

(UN)KNOWN MADRID IN THE CINEMA OF CARLOS VERMUT. PARODY, IDENTITIES, DISTRICTS, AND EDGES*

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INTRODUCTION

Kevin Lynch proposes that the construction of a city's image requires several essential urban and landscape elements among which the most important are: "districts", "edges", and "landmarks" (Lynch, 2014: 16). Thus, it is no surprise that cinematographic representations of specific cities form a sometimes obvious and explicit cannon transmitted by specific "landmarks" or places of reference—such as, for instance, the Eiffel tower, the Coliseum, and the Statue of Liberty—that configure said city's public image or what Lynch (2014:17-17) terms its *imageability*. However, there is also a deeper, socially based, literary and cultural cannon relating certain film genres with particular spaces, as is the case with cine noir and San Francisco, or the American frontier lands of the so-called Wild West and Westerns (Fernández Santos, 2014). Thanks to these visual icons, and to the characters peopling these stories, a "collective territorial worldview" is created (Gámir Ortueta and Manuel Valdés, 2007: 169). In the case

of Madrid, this worldview is established through images of Puerta de Alcalá and Gran Vía and either their direct literary environs or filtered via the medium of farce (Ríos Carratalá, 2002; Castro de Paz and Cerdán, 2011). Indeed, from early films such as in *Clarita y Peladilla van al football* [Clarita and Peladilla Go to the Football] (Benito Perujo, 1914) to the works of Pedro Almodóvar, the farcical has been a defining feature of films set in Spain's capital. A good example of this is the homage to *La revoltosa* (Ruperto Chapí, 1897) in *Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls Like Mom* (Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón, 1980). In fact, the great success of *Peladilla*, Spain's answer to *Charlot*, lies in how he transformed Charles Chaplin into a pure-bred Madrileño attending one of the first 'derbis' (a Spanish league football match) in Spanish history (Vales Fernández, 1997). Thanks to these strategies relating the spatial and cultural environments it is easy for us to identify particular films with their cities: San Francisco with *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958), Paris with *Irma la Douce* (Billy Wilder, 1963), and Madrid with

Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown (*Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, Pedro Almodóvar, 1988).

Carlos Vermut (Madrid, 1980) takes a radically different approach to the representation Spain's capital. Three of his feature-length films and one of his shorts are set in Madrid, however, this director chooses to avoid the urban landmarks and literary tropes of traditional Spanish cinema—farce and, instead, constructs an urban representation of the city completely at odds with expectations. In Vermut's cinema, spatial clichés are diluted and although his characters live in central “districts” and confess to liking the city, they in no way either evoke or bring to mind the characteristic model of Madrid's previous on-screen representations. Of course, although it is possible to identify the urban settings used in this director's work, he shies away from showing us the most recognizable locations, those “landmarks” referred to by Lynch. The streets, the homes, and the bars, where the action develops could be, in principle, located anywhere, in any city. Nevertheless, the director's choice is far from irrelevant: Madrid functions as a recipient where discourses about identity can take place while at the same time, by playing with foreign references, the director presents a new reading of the city's spaces. Intertextuality, a particular trademark of this director, enables us to travel from the Spanish capital to dark, and/or exotic locations, offering a subtext comprising elements that the audience must interpret in order to find their meaning:

The thousand different ways of acting and living in a defined—and defining—society, come together in a constant play between the utopian and the multiple, possible factual realities [...]. This is most clearly apparent in the context of cultural hybridisation (due to immigration, for example), but it also happens in more or less homogenised spaces as, in principle, Madrid is for a Madrileño (Del Río Castañeda, 2020: 24).

It is precisely from this academic perspective that analyses of Carlos Vermut's cinema tend to proceed, above all, recurring to concepts of intertextuality—due to the continual appearance of references to other cinema, music and literature in his films (Barranco, 2015; Bustos Segarra, 2016)—and cultural hybridisation—because of the *tromp l'oeil* created by Vermut's characteristic mixing of Spanish and Japanese identities (Gutiérrez, 2019). However, thus far, there has been no attempt address the use of space and location in Vermut's cinematography, specifically in his representation of Madrid.

Vermut sets his films on Spanish territory introducing insights into the meaning of Spain and its customs both in the dialogue and through his plots. We find ourselves in familiar territory: the homes of the Spanish middle classes and Madrid's streets but with the insertion of references to the unknown that transport us into mysterious and sinister realms. Thus, we find two distinct readings of space: one, more real, defined by known places with which we can identify, and another more fantastical—and sometimes terrible—which emerges from the precise way that the director decides to tell his story.

The cultural anthropologist, Edward Hall (1995) once said that to explain the artistic quality of photographic images, we need the presence of two apparently similar concepts: visual conventions and conventional vision. Vermut's cinematography uses visual conventions to bring us closer to his characters and their stories, but they are also there to be reinterpreted so creating a subtext rich in metaphors that succeeds in sealing Vermut's identity as an artist and impregnating his work with his own personal style. Furthermore, due to the lack of typically recognisable elements of the city, the importance of space in his films is, in the end, greater than we might initially suspect. He draws the audience nearer to his characters and stories through his more conventional uses of space—showing us surroundings that while well-known are not entirely well-defined—and this, in

turn allows the fantastical element contained in the second reading to take flight. Thus, the multiple layers of interpretation enabled by his plots ultimately distance them from that simple, conventional vision.

Carlos Vermut's work is characterised by, among other things, the telling of extraordinary stories in environments and frameworks that seem every day, and in many cases, would be best described as domestic. His characters roam the city, go to bars, cafes, and interact inside their homes. Each one has their own problems enabling the audience to relate to them through their every-day-ness. Nevertheless, the director takes a story-telling perspective that, in each case, produces a fantastical tale, one of science fiction, with superheroes, or magic; a tale that is sometimes dark, often tragic. Speaking about his attraction to the boundary between reality and fiction, Vermut comments: "I enjoy the point at which the fiction we have become accustomed to confronts reality; I find it fascinating. When a person who happens to be a superhero suddenly responds realistically," (Numerocero, 2012). This duality, the coexistence of the credible and the incredible in this Madrileño director's work brings it a special quality: his narrative method blurs the singularity of cinematographic genres fusing several meanwhile, at the same time, presenting us with everyday contexts in which the city has a central role.

For this analysis we have chosen four films by Carlos Vermut: the short *Maquetas* [Models] (2009) and three features: *Diamond Flash* (2011), *Magical Girl* (2014), and *Manticore* (Manticora, 2022). The feature film, *Quién te cantará* [Who Will Sing to You] (2018), and various other shorts and video clips will not be considered here, nor will we examine Vermut's extensive work as a comic book artist. Additionally, this article will address primarily the representation of Madrid's external spaces thus, interiors will only be considered where particularly relevant. The four films chosen here all contain multiple plotlines

and narratives, structured as what McKee (2009) terms "miniplots", and while all are filmed in Madrid, their main focus is not the metropolis itself but rather social and ethical problems—in some cases real and in others, imaginary. Moreover, the last two features discussed here, deal with themes that are unquestionably controversial and disturbing.

We feel that each of the four works selected for this discussion individually provide a potential avenue through which to explore Vermut's aesthetic treatment of urban space. The first two, *Maquetas* and *Diamond Flash*, do so through parody, where this is understood as a comedic strategy with sometimes serious intent. The remaining two features, *Magical Girl* and *Manticore*, on the other hand, offer a re-reading of Madrid as a city of "edges" and "districts" following the model proposed by the engineer and urban planner, Kevin Lynch.

PARODY: MAQUETAS AND DIAMOND FLASH

Last century, in the nineteen eighties, Linda Hutcheon, explored parody's powerful attraction for postmodern artists. For them, this particular literary device seemed to offer both a critical fascination as well as a creative driving force and the first two of Carlos Vermut's works considered here can be understood as the legacy of this postmodern trend. *Maquetas* and *Diamond Flash* are, first and foremost, although not uniquely, parodies of other texts: horror films and those of the superhero genre. These parodies, however, are not characterised by direct mockery, but rather by a disquieting "distancing":

Parody, then, in its ironic "trans-contextualisation" and inversion, is repetition with difference. A critical distance is assumed between the background text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signalled through irony. But this irony can be playful as well as belittling; it can be critically constructive as well as destructive. The

pleasure of irony's parody comes not from humour in particular but from the degree of engagement of the reader in the intertextual "bouncing" between complicity and distance (Hutcheon, 1985: 14).

Maquetas, filmed in 2009, is a short, fake documentary. It was awarded the judges' grand prize at the 7th Notodofilmfest and, according to the director, Nacho Vigalondo, who headed the judging panel that year, the film won because it "laughs at and takes a swipe at sentimentality; because it laughs at us," (El Mundo, 2009). In essence, the film is a collection of testimonies from people in various locations all of whom experienced a traumatic event in which they lost something or someone. Throughout this short film, Vermut re-uses—that is, he parodies—the tone and structure of a TV report. One participant, a man, tells of how he used to play in the Boadilla football team and that on the day of his tragedy he took a bus to Puerta Bonita (a well-known educational centre in the city) to lead a training session with some local kids. While this character is telling his story, we get a view from the San Isidro bridge showing us the banks of the Manzanares covered in snow. After this man, two women speak, and we learn both have gone through similar traumas: one lost a husband, the other a daughter, in inexplicable circumstances. Finally, the enigma is resolved: in all cases, tragedy was unleashed due to an attack by some kind of gigantic monster: a beast in the style of King Kong or Godzilla. The last scenes of the film show a city made of card—a model—being ravaged by a three-headed dragon breathing fire from its mouth obliterating buildings and other structures in its path. The final frame displays a message: "Every time a gigantic monster attacks a city, thousands of people become anonymous victims. This is a homage to each and every one of them."

The Madrid of *Maquetas* in no way resembles that of previous cinematographic representations; it is not the Madrid of farce, rather it is a vision of Madrid that directly references the model it

aims to parody: that of a North American or Japanese city devastated in a gigantic-monster movie. Vermut could have chosen to decontextualise his story completely; however, he does quite the reverse. He locates one of his characters on the baroque San Isidro bridge, something that Kevin Lynch would term a "landmark", that is, a highly recognisable, visible place (Lynch, 2014). Thus, the director clearly wants to tell us that his story is set in Spain's capital, yet, neither the plot nor the tone is what the audience expects in a film about Madrid, leading to this disquieting "distancing" we mentioned earlier.

In his first feature film, *Diamond Flash*, Vermut revisits parody as a strategy. The film contains several different stories joined by a common thread: the mysterious superhero for whom the film is named. The film's production budget was a mere 20,000 Euros, which the director once commented caused him "hell on earth" and lead him to think he "would never make a film ever again" (Medina, 2017). *Diamond Flash* tells of the conflicts faced by five women: Violeta (Eva Llorach), whose daughter has disappeared; Elena (Ángela Villar) who is in love with the superhero (Miquel Insua) but immersed in a toxic relationship with her abusive boyfriend; Juana (Ángela Boix), whose job it is to detain and look after a group of kidnapped girls in a hotel on the outskirts of Madrid; Lola (Rocío León), Juana's girlfriend who is intent on avenging her missing sister; and Enriqueta (Victoria Radonic), leader of a criminal gang who spends her days in a bar talking to strangers. Interiors are not the central topic of the present discussion; however, it is worth noting this last space is recognisable as Madrid's Picnic bar in Malasaña.

The film, shot in Madrid, mostly comprises interior scenes: "his [Vermut's] friend's homes and almost nowhere else," (CENDEAC, 2013). The exteriors show the hustle and bustle of the capital's streets overlooked by its characteristic balconies. According to the Madrid Film Office, filming took place in Madrid's Central district although we

can also identify several streets in the Arganzuela district (Martínez Ros, 2014). During the search for her daughter, we see Violeta at a bus stop and recognise several of Madrid's characteristic EMT vehicles as they pass by. We also watch Violeta crossing one of the bridges in the Madrid Río park, right next to where one of *Maquetas's* fake interviews was shot. These elements redirect us, inevitably to the streets of Madrid, but not as much to Lynch's "landmarks" as to his "districts", that is, those places where domestic or family life takes place. It is here that Vermut's brand of representation becomes even more intriguing since far from evoking the staging of farce or indeed, the dissident cinema of the nineteen fifties, it presents Madrid's most distinctive, modern districts. Thus, "districts" lose the meanings they have traditionally been assigned in Spanish literature and cinema allowing them to evolve into other spaces.

What Vermut achieves in *Diamond Flash* is a film that itself becomes a self-reflection on the superhero genre and, above all, the ways in which Madrid is represented. It is about examining "art as art", examining the form itself, and this, according to Linda Hutcheon, is precisely one of the revelations of parody as an aesthetic strategy: "Parody can be used as a self-reflexive technique to point to art as art, but also to art as a phenomenon inescapably linked to its aesthetic and even social past," (Hutcheon, 1993: 8). In *Diamond Flash*, Vermut talks about Madrid and its traditional districts, but at the same time, the film distances itself from the prevailing customs concerning the representation of such locations in the Spanish capital.

"EDGES" AND "DISTRICTS": MAGICAL GIRL AND MANTICORE

In 2014, Carlos Vermut's, *Magical Girl* premiered; a film that, to date, is his most highly acclaimed. The film won the Concha de Oro and the Concha de Plata for best director at the San Sebastián Inter-

national Film Festival. It was nominated for seven Goya awards, winning one for the Best Leading Actress, and eight Feroz prizes, of which it won four: once again winning Best Leading Actress in addition to Best Supporting Actor (José Sacristán); Best screenplay; and Best poster art. Here too we have a film with several interrelated storylines: that of Luis (Luis Bermejo), a father who wants to give his sick daughter, Alicia (Lucía Pollán), an anime inspired costume but lacks the money to buy it; that of Bárbara (Bárbara Lennie), a young woman with psychiatric problems who finds herself driven to do something she doesn't want to for money; and that of Damián (José Sacristán), a teacher who has just been released from prison. As its director readily admits, this is a film in which blackmail has a central role: in this mesh of interwoven stories, several characters find themselves forced to resort to some form of financial coercion (Cursos de verano Complutense, 2015). The film was shot in the Community of Madrid and Segovia, although with regards to the latter, the only location used was the old prison, La Cárcel, currently a museum and cultural centre. Within Madrid, filming took place in the Central district, as well as the Salamanca, La Latina, and Usera districts (Madrid Film Office).

In *Magical Girl* the audience can distinguish the social status of the film's characters through the city districts they move around or live in. Thus, while Bárbara has a home in the comfortable Salamanca neighbourhood, Luis has a tiny flat at the entrance to his building in La Latina. The bar (Bar Villablanca), where Luis and Damián meet at the end of the film, and the garage where we see Damián's friend giving him a gun are locations in Usera. Luis travels on public transport, Bárbara by car, and Damián walks everywhere. The interior decoration of the characters' homes is also indicative of their social differences: Luis is unemployed, and his dining room is very modest in comparison to that of Bárbara and her husband, meanwhile, Damián, alone and recently out

of prison, lives in sparsely furnished rooms devoid of any decoration.

As in his other work, this Madrileño director avoids showing us any of the standard urban or scenic “landmarks” to clue us into any specific “districts” and, once again, these spaces appear in tones that are entirely uncharacteristic of the city’s representation in popular cinema-farce. As we mentioned, the locations through which Vermut’s characters pass reflect the city’s social strata. Bárbara seeks the help of her friend, Ava, who lives in a luxury chalet on the city’s outskirts, and eventually ends up at Oliver Zoco’s mansion in Castillo de Viñuelas in the North of Madrid (Tres Cantos). Luis roams the streets of La Latina, goes to public spaces like the bookshop or the bar underneath his building. He crosses paths with Bárbara only when he decides to rob the jeweller’s shop that happens to be situated on the ground floor of her apartment block on Claudio Coello street. Damián, starting life afresh after getting out of prison, follows Luis as he goes about his daily routine (bookstore, home) and finally settles scores with him in a very traditional Spanish bar (Bar Villablanca). In this way, these Madrid districts define the film’s characters as much as they provide their contexts and, at the same time, help to justify the events that happen to them.

Perhaps the most meaningful space in the film is the one we never actually see: “the black lizard’s room”, in Zoco’s mansion on the outskirts of Madrid. The mansion is separated from the urban sprawl by an “edge”, a green boundary comprising a forest of holm oaks. Shot in Castillo de Viñuelas, this location is the setting for, perhaps, the film’s most relevant monologue concerning Spanish identity; the baroque paintings of nobility adorning the walls of the mansion’s principal room giving it additional emphasis. Against this backdrop, the sadistic pimp, Oliver Zoco first asks Bárbara whether she enjoys bullfighting—she claims not to—before continuing his speech:

I don’t much like it either. But it’s curious that it should be Spain where bullfighting is particularly popular. Can you guess why Spain is a country in eternal conflict? Because we can’t decide whether we’re a rational or an emotional country. The Nordic countries, for example, are cerebral countries. However, the Arabs and the Latinos have accepted their place on the side of passion without a guilt complex. They, to a man, know which side they are on. Spaniards, are balancing, teetering, right in the middle. That’s how we Spaniards are, like a bullfight. And what is a bullfight? The representation of a fight between instinct and technique. Between emotion and reason. We have to accept our instincts and learn how to grapple with them as if they were a bull, so they don’t destroy us (Aquí y Allí Films, 2014).

Spoken in the mansion isolated behind its “edge”, the limiting cordon of trees, this monologue produces a distancing in the film’s representation of Madrid. The words of this dark, cruel character, Oliver, describe something popular, something Madrileño, but they invert its meaning. There is nothing there of farce, or of the kindness of the characters populating traditional, *género chico* theatre. Nevertheless, this is not the first time we are treated to such an open discussion about Spanish culture and society in this feature. Spain is present in the discussion throughout, via the city of Madrid. As Del Río Castañeda comments: “Carlos Vermut made *Magical Girl*: a feature film with an English title referencing Japanese culture, to talk about Madrid,” (2020: 21). It is ubiquitous in the film’s dialogues, from bulls to sport—as Damián notes: “not being a football fan is a mortal sin in this country,”—from the King’s speeches and corruption to education cutbacks. We also find an exploration of sociocultural issues through food, as when Ava allows Bárbara to see her without bringing churros, or Bárbara’s choice whether to drink a coffee liqueur or a rioja wine. In addition, there are references to specific cultural icons. For example, where Luis holds back from selling his

copy of the book *La Colmena* [The Hive] because it was written by the Noble laureate, Camilo José Cela; or alternatively in the choice of text he uses to extort money from Bárbara: the Spanish Constitution. Then, of course, there is the film's theme music, *Niña de fuego* [Fire Girl] sung by Manolo Caracol which, interestingly, has given its name to the film in several other countries so underlining its Spanish subtext and, indeed, highlighting it against the international connotations of its English title, *Magical Girl*. Madrid materialises in the film's dialogues and images, but it always keeps its distance. We see the city through the windows of Luis's home in a scene reminiscent of the compositions more characteristic of Vermut's short films: the individual with their back to us, facing the metropolis. Likewise, we find direct references to certain meeting places such as Humilladero plaza, the Pedro Salinas Library in Puerta de Toledo, or the San Gabriel Hospital. What is more, we also recognise real locations such as the bookshop, Librería Juanito in General Vara del Rey plaza and the bar, Taberna de la Copla. Nevertheless, the most recognisable public place in the film, is one of very little cultural or touristic interest: the pedestrian bridge over the M-30 motorway in the Fuencarral-El Pardo district which also brings to mind certain scenes in *Diamond Flash* during the search for Violeta's daughter. However, "as it is for the characters, the audiences' understanding of the Madrid represented is incomplete, partial, and full of holes," (Del Río Castañeda, 2020: 24).

In this work, Spanish culture and Madrileño tradition co-exist harmoniously with continuous references to Asian culture; a feature that provides the alternative second reading of the film. For the most part, these references seem to pivot around Alicia's world: her nickname among her peers is Yukiko (those of her friends being Makoto and Sakura); her room is plastered with *anime* cartoons; her theme tune is the song *Haru Wa Sara Sara* by Yoko Nagayama; and she wants a Megumi 'Magical Girl' costume, however, we also find

them in the film's other two storylines. Bárbara's dress sense, for instance, is very specific—no collars and baggy trousers—clearly inspired by Japanese styles and she even uses a parasol when she visits Ava. Similarly, at one point in the film, she cuts herself in the middle of her forehead in a way that reminds us of the gemstone worn by the manga character, *Sailor Moon* (Naoko Takeuchi, 1991) and, just before she meets Luis, she drinks a cocktail of that name. In the same way, when Damián goes into a grocery store whose Chinese owner speaks perfect Spanish, he insists on being told how to say "thanks" in Mandarin.

Vermut plays with the duality of two distinct cultural identities to distinguish the two ways of understanding the same story. On one hand, there is the social drama centred on a father's need to satisfy the desires of his terminally ill daughter and on the other, a film about a magical woman (who cannot get sick) who is saved by her guardian angels, as Ava calls Bárbara and Damián. It is a fight between the fire girl and the magical girl; a battle right off the pages of a graphic novel or comic book. It is also a film combining a Spanish reality with a Japanese tale. From these two readings, comes a subtext about the duality present in Vermut's cinema in which the city functions as the context, but, at the same time, as a tool to reinforce the reality that brings us closer to his characters. It is for this reason that Vermut finds it unnecessary to show Madrid as a splendid city full of "landmarks", great avenues, well-known monuments, and art; rather it is a location that acts as a nexus for Spanish identity. The city works precisely because it is known by its least familiar images, by its everyday existence, and in the daily life of its inhabitants: by its visual conventions. Thus, we are shown a space that the audience is both ignorant of and familiar with at the same time.

Manticore is the most complex of Carlos Vermut's works so far and some of the issues with which it deals are so sinister and degraded that

their discussion is highly problematic. The film's subjects include paedophilia, abuse, and suicide—or attempted suicide—themes that, of course, never appear in Madrileño cinema-farce. In this film, the director employs several “landmarks” such as the Prado Museum and the Spanish Film Archive. However, the way in which this is done is far removed from the aesthetic of farce where these locations would provide a stereotyped, easily recognizable representation of Madrid. Carlos Vermut uses each of these two “landmarks” only once during the film, to demonstrate how Julián, the film's central character, tries to fit into the commonplace, or at least, normality. These two visits to “landmarks” have great narrative significance. The sequence in which Julián meets his girlfriend, Diana, at the Doré cinema (Spanish Film Archive) and the city-centre strolls taken by the couple are reminiscent of the work of Jonás Trueba, another Madrileño director whose films attempt a move away from cinema-farce. Here, the Spanish Film Archive is not presented as an authentic or traditional location but rather, simply as a place to meet. On the other hand, when Julián visits the Prado Museum, particularly his tour of the gallery containing Goya's ‘Black paintings’, despite the fact that the Prado is one of the most visited museums in Spain, this is not a moment for sightseeing but an opportunity to step into Julián's universe: that of the artist who creates monsters in the solitude of his home. Antonio Buero Vallejo wrote a few lines of verse dedicated to these works by the Aragonese painter which could very well be applied to the gargoyles and manticores created by Julián: “Now the gloomy twilight/ devours all colour/ daubed on the dirty plaster” (Buero Vallejo, 1994: 20). Far from being a visit to an urban “landmark”, this trip to the art gallery seems designed to thrust us into the darkness that developed in the homes of both Goya and Julián.

The film narrates the story of a young, single man, Julián, who designs avatars for video

games. Julián's particular project is creating a three-dimensional computer model of a monster something like the ancient manticore, a mythological chimera with a human head on the body of a quadruped animal. One day, while he is working, Julián has to save his ten-year-old neighbour from an accidental fire. After this encounter, Julián gets on with his life; he tries to complete his monstrous creation and also meets a woman, Diana, with whom he establishes a relationship. However, Julián harbours a compulsion to paedophilia which leads him to make a 3D model of his young neighbour. Eventually, Julián decides to leave his home and his neighbourhood to live on the outskirts of Madrid so as to be free of temptation. However, the company he works for discovers the virtual avatar of his young neighbour and Julián is fired. When Diana also finds out about Julián's compulsions she is horrified and leaves him. As a result, Julián goes to his neighbour's home, manages to trick the little boy into letting him in and then drugs the child. However, at the point when it seems Julián is about to abuse, or kill, the youngster, he throws himself off the balcony. The film ends with Diana caring for Julián who, although he survives his self-defenestration, is now quadriplegic—a strange kind of manticore.

Throughout, the film entirely avoids any kind of scenic or rose-tinted vision of the city; apart from those already mentioned there are no “landmarks”, and even the “districts” depicted are far from pleasant and welcoming. Madrid is, like the plot, dark and violent. The film's clear intention is to demonstrate how Julián abandons the centre of the city, that is, his “district”—and the city's “landmarks”—to place himself at the “edge” of the metropolis. He flees from his desires—which he finds next-door to his Madrileño home—and withdraws to the outskirts beyond the massive city ring-road which comprises a protective border or, in Lynch's words, “edge”. Julián himself is aware of the need to place himself, to isolate himself, at the very limits of the city.

As in Vermut's first films, Madrid and the continual references to its streets and neighbourhoods become the substrate of plausibility on which they story rests. Thus, Vermut uses the Madrileño essence not as a typical, commonplace representation but as an anchor to tether what amounts to his most unsettling plot to date. The most frightening aspect of this film is that Julián could be any citizen, any Madrileño.

TO CONCLUDE

The duality and the metaphors of Vermut's cinematography are, as Hall might say, coherent statements containing sufficient information to read what is being explained through experience itself, requiring time and an understanding beyond visual conventions in order to process their true meanings. All this occurs at the deepest levels of reading. At first, the director lays out a simple premise: a number of stories intermingle in Madrid, a well-known location, and a set of characters we can identify with. In this way, we get an initial impression of the story that is both credible and realistic. Yet, the intertextuality generated by references to other cultures and aesthetics—above all those of Japan—enables us to interpret these same stories from another perspective. This in turn, affects our perception of the film's genre giving us the impression that we are dealing with science fiction, a fantasy film, or one about superheroes. Vermut's storytelling technique is key to developing this, at times, parodic tone.

In the films discussed here, the majority of scenes take place indoors—nearly always inside homes or other domestic spaces. It is here that we get to know more about the living standards of a character or come to identify with what they eat or cook, recognise behaviours and aspects of everyday life. The interiors of various Madrid locations such as bars and bookshops, the city's streets with their bus stops and walkways, also bring us closer to Vermut's characters—through a

shared identity—and this enables us to empathise with them and feel their conflicts with them. In terms of exteriors, as we have seen, Carlos Vermut avoids the use of recognisable “landmarks” showing us instead, a city of “districts” and “edges”.

Depicted in this way, Madrid becomes the anchor that provides credibility to Vermut's stories and gives a realism to his characters and their situations. The metropolis has no protagonism as landscape, but rather as a complement to underline our closeness to Vermut's characters. This is why these films contain no “landmarks”; that is, with the exception of the Prado Museum, we do not see any of Madrid's great monuments or tourist draws. The city is constructed as a known place through the use of certain elements of visual convention, but entirely without recourse to cliché. Thus, Vermut's use of visual conventions never falls into the repetition of farce, in contrast, it generates a new way of representing Madrid.

This is, in essence, the greatest achievement of Carlos Vermut's cinematography with regards to the treatment of space: his vision of the city of Madrid is powerfully distanced from farce and popular cultural images. Without doubt, Vermut is a director with a powerful personal vision of his hometown, and, in contrast to other cinematographers, he neither uses the tropes of farce nor reinterprets them. Quite the opposite, this Madrileño director draws on parody as well as the concepts of “edges” and “districts” to describe a city that is recognisable but at the same time mysterious, even sinister at times. His is an (un) known Madrid. ■

NOTES

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(UN)KNOWN MADRID IN THE CINEMA OF CARLOS VERMUT. PARODY, IDENTITIES, DISTRICTS AND EDGES

Abstract

This article addresses the representation of Madrid in the cinema of Carlos Vermut (Madrid, 1980). To this end, we consider four of his films: *Maquetas* (2009), *Diamond Flash* (2011), *Magical Girl* (2014) and *Manticore* (2022). This work analyses Vermut's use of duality and intertextuality, incorporating references to Spanish identity and Asian culture, to produce a two distinct readings of his works. Madrid serves as a visual convention that reinforces the first reading and allows us to approach and empathize with Vermut's characters while the second reading enriches the discourse through genre-modifying strategies that bring about a more fantastical re-interpretation of the story. In two of the films explored here, the filmmaker uses parody as a formal strategy. In all four, the director avoids the use of "landmarks"—in Lynch's words—and avoids recurring to traditional cinema-farce. Vermut shows us a recognizable city, but one that is also completely different from its traditional representations in Spanish Cinema.

Key words

Carlos Vermut; *Diamond Flash*; *Magical Girl*; *Manticore*; *Maquetas*; Madrid; Locations; Filmic space.

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MADRID (DES)CONOCIDA EN EL CINE DE CARLOS VERMUT. PARODIA, IDENTIDADES, BARRIOS Y BORDES

Resumen

En este artículo se aborda la presencia de la ciudad de Madrid en el cine de Carlos Vermut (Madrid, 1980). Para ello, se realiza un recorrido por cuatro de sus películas: *Maquetas* (2009), *Diamond Flash* (2011), *Magical Girl* (2014) y *Manticora* (2022). Se analizan teniendo en cuenta la dualidad e intertextualidad que utiliza el director para aportar distintas lecturas a su texto, incorporando referencias a la identidad española y a la cultura asiática. Esto hace que la ciudad sirva como convención visual para reforzar una primera lectura, la que nos permite empatizar con los personajes y sentir cercanía, mientras que la segunda enriquece el discurso a través de un enfoque que modifica el género cinematográfico y aporta un ingrediente fantástico y lejano a la interpretación de la historia. En dos de estos films el cineasta utiliza la parodia como estrategia de formal. En los cuatro, el director renuncia a utilizar «hitos» urbanísticos, en palabras de Lynch, y no repite los modelos castizos del sainete. Vermut dibuja así una ciudad reconocible pero completamente distinta a la representación tradicional que hace de ella la cinematografía previa española.

Palabras clave

Carlos Vermut; *Diamond Flash*; *Magical Girl*; *Manticora*; *Maquetas*; Madrid; Localizaciones; Espacio fílmico.

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