

FROM MADRID TO HELL: THE CITY IN THE FILMS OF CARLOS SAURA

MARIANNE BLOCH-ROBIN

INTRODUCTION

Although he would end up settling in the Sierra del Guadarrama just outside the Spanish capital, Carlos Saura is not identified as one of the many filmmakers who claim Madrid as their home, either by birth or by adoption, such as Edgar Neville, José Luis Garci, Pedro Almodóvar, Álex de la Iglesia and many others. Indeed, only a handful of the 43 feature films made by the Aragonese director use Madrid and its environs as their setting. And even in films such as *Cría Cuervos* (1975), *Sweet Hours* (*Dulces horas*, 1981) or *¡Dispara!* (1994), whose action takes place in the Spanish capital, the city does not play a central role. However, three of his feature films made in very different eras, *The Delinquents* (*Los golfos*, 1959), *Faster, Faster* (*Deprisa, deprisa*, 1980) and *Taxi* (1996), as well as his short film *La tarde del domingo* [Sunday Afternoon], which he completed as a final project while studying at the Instituto de Investigaciones y Experiencias Cine-

matográficas in 1957, place the city at the heart of the story and urban spaces are of primordial narrative and aesthetic importance. Despite the time that separates these films and the very different socio-political contexts in which they were made—from the Franco dictatorship in the late 1950s to Spain's transition to democracy in the 1980s and finally to the resurgence of the far right in democratic Spain in 1996—they can be analysed as a coherent trilogy in terms of the filmic construction of urban space, which creates an image that evolves but that also maintains certain constants over the course of 35 years. In all three films, Saura constructs a hostile urban space in which his protagonists are trapped, confined, and persecuted by an oppressive city. He thus creates a stifling, exclusionary setting that engages in a dialectical relationship with the characters. This depiction of Madrid would endure beyond the end of the dictatorship and into the 1990s, when he made the last of his films set in the Spanish capital.

Urban and peripheral spaces play an important role in these films, fulfilling an essential aesthetic and narratological function that makes them much more than mere settings for the action. Moreover, in each case these spaces reveal historical and sociological dimensions of Spain, which underwent major changes from 1959 to 1980 and again from 1980 to 1996.

In each period, Carlos Saura explores the city as a synecdoche for the situation of the country through the themes of youth, marginalisation and violence. For *The Delinquents* and *Faster, Faster*, the director adopted a clear realist approach, using documentary material for the development of the script and choosing non-professional actors, some of whom had even been delinquents in real life (Sánchez Vidal, 1988: 28, 147). On the other hand, while *Taxi* also reflects social and political issues in Spain in the mid-1990s, its expressive aesthetic and use of a cast of professional actors demonstrate an evolution in the filmmaker's creative process. It is worth highlighting Saura's collaboration on this last film with the acclaimed Italian cinematographer Vittorio Storaro, who would subsequently work with the director on a regular basis.

The focus of this study is the cinematographic construction of the physical space of Madrid in the three aforementioned films. Indeed, beyond the referential locations (Gardies, 1993: 79), which are always present because even an imaginary city is constructed based on references to reality, all the filmic elements contribute to the construction of the space, as André Gardies points out, "[b]ecause in cinema, space is neither given nor represented (except of course in the form of places), it is yet to be constructed, on both the cognitive and perceptual levels" (1993: 99). The framing, scale and duration of the shots, the camera movements, angles, lighting, film formats, and choice of black and white or colour are all visual elements that can contribute to the creation of completely different spaces using the same reference location.

This can also be done with the soundtrack: in any given location, a city filled with deafening noise will be very different from the same city when all is silent. The role of music in the construction of space is also vitally important, as it can make a significant contribution to its characterisation, with the power to open up the space represented or to infuse a place with the emotions it elicits, thereby shaping the diegetic space (Bloch-Robin, 2018: 151-176).

The mode of representation thus always contributes to the construction of the space by offering a point of view that is essentially subjective. Moreover, our understanding of space also needs to take the audience into account, as the pact established between film and spectator is based on viewers' prior knowledge and on their relationship with the story developed at each level of cinematic articulation: shot, sequence, and film as a whole (Gardies, 1993: 99). Finally, the space of the city may play an important role in the story, constituting the object of the protagonist's quest, a support for that quest, or even an antagonist to the main character.

Before delving into a more specific analysis of the spatial construction of Madrid, its relationship with the protagonists and the dialectic between centre and periphery in the three films analysed here, a brief outline of the contexts in which the films were made is offered below.¹

THREE HISTORICAL AND CINEMATIC CONTEXTS: *THE DELINQUENTS* (1959), *FASTER, FASTER* (1981) AND *TAXI* (1995)

The Delinquents was Saura's first feature film. It was produced by Pere Portabella in 1959 and co-written with Daniel Sueiro and Mario Camus. The film tells the story of a group of petty criminals from the suburbs of Madrid who try to get ahead in life by helping one of their group to become a bullfighter. To raise the money needed to secure his future they commit crimes, each one

more dangerous and violent than the last. The bullfighting apprentice ends up failing in the bullring and one of the gang's members drowns in the muddy water of the Manzanares River after being "swallowed" by the sewers while trying to escape a crowd of pursuers. According to the filmmaker himself, the film was intended to be a metaphor for the struggle that he and his friends faced to make a film under the Franco regime (Brasó, 1974: 62), because, as one of the characters observes in the screenplay: "It's hard to get to be someone here."² Both during and after the production of *The Delinquents*, Saura faced severe difficulties. In particular, despite the film's selection to represent Spain at Cannes in 1960, the Spanish censors cut it up drastically and gave it a "2nd B" rating (a classification that placed extreme limitations on a film's release), and although it was subsequently upgraded to "2nd A", it did poorly at the box office and lasted less than a week in cinemas (Deltell, 2006: 254).

The film is above all an attempt at realism, a "transition film" (2006: 254) founded on two trends in modern cinema. On the one hand, although Saura himself would deny it (Kinder, 1993: 87-133), the influence of neorealism is evident, while on the other there are similarities to the films of the French New Wave (it is worth remembering that Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* [A bout de souffle, 1959] was made in the same year).

According to André Bazin, beyond its aim to offer a documentary view of the lives of the down and out, neorealism eschews the idea of editing as an illusionist practice, instead respecting the ambiguity and open meanings of reality captured in its physical continuity (1985: 49-61). In *The Delinquents*, the long descriptive shots that unify the diversity of the slums where the protagonists live (today the La Elipa neighbourhood), the depth of field of the extended shots that sweep around the Legazpi market, the traditional dance at the Salamanca cinema and the area around the Santiago Bernabéu Stadium allow viewers the free-

THE AUTHORITARIAN NATURE OF THE REGIME, WHICH CANNOT BE EXPLICITLY CONDEMNED, IS REFLECTED ON THE SCREEN THROUGH A SPATIALISATION OF THE IDEAS OF CONFINEMENT, AGGRESSION AND OPPRESSION THAT CHARACTERISE THE CITY

dom to discover telling details of the city in the 1960s without forcing them—as classical cinema always did³—to focus on the main action. On the other hand, the French New Wave, and particularly Godard's work, uses editing to reveal the filmic enunciation, exposing the constructed nature of the shots, which are juxtaposed, combined and deconstructed in a collage process. In *The Delinquents*, Saura uses an editing style that does not adhere to a coherent narrative logic. He cuts scenes before the action is over and introduces jumps in time and space that are often disconcerting for spectators accustomed to being guided by the *transparent* editing of classical cinema, forcing them to reconstruct the story in order to give meaning to the sequence.⁴ Spectators thus become conscious of their position and may therefore adopt a critical view of the film, as Marvin D'Lugo points out when he suggests that the audience can thus assume a critical distance—in relation to Spanish society under Franco—that the characters lack (D'Lugo, 1991: 29-45). The authoritarian nature of the regime, which cannot be explicitly condemned, is reflected on the screen through a *spatialisation* of the ideas of confinement, aggression and oppression that characterise the city. This spatialisation is presented as a metaphor for repression. Moreover, in narratological terms, the protagonists' desire to conquer their hometown reflects Saura's determination to make a film in his home country despite the difficulties he faces in doing so. This aspiration, much like the heroes' failure in the film, led to frustra-

tion, as *The Delinquents* would be extensively altered by the censors and poorly received by the public (Bloch-Robin, 2013: 52, 54).

In the years that followed, and particularly after the production of his third feature film, *The Hunt* (La Caza, 1965), Carlos Saura would develop a personal universe distanced from realism, developing a metaphorical, symbolic style with complex stories and metalepses that allowed him at least partly to get around the censors. Twenty years later, after eighteen years subjected to constant censorship and two years after Spain's transition to democracy, in 1980 Saura sought to question the evolution of Spanish society by returning once again to the depiction of a marginalised group, using non-professional actors and with extensive prior research into their lifestyles, language and favourite music. While the characters in *The Delinquents* had a specific goal to pursue amid the constraints of Francoist society (giving the film a clear storyline despite the deconstruction of the editing), the young protagonists in *Faster, Faster* have no aim at all other than a constant quest for freedom in a nascent democracy depicted as disconnected from its past, where the values of fighting for political justice seem to have vanished. The gang of four youths, including one female character (Ángela), live on the outskirts of Madrid and commit a series of crimes, each one more dangerous than the last. The film ends with the violent deaths of all three boys, while only Ángela survives. The protagonists' ignorance of their own country's history is made patently clear in a sequence where the group visit the Cerro de los Ángeles, the site of the Sacred Heart of Jesus monument that was bombed by the Republicans during the Spanish Civil War, a major historic event about which the youths evidently know nothing (Sánchez-Biosca, 2006: 211).

The film has been identified as part of the *cine quinquí* ("delinquent film") movement that came to prominence in Spanish cinema during the transition to democracy (Ríos Carratalá, 2014). Although

the similarities between *Faster, Faster* and films of the *quinquí* trend are much more than incidental, Saura's film could be said to occupy a place of its own in this genre. Specifically, the very particular treatment of space in *Faster, Faster* distinguishes it from other *quinquí* films, especially the duration of the shots, which are quite long for an action film, although that length is compensated for by Saura's use of music (Bloch-Robin, 2018: 53) and carefully choreographed camera movements (2018: 56-86).

The film seems to reflect the disillusionment that characterised the period of the transition to democracy in Spain (Bessière, 1996: 286), which itself coincided with the post-modern disappointment over the failure of the great utopias of the 20th century, described by Jean-François Lyotard as the incredulity towards metanarratives (1979: 63). This *double* disillusionment is expressed in *Faster, Faster* in particular in the protagonists' lack of a clearly defined goal. Their stance, verging on nihilism, reflects the sense of emptiness of the post-modern world, which no longer offers ideals or ideologies to fight for, a feeling that also characterised the situation of democratic Spain. This feeling is *spatialised* on screen through the aimless wanderings of the protagonists. In aesthetic terms, the long duration of most of the shots and the frequent use of sequence shots—and music—is evocative of the road movie genre. This editing approach, highly unusual for a film in which action and speed are crucial, is handled with great mastery. At the same time, the empty spaces of Madrid's outskirts may also evoke the arid atmosphere of certain American landscapes, such as the setting in Wim Wenders' film *Paris, Texas* (1984).

From *The Delinquents* to *Faster, Faster*, from the tension of the dictatorship to the disillusionment of the transition, it is possible to identify signs of Spain's entry into the post-modern era. This moment of an absolute crisis of values and utopias that affected Western democracies seems to push Pablo and his companions irrevocably to-

wards the abyss of drugs and death, in a frenetic, nihilistic race to nowhere. Saura thus reveals the extent to which the Spanish society of the transition is heir to the society and social structures of the Franco regime, leaving marginalised youth with no way out of their situation. The film can therefore also be analysed as a tragedy that uses music in particular to foreshadow the protagonists' dismal fate as early as the title credits, with Los Chunguitos' song "¡Ay qué dolor!" ("Oh, the pain!") (Bloch-Robin, 2018: 215).

Fifteen years later, in *Taxi* (1996), the city of Madrid had changed again, with the return of right-wing forces to political power in Spain. Like the other two films, *Taxi* has a linear narrative structure. However, the point of view and the spaces represented on screen have evolved a great deal since *Faster, Faster*. In 1996, Carlos Saura made a film that uses certain narrative elements of the crime film genre, with a screenplay by Santiago Tabernero and an aesthetic that could be described as expressionistic. To denounce the savagery of far-right groups in Spain, Saura once again situated a romantic relationship between two youths at the heart of the film, which in some ways recalls the love story in *Faster, Faster*.

The story revolves around Paz, a young woman who discovers that her father belongs to a group of taxi drivers calling themselves "The Family", who are committed to "cleansing" the streets of Madrid by killing off the "scum" or "garbage" that they believe makes them filthy: LGBTI+ people, drug addicts, and immigrants. Despite their problems, the protagonists in *Faster, Faster* are filled with vital energy and enjoy a utopia of freedom that no longer exists in *Taxi*, where the marginalised have changed from heroes to victims. They are now the African and Latin American immigrants who arrived in Spain in the 1980s, but also people with drug addictions and members of the LGBTI+ community. In aesthetic terms, while in *Faster, Faster* Saura sought to reflect Spanish society and Madrid in the 1980s in a realistic way,

in *Taxi* he portrays the capital in the 1990s with an approach which, although anchored in reality by the constant geographical references, uses expressive (visual and auditory) strategies to evoke a kind of urban violence in a futuristic megalopolis. The film is the second of seven collaborations between Carlos Saura and Vittorio Storaro.⁵ The extremely sophisticated lighting, with strong contrasts and violent colours, combines with the accentuated camera angles, the editing and the frenetic soundtrack to contribute to the film's expressionistic aesthetic, creating a strange nocturnal world that echoes the violently colourful graffiti covering the city.

The reference to Expressionist cinema is aesthetic, but it is also thematic in the film's depiction of atrocities, bearing in mind Kracauer's (1973) argument that German Expressionist cinema was a precursor to Nazism. The obscurantism, intolerance and far-right ideology of "The Family", whose members conceal their monstrous, murderous personalities, is a continuation of themes closely associated with the Expressionist aesthetic, projected onto an urban nightmare setting that becomes a kind of phantasmagorical manifestation of their criminal ideology, connecting the diabolical characters to their city. On the other hand, the film's expressionistic quality also suggests the aesthetic influence of Goya (Bloch-Robin, 2013: 109-112), an influence claimed by Saura himself:⁶ the light reorganises the space, sculpting the filmed location, just like many of Goya's paintings in which the brushstrokes highlight the outlines of the figures (Bozal, 2009: 132). Goya's work has much in common with the Expressionist movements of the early 20th century, which he influenced in various ways. At the intersection of these diverse aesthetic influences, the colours and lighting in Saura's film may also evoke some of the works of the *Der Blaue Reiter* group, and more specifically, certain paintings by Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc. Fascinated by colours and contrasts, both painters used bright

chromatic variations organised on opposing surfaces that give the themes represented a violent and anti-naturalist quality. From Franz Marc's blue horses to the blue motorcycle in the Saura/Storaro collaboration, along with Goyaesque distortions and Expressionist cinema, *Taxi* belongs to the expressive constant identified by Valeriano Bozal (2009: 125-134), an aesthetic that clearly aims to reflect the violence and angst that reigned in Spain in the period when the film was made.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE CITY SPACE

While the characterisation of city spaces in his films evolved over time, the city is always depicted as a hostile place that ultimately rejects and destroys the protagonists, while also operating in the first two films in an antithetical binary with peripheral spaces. In *The Delinquents*, the urban space plays a prominent role as it is present throughout the story, alternating quite regularly with the peripheral space. Of the film's total duration of 75 minutes, 33 take place in the city centre. The film begins with one of the delinquents robbing a blind woman selling lottery tickets for the National Spanish Organization for Blind People, followed by a long digression that presents the protagonists' living conditions on the city outskirts. From this point on, the story alternates between the centre and the periphery right up until the final sequence of the bullfight.

The city centre is characterised by the omnipresence of crowds: the Legazpi market,⁷ filmed with alternating high-angle and low-angle shots, is a seething pit in which the workers are slaves, while the Santiago Bernabéu stadium looms menacingly in the background. The crowd rushes to the doors of the stadium like a dehumanised mass in a Francoist version of the Roman bread and circuses. The city is also associated with high noise levels: roaring car engines, shouting and honking horns, in an occasionally unbearable saturation of the soundtrack that activates the off-screen space,

reinforcing the aggressive nature of the metropolis. Initially, the characters claim possession of Madrid to roam its streets freely, albeit only the working-class neighbourhoods. The city seems to accept the presence of the delinquents, and even to welcome them into its crowded, overpopulated, noisy and chaotic spaces (the El Rastro flea market, for example). The delinquents take advantage of the hustle and bustle to commit their petty crimes with impunity. In narrative terms, the film could be interpreted as an attempt by inhabitants of the periphery to conquer the city centre, represented symbolically by the bullring. Indeed, the members of the group all share this one goal. At the same time, the suburban space to which the delinquents belong (but with which they have a dysphoric relationship), compels them to leave it, to find a way out through Juan's dream to conquer the bullfighting world.

Following the sequence in which Paco is recognised by one of his victims, the city seems to turn decisively against the protagonists. This hostility of the space is represented by the angry crowd that chases Paco and forces him to seek refuge in the sewers, but also by the different urban aesthetic features that seem to threaten to crush him. The camera angles, the vanishing points, the long tracking shots and the deafening noises con-

Figure 1. The bullring as a synecdoche for the city





Figure 2. The connecting railways and roadways separate the spaces

tribute to this inversion of the urban space that literally seems to attack him. Then, the sewers, the city's intestines, absorb Paco, swallow him whole and "spit out" his corpse on the miserable periphery, now just one more piece of rubbish among the waste. Finally, in the last sequence, when the bullfight is over, with a hateful roar the crowd (used as a key element to represent the city) symbolically kill Juan with their booing, cursing and whistling, as the young man is unable to deliver the final blow to finish off the bull. In this urban space, the Madrid bullring is a synecdoche for the city itself. It serves as a symbolic centre, as although it is not actually in the centre of the city⁸ its shape can be interpreted as a representation of the metropolis and its periphery, a *hypercentre* dreamed of and longed for by the heroes who fail in their attempt to conquer it.

Only five sequences in *Faster, Faster* take place in the city, amounting to 12 minutes and 44 seconds out of the 97 minutes of the film's total length. The urban space is the setting for the opening sequence, and then for the lead-up to the film's denouement with the bank robbery, which

is the trigger for the gang's tragic fate. In aesthetic terms, the urban space seems visually distant from the peripheral district of Villaverde, where Pablo and Ángela live.⁹ The city is thus presented as far away and largely inaccessible to the protagonists, who are distanced from it by means of various aesthetic elements: obstacles (paradoxically, the roads connecting the different parts of the city seem to separate the protagonists from it), reflections on glass and the frames of car windows. This space is also depicted in opposition to the same space in *The Delinquents* because it is orderly and peaceful. However,

in both films, the city's famous monuments are conspicuously absent. The capital has been turned into a space without a heart, and thus, without a soul. This is a significant choice on Saura's part, as the bustle and noise of working-class Madrid was still there in the 1980s, but in the film the city is only depicted through its modern, peaceful, residential areas. It is also a space of order: the big modern buildings stand in neat rows and the cars seem to be carefully parked around a square with extremely limited traffic. These quiet spaces might belong to any city. There is no clearly identifiable site of Madrid shown on screen, except for the M-30 ring road, which is shown when the protagonists come to this borderline separating the urban space. The Madrid of *Faster, Faster* is thus indistinct; its modern redbrick buildings are all the same and the city looks as if it is populated entirely by a docile middle class. The working class no longer seems to form part of this monolithic, soulless city.

In *Taxi*, the excessively orderly, controlled city of 1980 has been transformed fifteen years later

into a wild and menacing jungle in which those nostalgic for the order of the Franco regime attempt to restore it by oppressing the marginalised, who are thus doubly victimised: once by society, which confines them to the city's dirtiest, most isolated corners, and a second time by the extreme violence of the neo-fascist groups. As was the case in *Faster, Faster*, the protagonists seem to be hemmed in by the metallic structures of the cars and the daunting reflections of the buildings

on their car windows. However, the lighting and the colours of the urban space, contrasting with the darkness of the night, give *Taxi* an almost fantastical, infernal dimension. The martial beats of Diego Carrasco's score take over the drums, mixing with the noise of the city to give the urban space a rhythmic quality, bringing it to life with a frantic pulse that is both visual and auditory.

In quantitative terms, *Taxi* is the film in which the urban space dominates the screen most. The historic city is shown right from the opening credits. A long, masterful tracking shot begins the film, panning down from the top of the Metropolis Building to the Grassy Building with its rotunda lit up, then to the bright lights of the Gran Vía, and finally to a taxi and the hands of the driver, her long red fingernails drumming on the door of the vehicle. This shot establishes a connection between the city—using one of its main streets, the Gran Vía, as a synecdoche—and the vehicles that fill its streets and render it threatening, with the red fingernails of Reme, a taxi driver who belongs to the neo-fascist group, hinting at the predatory savagery of the killers. The pronounced camera angle, the bright lights contrasting with the dark-



Figure 3. Reflections of the city

ness of the night, the car horns and the rumble of the traffic extending the first note of the film's recurring theme music, accompanied by martial drum rolls, establish an aesthetic paradigm that contributes to the homogeneity of the film as a whole.

In subsequent scenes, the spectator may recognise some of the city's most famous landmarks: the main streets of the capital, the Segovia Viaduct,¹⁰ or Retiro Park with its Crystal Palace and the imposing monument to King Alfonso XII that looms over the pond, which serves as the nocturnal setting for the final chase scene. The location for this last scene, in which the expressive aesthetic used by Carlos Saura reinforces the grandiose, opulent architecture of the monument, could be associated with the ideology of the killers, given that, as Bernard Bessière points out, Francoism "is a kind of military regency" in which "the aristocracy and the monarchy are by no means obsolete values" (1996: 274).

The city depicted in *Taxi* exhibits some very specific qualities that construct an aesthetically and narratively cohesive space. The urban spaces in *The Delinquents* and *Faster, Faster* are not so anchored in the landscape of Madrid and its monu-

ments. While in these first two films Saura sought to reflect each period through a realist treatment, in *Taxi*, Madrid is a futuristic megalopolis that at times even resembles a science fiction world, filled with vehicles whose incessant movements contribute to the unity of the urban space. In narrative terms, the city aids and abets the killers and clearly contributes to the execution of their victims. Throughout the film, the neo-fascists are able to commit their crimes under the protection of the different elements that make up the urban space. Bridges, viaducts, monuments and even more sordid locations such as the parking lot where “The Family” meets all seem to shelter the group and facilitate their actions, which are carried out with decisive determination with the support of all these architectural elements.

MADRID'S SUBURBS AND ENVIRONS

In *The Delinquents*, the periphery where the protagonists live and with which they identify is characterised above all by its heterogeneous nature. It is an intermediate space, neither city nor country, and yet at the same time both city and country, where shantytowns coexist with condemned buildings and new constructions. The marginalised status of the protagonists is thus represented metaphorically by the poverty and heterogeneity of their homes and by the image of the vacant lot, an emblematic space that belongs neither to the city (as it contains no construction or urban development) nor to nature (as it is contaminated by the constructions that surround it). This marginalised space is presented as separate from the city, which rejects it, but it also reflects the rootlessness of the protagonists, as most of the residents of these neighbourhoods have moved here relatively recently from elsewhere.

The vacant lots are often filled with rubbish dumped there by the city, and the characters who live in the midst of this garbage are identified with it. These suburbs are thus depicted as doomed to

be nothing more than receptacles for the city's waste. On the other hand, certain elements participate in the creation of a nostalgic space that evokes life in the country in this same space: a rooster crowing, the harmonious movements of Paco's mother throwing water over the ground, or a young woman passing by with a basket full of flowers, leading a girl by the hand, to the sound of variations on the nostalgic melody of the flamenco tune “*Al pie de un árbol sin fruto*”. This song played on a guitar becomes associated with the peripheral urban space. Nearly always extra-diegetic, it adds a sheen of nostalgia and a touch of poetry to the depiction of the city's outskirts. It also alludes to the rural (and especially Andalusian) origins of the protagonists, and to their original space, a *topos* that is introduced through the music played in the slums.

The periphery is presented with some similar features in *Faster, Faster*, but while in the earlier film the city is the centre of attraction, in *Faster, Faster* the protagonists always return to the suburbs. It is a primordial space, which metaphorically represents the status of the protagonists, who are equated with the urban waste strewn everywhere in a place contaminated by human activity. Meca and Pablo take Ángela to a vacant lot far from the city so that Pablo can teach her how to fire a gun. During her training, a kind of confrontation is established between the heroes and the industrial and domestic waste that litters the ground, reinforced by the use of a shot/reverse-shot editing technique. The protagonists also contribute to the desecration of the non-urbanised peripheral space through their fascination with destruction and the self-destructive nature of their essentially suicidal quest, as illustrated in the three sequences in which Meca sets fire to the getaway cars they use for their robberies.

The association of the protagonists with the city's waste is made particularly clear in the death of Meca, which could be compared to Paco's death in *The Delinquents*. In this sequence, the city's des-



Figure 4. Death of Meca in the dust

ecration of nature is symbolised by a monumental factory in ruins. Meca's death in front of this factory is filmed in a wide shot that frames his body as he falls in a heap. The camera freezes on an almost abstract shot in which Meca's pale shirt and dark trousers merge with the surrounding dust into a shapeless mound, like one more scrap of waste in this decaying space. However, like the film's four protagonists themselves, the periphery is ambivalent. The delinquents are not merely the waste rejected by the big city, represented by a standardised, regulated middle-class society that pushes young people like these to the margins in the same way it disposes of its garbage, polluting nature in the process. The periphery also reflects the insouciance, vitality and freedom of these youths, like the freedom of nature itself, rebellious and strong, like the wild grasses fighting to reclaim their rights over the rubble of industrial society.

In *Taxi*, the marginalised are no longer heroes but victims, and their place is no longer in the daunting and dreaded city, which shelters their aggressors under cover of night. The nocturnal wide shot that opens the sequence of the attack on an immigrant shantytown frames the slum in the

distance; a motley collection of shacks from which joyful, rhythmic Eastern music emerges under the lights of a motorway that dominates the setting. The shantytown, attacked by a gang of skinhead youths dressed in paramilitary gear and wielding baseball bats, is turned into an apocalyptic space when the attackers set it on fire under an infernal multicoloured light. The extreme violence of the attack is reinforced by the soundtrack, punctuated with the screams of the victims and the shouts of the attackers, and by the unsettling recurring drum rolls of Carrasco's score. This sequence constitutes a spatial projection of the group's discourse of hate,

which, in an amalgam of ideas typical of the far right, blames immigrants, drug addicts and gays for all of Spanish society's ills.

The La Elipa bridge, which appears in *Taxi*, is in a working-class neighbourhood located outside the symbolic boundary of the M-30 ring road. It is the place where the gang of killers murder a trans person: Calero shoots her in the mouth after humiliating her. This bridge is the same one that seemed to dishearten the protagonists in *The Delinquents*, cutting them off visually from the city rather than giving them access to it. When Saura shot his first film in 1959, he set it in a shantytown and underscored its distance from the city, while in 1996, the bridge forms part of the megalopolis.

CONCLUSION

The city of Madrid as imagined and expressed on screen by Carlos Saura over the course of nearly three decades is constructed in this trilogy of films through an initial dialectic between city and suburbs, between an exclusionary city centre that bars access to the protagonists and the outskirts where the marginalised live cut off, confined and

constrained in spaces polluted by urban waste. His last representation of the city in the 1990s is of a tentacular, phantasmagorical, merciless metropolis that leaves no room for the marginalised—not even on the periphery.

Madrid is the setting for this trilogy, but it is also a protagonist in the films, playing an active role in each story. While it can host the marginalised in its urban chaos, it seems to be identified with a ruling class or a subjugated working class while participating in the ruthless elimination of marginalised groups decried by Saura. The evolution of Saura's depiction of Madrid is of course marked by visions specific to each era, concluding with the evocation of a violent and xenophobic megalopolis that seems relevant to the city today, nearly thirty years later. But beyond the return of the far right in Spain, the trilogy evokes other extremely topical issues, such as pollution and the destruction of nature, which is linked to the forced displacement and annihilation of the city's most disadvantaged populations. ■

NOTES

- 1 This outline is partly an update of elements taken from the book *Madrid dans le cinéma de Carlos Saura* (Bloch-Robin, 2013).
- 2 Original Spanish: “*Es difícil llegar a ser alguien aquí.*” This line from the screenplay to *The Delinquents* was removed by the censors. Readers of the Directorate General of Cinematography. Readers' Report, 9 September 1959, on the second version of the script submitted to the censorship board. Ref. Archives C/36.4807. Alcalá de Henares, Ministry of Culture.
- 3 Luis Deltell stresses the point that when Saura made *The Delinquents*, he already had a highly developed theoretical understanding of cinema: “The storyboarding and subsequent editing of *The Delinquents* is thoroughly modern, and quite distinct from any American or Soviet classical approach. Carlos Saura had studied the Soviet school of montage. The professor who delivered the classes was Carlos Serrano de

Osma, a great lover of Russian silent film. However, Saura flatly refused to accept the Soviet theories of editing, or of course to adopt the approach of classical Hollywood cinematic language” (2006: 263).

- 4 It is difficult to distinguish between the original cuts made to the film and the 11 minutes of cuts made by the censors after the film's screening at Cannes.
- 5 For *Flamenco* (1995), *Taxi* (1996), *Tango* (1998), *Goya* (1999), *Io don Giovanni* (2009), *Flamenco, flamenco* (2010) and *The King of All the World* (*El rey de todo el mundo*, 2020).
- 6 Goya has been a constant aesthetic influence on Carlos Saura's work. In 1952, the filmmaker shot Madrid from San Isidro Park with the intention of making a montage using images from Goya's *The Meadow of San Isidro* (1788) and *A Pilgrimage to San Isidro* (1820-1823). Throughout his filmography he references Goya in numerous films, and in 1999 he directed *Goya in Bordeaux* (*Goya en Burdeos*), a biopic on the painter that evokes and represents his work in many different ways.
- 7 The Legazpi market was one of the starting points for the project. Saura wanted to direct a documentary feature film presenting the reality of Madrid and Daniel Sueiro had written several news reports on this wholesale market.
- 8 The bullring is represented on screen by two locations: the Ciudad Lineal bullring in the city's 15th district in east Madrid, and the bullring that the bullfighting apprentice longs to enter, which appears at the end of the film. The final sequence was supposed to be shot at the Vista Alegre bullring in Carabanchel, but in the end it was filmed at the Colmenar Viejo bullring.
- 9 Villaverde was the last town to be annexed by the city of Madrid, in 1954. The location is thus an urban space that was once peripheral, but that by 1980 had been part of the city for more than 25 years.
- 10 The Segovia Viaduct, nicknamed the “*Puente de los suicidas*” (“Bridge of Suicides”), located just outside Madrid's old centre, serves as the setting for a key sequence in the film. At night, “The Family” push a drug addict off the viaduct. The wide shot that shows the body falling from the structure from a sharp low

angle clearly identifies the viaduct, whose imposing concrete arches are lit up in the darkness of the city with contrasting lights.

REFERENCES

- Bazin, A. (1985 [1958]). *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma ?* Paris: Les éditions du cerf.
- Bessière, B. (1996). *Histoire de Madrid*. Paris: Fayard.
- Bloch-Robin, M. (2013). *Madrid dans le cinéma de Carlos Saura*. Los Golfos, Deprisa, deprisa et Taxi. Saint-Étienne: PUS-Grimh.
- Bloch-Robin, M. (2018). *Carlos Saura. Paroles et musique au cinéma*. Lille: Collection Arts du spectacle - Images et sons. Presses Universitaires du Septentrion.
- Bozal, V. (2009). *Pinturas negras de Goya*. Boadilla del Monte: Machado Grupo de Distribución.
- Brasó, E. (1974). *Carlos Saura*. Madrid: Taller de Ediciones Josefina Betancor.
- Deltell, L. (2006). *Madrid en el cine de la década de los 50*. Madrid: Ayuntamiento de Madrid. Área de gobierno de las artes.
- D'Lugo, M. (1991). *The films of Carlos Saura: The Practice of Seeing*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gardies, A. (1993). *L'espace au cinéma*. Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck.
- Kinder, M. (1993). *Blood cinema: the reconstruction of national identity in Spain*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kracauer, S. (1973 [1946]) *De Caligari à Hitler*. Lausanne: L'Âge d'homme.
- Lyotard, J-F. (1979). *La condition postmoderne*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.
- Ríos Carratalá, J. A. (2014). *Quinquis, maderos y picoletos: Memoria y ficción*. Seville: Editorial Renacimiento.
- Sánchez-Biosca, V. (2006). *Cine y Guerra civil española. Del mito a la memoria*. Madrid: Alianza editorial.
- Sánchez Vidal, A. (1988). *El cine de Carlos Saura*. Zaragoza: Caja de Ahorros de la Inmaculada de Aragón.

FROM MADRID TO HELL: THE CITY IN THE FILMS OF CARLOS SAURA

Abstract

Although he could not be called a Madrid filmmaker, Carlos Saura directed three films set in the city that problematise the Spanish capital as a hostile space and reflect its evolution over different periods. *The Delinquents* (Los golfos, 1959), *Faster, Faster* (Deprisa, deprisa, 1980) and *Taxi* (1996) all deal with the common theme of marginalisation and violence in Madrid, used as a synecdoche for Spanish society as a whole under the Franco regime, during Spain's transition to democracy, and in the crisis of the 1990s. This article explores the aesthetic and narrative roles of Madrid in these three films. The first two films establish a dialectic between the city and an urban periphery identified with the protagonists, who are rejected by the city centre and equated with urban waste, while the third film depicts a phantasmagorical city that has no room for the marginalised, who are persecuted and annihilated.

Key words

Carlos Saura; Madrid; Filmic Space; City and Film; *The Delinquents*; *Faster, Faster*; *Taxi*.

Author

Marianne Bloch-Robin is a lecturer at the Sorbonne Université in the Department of Iberian and Latin American Studies and a member of the CRIMIC research group. She holds a PhD in Hispanic and Latin American Studies and is a specialist in film music and the work of the Spanish filmmaker Carlos Saura. Although the focus of her research is mainly aesthetic and narratological, she is also interested in the historical and cultural aspects of films. She is the author of several articles published in scholarly journals. Her latest book on Carlos Saura, co-edited with Nancy Berthier, titled *Carlos Saura o el arte de heredar*, was published by Shangrila in 2021.

Contacto: marianne.bloch-robin@sorbonne-universite.fr

Article reference

Bloch-Robin, M. (2023). From Madrid to Hell: The City in the Films of Carlos Saura. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 36, 23-36.

DE MADRID AL INFIERNO: LA CIUDAD EN EL CINE DE CARLOS SAURA

Resumen

Carlos Saura, a pesar de no ser un director que se puede calificar de madrileño, dirigió tres películas ambientadas en la ciudad de Madrid que problematizan la capital española como espacio hostil y reflejan su evolución en distintas épocas. *Los golfos* (1959), *Deprisa deprisa* (1980) y *Taxi* (1996) tratan un tema común, la marginalidad y la violencia en la capital del país, sinécdoque de la sociedad española en su conjunto durante el franquismo, en la transición española y en la crisis de los años noventa. En este artículo, nos interesamos por los papeles estéticos y narrativos del espacio madrileño en las tres películas. Los dos primeros *opus* establecen una dialéctica entre la urbe y sus alrededores a los que se identifican los protagonistas rechazados por el centro y asimilados a los deshechos, mientras que la tercera película modela una ciudad fantasmagórica que no deja ningún resquicio a la marginalidad, que persigue y aniquila.

Palabras clave

Carlos Saura; Madrid; espacio cinematográfico; ciudad en el cine; *Los golfos*; *Deprisa, deprisa*; *Taxi*.

Autora

Marianne Bloch-Robin es profesora titular en el departamento de Estudios ibéricos y latinoamericanos de la Facultad de Letras de Sorbonne Université y miembro del grupo de investigación CRIMIC. Es doctora en Estudios Hispánicos e Hispanoamericanos, especialista en la música en el cine y en la obra del cineasta español Carlos Saura. El enfoque de su reflexión es principalmente estético y narratológico, pero se interesa también por los aspectos históricos y culturales de las obras cinematográficas. Es autora de numerosos artículos publicados en revistas científicas. Su último libro publicado sobre Carlos Saura y codirigido con Nancy Berthier se titula *Carlos Saura o el arte de heredar* y fue publicado en la editorial Shangrila en 2021.

Contacto: marianne.bloch-robin@sorbonne-universite.fr

Referencia de este artículo

Bloch-Robin, M. (2023). De Madrid al infierno: la ciudad en el cine de Carlos Saura. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 36, 23-36.

Edita / Published by



EL
CAMAROTE
DE PERE
JULES

Licencia / License



ISSN 1885-3730 (print) / 2340-6992 (digital) DL V-5340-2003 WEB www.revistaatalante.com MAIL info@revistaatalante.com

