

DISOBEDIENT GHOSTS: AN APPROACH TO MOTHERHOOD AND SINGLEHOOD IN *CURSED MOUNTAIN*

MARÍA AIMARETTI

INTRODUCTION

What social anxieties are conjured up by the presence on screen of an “impotent woman” (whether this refers to infertility or simple incompetence)? What fears are precipitated by her inability to gestate, to raise, to love children? What quality of roughness is incorporated into the imaginary of motherhood by the presence of women who *do not become mothers* or those who when they do—to conform to tradition, or out of carelessness or resentment—turn into absences, shadows, ghosts, or even threats? What other meanings, linked to the dominant gender discourses and sensibilities, might emerge from oblique or subversive readings of classic Spanish films?

Based on these questions, and as part of an investigation dedicated to mapping the imaginary of motherhood and the figure of the mother in classical Argentine and Spanish cinema, this paper explores the representation of motherhood

as obsession, impotence and traumatic absence through the figure of the single woman, using Antonio del Amo’s *Cursed Mountain* (Sierra Maldita, 1955) as a case study. To this end, it offers a description from the perspective of cultural studies, cultural history (Martín Barbero, 1987; Burke, 2006), gender studies and classical film studies (de Lauretis, 1996; Scott, 1996; Monterde, 1995; Gámez Fuentes, 1997; Arocena Badillos, 2005; Lozano Estivalis, 2010; Benet Ferrando, 2012; Rosón Villena, 2016) of the conditions that shaped the film. It also offers a visual analysis to examine the story and *mise-en-scène*, considering the dialogue within the sociocultural context and the tensions of meaning that arise in its own textuality.

This study turns the focus away from the bright, comforting glow of the bourgeois mother (domestic, marriageable, flawless, house-proud, upright and sexless), and from the vibrant tenacity of the epic historical matron (brave, hardworking, self-sacrificing, and strong), and even from

the tragic voluptuousness of the desiring mother (sexualised, eroticised, full of doubts and contradictions). Its focus instead is on the representation of motherhood as failure and impossibility, embodied in the figure of the unmarried woman who wants but is unable to have children, who—according to the normative paradigm that imposes equivalence on the terms “woman” and “mother”—has not accomplished *what she came into this world for*, and is therefore a frustrated, *failed mother*. The purpose of this analysis is to delve into an unexplored area in readings of del Amo’s film, which have usually focused on the male characters and their relationship with the environment. Moreover, although the focus of this study is on *Cursed Mountain*, in the conclusions a dialogue is established with other films, made around the same time and forming part of the same corpus, which also explore the problem of being a single woman, such as the Argentine film *Para vestir santos* (1955) by Leopoldo Torre Nilsson and *Calle Mayor* (1956) by Juan Antonio Bardem.

MIRRORS: WOMEN TETHERED WITH FACES IN MOURNING

By forcing women to return to the home, confining their identities solely to their role as mothers and implementing natalist policies through various mechanisms of promotion and control, the Franco dictatorship imposed a rather rigid model for the female, who was expected to commit to the regeneration of Spain obediently and productively. Living a sort of “domestic exile”, as Susana Tavera García (2006) describes it, women in the early years of the Franco regime found themselves *tethered*—constrained, limited—to a counter-revolutionary transformation movement that emphasised the regulation of gender relations and compulsory motherhood. However, in the 1950s (when the film studied here was made), this model became somewhat more flexible due to the sociopolitical, legal, cultural, and institution-

al changes that occurred when the regime abandoned its initial policy of economic autarky. As Spain rejoined the world stage, forging economic partnerships with the United States and participating in international organisations, the female workforce grew, and from 1953 to 1961 the legal equality of women was debated and their political, professional and labour rights were protected by law (Tavera García, 2006: 258).

Despite these advances towards greater social and gender justice, being a single female continued to be conceived of as a drama (Gil Gascón and Gómez García, 2010), since it implied not only a disruption of the norm and disobedience to the political, legal, moral and religious mandate, but quite simply the cancellation of one’s own subjectivity: “The language that places women outside of motherhood is negative: barren, sterile, fruitless... terms that can be applied to the earth, to nature [...]; the woman is essentially useless if she does not account for what gives her social meaning within the male symbolic system: she is simply not a woman” (Lozano Estivalis, 2000: 47).

At the same time, over the course of the 1950s cinema also experienced a moment of transformation, both in terms of the industrial production system—which was contracting—and in relation to the classical model of representation, which was destabilised as forms of *auteur* cinema began to emerge. Forms of co-production and independent production were developing and new cadres of technical and artistic professionals were appearing, while at the same time the world of mass media was being reorganised with the arrival of television. It was a period of transition and of paradoxes, in which surviving models coexisted with transformed elements, combining residue of the past with a newly emerging present.

The following section contextualises *Cursed Mountain* in this moment of epochal changes (in both social and aesthetic terms), while at the same time interrogating a specific area of the imaginary of motherhood depicted in it, with attention to the

representations of the single female, expressed in the *mise-en-scène*, the system of characters and the iconography. In the film, motherhood appears as a latent or explicit social obsession and moral compulsion on a personal level, and its opposite, sterility, as a phantom and an indelible stigma. And yet, the semantic contradictions provided by the film reveal a modality in its manifestation or depiction of the single woman: a variant referred to here as *phantasmatic disobedience*.

DANCE OF DISOBEDIENCE

Produced by Almasirio, at the time a young studio established in 1953 by Sirio Rosado Fernández after he left UNINCI (Unión Industrial Cinematográfica), *Cursed Mountain* premiered at the Callao cinema in Madrid on 30 January 1955 and was one of the most outstanding titles of the (short-lived) production company due to its visual quality and the acclaim it received. In fact, it won the *Círculo de Escritores Cinematográficos* awards in the categories of Best Film, Best Supporting Actor (José Guardiola) and Best Original Story, and it received the San Sebastián Award for Best Spanish Film and an Honourable Mention for José Guardiola, resulting in a positive critical reception. Its director was the communist filmmaker Antonio del Amo, who had worked for the cinematographic service during the Spanish Civil War, producing newsreels and revolutionary propaganda in defence of the Republic. After the war ended and he had served time in prison, del Amo took up writing film history and theory and was one of the first professors at the Instituto de Investigaciones y Experiencias Cinematográficas. He rejoined the industry thanks to the mediation of the filmmaker Rafael Gil, who had been saved by del Amo during the war, and who now used his influence so that del Amo could return to work in cinema under the Franco regime (Benet Ferrando, 2012: 178).¹

While the 1950s were a decade marked by the transition of models, and therefore by the coexistence of contrasting elements (attempts at neorealism and *auteur* approaches mixed with conventional, superficial proposals), Antonio del Amo's ability to adapt to the context, along with the sheer variety of his work (ranging from realism and *costumbrismo*), seems to reflect the coexistence of two simultaneous tendencies in his filmmaking. One is more ambitious and experimental, involving a personal quest for a high-quality cinema, which may even touch on social issues. The other is more commercial, aiming for entertainment, which he would develop after *Cursed Mountain* with the help of the child actor and singer José "Joselito" Jiménez Fernández. In relation to the first tendency, Jean Claude Seguin (2012) identifies *Cursed Mountain* as part of a trilogy that also includes *Day by Day* (*Día tras día*, 1951) and *The Sun Comes Out Every Day* (*El sol sale todos los días*, 1956), pointing out that in *Cursed Mountain* the director manages to merge the Spanish cultural tradition with a neorealist aesthetic.²

The film stars the Spanish actors Rubén Rojo (who had recently returned to the country after pursuing a successful film career in Mexico) and Lina Rosales (in her only major leading role) as Juan and Cruz respectively.³ The young couple are in love, but they belong to two neighbouring villages in the mountains of Almeria that have a tense relationship: Puebla de Arriba, where Cruz lives with her father, is cursed by a legend that the land and all women born there are barren; so the men go to Puebla del Valle, where Juan was born, to find brides to marry and have children with. According to Aida Antonino-Queralt, the scriptwriter José Dibildos decided to set the film in the Andalusian countryside because of proven cases of sterility in the high mountain villages due to climatic factors; while the stage designer, Eduardo Torre de la Fuente, justified the choice because he wanted to show the tradition of identifying the

marital status of the local women by their clothing (Antonino-Queralt, 2019: 219-220).

Despite the gossip, envy, suspicion and resentment between the two villages, the couple get married and build their home in Puebla de Arriba, where Cruz is incessantly harassed by Lucas (José Guardiola), who wants to have her for himself. Juan, Cruz and Lucas, together with a group of coal workers, spend a long season in the Sierra, the place of origin of the curse, which is said to have been caused by a ghost woman known as the *Niña Negra*, who was raped there, abandoned and eaten by wolves. One night, Cruz is chased by Lucas and another man who are attempting to rape her, but she manages to escape on her own; she finds Juan and tells him that she is pregnant.

Carlos Heredero has identified the film as belonging to an extensive, heterogeneous Andalusian corpus (some mythical, others less so), which, although representing an active trend in Francoist cinema, connects with a tradition developed in the years of the Second Republic, albeit not in a homogeneous or regular way. Indeed, the recovery of this movement “[...] followed a wandering, complex path that would lead to the hegemony finally conquered by the conservative vacuousness of folkloric Andalusianism. Along the way, this rough, zigzagging path seems full of somewhat confused efforts, frustrated attempts and timid transitional discoveries that do not follow one after another in a linear or chronological manner, but rather frequently emerge in parallel with more superficial references of a musical or purely ornamental nature in its portrayal of the Andalusian setting” (Heredero, 1993: 260). On the other hand, Pablo Pérez Rubio (2012) draws attention to the anomalous nature of the film, which evades both *costumbrismo* and a clichéd presentation of folk music traditions and offers a (rural) drama revolving around desire that from the very beginning establishes an atmosphere of tension, violence and bleakness (both visual and dramatic) expressed in the natural setting and social spaces,

the characters, and their customs and ways of relating. Finally, Vicente Benet places this film in a broader series that use a stylised form of melodrama tinged with realism to show the persistence of the overflowing passions, hatred and atavistic violence of the rural world, as the opposite side of modernity, making clear “the need for restraint that can only be guaranteed by an authority that ensures order” (Benet Ferrando, 2012: 262).

THIS FILM SEEMS TO USE THE LEGEND TO GIVE METAPHORICAL FORM TO THE SOCIAL FEAR AND ANXIETY OVER CONTROLLING WOMEN'S BODIES AND REPRODUCTIVE CAPACITY, AND TO REPRESENT/EXORCISE A PARTICULAR DEPICTION OF SINGLEHOOD

Shifting the frame of reference to the recent past (the 1920s)—a decision suggested by the censors who reviewed the script⁴—and placing it in a rural-folkloric context, this film seems to use the legend to give metaphorical form to the social fear and anxiety over controlling women’s bodies and reproductive capacity, and to represent/exorcise a particular depiction of singlehood. It is precisely in the physicality of their bodies, in mourning since their birth, that the female inhabitants of Puebla de Arriba are presented as “failed” women by their very nature. However, there is a ray of hope for them: Cruz, who as one of *las cobijadas* (the cursed women dressed in black shawls and with eyes lowered who pray in the church for fertility) repeats the myth, overcomes it and then breaks its effect, lifting the curse. Like the *Niña Negra*, Cruz also suffers sexual harassment, but she protects her honour, and even more importantly, the life that she carries inside her, avoiding the danger by hiding in a cave in the Sierra. She is the first woman in many years to conceive a child and, although nobody knows it, she will protect



Figura 1

her pregnancy even at the cost of her life. Would it not be possible to read in the union of these two villages, through the unborn child, an evocation of Spain's fratricidal civil war? Could these *women-in-mourning* be interpreted in relation to the many women who were cursed, neglected, discriminated against and despised for having been loyal to Republican Spain? In addition to the figure of redemption in the sacrifice of one for all the others (already suggested in the film title itself), is it possible to see in Cruz the materialisation of

WHILE THE WOMAN ANCHORS AND AFFIRMS HERSELF THROUGH HER CHILD, RATIFYING HER PRESENT AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES, HER IDENTITY AND CONNECTION TO A LARGER GROUP, THE SPINSTER, THE BARREN WOMAN, IS REPRESENTED AS A SHAMEFUL BODY, MARKED BY DEATH AND LACK, WHICH IS WHY IT MUST BE WRAPPED IN DARK CLOTHES: IT IS A SIGN OF WARNING AND DISGRACE

social expectations in relation to the maternal imperative for the women of the post-war era: repopulate and reunify the Nation?

In Puebla de Arriba there are two female types defined by their reproductive destiny. While the woman anchors and affirms herself through her child, ratifying her present and future possibilities, her identity and connection to a larger group, the spinster, the barren woman, is represented as a shameful body, marked by death and lack, which is why it must be wrapped in dark clothes: it is a sign of warning and disgrace. Here there is no individuality, specificity or personality, but only a homogeneous community of women who have been ill-fated, denied, removed from the marriage list, stripped of the possibility of conceiving children, and therefore annulled as potential human beings. They thus "go down to the Virgin of Puebla del Valle to plead for the blessing of a mother's pain" because they know that this is their only way of escaping deletion and of giving their lives meaning. These girls, suffocated by the pressure of convention, weighed down by a curse for which they bear no responsibility, are—like the *Niña Negra*—ghosts, spectres, desiring bodies

that are alive but veiled: bodies whose eyes are practically the only part of them that is visible, eyes that watch with interest, with hope, but also with greed and envy.⁵

On the other hand, the ones who control Puebla de Arriba are the women of Puebla del Valle, the ones who were able to get married and give birth, but also the “sour, bad-tempered witches” who could not marry, but who, having been born in Puebla del Valle are not cursed and therefore hold a certain symbolic power and authority over *las cobijadas*. They are capable of doing, of commanding, of speaking, and also of insulting and belittling the ones in mourning: there are no relations of sisterhood, empathy or friendship between the two groups; only hierarchy, asymmetry and control.

And in between the two groups, leaving *las cobijadas* but not able (yet) to join the matrons of Puebla del Valle, is Cruz, whose body throbs with the promise of a reconstruction, as a sort of new Eve who will regenerate Puebla de Arriba: “You will be the first ones,” the priest tells them (in an affirmation somewhere between a hope and a command). Indeed, in this foundational expectation, the epic action of raising their house up out of the ruins, of lifting it physically, morally and spiritually with their own arms and strength, with no other help than that of a few children and the priest, expresses the *burden of female identity* that

women under the Franco regime knew so well. It was the burden of the constant pressure from the government and from society to make *New Spain* a reality, the responsibility for the moral mission and civic obligation of being virtuous, complete and devoted mothers, dedicated to a single task carried out in the domesticity of the home (Osborne, 2012: 10; Nash, 1996; Juliano, 2012).

Clearly, the film’s storyline draws on and updates the Judeo-Christian biblical narrative, as the relationship that women establish with God occurs in a context of conflicting ideas linked to reproduction, gravitating around a body that in essence does not belong to them, and whose only permitted action is acquiescence. Citing Marcela Navarro, María Lozano Estivalis points out that in biblical texts motherhood is an institution of power that is managed by men in the name of God, reducing the visibility of women to their bodies. Under the patriarchal system, as a sign of status, motherhood implies rivalry rather than solidarity between peers. Indeed, the definition of females “is reduced to their presence as generative bodies on which the masculine divinity acts. Their personhood revolves around the interests of their offspring according to a hierarchical social dimension that is imposed on the female experience [...]”. The history of these women is told through the typical annunciation scenes, that is, compositional schemes of repetition with three elements: a) the

Figura 2



sterility of the woman; b) the divine promise of a child; and c) the birth of the child as the fulfilment of the promise” (Lozano Estivalis, 2000: 102).

To explore the disputes over the bodies of single women (their repression, oppression and stigma) and to identify the gestures of courage and insubordination in their relationship with desire (always postponed), it is worth analysing the film’s powerful wedding party scene. After the Catholic ritual (the first time that the village priest has married a woman from that place in a long time), the couple hold a party to which everyone has been invited. However, despite the fact that everyone goes to the main square, no one shows a spirit of celebration. There is no happiness or rejoicing; instead, the atmosphere is tense, full of fear, and even with a kind of funereal mood given that many of the girls must always be dressed in black from head to toe, covering their mouths and smiles.

At the suggestion of the chaplain—who sees in the couple the possibility of realising his vocational dream of putting an end to the widespread superstition of the *Niña Negra*—the couple begins the celebration with a beautiful traditional dance, with a choreography that alternates between the couple and the group. In the couple’s dance sequences, they wind together ribbons that are pulled out from a pole with a tree branch at the top

Figura 3



PLAYING IN THIS WAY WITH AN INTERTWINING CIRCULARITY, THE DANCE ENCODES THE CELEBRATION OF COURTSHIP, THE ROMANTIC AND EROTIC BOND, THE WHEEL OF LIFE THAT TURNS ENDLESSLY, MULTIPLYING AND FERTILISING; DEL AMO EXPRESSES HIS AESTHETIC IMPULSE AND VISUAL AMBITION, WHICH HE COMBINES WITH AN ASPIRATION TO CREATE A DOCUMENTARY-ETHNOGRAPHIC PORTRAIT OF RURAL FOLKLORE

as a symbol of life and blessing, while in the group sequences the dancers move in a circle in such a way that the tension of the ribbons gives the impression of forming the roof of a house. Playing in this way with an intertwining circularity, the dance encodes the celebration of courtship, the romantic and erotic bond, the Wheel of Life that turns endlessly, multiplying and fertilising; Del Amo expresses his aesthetic impulse and visual ambition, which he combines with an aspiration to create a documentary-ethnographic portrait of rural folklore.⁶

However, as noted above, it is initially only the newlyweds who dare to dance, to celebrate, to enjoy their union and the promise of good fortune, while everyone else watches attentively. But the force of the music—which breaks and contrasts dramatically with the dominant silence—will gradually awaken the bodies numbed by fear and fatigue. After the first stanza, Rosa, Cruz’s best friend, removes her black shawl in a brave and resolute gesture that looks as if she were untying herself, breaking free of a rope, chain, blindfold or gag, and once uncovered, she walks elegantly with an upright posture in her white blouse towards the pole, ready to join the dance.⁷ She no longer stares at the ground in humiliation, but straight ahead. Her mouth is now uncovered to reveal a self-as-

sured smile. A reverse shot shows the surprise, joy and secret pride of Emilio, Rosa's boyfriend (unknownst to his terrifying mother), and another reverse shot reveals two more young women throwing back their shawls in unison and joining the circle. Shortly afterwards, a third woman does the same, in a gesture of evident weariness not only with the annoyance and discomfort caused by the garment but arguably with an entire oppressive system that constrains the body and curtails freedom. The alternation between close-ups of these women with their radically changing facial expressions and wide shots showing not only the group dance but all the people gathered around it, watching in total stillness (an almost theatrical motionlessness) reinforces the metaphorical dimension of the scene and leaves no room for distraction, focusing our gaze on the dance and its symbolism. Sometimes the camera follows Cruz, and at other moments a dynamic backward tracking shot reveals to us all the dancing bodies. Indeed, this camera movement could be understood as the visual form acquired by the spirals and cir-



Figura 4

Y ASÍ COMO LAS SOLTERAS SE ZAFAN DEL MALESTAR, GRACIAS AL PAISAJE Y EN EL PROPIO PAISAJE CRUZ SE ZAFAN DE LA VIOLENCIA, Y ESA POTENCIA DISLOCANTE NO LA SALVA ÚNICAMENTE A ELLA. AUNQUE POR LA VÍA (TRAMPOSA) DE LA REPRODUCCIÓN, CRUZ SALVA TAMBIÉN A SUS CONGÉNERES SOLTERAS, HACE JUSTICIA CON LA NIÑA NEGRA Y, A POSTERIORI, INCLUSO TRANSFORMA A LA BRUJA EN HADA BUENA

cles of life, which expand from the inside out, from the couple to the whole community.

The rest of the single women are shown smiling and excited in very tight close-ups, moving their heads and torsos in a choreographed swaying that expresses the contagious joy they are watching and of which they are also a part even though they do not explicitly join the dance. They too take off their shawls, swept up by the whirlwind of movement and song that is breaking down and disrupting the rigid system of restrictions constraining their bodies and their will... at least for the duration of a song. Hence, in view of the actions of this rebellious, spectral group of women, rather than failed motherhood their unmarried status could be described as a kind of *phantasmatic disobedience*.

Despite the joy now spreading through the community, Emilio's mother bursts into the celebration in a vehement outrage as if it were an act of blasphemy, an unforgivable transgression or the violation of a religious precept. After silencing



Figura 5

the musicians, she overturns the banquet tables with brute force, tossing the food and drink to the floor. She then calls to her son, snatches him from the circle and abruptly takes him home. A few scenes later, she will shout angrily at Cruz: “Your wedding has upset my son. Get out, damn you!”

As mentioned above, it is Cruz’s flight to the Sierra, her struggle to protect herself from Lucas’s attempt to rape her, and especially her struggle to protect the unborn child she senses inside her, that will ultimately save the girls of the village, freeing them from the curse once and for all. The story suggests that the spirit of the mountain and the *Niña Negra* have protected Cruz: the telluric myth that until now has been a symbol of disgrace (precisely because it arose from the violation of a body that was deflowered, *disgraced*), that had marked a limit on the economic development

of the people of both villages, is transformed by Cruz’s strength and bravery. It is highly symbolic that the heroine should go into the mountain, and that among its feminine folds, cavities, hollows and tunnels she should find refuge from her aggressors.⁸ And just as the single women escape from their social malaise, thanks to the landscape and in the landscape itself Cruz escapes from violence, and this dislocating power does not save her alone. Albeit by the (deceptive) path of reproduction, Cruz also saves all unmarried women, vindicates the *Niña Negra*, and subsequently even transforms the *witch* into a good fairy, as Emilio’s mother changes her character and her clothes, returns to the church and prays, and instead of mercilessly and violently condemning and judging, she gives thanks to the Virgin at the baptism of the protagonists’ child.



Figura 6

The film is circular, as it opens and closes with the Catholic ritual of baptism and the presentation of an infant to the Virgin of the Valley. In both cases, but especially in the ending, it is the parents and the whole community who offer the child to God and the Church. The sacrament represents not only the consecration of the child, but also of the woman, whose existence is legitimised solely through motherhood. And despite this very clear *return to order*, no less important are the narrative, aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of the celebration scene, in which the bride is eclipsed by the strength of certain women who, although spectral, give physical expression to disobedience.

VANISHING POINTS

In the same year that *Cursed Mountain* was released, on the other side of the Atlantic another active film industry produced a comparable work: in Argentina, the film *Para vestir santos* [For Dressing Saints] directed by Leopoldo Torre Nilsson, which also offered a critical examination of the social significance of being a single female.⁹

The film, set in Buenos Aires in the middle of the 20th century, combines *costumbrismo* and melodrama to show that while women's marital status should be a private affair (freedom of choice), it was instead a matter of public scrutiny with a concern surprisingly shared by the entire social system, which pressured and demanded of women a particular form of vital-affective behaviour. The story presents three models of single women: one traditional and conservative, another liberal and daring, and a third who is more complex, played by the film's leading actress, Tita Merello (Martina), whose character reflects the social tensions and anxieties of her time

after a decade of Peronism. Indeed, her character attempts to reconcile a model of a woman who is still in debt and faithful to the past with the possibilities offered by a sociopolitical and economic present in which women had greater power and independence. Despite the fact that the protagonist sacrifices herself to continue to uphold the *whole woman* ideal necessary to the nuclear family, in the last moments of the film she commits a small but revealing act of opposition, of rejection of the status quo in which she is living. This expression of contestation, of painful and rageful non-conformity, is ambiguous but also powerful in terms of the meanings it suggests: it may constitute a mode of opposition both to the conclusion of her love story and to the system that has forced her to give up her freedom and now requires her to "get used to it". Her failed motherhood, her singlehood, could thus be classified as an *adversative sacrifice*: it is not full, it is not unconditional, it is not stoic, but rather contradictory and negative.

Back in Spain, one year after *Cursed Mountain*, the film *Main Street* (*Calle Mayor*, Juan Antonio Bardem, 1956) was released to public and critical

acclaim. The film starred the American actress Betsy Blair (Isabel) and the Spaniard José Suárez and was directed by another young subversive *auteur* (like Torre Nilsson), Juan Antonio Bardem. In contrast to *Para vestir santos*, which explored the working-class world, and *Sierra maldita*, which had a rural setting, here the focus is on the middle classes and the urban *petite bourgeoisie*. Isabel is the victim of a dirty trick played on her by a local group of men who treat her with the most appalling disdain. Bardem's subtle and intelligent objective is to represent the flipside of gendered social conventions: i.e., to reconstruct the internal and external voices that harass Isabel from without and within, to depict her self-perception, her awareness of her own situation, taking a figure turned—through humour and *costumbrismo*—into a cliché, stereotype and generalisation and anchoring it in a specific body and face, in a specific identity. Isabel navigates the waters of frustration and social expectation without ever sinking into emptiness or resentment, still clinging to the vitality that gives hope, thanks to two qualities: erotic fantasy/imagination, and the curiosity of a restless, expectant gaze. These two elements nuance the characterisation of this failed mother. After a disappointment in love, the possibility of escape opens up, but the woman chooses another path. In a torrential downpour, and before the mocking gaze of the men, Isabel once again crosses Main Street, drenched but with her integrity and her dignity intact. She confronts her present with the only certain thing she has: herself, her body, her energy, her face. The last shot shows her through her bedroom window, in an ambiguous image mixing resignation with courage, shame with awareness. The fact that we do not know for sure the end of the story of this single woman is precisely her greatest victory: her failed motherhood, her singlehood, could thus be classified as *expectant waiting*, combining the senses of a curious and active gaze, driven by erotic imagination.¹⁰

Looking back on classical mainstream cinema, interrogating it from a gender perspective and re-viewing the subversive visual and dramatic constructions in some of its films reveals paradoxes and semantic shifts from the dominant model for representing the single woman. This analysis has sought to contest the homogenising, essentialising patriarchal idea of the *failed mother* through the use of a more nuanced, tension-charged concept of *phantasmatic disobedience* that has been articulated with two others: *adversative sacrifice* and *expectant waiting*. To map the imaginary of motherhood and identify the porous nature of its context, it is essential to investigate all its dimensions and subtleties, including its opposites (sterility, the difficulty of being a mother, impotence as incompetence), considering the female bodies whose disrupted relationship with reproduction challenges the established order and reveals that women's desire, rather than having a fixed vector, moves in spirals and zigzags. ■

NOTES

- 1 Despite the repressive violence and control, Benet and other researchers have pointed out the existence of fissures or cracks in the system in this context of the reactivation of the film industry after the civil war, in a kind of *silent resistance* resulting from "spaces in which a certain reminiscence of the liberal intellectual tradition survived, albeit very discreetly, along with the lingering effects of modernity in a regime that was attempting to replace it with fascist-inspired official rhetoric [...]." It was thus "[a]n often clandestine world, almost always subdued, but not paralysed" (Benet Ferrando, 2012: 178).
- 2 Quoting the filmmaker himself, Seguí argues that "[t]he filming conditions and the demands of making a film that comes as close as possible to the living conditions of the coal workers give *Cursed Mountain* a strength and a quality that make it the best example of Spanish neorealism: 'In *Cursed Mountain* I went with the camera to the forests, the villages, the

- fields of Spain. We lived among real coal workers in a mountain range. I forced the actors to learn how to handle an axe, to cut down oak trees, and if I did not go to greater extremes in the midst of the great battle I had to fight to defend the rigour of truth and realism in the filming, it was because the convenience of plaster still ruled Spanish cinema, and it would have been too abrupt to break completely with an entire custom” (del Amo, in Seguí, 2012: 240).
- 3 As Quim Casas points out regarding the potential of this film and the subsequent career of the actress: “Despite her dramatic skills and her somewhat inscrutable beauty, she did not manage to become one of the outstanding stars of mid-twentieth-century Spanish cinema but instead began taking on roles of a more secondary nature in smaller productions [...]. The film did not earn the actress the recognition expected” (Casas, 2012: 541).
 - 4 “According to the Administrative Dossier of the Ministry of Culture, the production company was warned that ‘[...] they must also take care to ensure that the action of the film take place in a period chronologically distant from the present day, since it is not conceivable that superstition such as that which serves as the basis for the plot of this film could exist anywhere in Spain today’” (Pérez Gómez, 1997: 344). Pérez Rubio points out that after the censorship of the original script for the film, del Amo and his screenwriters Alfonso Paso and José Luis Dibildos had to modify the project: it went from being a collective seduction by the female protagonist to a love triangle, and also several passionate scenes were deleted (Pérez Rubio, 2012: 1317). It is worth noting that in addition to this film, the young friends Paso and Dibildos, both of whom were still under thirty years of age at the time, had worked together in the early 1950s on the scripts for two other films of different genres: *Hombre acosado* [Hounded Man] (Pedro Lazaga, 1950) and *Happy Easter* (Felices Pascuas, Juan Antonio Bardem, 1954). Unlike del Amo, both were at the beginning of their (prolific) careers in film, but like him, in the years that followed they would shift towards a safer, more commercial style.
 - 5 The association of women’s bodies with the spectral is notable throughout the film, as if the anxiety of a feared, powerful and unknown alterity were negotiated there, especially on a sexual and erotic level, which explains the symbolic and physical violence perpetrated on these bodies. During a break in the work, a coal worker makes the tongue-in-cheek remark: “A woman [in reference to the *Niña Negra*], even if she is a ghost, is still a woman.” And in an identical syntactic construction, another adds: “A ghost, when dressed as a woman, is three ghosts.”
 - 6 Other less stylised scenes with expressive visual compositions, such as those of the work in the Sierra—carried out by men—are more realistic. Although the director complained of budget and infrastructure problems, *Cursed Mountain* was del Amo’s favourite and highest quality film (Pérez Rubio, 2012: 1317). Almería was a rather poor area of Spain in those days, with little infrastructure and quite rudimentary connections in terms of transport and communication with the rest of the country. However, given that the rugged, dry landscape in itself constituted an attractive and expressive film setting, Almería would soon become the preferred filming location for exotic or earthy action and adventure stories, for both Spanish and foreign production companies, as well as co-productions. See Aguilar (2001).
 - 7 Some lines of the song read: “*Suene suene la guitarra,/ baile la danza del vino,/ que se casa una mocita,/ que es más bonita que un lirio./ ¡Olerelelé (...) la novia!/ ¡Olerelelé, qué rico el vino!./ ¡Olerelelé la novia está contenta,/ porque ya tiene marido!./ ¡Ay baila baila ya!./ ¡y no te canses de bailar!./ No se canse la mañana,/ bailen las aguas del río,/ que va a beber la paloma,/ que es más joven que aquel vino/ Luna luna de la Sierra,/ olivares del camino,/ trae dos estrellas santas,/ para su pelo estreñado.*” (Let the guitar play,/ dance the dance of wine,/ for a young girl is getting married,/ who is prettier than a lily./ Olerelelé (...) the bride!/ Olerelelé, how delicious the wine!./ Olerelelé The bride is happy,/ because she now has a husband!/ Oh, dance, dance now!./ and do not tire of dancing!/ Do not tire in the morning,/ let the waters of the river dance,/ the dove shall drink,

/ who is younger than that wine/ Moon, moon of the Sierra./ olive groves along the way,/ bring two holy stars,/ for her flowing hair.”

- 8 With respect to the film’s intertextual references, both in thematic and iconographic terms, Pablo Pérez Rubio lucidly points out that “although *Yerma* is the most frequently cited reference to García Lorca (and to Andalusia) [...], it is closer to some aspects of the *Romancero gitano* (...), as also reflected in the symbolism of the story: the opposition between village and mountains, moon and snow, the cave-womb, the phallic axe, the onomastics (Cruz, Juan)” (Pérez Rubio, 2012: 1318). Aida Antonino-Queralt points out that the natural settings where the film was shot place it “[...] in line with other European film styles that search for the value of real settings whose physicality is materialised in the bodies of the female characters [...]. A relationship that turns women into more than metaphors, emanations of the landscape” (Antonino-Queralt, 2019: 219-220).
- 9 *Cursed Mountain* premiered in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on 25 July 1957 at the Atalaya cinema, which was not one of the more important cinemas in the city. The film magazine *El Heraldo del Cinematografista* rated it with an artistic value of 2 points (out of 5) and a commercial value of 2½, classifying it as “popular”, and reviewing it quite negatively (Sierra..., 1957: 215). The Catholic bulletin *Calificación moral* judged it to be “only for adults” (Estrenos..., 1957: n. p.).
- 10 For a full review of the comparative analysis of *Para vestir santos* and *Calle Mayor*, see “Claroscuros de mujeres solteras en los cines argentino y español de los 50” in *Asparkia. Investigació Feminista* (42), 252-288. <https://doi.org/10.6035/asparkia.6776>.

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DISOBEDIENT GHOSTS: AN APPROACH TO MOTHERHOOD AND SINGLENESS ABOUT SIERRA MALDITA

Abstract

This work studies the representation of motherhood as obsession, impotence and traumatic absence from the figure of the single woman, addressing the case of *Sierra Maldita* (1955) which, produced by Almasirio and premiered in Madrid on January 30, 1955, was directed by Antonio del Amo and winner of several awards. Situated in the rural-folkloric environment, we suspect that this film allows, through the use of a legend and in the face of the socio-cultural changes that occurred in the mid-fifties, to give metaphorical form to social fear and anxiety regarding control over women's bodies and their reproductive capacity, and represent/exorcise, in a punctual figuration, singleness. The article places the film in the diachrony of the history of Spanish cinema and, based on visual analysis, examines the story and the staging, observing its dialogue with the socio-cultural context and the tensions of meaning that are presented in its own textuality.

Key words

Spanish cinema; Women; Motherhood; Singleness; Antonio del Amo.

Author

María Aimaretti holds a doctorate in History and Arts Theory from Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA), where she works as a professor in the Department of Arts. She is an adjunct researcher at CONICET, a member of the AsAECA and RICILa associations, and a member of research teams at Instituto Gino Germani and Instituto de Artes del Espectáculo. She is the author of various articles published in scholarly journals, and her lines of research focus on the relationship between cinema and memory in the Latin American documentary and on the links between cinema and popular culture, with special attention to representations of women. Contact: m.aimaretti@gmail.com.

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FANTASMAS DESOBEDIENTES: UN ACERCAMIENTO A LA MATERNIDAD Y LA SOLTERÍA A PROPÓSITO DE SIERRA MALDITA

Resumen

Este trabajo estudia la representación de la maternidad como obsesión, impotencia y ausencia traumática a partir de la figura de la soltera, abordando el caso de *Sierra Maldita* (1955) que, producida por Almasirio y estrenada en Madrid el 30 de enero de 1955, fue dirigida por Antonio del Amo y ganadora de varios premios. Situándose en el ámbito rural-folclórico, sospechamos que esta película permite, a través del uso de una leyenda y de cara a los cambios socioculturales suscitados a mediados de los cincuenta, dar forma metafórica al miedo y la ansiedad sociales respecto del control sobre los cuerpos de las mujeres y su capacidad reproductiva, y representar/exorcizar, en una figuración puntual, la soltería. El artículo ubica la cinta en la diacronía de la historia del cine español y, a partir del análisis visual, examina el relato y la puesta en escena, observando su diálogo con el contexto sociocultural y las tensiones de sentido que se presentan en su propia textualidad.

Palabras clave

Cine Español; Mujeres; Maternidad; Soltería; Antonio del Amo.

Autora

María Aimaretti (Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1983) es doctora en Historia y Teoría de las Artes por la UBA, donde se desempeña como profesora del departamento de Artes. Es investigadora adjunta del CONICET, miembro de las asociaciones AsAECA y RICILa, e integra equipos de investigación en los Instituto Gino Germani y Artes del Espectáculo. Es autora de diversos artículos publicados en revistas científicas, y sus líneas de investigación se centran en las relaciones entre cine y memoria en el documental de América Latina; y también en los vínculos entre cine y cultura popular, prestando atención a las figuraciones de mujeres. Contacto: m.aimaretti@gmail.com.

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