

Cuba and Spanish Cinema's Transatlantic Gaze

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Spectral Spectacles: From Gastronomy to the Consumption of Postnational Ruins

This essay seeks to historically, theoretically and politically contextualize Spanish cinema's current transatlantic gaze and its persistent (re)vision of the Cuban subject. Historically, this (re)vision finds its central referent in the discourses generated around the centennial commemorations of the 1898 Spanish-American War. Politically, such (re)vision is framed by the distancing and tension between Fidel Castro and José María Aznar. Manuel Vázquez Montalbán skillfully chronicles this tense situation in his written account of Pope John Paul II's historical trip to Havana in *Y Dios entró en La Habana (And God Landed in Havana)*. Vázquez Montalbán writes:

The Spanish industrialists agree with him [Castro], while speaking of the second loss of Cuba. They are perplexed and irritated to find out that despite the presence of four hundred and fifty Spanish firms in the International Commercial Fair in Havana, there was no official Spanish representation, which contrasted sharply with the presence of many delegations from other European nations. (434-5)¹

It seems, therefore, that the Partido Popular, ruling Spain since 1996, is reenacting, at least as far as Cuba is concerned, its Francoist past of "Spain is different."

Theoretically, the persistence of current Spanish cinema's transatlantic gaze towards Cuba must be analyzed as the imaginary articulation of two historical phenomena: the nostalgic reinscription of the Spanish imperial subject and the touristic commodification of the island as an erotic and "archeological" paradise. Vázquez Montalbán, in the text mentioned above, summarizes this double Spanish projection in very clear terms: "Spaniards in Cuba today are divided basically between tourists and industrialists. Tourists, themselves, are composed of two "espeleo-logies:" searchers of sex and searchers of revolutionary archeologies" (441).

Maité (Carlos Zabala and Eneko Olasagasti, 1995), the filmic text that will be the basis of most of my critical analysis, gives us a perfect example of that double presence. Mikel and Juan Luis Oraiola are two Basque brothers who travel to Cuba in the hope of saving their small family *angula* (baby eel) business by refashioning it into a multinational enterprise. These two brothers are emblematic of the tourists and industrialists described by Vázquez Montalbán. Zabala's and Olasagasti's film uses the family metaphor as national allegory and forces the audience to confront the intolerance and insularity of Basque and Spanish national identity discourses by projecting them onto the Cuban mirror. Despite its comedic tones, or perhaps due to them, *Maité* embodies some of the crucial aspects of the political complexity of the Spanish transatlantic gaze. Issues such as racism, the need for social and cultural hybridization, and the questioning of Catholic and con-

servative moral attitudes occupy the narrative center of this film which is very critical of Spanish society.

With the above historical, theoretical, and political considerations in mind, this article analyzes some of the ideological and/or aesthetic elements that come into play in the (re)vision of the Cuban subject undertaken by the nostalgic gaze of "autonomous" Spain at the dawn of the twenty-first century, which also affects and regulates other Latin American filmic gazes. However, before entering into a deeper analysis of *Maité* and other recent filmic texts that share the same Cuban referent, I would like to widen the theoretical frame of my discussion. Firstly, I want to mention the role given to tourism and communication by Jürgen Habermas in his book *National and Postnational Identities*:

Communication and mass tourism have their impact in a form less dramatic (than the forced migrant movements). [...] Both effect mutations on our view of the immediate, by means of direct intuition, and on the social mores, that are closely related to the realm of immediacy. They train our gaze in heterogeneous ways of life and in the real gradation between our life conditions and those existing elsewhere. (97)

Undoubtedly, tourism and immigration are the two most important demographic forces that have the largest influence on the reconfiguration of national identities as they gain, in this modern age, a new and increasingly flexible character. And yet, with the introduction of the touristic subject in the Spanish cinema's gaze at Cuba, we are faced with a case of recovering what is "ours" by consuming a simula-

tion of what is “foreign.” That is to say, the filmic consumption of Cuban otherness allows Spaniards to visually recover their own identity and historical property.

The persistence of the colonial ghost in this gesture seems evident to me, just as the persistence of other phantasmatic discourses appear as symptomatic to Teresa Vilarós in her analysis of the historical period of the Spanish transition to democracy (*El mono del desencanto, The Disenchantment Symptom*). As Vilarós explains:

Up to a certain point, it is correct to state that many echoes and traces left in the air by Francoism’s ideology of national Catholicism may be easily traced in the cultural production that emerged after the dictatorship and, with them, the spectral presence of imperial remnants. Bigas Luna’s film, *Jamón, jamón* (1992), despite the absence of any direct reference to Francoism, appears as a clear illustration of this point. [...] And yet, the submerged presence of old stories, structures, and ideologies overflows wildly in the guise of parodic simulacra that now run, not through high-brow spheres and politics, but through those low realms of sex and guts. Following the trail of a perverse celebration blazed by the early writings of the first transition, Bigas Luna tells us, at the end of the period, the story of a wildly phallic and peculiarly patriarchal gastronomy, one that recalls other ancestral and deprecating appetites. (234)

Vilarós’s analysis of Bigas Luna’s parodic gesture is still relevant today and helps us to understand a new kind of cultural gastronomy (to use Vilarós’s term) that is both local and global and also centers itself on the Hispanic in general and the Cuban

in particular. In the case of the Cuban, there is an added condiment (to continue with the above gastronomic discourse). The reality of the Marxist specter is as abject on the temporal and political axis as gastronomy is on the cultural and bodily axis due to the persistence, both historical and virtual, of the Castro Revolution. In this sense, it may be appropriate to recall here Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, where he writes, in a spectral rather than a gastronomic rhetoric, what amounts to a similar abject reality:

There are several times of the specter. It is a proper characteristic of the specter, if there is any, that no one can be sure if by returning it testifies to a living past or to a living future, for the *revenant* may already mark the promised return of the specter of living being. Once again, untimeliness and disadjustment of the contemporary. In this regard, communism has always been and will remain spectral: it is always still to come and is distinguished, like democracy itself, from every living present understood as plenitude of a presence-to-itself, as totality of a presence effectively identical to itself. Capitalist societies can always heave a sigh of relief and say to themselves: communism is finished since the collapse of the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century and not only is it finished, but it did not take place, it was only a ghost. They do no more than disavow the undeniable itself: a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back. (99)²

Cuba incorporates, in my opinion, this doubly spectral and atemporal condition described by Derrida by having the historicity of the Marxist revolution coexist with

its spectral virtuality. The following statement of Vázquez Montalbán's can be understood in this light:

There are, however, almost twenty Spanish universities that sign agreements with Cuba, together with a very important gesture of Spanish solidarity, mainly from leftist municipalities or from associations specially formed to assist the Cubans; to help a Revolution that thousands of Spaniards regard as their own, an adopted Revolution that makes up for the one they could not have on their own land. (435)

In the current nostalgia boom, therefore, Cuba offers a double and contradictory stimulus for the new Spanish touristic subject: to be able to satisfy at the same time, almost unconsciously, his/her historical-imperial and/or erotic-revolutionary frustrations and appetites. Or, in other words, Cuba is a living museum where communism and the imperial past are (con)fused in their spectral reality.

The dual reality of the tourist—temporal and spatial—is perceived from the very moment one steps foot on the streets of Havana and feels the sensation of entering a time warp or the set of an old Hollywood thriller from the fifties. The persistence of the past in the present is so evident that, ultimately, one ends up not seeing the historical reality but its spectral simulation. And it is through the cultural and media construction of this spectral simulation that the discourses of global consumption—touristic, gastronomic and political—of all things Cuban is articulated. Jean Baudrillard, elaborating on Walter Benjamin's pioneering work, helps us understand the symbolic character of any form of consumption—political, touristic and gastronomic—

in contemporary society. Baudrillard claims that reproduction, rather than production, is at the core of the symbolic logic inherent in multinational capitalism:

It is Walter Benjamin who, in "The Work of Art in the Era of Mechanical Reproduction," first elicited the implications essential in this principle of reproduction. He shows that reproduction absorbs the process of production, changing its finalities and altering the status of product and producer. He demonstrates this mutation on the terrain of art, cinema and photography, because it is there that open up, in the 20th century, new territories without a tradition of classical productivity, and that are placed immediately under the sign of reproduction. But we know that today all material production enters into this sphere. We know that now it is on the level of reproduction (fashion, media, publicity, information and communication networks), on the level of what Marx negligently called the nonessential sectors of capital (we can hereby take stock of the irony of history), that is to say in the sphere of the simulacra and of the code, that the global process of capital is founded. (98-99)³

The revision of the Cuban subject by Spain's transatlantic cinema falls into this category of consumption and, in my opinion, constitutes one of the most prominent examples of performing the postnational condition of contemporary Spain within a traditional nationalist discourse.

Any discussion of postnational performance needs to take into account the current media construction "Latin chic," a phenomenon already evident in the worldwide consumption of the music of the

Buena Vista Social Club made famous by Wim Wenders's successful film of the same name. Perhaps the easiest and most recent illustration of this phenomenon, as seen from the United States, may be summarized by an article published in *The New York Times* on Sunday, October 22, 2000. Its headline reads: "Paris Burns to a Tropic Beat. For the Latest French Chic, a Restaurant Borrows from Brazil's Shantytowns." It is, in fact, the name of the restaurant, "Favela Chic," that best summarizes the spectral gastronomy of consumption being considered here. Guy Trebay chronicles the phenomenon in the following terms:

Proof of this proposition might be the restaurant itself, a frenetic Brazilian dive in the 11th Arrondissement with the name Favela Chic. Favelas are the hillside slums of Brazil, which in no way resemble even the grungiest sections of Paris. And 'chic' is the last word that would ever be applied to those appalling shantytowns. But the oxymoron is intentional, affectionate and meant to convey something like a Frenchified version of that most American of concepts, Ghetto Fabulous. 'People in favelas don't have any choice about living there,' explained Rosane Mazzer, one of Favela Chic three owners. 'But they still have a lot of energy, of life. It's their own chic.' (1)

In a similar vein, bell hooks responds to this Latin chic and its hidden racial and class ideologies in her analysis of Jennie Livingston's film, *Paris is Burning*.⁴

Watching *Paris is Burning*, I began to think that the many yuppie-looking, straight-acting, pushy, predominantly white folks in the audience

were there because the film in no way interrogates 'whiteness.' These folks left the film saying it was 'amazing,' 'marvelous,' 'incredibly funny,' worthy of statements like, 'didn't you love it?' And no, I didn't just love it. For in many ways the film was a graphic documentary portrait of the way in which colonized black people (in this case black gay brothers, some of whom were drag queens) worship at the throne of whiteness, even when such worship demands that we live in perpetual self-hate, steal, lie, go hungry, and even die in its pursuit. The 'we' evoked here is all of us, black people/people of color, who are daily bombarded by a powerful colonizing whiteness that seduces us away from ourselves, that negates that there is beauty to be found in any form of blackness that is not imitation whiteness. (149)

We are, once again, consuming the cultural representations that colonize, by means of consumption, the historical reality that it portends to represent. This colonization is none other than a taste-enhancing "spice," since it allows for the consumption by the colonizers of social and racial otherness without one having to leave the comfort of the chic restaurants and movie houses of the metropolis. It is not surprising, therefore, that the two Latin films most highly circulated in the North American screens last season were *Orfeu*, Carlos Diegues' remake of the classic *Black Orpheus*, and *Woman On Top*, by Fina Torres, the Venezuelan director who has made Paris her principal residence.⁵ Diegues's film is a perfect example of the economy of commodified simulacra defined by Baudrillard, since it transforms the shantytowns of Rio de Janeiro from urban ruins into a national allegory of a Brazil that

gets reduced to its music and its carnival. Fina Torres's film is more self-conscious of its central gastronomical metaphor. Torres, whose previous film *Mecánicas celestes* (Celestial Clockwork, 1994) is a fairy tale about cultural hybridization in France, benefits from the social and commercial simulacra of "favela chic" in order to make her first entry into Hollywood. She does this through the reconstruction of Penélope Cruz as a generic Latino-Brazilian, a woman who is ready and eager to offer her culinary talents and erotic nature in order to fully satisfy the scopical desires of the white North American males that the film clearly attracts. Thus, in a rather circuitous way, we come back to *Jamón Jamón* and its figuration of the return of the repressed, of that patriarchal and predatory subjectivity of a neoimperial Spain which Vilarós recalled so vividly.

As I pointed out earlier, such a cinematic gaze can be analyzed as belonging to a series of cultural transformations conceived postnationally but within a national register. I now return briefly to three postnational performances whose common element is, precisely, their projection of a touristic and spectacular gaze upon the ruins, not of a Benjaminian allegorical past, but those of an historical present. These three Spanish transatlantic performances are located in Bilbao, Barcelona and Cuba, respectively. They escape the Spanish national framework to which they are reduced; thus they perform the postnational condition of Spain within a national hegemony.

The first one is the transformation of the industrial ruins of Bilbao into the urban foil of the Guggenheim Museum, arguably the most spectacular and spectral metaphor of the collusion between local and global, or between national and postnational, as the essays devoted to the subject

by Joseba Zulaika, Annabel Martín, and Joseba Gabilondo powerfully illustrate.⁶

The second postnational and transatlantic performance took place with the 1992 Summer Olympic Games in Barcelona. Like Bilbao, Barcelona also built on her historical ruins: the Olympic village was literally constructed on the ruins of the shantytowns occupied by gypsies in the Barceloneta area, whereas the new Olympic sites were built on Montjuïc, the enclave of other quite significant historical ruins, as the very name—Mountain of Jews—indicates. Despite this, Barcelona became a "gypsy enchantress," if one recalls the lyrics of the *rumba* song by Los Manolos, which became the unofficial anthem of the Games. Both the inaugural and closing ceremonies of the Games, moreover, were staged as spectacles of a pan-Hispanic identity emblemized by huge human rings of *sardana* (Catalonian dance) performers that were soon intertwined with other human rings of flamenco dancers and Andalusian horse riders, all of them fused under the aura of the Olympic rings. Crowning the event, the Spanish royal family presided over the proceedings, thus reinforcing the national allegory from the very center of Spain's largest postnational performance broadcast to the global village.⁷

With the arrival of 1998 came the most recent of these three major Spanish spectacles: the transformation of particular sites of Cuban historical importance into sites of consumption and Spanish national identity through nostalgia, with imperialist overtones. As mentioned previously, around the time of the centennial commemorations of the Spanish-American war in Cuba, the Caribbean island has once again taken a central place in the Spanish imaginary. It has become a living museum where the ruins of Socialism may be expe-

rienced first hand and then re-codified in a series of narratives that constitute themselves as postnational performances and nostalgic supplements for the neocolonial and proto-national discourses of the Spanish subject.

In fact most Spanish films about Cuba have narratives that represent and problematize identity shifts. Often, Spanish tourists and industrialists find their identities reinforced through the fictional simulacra of cultural hybridities that are postnational in nature. Thus, the economic “repossession” of the island acquires a double historical symbolism, as suggested by Vázquez Montalbán:

Of the six hundred foreign firms legalized in Cuba, a hundred and eighty are Spanish and the applications to invest in the island are growing by the day, especially among hotel owners who are in search of the touristic offer of the almost virgin keys. In the meantime, other Spanish-owned hotels are becoming the cultural location of Havana’s most significant social life, especially the Habana Libre and the Meliá-Cohiba. (435)

The island, as a symbolic and touristic territory, is still almost “virgin.” “Her” repossession by the neocolonial Spanish subject, under the guise of the hotel owner or the sexual tourist, satisfies a double sense of loss: the historical and the imaginary. One achieves a certain degree of territoriality on the island while fulfilling imaginary and nationalist desires for revenge on the empire that took that very property from “us,” by means of transgressing the economic blockade imposed on the island by that very same empire, the United States of America.

My critical analysis will be framed, therefore, by this theoretical and historical background. Ultimately, the question still remains: do Spaniards continue to be immersed in the identity politics of a transition that positioned the national subject as divided? The Spanish subject’s division lies between the nostalgic return of the historically repressed and the persistence of postnationalist discourses conceived as nationally self-exclusive.

The Density of the Textual Context

One only needed to glimpse at the Spanish billboards and bookstores in the summer of 2000 to realize the textual density of that moment of Spain’s transatlantic gaze. For example, the presence of six Latin American films, alongside many Spanish films, was surprising in a market almost always dominated by Hollywood and French cinema. These six films were: *Lista de espera* (Juan Carlos Tabío, Cuba), *Un lugar en el paraíso* (Gerardo Chijona, Cuba), *Che, hasta la victoria siempre* (Juan Carlos Desanzo, Argentina), *Tierra de fuego* (Miguel Littin, Chile), *Mundo grúa* (Pablo Trapero, Argentina), and *Hijos del viento* (José Miguel Juárez, Mexico).

It is important to understand that the Spanish transatlantic gaze, in its nostalgic and neoimperialist articulation, is centered on Cuba. At the same time, because of its Atlantic scope, it also interpellates other Latin American national cinemas such as the Mexican or the Argentinean—through coproductions, casting, etc. As a result, the Spanish scopic fix on Cuba can be detected in these other national cinemas while the

Spanish discourse of imperialism and nostalgia also transforms their gazes upon their own national and cultural identities. Therefore, it is important to begin by analyzing, not just Spanish but also Latin American films. Only in this way, will we be able to capture the new transatlantic—and post-national—condition of the Spanish filmic gaze.

Of the six films cited above, two are Cuban: *Lista de espera* and *Un lugar en el paraíso*. The former was directed by Juan Carlos Tabío, the co-director of *Guantanamera*, the last production of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, whose *Strawberry and Chocolate* opened up the international market for new Cuban cinema. The latter was directed by Gerardo Chijona who also made *Adorables mentiras* (Adorable Lies). His new film, like the previous one, is a musical with melodramatic structure, which allegorizes the nation using the family metaphor and, consequently, narrates the problems of diversity and truthfulness while, at the same time, celebrating the immense richness of Cuba's racial and cultural hybridation.

The Cuban referent fully occupies the central space of the third Latin American film: the Argentinean *Che, hasta la victoria*, directed by Juan Carlos Desanzo. As he previously did with *Evita Perón*, the veteran Argentinean director succeeds in humanizing the historical myth of Che while, at the same time, giving us a view of the hero's real-life ordeal, which adds texture to the body of its hero, the legendary guerrilla commander. Considering *Che, hasta la victoria* along with the two above Cuban films places us in this atemporality or double temporality of the Derridean specter by presenting the coexistence of the dualistic Cuban dream: that of the erotic-musical paradise and that of the revolutionary phantasm.

Two of the other six Latin American films exhibit the colonial referent as their narrative centers: the Chilean *Tierra de fuego* and the Mexican *Hijos del viento*. The most interesting (though perhaps not the best), *Tierra de fuego* was directed by another great veteran filmmaker, Miguel Littin. This film presents the story of Rumanian Julius Popper's attempt to colonize Patagonia, which also offers another version of the double, allegorical temporality to which I refer in the theoretical introduction. On the one hand, the film appears as a new reading of the madness of the colonial enterprise, in the style of Werner Herzog's *Aguirre, or the Wrath of God*, and on the other, it offers us a new cryptic version of Chile under Pinochet's dictatorship, specially if we recall Popper's words and his "crusade against barbarism."

The other colonial-themed film is *Hijos del viento* (1999), by Mexican film director José Miguel Juárez, another Spanish-Mexican coproduction fully inscribed within the neoimperial industry of nostalgia fueled by the new transatlantic gaze of contemporary Spanish cinema. This inscription is evident already in the casting of Carlos Fuentes for the role of Rodrigo, the lieutenant of Hernán Cortés, whose persona will appear in the dream of an Aztec princess as the reincarnation of Quetzacoatl; his imaginary or spectral arrival is the cause of the downfall of Moctezuma's empire. It is worthwhile to pause on the analysis of the casting of Juárez's film, since it offers us one of the best instances of this spectral return of the historical repressed to which Vilarós referred in her study of the Spanish transition and its phantasms.

Juárez's casting strategy is twofold. The first component his strategy recalls the double phantasm of Spanish history. One

must take into account that the young actor Fuentes gained notoriety in Spain through his performance in *Taxi* by Carlos Saura, where his character was already divided between the law of love and his patriarchal debt to fascist, xenophobic violence. Carlos Fuentes, moreover, was the protagonist of *Mambi* (1998), the epic “film” about the Cuban War by directors Teodoro and Santiago Ríos, both from the Canary Islands. This film, next to *El Dorado* by Saura, was the Spanish film that most clearly shows a transatlantic gaze as sign of friendship and/or reparation as it engages in narratives containing interracial and intercultural stories. These stories signal the historical beginning of a process of hybridation which does not follow armed violence but rather love’s power. In *Hijos del viento*, Rodrigo, Carlos Fuentes’s character, ends up marrying the Aztec princess, forming the first marriage between a native and a Christian official. This new union works as narrative counterpoint to the legendary relationship between Marina, La Malinche, and Hernán Cortés, which is the infamous master narrative of the Mexican patriarchal imaginary so paradigmatically defined by Octavio Paz.

The second component of Juárez’s casting strategy relies on his choice for the role of Hernán Cortés: José Sancho, the veteran Spanish actor who had just finished another Spanish film centered on Cuba, Iciar Bollaín’s *Flores de otro mundo* (*Flowers From Another World*, 1999). Sancho plays the role of Carmelo, the construction manager who travels to Cuba as a sexual tourist several times and who, at the beginning of the film, returns to his village with Milady, his Cuban erotic trophy. Sancho’s dramatic persona as the “Spanish macho” who has (re)conquered Cuba in this new vein of erotic-colonial tourism adds an element of

internal criticism to the Spanish ordeal in Juárez’s film. The character of Cortés in *Hijos del viento*, however, is introduced as religious and ambitious, and not as fanatic, inhuman, or unnecessarily cruel.

Perhaps the most interesting irony in Juárez’s casting strategy, however, might be his implicit reference to the change in empires (Spanish to North American) when incorporating the North American actor Bud Spencer in the role of the tortured and finally defeated Aztec emperor Moctezuma. Spencer’s presence seems to incorporate an imperial irony since the United States government captured the South West the same way that it took over Cuba.

The references to this shift of empires are also present in the two films I mentioned above. In *Flores de otro mundo*, director Bollaín presents us with Cuban character Milady dressed with tight spandex pants imprinted with a United States flag. A close-up of the pants precedes a hilarious scene where Milady “humiliates” Carmelo’s masculinity, thus establishing the real dominant symbolic order. At the end of our other filmic referent, *Mambi*, a Yankee horseman is the one humiliating the Canarian Goyo, an ex-Spanish soldier now turned into Cuban colonist; the Yankee shouts: “Get back in line! Get out of here, bastard!” The shift in master and/or empire over Cuba is, therefore, explicitly visualized. Goyo, on the other hand, much like Rodrigo in *Hijos del viento*, decides to remain in the ex-colony, in the (re)discovered country. This is reinforced in the film by his new marriage, which allegorizes the history of Hispanic hybridization based on the metaphorical image of the loved woman as desired/colonized nation. Thus, I must conclude that, *Hijos del viento*, despite its voluntaristic revisionism, ends up reinforcing this

phantasmatic and imperial nostalgia that permeates the transatlantic gaze of contemporary Spanish cinema.⁸

However, this synchronic cut into the year 2000 must be complemented with a diachronic dig into the textual density presented here. This diachronic dig unearths a filmic genealogy that goes back to the year 1992. For the time being, I will limit this archaeology to the Spanish side, although a more comprehensive examination would have to include also the Latin American reinscription of the new Spanish neoimperialist and nostalgic gaze over Cuba, in particular, and Latin America, in general. In this emblematic year, 1992, the Catalan director Toni Verdaguer presented his *Havanera 1820*, which was cowritten with Jaume Fuster and Jaume Cabré. This film is contextualized in the following way by critic Galina Bakhtiova in her study entitled “*Havanera 1820* by Antoni Verdaguer: Catalonia, Cuba, and Colonial Desire” (my translation):

In its focus on this colonial past, *Havanera 1820* inserts itself in the recent trend of imperial nostalgia of films such as *Passage to India* by David Lean or *Indochine* by Régis Wargnier. The film was shot in museum-houses in Catalonia and in the historical patrimony area of Trinidad, in the Cuban province of Las Villas. By representing the historical reality of elegant and luxurious spaces of mansions in Barcelona, Canet, and Cuba, the filmmakers rescue and highlight the myth of the ‘Americans [...]’ In *Havanera 1820*, a cinematographic work of the last decade of the 20th century, colonial desire is associated not only with the mulatto woman—a woman of another race—but with the refiguration of

the complex labyrinths of desire: the simultaneous desire and rejection of the woman of one’s own race, the legitimate spouse, and the passion and hatred of another woman, of a different race. (2-6)⁹

Verdaguer’s film is undoubtedly meritorious for its historical recreations. At the same time, the film suffers precisely from a scopical indulgence, which is almost absolute in its representation of this allegory of eroticized colonization. In this respect, the film anticipates the trend that, at the end of the decade of the ‘90s, will recapture comedies such as the one already mentioned, *Maité* (1995) by Zabala and Olasagasti, as well as *Cuarteto de la Habana* (Havana’s Quartet, 1999) by Fernando Colomo.¹⁰

This archaeology of the Spanish gaze and its textual density brings us back to the end of the 1990s and early 2000s when many films proliferate as the date of 1998 approaches. Besides *Mambí* and *Flores de otro mundo*, arguably the two most interesting films with a Cuban referent, I would like to briefly discuss four very recent Spanish movies: *Frontera Sur* (South Border, 1998), *El invierno de Aljamas* (Aljama Winter, 1999), *Ataque verbal* (Verbal Attack, 2000), and *La noche de Constantinopla* (The Constantinople Night, 2000).

Next to the epic-historical characterization of *Mambí*, for example, we encounter Gerardo Herrero’s *Frontera Sur*, a realistic film with fantastic overtones. The film tells the story of Roque Díaz (José Coronado), the “gallego”¹¹ emigrant who arrives to Argentina in the early years of the twentieth century. He hears the following emblematic words uttered by Piera (Maribel Verdú), the madam of a fashionable brothel: “At some point in time, you gotta lose your past.” Just as in *Havanera 1820*, Herrero’s

film articulates the narrative of the emigrant/colonist regulated by a convoluted erotic desire and, in this case, further exacerbated by the spectral passion embodied by the phantasmatic character of Ciriaco Maidena, a Borgesian type that even Federico Luppi's actorial experience and *savoir faire* cannot totally rescue.

The use of the Cuban referent also extends to films that use Cuba as historical background, as in the case of the recent *El invierno de Aljamas* by Pedro Telechea, which tells the love story between Adelaida (Elena Anaya), the daughter of the local chief and owner of the emblematic ship company "Compañía Transatlántica," and Eusebio (Ernesto Noriega), the rebel who returns from the Cuban War. Telechea synthesizes the Cuban historical context through a critique of the bourgeois rhetoric about the defense of national honor and pride, compromised by the possible loss of the Cuban colony. However, by including the love narrative, Telechea opts for diluting his historical reading and, thus, ultimately confuses it with this nostalgic-critical gaze generated around the events of 1998 to which I refer above.

The most amusing reference to the "Cuban dream" generated by recent Spanish cinema is constituted undoubtedly by the final episode of *Ataque verbal* by Miguel Albadalejo. In this episode, we follow the romance between Elke, a Spanish-Danish ventriloquist, and Karen, the Cuban mulatto who personifies her own sister and Elke's former lover. With this romance bathing in Cuban waters, Albadalejo also deepens and dilutes all the erotic phantasms of Spanish patriarchy by establishing a narrative that shows a lesbian love relation between two archetypal figures: the beauty from the North and the mulatto from Cuba.

Never before has Spanish cinema presented the denunciation of the erotic consumption of the other in such a refreshing and parodic key.¹²

Finally, the Spanish-Cuban coproduction *La noche de Constantinopla* by Orlando Rojas, also starring Paco Rabal and his grandson Liberto, deals with a narrative in which art objects that are part of the national and cultural heritage of Cuba are traded and stolen through lies and deception. This plot, also present in *Cuarteto de la Habana*, is the one that links this film with the one that I will analyze in detail in the next section: *Maité*.¹³

The Cuban Dream and the Historical Reconciliation

"Havana is not only the backdrop of our story. She has become almost a character, with whom we deal with the same tenderness as all the rest, without judging her" (Gurpegui 15). These words by Eneko Olasagasti, one of the two Basque directors of the film *Maité*, may illustrate, on the one hand, his conciliatory approach to Cuba while showing, on the other, the double temporality of Havana's spectacular specter described above. Indeed, Havana becomes a character whose absence-presence ends up constituting itself as the true protagonist in these stories told from the perspective of current Spanish cinema's desiring gaze on Cuba. And yet, the narrative of this reconciling desire is always couched in a "necessary lie" that, as I will explain below, perhaps betrays the return of the historically repressed, of that unnamable desire of re-colonization.

Using a similar melodramatic light comedy format, *Maité* centers on a single

metaphor: the restoration of the familial patrimony. Thus, in the first conversation between Juan Luis Oraiola (José Ramón Soroiz) and his brother Mikel (Agustín Arrazola) one notices the linguistic shift from Euskera (Basque) to Castilian when Mikel exclaims: "And my family, and my country, are in a crisis," to which, a furious Juan Luis replies: "You have mortgaged my house?" "Our house," is Mikel's answer, thus reinforcing the family metaphor as national allegory of a Basque Country figured as a split brotherhood that inhabits the mortgaged house of the father.¹⁴

At the beginning of *Maité*, we see how Juan Luis, upon his arrival in Havana's José Martí airport and after his customs clearance, bumps into a little toy figure of a pig, which recalls his previous remark to his brother Mikel: "That the world has become a pigsty does not make me a pig!" When he raises his gaze to see to whom the toy belongs, he (and the audience as well, through the use of a subjective shot) encounters the gracious smile of a toothless little girl, Maité (Nadia Moreira). Upon hearing the girl's name, Juan Luis utters: "Maité! Look at that, a little black girl with a Basque name!" "I am not a little black girl, I am a *mulatita*!" is Maité's self-assured reply. This reply not only affirms her hybrid identity but establishes the first link in Juan Luis's process of transformation and reconciliation, a process that culminates in his romance with Daisy Ortega (Ileana Wilson), the girl's mother and the person in charge of supervising the commercial deal that entails the exchange of Basque *angulas* (baby eels) for Cuban Cohiba cigars. In the background of that initial encounter in Havana's airport, we see and hear a couple of Catalan industrialists saying: "Anem, que ja tenim aquí a aquestes ties!" (Let's go, since we already have these

broads here!) when they see the two arriving *jineteras* (prostitutes) who are being offered to them by their Cuban commercial contact. Juan Luis and his brother Mikel, the two Basque industrialists, receive identical treatment.

Thus, despite the comedic register of their film, Zabala and Olasagasti insist in the narrative analogy between the commercial and the sexual exploitation of Cuba.¹⁵ This also explains why they interrupt the humorous mood of the film in the sequence where we find the character of an old and dignified man, Clemente, who, after having generously invited a "swindled" Juan Luis to his house, ends up shouting very bitterly: "All these *gallegos* are a bunch of sons of bitches!" His words underline a middle close-up shot of his niece, who is leaving the house, undoubtedly dressed in a way that bespeaks of her participation in the sexual tourism decried by Clemente. The sequence continues with Clemente's uninterrupted complaint about the historical irony of a country like Cuba, which went through a national liberation war and a socialist revolution just to end up with the reality of having to once again face the same Spaniards, now full of *fulas* (dollars) and eager to retake the human and economic richness of the island. This historical encounter is embodied in the "necessary lie" that takes Juan Luis and his brother Mikel to Cuba: to make the Cubans believe that they have sent four tons of baby eels when they have only sent two tons and are hoping that their growth and weight are enough to cheat the other party. The "necessary lie," however, is reciprocated by the Cubans: due to a "mistake in the warehouse," only half of the cigars are true Cohibas.

Much more than the telling of a story about the drastic measures one Basque fam-

ily takes to save their business, what Zabala's and Olasagasti's film undertakes is the breaking of new cinematic ground in the cinematic self-representation of Basque people. Elsewhere, I have explored Basque cinema itself as a migrant subject, given its "invisibility" at home, its dark narrative tendencies and its recurrent disavowal.¹⁶ Unlike most Basque film, *Maité* is a melodramatic light comedy—a genre almost non-existent in Basque cinema but dominant in Basque oral culture, theater, and television (Gabilondo, "Before Babel" 32-7). It relies on humor, a tropical festivity and the celebration of a marriage. Neither fully departing from the Basque aesthetic of contradiction nor from its cultural tradition of affirmation by denial, *Maité* constitutes a variation on the present exploitative touristic gaze in the context of Spanish cinema. As Isabel Sánchez has it:

Baby eels and cigars, two products as different as their original territories—Euskadi and Cuba—become united cinematically in *Maité*, a Spanish-Cuban co-production which, thanks to its romantic comedy format, is able to make fun of the stereotypes in both countries. [...] The idea to make the film appeared during the vacations that the two directors spent in Cuba. In that occasion, they said that they fell in love with 'the country and its people.' The idea they had then was 'to transmit the brotherhood and spirit of tolerance that must exist between the two countries.' (Sánchez 34)

In fact, as I stated at the beginning of this essay, the tolerance and brotherhood desired by the two Basque directors is not something necessary only between these two distant countries but between the countries

that form the Basque Country and the Spanish State, always postnationally split by that very national narrative of intolerance and rejection of otherness. Zabala's and Olasagasti's social text projects itself onto the deforming mirror of humor and distance in order to renegotiate the ideological and identity problems that haunt a national history full of violence and intolerance.

Interestingly enough, the film's purpose is to find the common ingredients of humor and love in order to evoke an historical reconciliation, not only between Basques and Spaniards, but between all of the inhabitants of the Spanish State and Cubans. *Maité* achieved a box-office return of ten million pesetas in only eight weeks in Donostia (San Sebastián), thus breaking the record held by Imanol Uribe's *Mikel's Death* (1983); it became the largest grossing film in Basque cinema up to that point. This fact, together with the award of the audience's prize in the 1995 Havana Film Festival, seems to confirm Augusto M. Torres's words:

Curiously, what works the best is what in theory seemed the most difficult to capture in film: the atmosphere of the island and the contradictions lived daily by the Cubans after 35 years of revolution and dictatorship under Fidel Castro. (45)¹⁷

This is indeed the most salient quality of Zabala's and Olasagasti's film: to be able, as Senal Paz (co-screenwriter and producer) put it: "to capture Cuba's reality honestly and without being at all judgmental" (Gurpegui 17).

Once one considers *Maité* in the context of the texts analyzed in this essay, one crucial discordant element in its narrative stands out. This element is symbolized in

the sequence where we see Roberto Cabrera (Carlos Acosta), Daisy Ortega's Cuban boyfriend and the person initially in charge of the commercial deal with the Basque firm, arriving with a bunch of flowers for her, only to find Daisy and her daughter Maité posing in a "family photo" with Juan Luis. After a subjective shot from Carlos's perspective, we see him leaving the flowers by a nearby sculpture of José Martí, the poet and father of the land whose spectral presence evokes both his Spanish origin and his revolutionary life. As noted earlier in Clemente's film, the (re)conquest of the island by the Spaniards is figured in the "conquest" of Daisy by the Basque industrialist. Roberto's gesture may be read, therefore, like a funeral homage, the setting of the flowers by the tomb of a country and of a revolutionary project that seems to be mortgaged, like Mikel's and Juan Luis' own "house of the father" was at the beginning of the film.

In the end, therefore, the neocolonial narrative is repeated and, despite their "benevolent" intentions, Zabala and Olasagasti cannot escape from that collective neoimperial and nostalgic gesture of Spanish cinema's transatlantic expression of its (post)national identity. Cuba's spectacular specter remains, as Derrida puts it, "only a ghost." And yet or because of it, it continues to attract those "ancestral and deprecating appetites" that may be now satisfied scopically through the cultural consumption of otherness afforded by these cinematic refigurings of the same. Nostalgic gestures, however, can only reconstitute empires in the collective imaginary. Ultimately, when seen from the corporate world of real political and financial empires, one can consider the possibility that films like *Maité* and some of the others discussed in this essay may open up a certain symbolic space, that of a "common mortgage" of countries and

cultures facing the seemingly unstoppable assault of late capitalism and its colonization of the global village.

Notes

¹ Vázquez Montalbán combines an objective journalistic approach with an ironic subjective view and, at times, a touch of idealist nostalgia in this highly entertaining chronicle. All translations of this and other texts, unless indicated, are mine.

² Original quote in English.

³ It is based on another of Benjamin's insights, that of his analysis of ruins as historical allegories, moreover, that we can find the model on which the Latin spectral realities are re-codified and made ready for global consumption.

⁴ The essay quoted belongs to bell hooks' well known volume *Black Looks. Race and Representation*, where one can also find her influential study: "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance." I am indebted to bell hooks' analysis for many of the formulations surrounding my argument of the "generic consumption of otherness" in the Cuban case.

⁵ I am referring to the Fall of the year 2000. A much more interesting intertextual elaboration of *Black Orpheus* than the one carried out by Diegues' bland reliance on Río's carnival to create a rather reductive Brazilian national allegory may be found in Doris Dörrie's *Keiner liebt mir* (Nobody Loves Me, 1996), which is a sharp and funny parody of German "generic consumption of otherness" placed in the midst of the Köln carnival.

⁶ I am referring to Joseba Zulaika's *Crónica de una seducción* and "Ruinas/Peripheries/Transizioak," to Annabel Martín's "A Corpse in the Garden: Bilbao's Postmodern Wrapping of High Culture Consumer Architecture," and to Joseba Gabilondo's "Bernardo Atxaga's Seduction: On the Symbolic Economy of Postcolonial and Postnational Literatures in the Global Market." I want to thank Annabel Martín for letting me have access to her still unpublished manuscript.

⁷ The sardana is the national dance of Catalonia. Its merging with the dancing of flamenco, a traditionally gypsy dance that was co-

opted by Francoism into a stereotypical shortcut to Spanish identity, shows the competing national discourses in the postnational performance of the Olympic Games. For a more detailed analysis of that event and its symbolic configurations, see Jaume Martí-Olivella's "Barcelona On Screen: City Landscapes and Textual Mirrors."

⁸ The final of the six Latin American films, *Mundo grúa*, by novel Argentinean director Pablo Trapero, deals with the internal displacements of people looking for jobs in a new Argentinean economy highly regulated and dominated by global capitalism.

⁹ I would like to thank the author for giving me access to her work.

¹⁰ Verdaguier's film also seems to anticipate another textual tendency of a more interesting and innovative type. I am referring to the narratives about "indianos" or "americanos" (Spaniards who return home from the Americas after attempting, successful or unsuccessfully, to build a fortune). This narrative tendency is illustrated by novels such as *Lherència de Cuba* (The Inheritance from Cuba, 1997) by Margarida Aritzeta or *Cap al cel obert* (Towards the Open Sky, 2000) by Carme Riera. The latter novel is specially interesting in the sense that it continues the author's historical and narrative exploration she brilliantly began with *Dins el darrer blau* (In the Last Blue, 1994). In both cases, the author studies the phenomenon of the Inquisition's intransigency against the Xuetas or Majorcan Jews, thus exposing, the historical phantasms of the racist and xenophobic past of the Spanish people and its official institutions. When exploring this historical ordeal alongside with that of the Cuban colonization, Riera's text becomes a very valuable social document of the necessary transatlantic gaze that is anchored in neocolonial or imperialist nostalgias.

¹¹ Literally "gallego" means "Galician," but in Latin America the term connotes any Spanish emigrant.

¹² Another textual parody of the same tone is constituted by the theater production *Cacao* (2000) by the Catalanian group Dgall Dagom,

which is one of the first Spanish "musicals" that includes the problematics of the Cuban immigration to Spain. Despite its esquematic plot and the easy resolution of several narrative conflicts, the musical comedy by Dagoll Dagom permits a mainstream public to have access to a critical vision of this nostalgic look at the Cuban dream.

¹³ Two other literary texts also follow the same narrative plot and add on to the textual density that I am trying to delineate here. I am referring to *Los placeres de la Habana* (The Pleasures of Havana, 2000) the opera prima of the awarded journalist Vicente Romero and *Paisaje de Otoño* (*A Fall Landscape*), the superb thriller by Cuban writer Leonardo Padura Fuentes that was published in Spain by Tusquets in 1998, precisely the year of Spain's centennial nostalgia.

¹⁴ This situation of economic crisis and ideological or psychological orphanage will be replicated at the beginning of *Havana's Quartet* in the sequence where we witness Walter Martínez's (Ernesto Alterio) mediated discovery of his Cuban "family" when he finds the video clip that Lita del Valle (Mirtha Ibarra) had sent him, a video clip that his conservative grandmother had kept hidden. Racism and the tension between rejection and desire of any cultural hybridation will also be inscribed from the very beginning of both films. In *Havana's Quartet*, we will find Walter's reactionary grandmother commenting on a photographic montage where we may see Prince Felipe, the inheritor of the Spanish crown, by a beautiful woman of color. "And even the Prince is marrying a black woman!" Will be Walter's grandmother's words, to which, he will reply: "With a *mulata*, grandmother!"

¹⁵ The merging of the two forms of neocolonization, the commercial and the erotic, corresponds exactly to the description made by Vázquez Montalbán in his book. Sexual tourists and industrialists often are one and the same in the present situation. *Maité*, however, barely touches upon that other side of the nostalgic gaze, the need to exorcise the revolutionary ghosts through the spectral satisfaction of the Cuban Revolution.

¹⁶ See my essay "Invisible Otherness: From Migrant Subjects to the Subject of Immigration in Basque Cinema" where these issues are explored in certain detail.

¹⁷ The international success of Basque films is nothing new. Its large scale success at home, however, is a rare phenomenon, as I have explained in the essay "Invisible Otherness" just quoted. This process of a higher visibility within Euskadi and Spain will continue with several other Basque films of the late nineties, such as Alex de la Iglesia's *El día de la bestia* (*The Day of the Beast*, 1996), a "Satanic comedy" that constructs a wild caricature of Basque and Spanish traditional social mores; Juanma Bajo Ulloa's *Airbag* (1996), an outrageous "on-the-road satire" of Basque stereotypes, Imanol Uribe's *Días contados* (*Counted Days*), a powerful action movie with an ETA background and Montxo Armendáriz's *Secretos del corazón* (*Secrets of the Heart*, 1997), an affecting coming-of-age story placed in rural Navarra during the Francoist times.

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