

URBAN AND SUBURBAN NATURALISM: FERNANDO LEÓN DE ARANO A'S *BARRIO*

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Directed by Fernando León de Aranoa, *Barrio* (1998) narrates the summertime adventures of three boys who live in Madrid's suburbs; it is the kind of trip in which the spectator is witness to Rai, Javi and Manu's awakening to life, to their loss of innocence. However, far from looking like those lived by classical heroes or knights errant, this trip is tinged with a tragic hue. The author's discomfort with the world around him in this film is manifest interwoven with a naturalist aesthetic by means of which not only are the lives of the adolescents portrayed, but also, through their experiences, and on a larger plane, the miseries of the suburb in which the story is situated are discovered.

Beyond the realism which the documentary-like images from the beginning of the film can suggest, the film is charged with a deep anguish, as much in the story of the three youths -as in the fatal outcome with which their adventure ends- as in the life of the suburb where they reside -expanding this space which provides the title for the film into a collective character whose problems are presented to the spectator through the eyes of the boys. Social and material surroundings, in fact, end up directly determining the life of spaces marked by unemployment, delinquency, domestic violence, prostitution or drugs. *Barrio*, thus, can be understood as a critical aesthetic response -which itself could be classified as urban naturalism- to the throw-away margins created by industrial/post-industrial societies; as a critique, on the other hand, which goes beyond Madrid's outskirts where the story is set, since it well could be the periphery of any large city, a fact that assigns to the film a glocal¹ quality.

Produced by Elías Querejeta, the film, which received a

¹ The term "glocal," a construct coming from the words "global" and "local," responds to the idea of thinking global to later act locally.

phenomenal critical reception -as is evident in granting of several prizes, among which stand out the Goyas² for best director and best original screenplay- and a more that meritorious reception among the public with an audience attendance of around 800.000 spectators³ was accompanied during the decade of the 90's by other new, and as time would show, great directors. Along side León de Aranoa, in this decade, directors like Alejandro Amenábar -*Tesis* (1996) and *Abre los ojos* (1997), Iciar Bollaín -*Hola, ¿estás sola?* (1995) and *Flores de otro mundo* (1999), Isabel Coixet -*Cosas que nunca te dije* (1996), Salvador García Ruiz -*Mensaka* (1998), Chus Gutiérrez -*Sexo oral* (1994), *Alma gitana* (1995), and *Insomnio* (1997), or Julio Medem -*Vacas* (1992), *La ardilla roja* (1993), *Tierra* (1996) and *Los amantes del Círculo Polar* (1998), to name a few, made their appearance as directors in the world of film.

Barrio quickly was framed within the type of realist and critical film which was also developed by auteurs of the same generation like Bollaín or García Ruiz, and, which, due the characteristics of history and their protagonists remind the viewer of classics of Hispanic film like *Los olvidados*, by Luis Buñuel, or *Los golfos*, by Carlos Saura, both internationally renowned filmmakers.

Also, it is important to point out, in a summary of the evolution of this director and screen write from Madrid, that his social commitment has continued being a constant in his films, as is again visible in his subsequent films *Los lunes al sol* (2002) and *Princesas* (2005).⁴ In a recently published text, however, León de Aranoa himself does not hide the subjectivity of his point of view when he explains that "Hacer películas es la mejor manera que conozco de

² The Goya Awards, given annually by Spain's Academia de las Artes y Ciencias Cinematográficas, recognizes the achievements of the best professionals from the world of cinematography.

³ Data available from the Ministerio de Cultura at its web site: www.mcu.es.

⁴ To date, all of the films directed by this Madrid filmmaker focus on the different problematics of society: *Familia* (1996) questions the perfect family; *Los lunes al sol* (2002) focuses on the consequences of unemployment; and *Princesas* (2005) treats the theme prostitution and illegal immigration.

reinventar la realidad, de ajustar cuentas con ella. Decía Chejov que la obligación del autor no es contar las cosas como son, sino como él las ve. Es su interpretación, su punto de vista, lo que diferencia a la creación literaria o cinematográfica de la labor del historiador o del periodista”⁵ (León 17). In spite of this confession, the subjectivity of the approach with which León de Aranoa works in his stories, the fictions which the author creates in some way do correspond to a series of problems, mentioned at the beginning of this essay, present in today’s Western societies, and which in the flow of *Barrio* will cross the paths of its young protagonists.

Thus, through the previously mentioned initial images, accompanied by music and the title credits, the auteur continues his film with the presentation of the, Rai (Crispulo Cabezas), Javi (Timy Benito) and Manu (Eloi Yebra), standing in front of the display window of a travel agency: Sol y Mar Tours S.L. One of the desires of the youths, a theme which reappears throughout the film⁶ and which, among others, adds to the film’s cohesion, is to go on vacation, a custom understood as frequent among Spain’s middle class and taking place primarily during the months of July and August. However, while they look at the display window, the youths are not deciding where they will enjoy their next vacations, but rather they observe the different tourist destinations which the agency offers, knowing it will never happen unless something extraordinary occurs due to their families’ limited financial resources.

With the following words, Óscar Pereira Zazo relates this first scene with mass consumption, a theme which is key in defining the characters in the film in as much as, generally, it is out of their reach:

⁵ “Making movies is the best way I know of reinventing reality, of coming to terms with it. Chekov said that the author’s job was not to tell things as they are, but rather as he sees them. It is the author’s interpretation, his point of view, that which differentiates literary or filmic creation from that of the historian or the journalist.”

⁶ Throughout the film one can hear and/or see Matías Prats –a well known figure from the world of television news who at the time was the host of Telediario on Televisión Española – reporting on the beginning and the developing stories of summer vacation, a fact that speaks to the media-worthiness of the phenomenon.

Manu, Javier y Rai sueñan con las vacaciones de verano y el torrente de connotaciones que la cultura de masas y la sociedad de consumo han creado en torno a ese fenómeno social: playa, juventud, sexo, lugares exóticos, escapismo. Todo ello sugerido en un momento, frente a una agencia de viajes (Sol y Mar Tours, S. L.): los chicos miran el escaparate con tentadoras ofertas y un gran cartelón que reproduce a tamaño natural el perfil seductor de una muchacha. Se trata de la fotografía de una joven cubana que espera sonriente en una virtual playa del Varadero.⁷ (Pereira Zazo 2)

However, the type of escapism which the situation offers contrasts with the limited possibilities the youths have of spending their vacations in one of the tourist destinations which the agency offers, or which the television constantly promotes during the daily newscasts, since they are so far removed from the middle class which seeks an escape from the daily grind. The three boys' situation is that of young people who take a break from their studies during the summer and who, in part because of their families' social class -in turn associated with the space in which they live- manifest a deep disorientation during the educational hiatus that takes place between June and September.

From this opening scene on, very apparent is the care given to the creation of characters, to whom the auteur will be giving their own personality and context throughout the film. This quality, one of the most important of the film, has not gone un-noticed by critics, and, addressing this topic, Nuria Cuz-Cámara has said, "Uno de los atractivos de esta película reside en haber logrado crear tres personalidades claramente diferenciadas que se enfrentan al mismo condicionamiento social, pero que de ninguna manera pueden

⁷ "Manu, Javier and Rai dream about summer vacation and the torrent of connotations which mass culture and consumer society have created relative to that phenomenon: beach, youth, sex, exotic places, escapism. All of it is suggested in one moment, in front of the travel agency (Sol y Mar Tours, Inc.): the youths look at the display window with its tempting offers and large poster which reproduces a life-size, seductive profile of a girl. It is the photograph of a Cuban girl who awaits smiling on a virtual beach at Varadero."

unificarse bajo una etiqueta estereotipada”⁸ (Cruz-Cámara 68). However, while it is true that León de Aranoa takes care to give his characters their own voice, in a wider reading the message which *Barrio* proffers refers to a collective whole, to a sector of the population subject a set of circumstances related to the lack of resources and to the consequences such a situation brings with it, and which frequently are repeated in the marginal spaces of other urban areas of Western society.

This kind of critical approach to the environment which surrounds the auteur is not something new; a similar tone is present, within Spanish literature, in the picaresque novel or, at the end of the 19th century in the realist novel, this being the label most frequently associated with Aranoa’s films, or in the naturalist movement. With respect to these last two movements, it is important to point out that for some critics the second rightly forms part of the realist movement,⁹ while for another group of critics, naturalist writers form an independent literary entity. This debate notwithstanding, be that second generation one of realist authors or one of naturalist authors, what is certain is that there exist a series of clear differences which separate them literarily. While Realism would have the middle class and bourgeois ideals as its point of departure, as the style evolves, there appear a series of influences which unmistakably change the way of understanding reality as well as the way in which it is represented.

If, in fact, these styles share some characteristics: “The choice of a commonplace contemporary subject, careful observation and painstakingly exact reproduction of nature” (Gauthier 516), as the years go by, this reproduction of reality with documentary

⁸ “One of the attractive things about this film resides in its having achieved the creation of three clearly differentiated personalities who confront the same social conditioning, but who in no way can be labeled as stereotype.”

⁹ Ángel del Río defends the existence of but one movement, the realist, divided into two generations. The first would be lead by Benito Pérez Galdós. The second, influenced by French Naturalism, would have as its exponents in Spain Emilia Pardo Bazán, Leopoldo “Alas” Clarín, “Palacio Valdés and Vicente Blasco Ibáñez (211).

objectivity proposed by Realism will change in response to different concerns, showing in its works an implicit criticism of how a society is constituted, surrounding the author, as unjust source of human tragedy. In terms of this aspect, the characters that populate the pages of the naturalist novel cease to be ideals in order to become individuals with their own intrahistory and whose personality is subject to a particular context. In an urban environment, *Barrio* makes its own the literary ideas created by Émile Zola, creating a space defined by the material, where social as well as cultural changes are determined by variations in economic conditions.

Connected to the material conditions mentioned above, one of the topics to which the author directs his attention is on the presence of dysfunctional nuclear families. As for the specific case of *Barrio*, out of the families of the boys, the three of them show signs of some serious problems. In the case of Manu, who does not have a mother, his father (Francisco Algora) is retired due to his alcoholism, and his brother (Gregory Galin) is a drug addict who has lost all connection to the social reality surrounding him. In an attempt to hide the real situation from Manu, his father lies to Manu by explaining that his brother cannot visit them because he travels constantly because of his work commitments, and he lies again when he shows an envelope with money sent by Rafa. Such a job is actually the illusion that the father wants for his son: to have a well-paid job and the attendant social status. Eventually, Manu's wish is granted on the day of his birthday. After following his father, whom he accidentally runs into on a bus while Manu is delivering a pizza, he finds his brother living in terrible physical conditions under a subway tunnel.

As for Javi, the second boy of this group of friends, he lives with his parents (Enrique Villén y Alicia Sánchez), his sister (Marieta Orozco), and his grandfather (Claude Pascadel). Out of the three families, this one seems to be the one with most problems. The father, who batters his wife, is forced by law to leave his home due to a restraining order; the grandfather chooses to pretend to be deaf in the presence of constant domestic arguments; and the sister apparently opts to prostitute herself because of the lack of money due to the absence of the father figure.

Rai's family, the third of the boys, seems *a priori* to be the

least dysfunctional. Neither his parents nor his brother appear to have any problem. Yet, in this case, tragedy comes from the son, whose escalating felonies lead to his own death.

Due to these and other problems, their family spaces lead the boys to experience a drowning sensation; and for that reason, public spaces represent to Manu, Javi and Rai a place where they can find their freedom. They are in a way the owners of places which appear to be the dregs of a society ensconced in monstrous postindustrial process without any identity. Steve Marsh echoes this circumstance when explaining that:

The city depicted in *Barrio* bears no resemblance to the picture postcard view of Madrid that is familiar to tourists, nor to the space of hedonistic desire often identified in the films of Almodóvar. The traditional 'Old Madrid' with its palaces and monuments, is conspicuous by its absence; so too is the bureaucratic capital of Spain's centralized political administration. *Barrio* could be set almost anywhere. (Marsh 167)

Like what happens the characters' severely deteriorated families, the places where the plot of *Barrio* takes place share the same marginality, both of these spaces being key in the process of shaping the boys' personalities.

These physical spaces in which the trio develops primarily revolve around their suburban neighborhood, but sometimes their trips take them outside their natural space. Determined by their lack of economic resources, to get anywhere they cannot go on foot, the boys will use public transportation, either the bus or the subway. The film frequently shows the boys' travels as well the urban infrastructures created for such mobility: roads, rail tracks, tunnels, grade crossings, and bridges. Yet, these "bridges", although they have been built to bring together, also determine physically where certain spaces begin and end. Steve Marsh highlights the liminality of the spaces in *Barrio*, where these "bridges" perform a double function, as they both connect and separate: "Certeau writes that 'the *bridge* [original emphasis] is ambiguous everywhere: it

alternatively welds together and opposes insularities' (1984: 128). In *Barrio* we see examples of this ambiguity. Bridges both connect and communicate between spatial points but also carve out liminal zones" (168). The boys use a space, their neighborhood, where they know how to handle themselves. Yet, although it is true to say that public transportation allows them to travel and continue their adventures in different places, it also determines the place where they belong. Although they are permitted to travel downtown, this circumstance does not necessarily mean that they are going to be welcomed, since they belong socially and economically to the outskirts.

In addition to their wanderings through the neighborhood and the vacant lots, from among all the spaces to where boys have full rights, a fictional island stands out, located next to a tunnel between the train tracks and a highway, where the boys often seek refuge. The marginality of the place is evident by the amount of trash that the place is full of, which confers on the place more of the appearance of a dumping site than a place where First World adolescents might spend their free time. Thus, the marginality of the spaces, to which the boys belong, contrasts with the imaged realities offered by advanced societies of the Western world.

Apart from the spaces already presented, which expose the boys' socioeconomic precariousness that equally extends to their neighbors, there exists another recurring topic in the film that inevitably relates to the boys' social class: money and the different means to get it that exist within their range of possibilities. In one of the conversations which revolves around that matter, different ways to obtain money are proposed. The different ideas that they suggest show no regard for the legality of the plans, which range from selling hair to copying audio tapes to sell them.¹⁰ This genuine interest in obtaining money leads them to even advertise themselves on a TV program called "Teleempleo" (Tele Jobs). Yet, they make a terrible and ridiculous appearance, only proving to them that they have no

¹⁰ At the time the film was premiered, the most popular audio formats were cassette tapes and vinyl LP. Music piracy would not become a serious problem until the later advent of the compact disc and the emergence of organized groups that dedicated themselves to illegal copy mass production.

work experience at all. Thus, it is not surprising that only one of the boys finds a job.

Having seen a job ad in a pizzeria "Se necesitan repartidores con moto propia" (Delivery drivers with their own motorbike wanted), Manu decides to apply for the job. The craziest thing about this is that Manu does not own a motorbike, but he gets the job by lying saying that a motorcycle parked right outside the place belongs to him. His duties as a delivery boy turn out to be crazy, since he must use public transportation as well as run in order to deliver the pizzas. The customers complain often that their pizza is cold, to which Manu replies using the same excuse, that his motorcycle stalled, followed by asking the customers whether they have an oven to heat up the pizza. Even though it is clear that Manu's job is a legit one, what is not so clear is how he gets it, as he lies to the owner of the business, which may pose a moral conflict.

The line between legality and illegality is crossed by another of the boys' activities to obtain money: robbing flowers from the cemetery, and selling them later at night in bars. This deed could represent the blurry boundary where the actions the boys being to move into the world of crime. The only one of them who has qualms about this activity is Manu, not because he fears any legal consequences, but rather because he has a high respect for the dead, again presenting the same moral dilemma. That same night, the group enters a trophy shop; but, whereas Manu and Javi take with them just a couple of trophies, Rai can barely carry his loot. Even though this crime was not planned ahead, it is true this action goes beyond mere mischief, as it compromises the civic character of the adolescents. In their search for money, in the face of a lack of opportunities, the options that they choose progressively lead them to delinquency.

There exists, nevertheless, a substantial difference among the three guys; while Javi and Manu cross the line of legality accidentally, Rai displays a more defying attitude towards society and many of his actions are done deliberately, showing signs of what could be taken as a sort of pathology. He acts alone in criminal career; his first felony is similar to the ones he commits with his friends: he steals yogurt lids in order to send them in to take part in a prize drawing -a

trip to the beach- sponsored by a dairy product company. Shortly after, having broken the shop window of the travel agency that appears at the beginning of the film, he will steal the cardboard picture on display. The purpose of this theft is to have a female companion at the Caribbean party that the boys are going to have at their island-dump. Yet, the turning point for Rai to enter into crime is when he decides to work for a drug smuggler from the neighborhood, for which he will be detained by the police for drug possession in quantities exceeding the amount considered normal for personal use. Rai, who does not give the dealer away, is rewarded by him with 30,000 pesetas, the equivalent of 180 euros.

In addition to earlier examples, the film offers other hints that reveal that this criminal career has but begun. On a visit to his brother, who works as a security guard and where they have gone to ask him to show them his gun, Rai simulates a robbery while wielding the gun in a threatening way and saying: "Las pelas; he dicho las pelas, hostia."¹¹ This action, over and above crime, indicates a tendency towards delinquency as it would be with a firearm. These pre-criminal fantasies repeat themselves again when the three kids watch how a security van collects sacks with money. Rai asks his friends if they can picture themselves stealing the van. Rai, who does not have the experience to commit such a crime, is satisfied with having broken into the car they are seating in, which angers Manu. Thus, the line that Manu and Javi are not willing to cross is drawn.

It is at this instant when a dual reading can be considered if we take as a reference the ideas on Naturalism by Émile Zola, or even quite the opposite, if we apply to this situation the interpretation of Naturalism by Emilia Pardo Bazán in regard to a subject that irreconcilably distances both writers: free will.

Published in 1882, *La cuestión palpitante* is regarded as the key work for the implementation of the naturalist movement in Spain.¹² In this work, the countess of Pardo Bazán brings the

¹¹ "The money; I said money, dammit."

¹² There exists also another opinion stating that the work by Pardo Bazán, is rather the culmination of a long time gestated movement since 1876 (Davis, "The Critical Reception" 97),

innovative ideas on Zola's literature to the Spanish public. Yet, the Galician writer's realism was never fully accepted by the naturalist literary environment mainly due to her public embracing of the Catholic faith. "Zola declared that Pardo Bazán could be only an artistic and formalistic follower of Naturalism, because as a Catholic, she would be unable to accept his doctrines" (Davis, "Catholicism" 282). "El ideal de doña Emilia era más bien de un naturalismo intermedio, transicional, entre el irrealismo romántico y el verismo exigido por los nuevos tiempos y las corrientes extranjeras."¹³ (Brown 156). The impossibility of bringing both writers' opinions together was due to the nature of such opposite points, among others, as materialism and free will.

According to Zola's doctrines, the human being lacks free will and is conditioned by his genetic inheritance and the social environment in which he lives. On the other side, Pardo Bazán follows the definition proposed by Saint Agustin, who makes a clear distinction between the concepts of free will and freedom. Whereas the former determines our freedom to choose between good and evil -typically evil-, the latter concept represents divine grace than enables the individual to choose for good, and also redeems the individual from his sinful nature.

Regarding its relationship to these naturalist theories, this is a crucial aspect within *Barrio*. Going back the previously explained scene in which Rai breaks into a car and Manu and Javi decide to

rather than the initiator of such, as there had been a social stratus favorable to the appearance of this way of interpreting Spanish reality. According to Hans Jörg Neuschafer, "The social question" by Zola had already been proposed in Spain even though the Industrial Revolution had not been fully developed by then. "Si bien es verdad que en la España del siglo XIX no se había aún realizado por completo la revolución industrial, hecho que se considera generalmente como una de las condiciones necesarias para la aparición del naturalismo literario, sí se había planteado ya lo que Zola ha llamado "la cuestión social," otra de las bases del gran naturalismo europeo. Hasta tal punto preocupó esta cuestión a las clases dirigentes en España, que por Real Decreto del 5 de diciembre de 1883 fue creada una Comisión de Reformas Sociales en el Ministerio de la Gobernación, con el fin de estudiar a fondo las condiciones de vida de la clase obrera y de mejorar en lo posible su destino" (519.).

¹³ "Ms. Emilia's ideal of Mrs Emilia was rather a sort of transitional naturalism, that was half way between romantic irrealism and the realism demanded by the new time and foreign movements."

take off, the dual interpretation may be based on the identification of individual characters or on group think. Taking the three characters as independent individuals, while Rai decides to commit a crime, his friends opt not to take part in such activities. The action by Rai may be considered as an act of free will, as he chooses the wrong path, while the decisions by his friends may be regarded as an act of freedom.

However, taking into account the possibility of a collective character or group think, in which Rai, Manu and Javi could be classified as representatives of the young adolescents that dwell in the suburbs of Madrid, it is all but inevitable that a small part of such a group will fall into crime while the rest live the straight and narrow. In the case of this specific space, and taking into account the economic precariousness lived by its dwellers, the chances of the first option, that is, to fall for crime, are greater.

In sharp contrast to this picture of marginality, in which the usual problems coexist with activities of doubtful legality, there are two in the film moments that bring happiness, as temporary and illusory as it may be, to the characters. The first one of them is when Rai receives the awards from the drawing to which he mailed the yogurt lids stolen at the supermarket. Yet, luck does not come to him in form of the coveted trip, but rather in the form of a jetski. Such a scene creates a rather comical moment, when the three friends stare at the jetski from the Rai's bedroom, Manu points out that "Si tuviera ruedas ya sería la hostia."¹⁴ This moment of joy is ephemeral, since on the night when the boys return home with the stolen trophies, they find out that their jetski itself, which was left on the street chained to a street light because Rai's mother did not want it in the house, has been stolen. This circumstance is a paradoxical one, as Rai accuses his fellow neighbors to be "chorizos de mierda",¹⁵ even though he has just committed a crime, as well being comical, because his friends point out that the thieves did not even leave the wheels behind.

¹⁴ "If it had it wheels, it would be damn great."

¹⁵ "fucking thieves"

The other time of joy is when the adolescents loosen up their inhibitions; it is the afternoon they go downtown to a shopping center, and then clubbing at night, both spaces located in the city. The money that they spend is the money earned by Rai for not giving away the drug dealer while being detained. On that day they can even afford to ride around the city in a taxi. The bad thing is that they are thrown out of the shopping center, despite the fact they have money to spend. This leads them to wonder about the restrictions to the rights of a citizen to the city and its spaces. Evidently, Manu, Javi and Rai may walk freely through public spaces, especially if those areas are located within their own neighborhood. The problem lies in private areas, in which case the social class of the boys will be a deciding factor.

The touch of humor present in both situations could distance the film from what is strictly understood as Naturalism, which demands a neutral point of view because of its scientific character. Yet, both facts really entail a rather tragicomic image: the uselessness of reward, since it cannot be used due to the previously mentioned impossibility of going on vacation; the fleeting of joy of enjoying the city, which continues to be reserved middle-class youth. Both facts are no more than two anecdotes which only further establish the difference between their socioeconomic situation and that reality to which they aspire to belong.

Another of the topics tackled in *Barrio* is love, which similarly serves to portray the marginality of the space where the boys live. Two are the possible approaches to this topic in the film. On the one hand, pure love, without any sort of libidinous attitude, can be observed. On several occasions in the film, two of the main characters can be seen taking an interest in women. In the case of Manu, his platonic love becomes focused on a babysitter, possibly of foreign descent, whom he frequently sees in a park. Javi, for his part, has similar feelings for Alicia, a supermarket cashier who works in their neighborhood.

The case of Rai is different, as his attraction for Susi, Javi's sister, revolves around a budding sexual instinct. Unlike his two friends, who at no point in the film dare talk to their platonic loves, Rai does resolve to take the necessary steps to begin a possible

relationship. At begin with, Rai asks Javi to invite his sister to the Caribbean-style pseudo-party at the island-dump. Later on, having caught Susi inside a car with a stranger, in what seems to be an act of prostitution; Rai goes to look for Javi, who is gone. Rai asks Susi instead if she would like to go for a walk with him. Possibly remembering the sight of Susi with a stranger in a car, Rai decides to jack another car parked next to where Javi and Susi live, but unluckily for him, the vehicle belongs to a neighbor who happens to be a policeman.

In parallel with the nature of the boy's feelings towards women, León de Aranoa takes time to tangentially deal with the figure of the woman from the suburbs and other topics that he would further develop in his next film *Princesas*, such as immigration and prostitution, which once again tend to appear more frequently in the marginal outskirts that surround the city.

The Rai's attempt to impress Susi by acquiring a vehicle will eventually lead to his death. Yet, his death does not surprise the spectator since throughout the film the director has been offering hints that encourage the spectator to foretell such an ending. One of the boy's favorite pastimes is to sit on a bridge that crosses over a highway while they play car spotting. In the game each boy must choose a color, and then the first passing vehicle that matches the color becomes his. The colors chosen by Manu and Javi lead to uneven results, since one of the cars is better than the other. When his turn comes, Rai chooses the color white, and, curiously enough, traffic seems to disappear. The boys get up and leave, but the camera stays on frame and, seconds later, shows the passing of an ambulance, which can be understood as omen of a tragedy ending.

The Rai's defiance of death becomes constant throughout the film: in his lack of respect when they steal flowers from the cemetery; in the time when he is walking on a wire and imagining himself to be tightrope walker; or when he insists on his potential success as a Russian roulette player while sticking his brother's gun in his mouth: "Yo podría ganarme así la vida porque para eso hay

que tener mucha suerte, y yo tengo una suerte de la hostia.”¹⁶ At another point of the film, he claims that when he dies he plans to come back to life, since he did it already in the past; he explains that he was born dead, but the doctors managed to revive him. Throughout the film León de Aranoa offers to the audience a story, which, from within, in any other medium would be nothing more than a dark news story.

Speaking in cinematographic terms, and owing to the social commitment of its author, León de Aranoa's work can be associated with cinematographic styles such as Italian Neorealism, British *Free Cinema*, or New Latin American Cinema. Yet, even though a critical tone is present, there exists a series of aesthetic differences, among which most notable is a fictional story as a means to present the author's social reality, therefore distancing itself from the typical documentary testimony of the movements mentioned above. The author advocates for a marriage between Lumière-Méliès, attempting to make a fictional story, as Andrew Sarris would say, appear to be real (108).

We can establish, though, different similarities between *Barrio* and the naturalist literary style that arose in Europe by the end of the XIX century. Thus, the reality shown by León de Aranoa and his work is above all an uncomfortable view insofar it reveals semi-marginal ways of living in the suburbs; equally uncomfortable are the issues dealt with such a literary style, becoming as they do a source of public debate.¹⁷

Beyond its intimate look (Feenstra 210) into the three adolescents, *Barrio* serves a wider purpose than just presenting the life of an individual, since behind this subject there exists another reality, the life of a marginal and well-defined: male adolescents who belong to a socially disadvantaged class, and residents of a physical

¹⁶ “I could earn a living like this since to do it you have to have a lot of luck, and I have tons of luck.”

¹⁷ As happened to Realism, public opinion became part of a debate in the press, in which several attacks against Neorealism were launched for nonliterary reasons, such as morality and religion. (Davis, “The Spanish Debate,” 1649).

space far from center-city, as are the outlying districts of a big city. The three points of view of the youths eventually complement each other, thus offering to the spectator the conditions in which their social group lives, and also portraying the adversities which daily they must face in their interaction with other groups.

Barrio is guided by an attempt to expose a part of society that has come to a standstill within the discourse of progress and equality offered by Western societies. Through the boys the spectators may see beggars, drug addicts, prostitutes, gypsies, or immigrants; characters that rarely find a place within other films that have more restrictive representational view. In this way, the critical tone of the film connects to its documentary character, which, despite its subjective stance, truly portrays numerous realities common to a certain space that geographically and materially is located on the margins of center-city.

Being torn between rebelliousness and submission, the filmmaker chooses to such an end a group of teenagers who are reaching an age when they begin to lose their innocence. According to Pereira Zazo, "Para estos adolescentes, la vida es un constante descubrimiento, pero también un desear artificiosamente manoseado por la sociedad de consumo (manoseo que quiere ocultar con ardides la nada que anida en el centro de la vida social), y, por supuesto, un choque con la adversidad, el descubrimiento del dolor en sus múltiples manifestaciones."¹⁸ (9) Having covered all their most basic needs, the youths identify happiness in a materialistic way. Yet, due to their social status, their access to consumer goods is very limited. The story of these three boys is not an epic tale of hunger, but rather of their struggle to become part of a discourse from which they have been excluded, without knowing how or even asking why they have been excluded. To thrive in society becomes a pipe dream for them due to their social standing, being determined by a urban environment from which there is little hope of escape, an

¹⁸ "For these youths, life is a constant discovery, but it is also a desire artificially manipulated by the consumer society (a manipulation which seeks to hide the nothingness that resides at the center of social life), and, of course, facing adversity, the discovery of pain in its many manifestations."

environment defined by Cruz-Cámara as a "viaje circular, a ninguna parte."¹⁹ (60)

This does not mean though that these youths do not have to chance to choose. Manu and Javi's future will be different from Rai's, as a result of their personal choices. Yet, their choices are limited, leaving the spectator to witness how a kind of urban naturalism devours its dwellers, lead on by a mass consumerism to which they do not have access. Within this natural selection, characterized by its competitiveness, the suburban youth will attempt to escape, by using his own wits, from a series of problems common to the surroundings: unemployment, domestic violence, drug addiction, prostitution, juvenile delinquency, or death. In this way, *Barrio* offers itself as a committed glocal alternative to commercial film, raising its viewers' consciousness, and rejecting the idealism of anesthetizing commercial film productions.

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¹⁹ "A circular trip to nowhere."

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