

## **REALISM AND STYLIZATION. MAN AND WILDERNESS IN SPANISH FILM OF THE 60'S AND 70'S**

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In this article I will analyze three sequence types or space motifs which I have identified through my examination of 1950's and 1960's film. I hope I can be excused for the lack of elegance of the terms employed here, but I have sought if for the emphasis to be on the images and not on the proposal of new terminology, which would exceed the framework for this essay.

The films chosen, *La busca* (Angelino Fons, 1967), *Surcos* (José Antonio Nieves Conde, 1951), and *Cómicos* (Juan Antonio Bardem, 1954), are usually classified within Spanish critical realism. This was an aesthetic and social movement, although less well-known, similar to those of other cinemas of the period: precursors like John Ford of *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) or some of the early works of Jean Renoir, Italian neorealism, etc. However, in this article I will attempt to show that in the Spanish case, there is a certain originality which makes it difficult to so directly include Spanish film within that realist track.

The proposed sequence types create a certain chain of inter-relationships which I will describe below. I have chosen them for their aesthetic, their mise en scene, and their specific importance within the narrative, which leads to an innovative identification of the spectator in the period, and which, by the way, is hard to find in contemporary Spanish film. In this sense, these space motifs are missing from current postmodern cinematography, perhaps because they are useless in purely commercial films. Nevertheless, they do show something which I believe has disappeared from current Spanish cinema, and which Jesús González Requena has called the ignition point (*punto de ignición*<sup>1</sup>), and which has to do with an

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on this concept, see: González Requena, Jesús. "Frente al texto fílmico: el análisis, la lectura. A propósito de El manantial, de King Vidor", in J. González Requena comp. (1995), *El análisis cinematográfico. Modelos teóricos, metodologías, ejercicios*

invisible point that locates a certain spectator pleasure in the experience with the text.

### Realism and Ignition Point

As its name suggests, ignition point is something that **burns**, and perhaps there we need to see its inoperability in contemporary film in its ability to engage spectators progressively less disposed the aesthetic demands which a film might require. It is usually a point in the narrative at which the experience of the viewer becomes especially patent, because the text achieves a crystallization of his deepest emotions.

Specifically, the three above-mentioned sequence types present the ignition point in their respective films. To demonstrate this, I will reveal certain images in which man seems to rise up from a wilderness, in other words, from a "deserted, flat and solitary land" or from an "extremely cold and desolate place."<sup>2</sup> These definitions remind us of certain motifs for which realism is often understood, with realism being, as mentioned above, an aesthetic movement into which the films here analyzed do not necessarily fit.

As González Requena points out, a feeling is crystallized in the ignition point: that point towards which the text is unerringly aimed. Also, it is one of the points into which the semiotic web of the narrative is burned and where the real appears as something the semiotic and imaginary framework are unable to hide. That register of the real is what contemporary film is incapable of structuring, be it because everything in it is disintegrating burn, -see *El día de la bestia* (Alex de la Iglesia, 1995)- or because it avoids it completely, then becoming instead a ninety-minute spot.

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*de análisis*, Madrid: Editorial Complutense; and (1999), "Pasión, Procesión, Símbolo", *Trama & Fondo*, nº 6, Madrid, 7-20.

<sup>2</sup> A "terreno, yermo, raso y desabrigado" or "lugar sumamente frío y desamparado" are the first and second definitions of "páramo" (wilderness) in DRAE, electronic edition. <http://www.rae.es/rae.html>. 1 de mayo de 2010.

The scenic space or wilderness of the sequence type which I am going to analyze is made up basically of a landscape, which can be populated by churches in ruins, eroded architecture, and empty scenarios, which in some way are reminiscent of classic romantic ruins or the descent into Dantean infernos. In this sense they constitute, in spite of their apparent reality, a scenographic whole which places in question their inclusion within the parameters of realism.



Figure 1

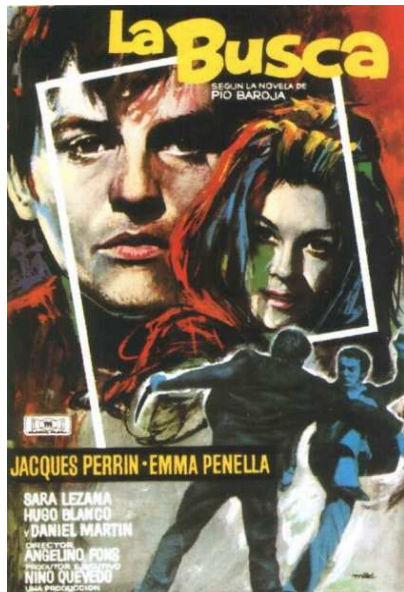


Figure 2

For his part, man, the character who wanders, eats, sleeps or fornicates in this wilderness, is usually a character who has been disdained and who, in some way, finds himself in that space where the real reigns –that which can be understood as the shapeless underlying the semiotic weaving of reality. It is a place, then, where he momentarily he can regroup or where some of the more visceral human energies and potentialities can be profiled. The deathly aspect of this desolate landscape which returns us to the three sequences we are going to analyze aside, a multitude of situations occur in the wilderness which, finally, can renew man in the face of death or lead him to a mystical catharsis.

Through this analysis, therefore, I will endeavor to examine the relationship of these sequence types to a historical time as well as to the larger and accepted concept of realism.

### La busca



The first of the examples I wish to bring to the discussion –and one of the purest which I have analyzed- is *La busca*. Based on the novel of the same name (1904) by Pío Baroja, it forms part of a trilogy, *La lucha por la vida*, which is completed by *La mala hierba* (1904) y *Aurora roja* (1905). In this trilogy, which is Baroja's best known work abroad, he shows an anarchist individualism and a pessimist-leaning philosophy. As in the film of the same title, we find in this trilogy a moving, realistic description of Madrid's lower classes.

The film *La busca* is considered an emblematic work

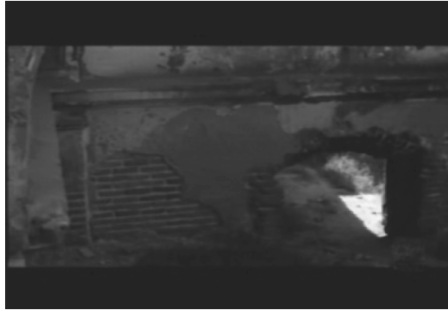
of New Spanish Cinema. Although it is set in the oppressed Spain at the end of the 19th century, according to statement from the director himself, the characters and the situations would have been moved to the Franco period. In this sense, Fons used several anachronisms in the adapted story; for example, an air conditioner and a radio, which, filming on real sets, he intentionally did not want to suppress or hide.<sup>3</sup> This fact perhaps can help us to begin to change our ideas about the kind of realism I which Fons was working. However, we cannot ignore that the culture was perfect for a realist aesthetic, which the director managed to transmit by means of Manuel Rojas' arid black and white photography and Luis de Pablo's avant garde or contemporary music.

The protagonist, Manuel, a small town guy, arrives to the outskirts of Madrid, where he moves in with his family and begins a close relationship with his cousin Vidal. Vidal opens up to him a world of delinquency, one of whose petty bosses calls himself «El Bizco» (cross-eyed). Manuel gets an honorable job at a print shop thanks to Tomás, another family member of his; but fate keeps him from achieving the life of which he had dreamed. Meanwhile, an unconscious love story begins to take shape between him and Rosa, Vidal's girlfriend. Everything ends tragically when Manuel finds himself having to kill «El Bizco».




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<sup>3</sup> *Versión española*, TVE, 21 October 2005, guests: Angelino Fons, Emma Penella, Ernesto J. Pastor.



We are in the middle of the story.

At the back of the shot, vertically reframed in an obvious way, that is, by the frame of a nonexistent door –as nonexistent as the Law in that world- Manuel appears like a Ford-like hero.<sup>4</sup> But that vertical form is missing something for it to be the presentational frame of the hero: a horizontal bar crossing the vertical and giving it the feeling of sacrifice. His cousin Vidal also shows up in the frame marking a clear direction which will be revealed in the fatal ending of the story.




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<sup>4</sup> Fons' interest in the Western is explicit. See note 3, *Versión española*.



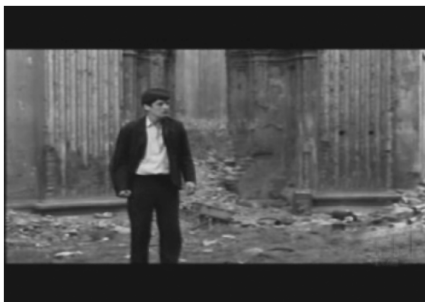
In the next still, both characters appear erased by the bars of the transom; bars which are not quite horizontal but rather diagonal, marking the violence of the story which moves towards an evident emptiness of feeling, as viewed in the third still.

Manuel and Vidal move through a space which is defined by ruins of what appears to be, and not by accident, a church or cathedral, because of the arches, apse, vaults, portals, cloister, etc. It is not just an abandonment or neglect of that sacred place, but rather the erosion of time, the destruction and the absence of Law (now symbolic) which are evident. Even when the point of view is through a window, as was just analyzed, there are no glass panes to embellish, but rather aggressive, diagonal metal spokes that run through the frame and trace the characters' path.

In the interior, in spite of that erosion, as the director himself has commented, all kinds of *lumpen proletariat* characters<sup>5</sup> interact, they fall asleep after fornicating, they conspire or they attack others.

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<sup>5</sup> See note 3, *Versión española*. According to Fons, these scenes were shot in Madrid, in the Las Vistillas and Princesa sectors.



We could think of, then, a perfect example of realism, bordering on documentary. On the other hand, also, we could think of *social* cinema, which, as Félix de Azúa indicates, is an adjective which frequently is applied to realism "to make it more real"<sup>6</sup> if it fits.

And all these images seem real or realistic; for example, the first confrontation arises between *El Bizco* and Manuel, which will remain in suspense as a fatal foreshadowing, up to and including the dramatic final denouement.

Let's look now at the background in the stills: they are only eight selected moments in which the characters are re-framed by a door or an entry way which is always eroded or incapable of signaling limits between interior and exterior, that is, of giving meaning to what is happening there. What is more, as has been pointed out, they seem to be entries to churches or they are reminiscent of classical architecture. That is to say that the background is showing us something in relationship to some Truth which is in play there. We can draw, then, an axis that goes from realism to Truth -a Truth that always seems very abstract.

Perhaps like the right-to-left axis which can be drawn in the following semi-subjective stills of Manuel: the first belongs to the end of the central sequence. The second is from a point farther along in the movie, when Manuel tries to escape everything, even if it means going hungry.



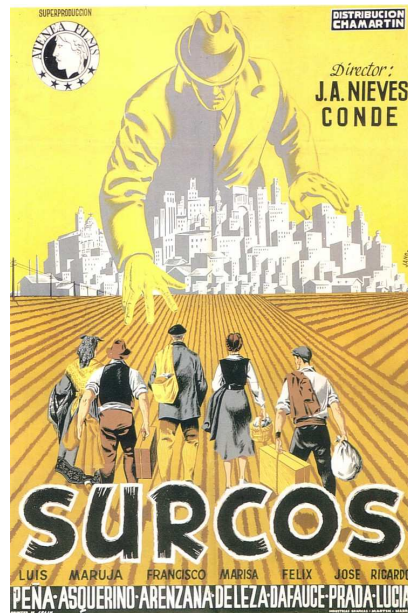
In order to finish this first example, it only remains to point

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<sup>6</sup>"Para hacerlo más real." Azúa, Félix (2002): *Diccionario de las Artes*, Barcelona: Anagrama, 2ª edición, octubre 2003, 242.

out that the set in these stills were real places, in the Vistillas and Princesa sectors of Madrid<sup>7</sup>; a fact which reinforces their realist quality as analyzed and which will continue to be pointed out in my analysis.

### Surcos



In this new example, again, we are almost in the middle of the film.

A semi-subjective still of a character who looks towards a place which evokes a certain authority, we could say, also, is again related to a certain Truth: it is a military quarters where they give food to the poor at midday. This is where one of the Pérez sons has come to; another rural family in search of the golden dream in Madrid. We have taken a diageitic jump in time, to the Madrid of the 1950's.

<sup>7</sup> Op. cit.: *Versión española*.

However, this film was made in 1951 by José Antonio Nieves Conde; that is, before *La busca*. The portrait presented, though, is no less harsh and realistic.

In this case, the original script is by Nieves Conde himself, though he enjoyed the literary collaboration of Gonzalo Torrente Ballester. It is known that, in spite of the Falangist affiliation of the director and his having held high-ranking posts in the dictatorial regime –it was dealing with delicate topics for the times like misery, the black market, and the immigration from the countryside to the city–, the film did not manage to receive the maximum Francoist film subsidies, though it was “de interés general” (“of general interest”). The scandal which the film produced in some media led to the resignation of the then General Director of Film, José M<sup>a</sup> García Escudero. The general thought became that, in spite of its raw nature, the film had served the purpose of warning rural families to stop immigrating to the city. To that end, then, clearly its realism worked.

Again we find real, eroded, crumbling scenarios, and again they look to frame the character with the help of arches, frames and windows which are still standing. Thus, man in the wilderness is integrated in a way that goes beyond realism, since both levels interact: it begins with man in the foreground crossing the wilderness, then he is framed by the background thanks to that larger frame or eye.





The man crosses the wilderness and, as he does, he is trapped by it. But that concrete space is also personalized by his crossing, and to such a point that it literally comes alive, as can be seen in the semi-subjective shot of the bum who is spying on the man, or, even more radically, when from the background arises a gaze that is multiplied by the eyes formed by the crumbling windows and the children who are stationed in them. It is at this precise moment that the man's back and skin sparkle most intensely in the sun, suffering the visual erosion this produces and producing a sensation of hyper-realism.

This is a case, therefore, of the thematization of the gaze, even more obvious than in *La busca*. These sequence types, then, intensify the viewer's emotion, not only through sets which are radically realistic and, in some ways unique to the artistic direction of both films, but also, as we have analyzed, through placing into

evidence the very act of watching, precisely through the selection of point of view and framings which represent, by means of elements in the scene, a gaze which places itself above a rank realism.

But we find ourselves, nevertheless, in a realistic space. Is this thematization of the gaze a characteristic of the films or does it correspond to a stylization which distances us from the gaze?

### Cómicos



The last film to be analyzed is the first that Juan Antonio Bardem directed – because of which it is situated between the two others time wise. In cinematographic terms it is a deviation from the path taken having begun with *La busca* and which is going to give us the key to come to the conclusion of my analysis. Here, I am referring to a story that we can continue to classify as realistic and is different from the two previous narratives in its aesthetic aspirations; all that, perhaps, because it is a story that come from the theater

**world. However, in order to come to any sort of interesting conclusion, it is going to be productive to look for points of contact with the two first films.**

And the first of these points is that *Cómicos* is a film that centers on the life of the actors in a traveling theater; a fact that allows us to place it in relation to those other exiles portrayed in *La busca* and in *Surcos*.

José Luis Castro de Paz -citing Pérez Perucha and Santos Zunzunegui- pointed out how, in the history of Spanish film, there is

prevalent “corriente subterránea común” (“common underlying current”) constituted by a “savia nutricia” (“nourishing vital fluid”).<sup>8</sup> The idea is that Spanish film from the period comes as the result of the intersection among popular cultural traditions, the Hollywood model and the historical moment. Basically, I agree with this view. But I would add, from the outset, that in the analysis I have undertaken the external cinematographic is European, mainly, Neorealism. As for the popular referent, I would situate it in the masterful, dark etchings of Goya.

In this regard, the explicit reference which Nieves Conde makes in *Surcos* is very interesting: I am referring to the sequence in which the girlfriend of the street boss wants to go to the movies to see, as she says, a *película psicológica* (psychological film). The street boss, who is a character tinged with negativity in the story, tells her that it is no longer fashionable, and that now what is in are neorealist films, films about social problems and people from the block.



<sup>8</sup> See: Castro de Paz, José Luis, et al, *op. cit.* 16.



Ana Ruiz, the protagonist in the story, has just realized her dream: to fill in for the company's lead actress and to triumph. Then, why does the sequence open from black? Is it an empty dark set after the drunken party for her success? Why those intense looks which do not seem to denote happiness?

The scene is lit with a light reminiscent of expressionism, emerging through a door in the scene. Through that door, Ana appears in a perfectly unbalanced framing. And, shortly, we move in on her face, where the intensity of her gaze stands out.

For the moment, then, this sequence is substantially different from previous sequences because of the stylization which that light implies. However, there are points in common, like the thematization of the gaze which we began to intuit with the radical change in shot size, from the long shot to the closeup.





The director of the company informs her that her success has been short-lived, since the lead actress will return to the stage soon. Ana then searches for the remains of that success, the applause, the full seats...; but she only finds emptiness –that is, a figurative wilderness- and her very Mephistopheles, who enters through another door, the one that is most spatially distant from the door through which Ana entered the scene.



Following Mephistopheles' definitive good-bye, the empty spaces which are filled with Ana's gaze change subtly, showing us, in counterangle, the theater's ceiling, framing the large central chandelier in the distance. Just as she has been at the height of triumph, she also has fallen at the hands of the devil's messenger. Ana turns brusquely, as if receiving a call from on high, from the other contrary to Mephisto, which materializes in that zenithal light. And the contrary to Mephisto is the place of the sacred which here looks like a cathedral copula, and towards which Ana turns and looks.



Now the point of view moves to precisely that place, first from the viewer who occupies a privileged space from above, then from the theater seating and then inside the protagonist, in Ana's subconscious, as the fade from her head to the copula seems to suggest. In the end, her subconscious has appeared in the middle of a mystical experience.

Now the background begins to appear that has been so important in the first two films I have analyzed: a background that again begins to look like a wilderness, that is, something in relationship to the real, or, in another way, something which is yet to be built.

### Conclusion



According to Santos Zunzunegui, in order to analyze the propriety of the concept of "realism" in this period in the history of Spanish film, two general modes should be kept in mind:

1) The propensity towards making this type of art on the part of some artists, who would move between the poles of realism/stylization (symbolism).

2) The historical period from the second half of the 19th century on through is psychological and sociological currents.<sup>9</sup>

The second modes is rather evident in the examples we have

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<sup>9</sup> *Op. cit.*, Castro de Paz, et al., 142.

seen, since, along with the supposed realism of the narratives herein analyzed, there is a deep psychological exploration into the characters as well as an almost scientific sociological case study. But this does not explain to us the realism of these narratives, but rather it describes for us the foundations upon which their aesthetic is built.

As for the first mode, I believe, through the detailed analysis of the isolated images, above all everything from *Cómicos*, but with the other two examples as well, that I have placed in evidence the existence of a dialectic –if not a contradiction– between realism and stylization. At the same time, what can be taken from my analysis is that in such realist films as those analyzed, stylization achieves its maximum level of expression in the sequence types explored here.

Zunzunegui adds further that to talk about *realism* is to:

[...] ocuparnos de la manera histórica en las que determinadas sociedades deciden hacer suyas ciertas formas como suficientemente aceptables como descripción del mundo. Desde este punto de vista, el "realismo" aparece como una mera cuestión de eficacia histórica y queda de una vez por todas desvinculado de cualquier dimensión fotográfica o naturalista.<sup>10</sup>

He includes here a new element which is of interest and which involves the specific society in which that *realism* appears, since it is nothing more than *historical convenience*. In this sense, we are reminded of the debates over realism in Egyptian painting, or, in an even closer example, the realism in Romanesque painting.

It is in this same sense that Jesús González Requena speaks when he affirms that:

[...] el realismo aparece siempre como el rasgo que se

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<sup>10</sup> *Ídem*, 143. "[...] to worry about the historical way in which some societies decide to make certain forms their own as acceptable means for describing the world. From this point of view, 'realism' is simply a question of historical convenience; it remains once and for all separate from any photographic or naturalist dimension".

atribuye a los textos que, para cada época y sociedad, participan del sistema de representación dominante, en tanto que éste constituye, para esa sociedad y en esa época, el modelo de lo que se entiende por realidad.<sup>11</sup>

From the 1950's and 1960's I have presented two classical examples of realism and one which is perhaps superficially stylized; but all have a realist texture. Above all, we have seen how man defends himself in the most real of scenarios, in the wilderness, be it real or figurative. That stark reality has acted upon him, killing him, laying him bare, or producing in him an almost mystical transformation.

Therefore, those identified ignition points go beyond the dominant system of representation of which González Requena speaks; they surpass *reality* moving into symbolization –and they now give meaning to the dialectic pointed out by Zunzunegui.

**Translated by Richard K. Curry**

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<sup>11</sup> González Requena, Jesús: *Clásico, manierista, postclásico*, 17. "[...] realism always appears as the trait which is attributed to texts that, for each epoch and society, reveal the dominant system of representation, in as much as this system constitutes, for that society and that epoch, the way in which reality is understood."

**Notes:**

Figure 1: Goya, Francisco de. Created between 1810 and 1815, published in 1863, etching, 154 x 207 mm, Harris, 180.III.1. *Biblioteca Nacional de España*. Web. 30 April 2010.

Figura 2: Battista Piranesi, Giovanni, "Vedute di Roma. Avanzi di una sala appartenente al Castro Pretorio nella Villa Adriana in Tivoli", etching, 1756.