Anne Hardcastle 79-82, 89-91. The issue, with some exceptions, has not received as much attention in films by other directors (Zecchi 152, Ballesteros, *Cine* 277-78).

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