

## ***BELTENEBROS*, FILM NOIR MADE IN SPAIN**

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No me pidieron nada más ni me ofrecieron nada a cambio, no me aseguraron un porvenir en el catálogo de los héroes. (Muñoz Molina 11)

Usted está muerto, no tiene sangre, no siente nada y piensa que puede comprarme a mí y matarle a él o perdonarle la vida. Es un resto de otra época. Como ese comisario. (Miró 77)

*Beltenebros* (1991), a film directed by Pilar Miró, based on the novel by the same name written Antonio Muñoz Molina in 1989, and whose cinematographic adaptation is brought about by the director herself and the famed script writer Mario Camus, essentially brings together the basic pillars which have forged the collective understanding of what *film noir* is, as it was created by the American film industry during the 1920's and 1930's. Although the filmic work is based on national raw material of high quality, the endemic preoccupation with not reflecting quotidian Spanish concerns and the constant thought that foreign film is necessarily superior to Spanish film cause this work to try to distance itself from any dynamic understood as having a national bent, falling instead into practices which limit creativity and the country's film industry. Spanish character stands out in the film, and a peninsular factor is undeniable, creating a product which assimilates the characteristics of *film noir* and places them at the disposition of Spanish taste. Paradoxically, in one more of her constant attempts to internationalize Spanish film and to endow it with products of high quality, Miró creates this film which, far from giving the viewer an impression distanced from a national profile, picks up on essential preoccupations and traditional forms of Spanish film not considered as their own entities and supported by external cultural products.

Briefly summarizing, *Beltenebros* is a political thriller which bases its story on the experience of a communist party member, Darman (Terence Stamp), who has been charged with killing a traitor in Madrid in 1946, an event which will be a determining factor in his life. In 1962 he is asked again to return to this city to kill another traitor who has infiltrated the party. Leaving behind his tranquil life style in Great Britain, he must travel to Poland to receive specific orders and from there he goes to Madrid in order to carry out his mission. Once in the capital and in contact with communist leaders, he begins to shadow his mark and to realize surprising coincidences between the current situation and the one which took place under similar circumstances in 1946. The plot becomes more complex as the story repeats itself, and the protagonist realizes that he must resolve a personal conflict in order to accomplish his mission. The traitor turns out to be the same one as before, Valdivia/Ugarte (José Luis Gómez), and the *femme fatale* involved in the conflict uses the same name as the woman with whom Darman fell in love in 1942, Rebeca Osorio (Geraldine James/Patsy Kensit).

In order to understand the Spanish dynamic and presence of related elements which mark it in the film, it is absolutely necessary to keep in mind the debt owed to and the connection between Miró's work and that Muñoz Molina, as well as the film's own self-awareness as an element, far from rising up as a mere production, it frequently shows the power of the medium and its potential impact on the national film industry and on the spectator:

El *Beltenebros* de Pilar Miró da cuenta a su modo de esa dimensión metaficcional que define al texto de Muñoz Molina: Si en la novela accedemos a la literatura dentro e la literatura, en el film nos abismamos en el cine dentro del cine. (Ferrari [2001] 193)

Cinema itself, the theater as well as celluloid itself, create a space in Miró's film which is centered upon the importance and the presence which cinema has for Spaniards of the Franco era, the period in which the movie is set.<sup>1</sup> In a nostalgic way Miró picks up on the nostalgic idea of

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<sup>1</sup> If the principal point of *Beltenebros* is not to document the Franquista period, it is also certain that the setting and the dynamics produced during that period markedly characterize both the novel and

the grand old cinemas and of eras in which the cultural greatest expression to reach the widest audiences were those movies, usually American, shown in those theaters. Laying out her look back towards the filmic event and towards film in society, Miró, metafictionally and within this film, seems to put forth her concept of film and her attempt to recuperate a better past for the big screen.

Miró's idea, which she herself puts into practice in works like *Beltenebros* consisted in "producir menos films pero de mayor calidad para así aumentar su competitividad frente al mercado nacional e internacional. . ." (Riambau 402). Criticisms towards the time in which Miró was at the head of ICAA (Instituto para las Ciencias y las Artes Audiovisuales) are common, frequent, and constant, and they generally point to the failures of Miró's proposals, to her controversial administration, and to the delicate state in which she left the Spanish film industry:

La ley Miró, por tanto, fue una ley lesiva, que no sólo no supo paliar los efectos de la crisis, sino que consiguió desindustrializar el cine español y convertirlo en el cine de unos pocos, determinando que perdiéramos el rango de potencia industrial cinematográfica en nuestro país. . . (Bastias y Barahona 231)

In spite of the criticisms, *Beltenebros* has aged well. Maybe this is because of its quality, or maybe it is because of the public's familiarity with the work of Muñoz Molina; or perhaps it is due to the fact the story unfolds in classic, practically timeless terms with a cast of international actors and with references to historical *film noir* moments, or perhaps it is because it treats the eternal questions of historical memory and Franquism. What is certain is that Miró's film continues to be attractive and interesting.

*Film noir* has a long tradition, and it has seen a number of revisions to its premises throughout the course of film history in which it

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the film "...*Beltenebros* mezcla las características genéricas de un thriller político con las de una novela de espías. Independientemente del marco genérico y más bien a nivel histórico y *puramente* diegético, la novela proporciona informaciones sobre la atmósfera mental y el clima social dentro y fuera de España entre 1945 y 1965" (Zoltán 60). The work centers on developing a political, espionage plot with the feelings of the protagonists foregrounded.

has been used as a recurrent paradigm. Miró picks up on the central aspects of universal *film noir*, and she molds them in order to adapt them to the Spanish dictatorship of the 40's, 50's, and 60's.<sup>2</sup> The term *film noir* originates in France:

. . . *Série noire*, the title of a series of crime novels edited by Marcel Duhamel for French publisher Gallimard, starting in 1945 [...] the term *noir* was used in France before the Second World War, usually in the right-wing press to derogate left-wing culture, and some other 1930s films were described as film noirs in the 1940s. . . (Bould 15)

However, it is American cinema which gives it a fixed and stable category to the genre, developing it as a filmic structure during the 30's, 40's, and 50's. It is precisely Hollywood productions of this period which are the principal sources of reference for *Beltenebros*, which throughout the film makes numerous complicitous winks to the conscious viewer in its allusions to great works of the genre. The *film noir* to which Miró ascribes, as a genre and as a movement, is rooted in the different tendencies which were produced in different times and different places:

The cinematic origins of *film noir* can be traced to the German Expressionist films of the late 1910's and twenties, to the American crime film of the thirties, and to one contemporary and less central source as, following the war, noir absorbed some of the concerns of Italian NeoRealism. (Hirsch 53)

This genre lists in its ranks productions central to film history at critical moments for the formation of what today is considered important in an overall view of film. So, *Beltenebros* joins not only the genre as such, but it is also a contribution to and a part of the intertextuality of multiple factors which make up *film noir*.

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to the thematics and the oppressive atmosphere in which the different characters which are passed down from the film noir genre evolve, the filming itself and the form it takes reflect the genre: ". . . recursos de la retórica cinematográfica, incluyendo el montaje y ciertos movimientos y ángulos de cámara" (Marí 449).

But, the essence of *film noir* in Miró's work does not reside so much in its conception of or position within the body of works which make up the genre. Rather, it bases itself there in its form and content, reproducing and adapting the editing, the lighting and the sets appropriate to the genre, thus endowing its story and its characters with a feel typical to the genre:

. . . the noir look and feel as well as a typical noir narrative, with the femme fatale, the alienated and doomed antihero, and their scheme to do away with her husband. It has the feeling of disorientation, pessimism, and the rejection of traditional ideas about morality, what's right and what's wrong. (Conrad 7)

The protagonist antihero, Stamp, and his necessary counterpart the *femme fatale*, Kensit, find themselves in the midst of a spiral of plots of espionage and political conflicts in which moral values are abandoned in order to survive tough times. Their maximum hope is to flee from a strange and stifling environment that seems to suffocate them at every turn.<sup>3</sup>

With these thematics and storyline, the tone of *Beltenebros* rests squarely on a *film noir* base. To support the setting, the cinematography used also makes use of the basic elements which gave that type of film its character:

. . . voice-over commentary, other recurrent aspects of noir narrative style -the fractured time scheme, the shifting points of view, the maze-like storyline- are distancing devices which enclose the characters within a frame, and thereby underscore the genre's interest in alienation and entrapment. (Hirsch 78)

In reality, Miró's work contains the majority of the traditional *film noir* elements: the narrator-protagonist commentary guiding the viewers and placing them in his perspective, the fact that most of the film is a flashback sprinkled with other lesser flashbacks which slowly reveal the

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<sup>3</sup> The different readings that can be made of *Beltenebros* endow the film with a transcendence which is unusual for the Spanish film industry: "La historia no es una sola manera de contar el tiempo sino muchas" (Bergamín 12). The combination of historical, political and emotional aspects makes its visual narrative a benchmark in Spanish filmmaking.

plot, and the constant suffering of the characters caught in a spiral of intrigue.<sup>4</sup>

In a certain way, Miró's film is not only a revision of the *film noir* genre, but it also pays homage to the classic works of cinema through its careful photography, its lighting, and its sordid urban settings:

With their high-contrast cinematography, doomed atmosphere, and evocative urban settings, many Hollywood films by Vidor, von Sternberg, Murnau, or von Stroheim anticipate the visual universe of noir. (Saada 181)

The directors mentioned established the basic parameters for the formation of the genre so that Orson Welles could readapt and reformulate them and they would become fixed in the eye of the viewer:

Many of the motifs of *film noir*, from low-key lighting to great depth of field to oblique camera angles derive from the technical evolution of Hollywood throughout the 1920s and 30s culmination with Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*. (Saada 182)

The impact of those auteurs and the admiration for them which Miró reflects in her work is patent throughout *Beltenebros*, which is constantly giving thanks to the great classics for the legacy they left. However, Miró does not stop with imitating these sources, she recreates actualizing and adjusting to Spanish reality a type of crude, striking film which borders on the grotesque in search of an impact on the viewer and in search of a hyperrealism or dirty realism natural to the times of the Franco dictatorship "The sex is more explicit, the violence more graphic, more extreme, and the forces at work behind both are of a decidedly darker hue" (Holt 37). *Film noir* is *Beltenebros*, but it is also represented according to Spanish tastes because of the darkness of its themes and

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<sup>4</sup> The film's very editing attempts to simulate a confused situation in which Spain saw itself immersed during the dictatorship: "La técnica cinematográfica del flash back es empleada aquí con el fin de lograr la confusión temporal que embarga al héroe y para evidenciar la similitud entre lo que ocurrió hace veinte años y lo que ocurre en el momento de la narración" (Mas 153). Remembrance and the mixture between past and present events produce in the viewer the sensation of loss which the protagonists experience and which covered a great part of the society of the time.

forms which trace back to naturalism and literary *tremendismo*, movement which were as popular with the Spanish public as Muñoz Molina's novel or the film which is the object of the present essay.

Within the scope of *film noir*, Spanish film traditionally has approached it as a genre and has shown an interest for it. It is obvious that Spanish *film noir* has molded the Hollywood premises in order to adapt them to its particular circumstance, to its socio-political situation and to its history. On numerous occasions the *film noir* genre has been used by Spanish filmmakers to denounce certain situations beyond the public domain or to inform about them:

El cine negro, que muestra un desafío al orden social motivado por diferentes razones (miseria, desequilibrio, ambición, venganza, etc.), desarrolla, en general, un proceso iniciático (característico de la delincuencia juvenil, por ejemplo) que conduce desde la inocencia o la juventud al conocimiento, a la madurez, pero también al fracaso o al mismo crimen com último peldaño del descenso hacia los infiernos. (Sánchez Barba 213)

These different pessimistic aspects regarding Spanish society are but a few of the tendencies shown by *film noir* on the Iberian Peninsula. In this category, films also have been made which simply seek the recreation of similar themes and settings in order to appeal to popular taste. And, on numerous occasions *film noir* stereotypes have been used to create narratives for commercial acceptance and success which translate into box office receipts.

The relationship between the Spanish film industry and *film noir* has been relatively regular, with a number of films which have approached the genre with greater or lesser satisfaction. Thus, and in spite of the American references to this genre, Spanish film history has created an important corpus of productions in this direction. Worthy of mention are: *El crimen de la calle de Bordadores* (1946) by Edgar Neville, *Los ojos dejan huellas* (1952) by José Luis Sáez de Heredia, *El cebo* (1958) by Ladislao Vajda, *Los golfos* (1959) by Carlos Saura, *La muerte silba un blues* (1962) de José Luis Franco, *El precio de un asesino* (1963) by Miguel Lluch, *Crimen de doble filo* (1964) by José Luis Borau, *Las Vegas, 500 millones* (1968) by Antonio Isasi Isasmendi, *Perros callejeros*

(1976) by José Antonio de la Loma o *El crack* (1981) by José Luis Garci, just to name a few of the more relevant titles of the genre in Spain. Antonio Llorens, critic and expert of the Spanish version of *film noir*, comments on the lack of quality and the lack of knowledge of the idiosyncrasies of this type of film:

. . . en nuestro mermado panorama de cine negro, acostumbrese a adaptar y a transplantar magníficos textos de otras latitudes conllevaría [. . .] un necesario dominio de las difíciles reglas del género, el moverse con una facilidad más notoria entre las aguas de unas historias policíacas repletas de posibilidades. (31)

If Spanish film is not noted for high-quality detective films, it is also true that there are a number of very acceptable productions under this category, like those just mentioned. One of the great achievements of Miró's film is precisely its mastery of the *film noir* conventions and its foreign referents, with which it constantly plays in order to produce a high quality film that captures the essence of the genre at the same time as it embraces the national imagination, endowing the work with a much more Spanish character than it might have at first glance.

These are preoccupations with different social aspects or with the commercial benefits of Spanish film, and in its development and evolution, the genre has maintained and has continued to exploit one of the genre's principal characteristics, which is the *femme fatale*:

Sin duda la prototípica desconfianza hacia el género femenino no ha sido resuelta en un género en el que la *femme fatale* funciona como elemento estructural de transgresión. (Sánchez Barba 203)

And *Beltenebros* is no different, in this sense, from other Spanish films, in which the appearance and the function of this character is not only central to the narrative process of the work, but it also drastically determines the actions of the male protagonist, in such a way as to condition, for better or for worse, his destiny, with the potential to completely change events.

In the Spanish film scene, the connections between cinema and literature are constant, and traditionally they have been exploited to



greater or lesser degrees of success. A frequent current within Spanish national film is the unfounded idea of the logic of a directly proportional quality between a successful original novel and its correlate put on the big screen. If, on the one hand, numerous cases of these adaptations to the big screen have not been completely as effective and striking as was predicted, it is also true that in the case of Muñoz Molina and his *Beltenebros*, a quality product was produced with sufficient identity as to be a commercial success without depending on the original text:

Trabajo militante, sin duda, lleno de valores humanistas, pero tratado con el realismo y la dureza de una rugosa película policíaca, sin ser simplemente cine negro, como tampoco es novela negra la obra de Muñoz Molina. (Jaime 189)

The symbolic relationship between cinema and literature is manifest in the *Beltenebros* case, which is to say that the mutual debt of literature to film and, later, of film to the printed word becomes a relationship which, far from conditioning and limiting the possibilities of both texts, enriches them by playing with intertextuality, and even with the medium in which they are produced, not just the genre. In other words, the novel is already drinking from the well of filmic sources, developing as a police/detective novel, like a film from the era of American film that produced these kinds of movies. Thus, in Muñoz Molina's work, there appear elements which are central to *film noir*, like "los claroscuros, la violencia y la violación, y por supuesto, la mujer fatal, Gilda. Y los encuadres claustrofóbicos del cine, coinciden con los estados de ánimo del protagonista" (Steen). In a parallel way, Miró's film faithfully follows the *film noir* style and detectivesque story line in order to bring about a revision of the genre, a kind of "neo-noir," which is well-received by public and critics alike.

The connections between the film medium and the literary medium following the lines that mark the noir, detective genre show up clearly in Muñoz Molina's text, "la novela sería un *thriller* con un suspense que es heredero de influencias tan variadas como Borges, Le Carré, Simenon, Chandler o Hitchcock" (Aguilera García 106). In an implicit way Jorge Luis Borges short story style is apparent in Muñoz Molina's narratives; stories like "Tema del traidor y del héroe", "Funes, el

memorioso”, “La muerte y la brújula” o “Las ruinas circulares”, are works from which *Beltenebros*, the novel as well as the film, takes inspiration. References to literary classics and especially to Spanish-language narratives are numerous, and they begin with the title itself:

El hombre literario de Beltenebros es el que se da a sí mismo Amadís de Gaula cuando se retira a una ermita después de haber ofendido a su señora, Oriana. (Ferrari [2000] 201)

The relationship between Amadís de Gaula and the protagonist in *Beltenebros* is direct; he rises up like a knight errant –distances and temporal context aside- for whom loyalty to party is crucial, for whom love is undying, and whose sentimentality is deep.<sup>5</sup>

The archetype of the knight molded into the protagonist in order to converge with the noir genre in the antihero is common and his personal traumas and emotional baggage weigh on him as much as the case in which he finds himself involved:

Darman es la imagen del hombre moderno enajenado, vaciado de sí mismo en aras de su función y de la eficacia requerida para cumplirla [. . .] pasó a ser la representación viva del hombre postmoderno, más funcionalizado que nunca. (Martínez)

Miró does not modify this aspect of the character, what is more, she exploits it to the extreme, playing with time and with the repeated situation of this knight who has come to less. The novelist as well as the filmmaker pick up on principal aspects of classic films of the *film noir*

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<sup>5</sup> Muñoz Molina’s original text involves in its very title the essence of the protagonist’s character and the heritage of one of the elements most characteristic of high Spanish culture:

*Beltenebros* se nos presenta como una novela que adopta como punto de arranque la tradición literaria, en este caso puntual la de los libros de caballería, con lo cual nos situamos ante un texto que apuesta por el imperativo de la acción, nos referimos al *Amadís de Gaula* y al *Quijote* respectivamente. Mientras el título alude al nombre poético que toma Amadís al retirarse a una ermita por haber ofendido a su señora, Oriana, el epígrafe proveniente del *Quijote* se refiere a la doble condición de perseguidor y perseguido. (Ferrari [2001] 218)

Just like Don Quijote or Amadís, Darman stalks his prey, just as he is stalked by his past.

genre in which the behavior and the internal suffering of the protagonist crystallize in the plot and in his action in such a way that his very existence hangs on the solution of the mystery which the work entails.<sup>6</sup>

The case of *Beltenebros*, novel and film, most probably is one of the most fruitful and most achieved in the long tradition of adaptations of literature to Spanish film:

. . . la futilidad de tratar de establecer un análisis basado en la precedencia de uno u otro texto, ya que tanto el proceso como el producto final de los mismos ilustra que la cadena de significaciones o representaciones ni termina con la película ni comienza con la novela. (Pillado-Miller 22)

Few binomials have been produced of such high quality and acceptance without having to fall into the traditional comparisons and discussions as to whether the printed text is better or not than the film. This artistic and commercial success of the noir genre is due to the connection and direct interplay with the genre; it is a total connection, not partial as had been developed with previous literary and filmic productions. The direct conversation between *film noir* texts and paradigms becomes the principal element at play in the execution of a relatively effective work.

In spite of the detective quality and the *film noir* heritage which underlie Miró's film, the discourse that flows over the visual narrative is a more or less implicit way is a discourse of the revision of a series of characteristics related to Spanish national identity and is a discourse anchored in the potential for the visual medium to dialogue about these types of questions:

. . . el cine adquiere un protagonismo inusitado en base a su poder como aparato cultural capaz de reflejar y construir identidades nacionales y de difundirlas e internacionalizarlas. . . (Herrera y Martínez-Carazo 9)

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<sup>6</sup> This archetype of the knight -with certain exceptions- thrown into hostile surroundings is traditional in film noir: "The independence, isolation, and irreverence of hard-boiled antiheroes were ideal prewar qualities readily adaptable to more politically charged protagonists in topic espionage pictures" (Chinen Bisen 48). From the very beginnings of the genre, the protagonist showed this facet as central to his characterization.

A reading of the film centered on the detectivesque and espionage plot comes up short as an analysis of the work as a whole. Miró's conception ties into a past which is determinant for Spain in the 90's, in which the confirmation of the radical change which Spain had lived since the end of the Franco dictatorship demanded imminence. The opening up to and the recognition from the outside would come to the country the next year with the Olympic Games in Barcelona and the World Expo in Sevilla, putting the stamp of post-modernity on the country and presenting it to the world community as an emerging economy and culture.

*Beltenebros* gives the viewer a look at a tension which molded the political-ideological scene for so many years, and it rises like a counterpoint for the new articulations of Spanish nationalism which were forming:

In the film, there is a double striptease, sexual and political, that hides the emergence of a new refashioning of Spanish nationalism, which is shaped in the form of nostalgia for a bygone patriarch. (Gabilondo 242)

The nostalgia to which this critic refers is the nostalgia for a past in which ideals and social values were above the lives of ordinary citizens, as Miró posits, and this situation in which thought and image of nation were one, gives way to a different Spain where the emotions and national sentiment which flow in *Beltenebros* are not repeated.

The search for referents outside of Spanish culture, taking into account the setting and period in which *Beltenebros* takes place, paradoxically, ends in an affirmation of that very culture which inevitably is fed by icons of U.S. popular culture, and specifically by film: "Ironically, it is in these very self-conscious references to US film and literature that the film's specifically Spanish flavour lies" (Smith 39). The interplay with the great classics of *film noir* is what is proposed as to how the Spanish resistance to the Franco regime took refuge in hidden, sordid and dark spaces which the *noir* genre affords. Thus, in Miró's film the spaces where the action develops and where the characters evolve are dark theaters, semi-abandoned attics, places of ill repute, and inhospitable,

dank streets.<sup>7</sup> The combination of references to international texts with a *mise en scène* like that used in *Beltenebros*, far from distancing the film from Spanish character, reaffirms the country's condition in terms of its marginal, escapist context as related to the dominant ideology. In this way, the survival of a good portion of national sentiment is kept alive, in spite of oppression, by the protections offered by foreign icons and images which served as a cover for the hope of repressed freedoms. Dissidents and activists, as well as ordinary citizens who did not agree with the regime, maintained their identity against the dictatorship during its strictest, most repressive period, just as *Beltenebros* presents it.

The nature of this film's confrontation with history is clear and explicit. In spite of the quantity and frequency of the revision of historical memory currently still used in cultural productions, *Beltenebros* manages to create a legitimate space for this type of filmic narrative as it covers over this aspect with a type of veil which is international in its sources, parallels, European settings, and, above all, with its choice of foreign protagonists filming in English. Nevertheless, this whole device of distancing itself from things Spanish does not achieve its full effect since it is impossible to hide the underlying preoccupation with a past and present in which political polarizations are all too recent:

. . . contemplar la evolución de la sociedad en su mirada a un pasado histórico, desde una transición política que surgió, entre otras cosas, de un enfrentamiento crítico con la historia que era imprescindible para interpretar el presente. . . (Benet 168)

It is precisely this dialogue between past and present which is implicitly manifest in Miró's film; it is manifest in such a way that national identity again becomes the focus for the understanding of Spanish character and its formation in the second half of the 20th century.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The treatment of space "defined by architecture, urbanism, and landscape" (Dimendberg 178), in *film noir* is used as one more element which contributes an extra ingredient to the building of an image to create the sensation of asphyxia which these films seek to cause in the viewer.

<sup>8</sup> Obviously, the revisions of the past, the confrontation with history, and the reconsideration of national character which are developed in the work of Miró do not leave critics or society indifferent:

Las representaciones exageradas o falsas de lo español pueden gustar a los españoles, o al menos ser aceptadas por ellos, porque corresponden a su forma de ver y pensar

The chronology of feelings as they relate to Spanish national identity, as they are seen in the film, does not coincide with the historical periods and attitudes generally accepted by historians, critics, and public imagination:

La tensión entre el proyecto político de la clandestinidad y el consiguiente desencanto, parece dar cuenta parcial de la oscilación narrativa, siendo preciso, no obstante, buscar el complemento desestabilizador en la dimensión afectiva. . . (García 20)

That is, *Beltenebros* is set in the years in which exile, censorship and control by the Franco regime were asphyxiating. However, the feeling which the film projects is one of nostalgia and not of denunciation, much closer to the disenchantment lived following the frustration of the transition period which did meet expectations. In the same way, a kind of tragic, doubting tone impregnates Miró's film in the face of an uncertain future which awaits Spain and whose setbacks and how it might mold national identity could not be anticipated. For that reason, the film seems reticent to take the recent convulsive history from the foreground and to relegate it to a secondary position, instead reliving in a way a resistance which forms a real part of national character.

Miró's film develops in *film noir* terms, but with its reflexive underpinnings, it unfolds as a "utilización del género policíaco como vehículo de reflexión más aséptica sobre hechos históricos" (Aguilera García 112). This reflection on and revision of past national history through well-chosen thematics and characters gives the film a: "nostalgia reflexiva, es decir, aquella que presenta una reflexión sobre la historia y el paso del tiempo" (Herrero 88). Again, somewhat admiringly Miró remembers a past which, even though it was charged with danger and coercion, also motivated its players to display an attitude which was more committed to their time, to their society, and to their country. It was a time in which emotions seemed to be lived more intensely; it was a past

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determinados fenómenos o historias [...] una operación de mistificación de la realidad histórica representada, que refuerza los mitos y los justifica con la fuerza realista de las imágenes en movimiento. (Camporesi 148)

that will not return and which is about to disappear with a socio-political reconfiguration given by the transition.

*Beltenebros* covers two decades of the Franco regime, and, just as it happens with Darman, society evolves and the levels of repression change:

La dictadura fue muy larga, por lo que la misma, en su afán de supervivencia, tuvo una clara evolución interna. Así tras unos primeros años de miseria y hambre, evolucionó a partir de la década de los cincuenta, asistiéndose a una profunda transformación económica que complicó un cambio de la estructura social. (Soto Carmona 33)

In a parallel way, these social changes are reflected in the protagonist; exiled in a comfortable middle class residence in Great Britain, Darman returns to Spain to relive the traumas of his youth and to realize that he has changed as much as his resistance to the regime. The paid assassin of liberal movements now only seeks comfort, and the carrying out of his charge involves the elimination of his fears and the aversion to closed, asphyxiating spaces in which, as much in now as then, he always has found himself in Spain.

These environments and the playing with doubles are constant in the work:

. . . Miró faithfully captures the settings, atmospheres and oppressive conditions of life under Francoism. She also coolly explores the narrative's return of the repressed, i.e. Darman's fear of making the same mistake in 1962 as he did in 1946. (Jordan and Morgan-Tamosounas 95)

A bluish lighting, prevalent throughout the whole film, is used to symbolize the protagonist's coldness and the depressive tone of the time. This setting is submerged in unending silences and in chiaroscuros in which the various sequences take place, and these give to the film an oppressive feeling as typical of *film noir* as of the Franco era.

The treatment of the visual image which Miró offers and the cinematographic work which she develops are produced in classic terms, following the spirit of the great landmarks of Hollywood film:

. . . teatralización de la puesta en escena, organización espacial del encuadre, relaciones aceptadas entre movimiento, planificación y diálogo, montaje que acentúa la ilusión de continuidad, uso del *flashback* para ligar narrativamente el presente y el pasado, planos generales para denotar metonímicamente espacios concretos (un coche antiguo para Madrid, nieve para Polonia, mar gris para la costa de Inglaterra). (Rubio 170)

The heritage of invisible editing traditional to American film reaffirms the quality of Miró's productions, and, particularly that of *Beltenebros*, where she creates Spanish film of high quality, seeking in canonical models archetypes which might create filmic produces which might be at least acceptable.

These references to the classics of Hollywood are constant, and they appear sprinkled throughout the film, implicitly and explicitly:

*Touch of Evil* (Orson Welles, 1958), *They Died with their Boots On* (Raoul Walsh, 1941), *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946), *Mutiny on the Bounty* (Frank Lloyd, 1935), and *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940) [. . .] remain visually familiar to current audiences through their easy availability in television broadcast and international video re-release. (Rolph 117-18)

These filmic narrations are ever present in Spain's public imagination, since they were main works which reached theaters during the Franco era and they have continued to show up in theaters and on television, increasing the importance of these myths.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The majority of these references to classic *film noir* are used in a way in which the tradition of the genre is conserved and to which homage is paid. However, Miró also turns to canonical films of this type which were already beginning to break with some principal films premises:

...*Touch of Evil* does seem an appropriate end-point: the movement had been winding down for a few years, and in its atmosphere of corruption and decay there is a sense that



But Miró, not only turns to these texts in order to connect with public consciousness, and the homage she pays *film noir* is developed in a metafictional way, expressed through references to these films, to the different connections between characters, or with its plot based on classic models. Thus, the film enriches its interpretive levels at the same time as it helps the viewer to understand and sympathize with the life struggles of the protagonists and with how these film icons are put into play in order to explain a difficult period of Spanish history.

In this heritage-homage to *film noir*, one of the most explicit elements is that of the *femme fatale* figure, based on Gilda:

*Film noir* might be a man's world but it is one in which women were able to make a significant mark through strength of character, ambition, determination, some challenging roles, and a compelling ability to exploit the power of their sexuality. (Crowther 138)

Rebeca Osorio torments the protagonist, and she leads him, in the past as well as in the present, to changes his actions, and, therefore, to change the course of events. This fatal woman, who conditions Darman throughout the work, appears as a turning point for this assassin for hire, and she is precisely the repetition of the past, the new Rebeca Osorio who makes Darman concentrate on his personal situation, relegating his charge of political justice to a secondary plane:

. . . the male abandoning his active position as masculine subject by willingly setting himself in thrall to the loved object. He allows himself to become engulfed by the woman. (Krutnik 84)

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the work of the movement is somehow finished. Noir's simultaneous movement towards realism and stylisation is demonstrated here, although the accent is more on the stylisation in a manner atypical of 1950s film noir [...] repeatedly against the classical style of establishing a comprehensive three-dimensional space out of two-dimensional images. (Robson 233)

So, *Beltenebros* plays with the most traditional aspects of the genre without limiting itself to the standards of this type of film, demonstrating its intrinsic knowledge of the history and evolution of the *noir* aesthetic.

The idealization of the *femme fatale* and the turn in the political plot towards the personal unite in one more attempt by Miró link with traditional *film noir* in which plot lines overlap.<sup>10</sup>

But, to the contrary of what the majority of the film augurs, the ending –a continuation of the opening sequence closing a long flashback– again exposes the stereotypes in the collective consciousness about Spanish character in which the man is dominant, reducing the *femme fatale* to a level quite inferior to that which she had up until that moment of the film:

. . . la presunta mujer fatal es, en realidad, víctima de la perversidad del personaje masculino que tiene la mente puesta en la apropiación y el desposeimiento del objeto de su deseo (o, mejor aún, del objeto de su goce). (François)

Once again, Miró returns to the reaffirmation of expressions considered as typically Spanish, moving away from the models which so carefully had been spread throughout the film and which she had followed in it.

Finally, the influence of Muñoz Molina's work on the film goes beyond mere adaptation and becomes a combination of intertextual relationships which enrich Miró's film by widening its references to the *noir* genre:

If the use of apparatus theory in reading *Beltenebros* turns a postmodern pastiche of *noir* culture into an allegory, finally, guides the reader toward a final reading in which the cultural moves towards the political, and commentary on the past advances towards the present. (Richardson 277)

However, the strong *film noir* heritage which the film possesses does not become a drawback to its tying into the Spanish quality which is latent in the film. On the contrary, the manipulation of the codes and conventions

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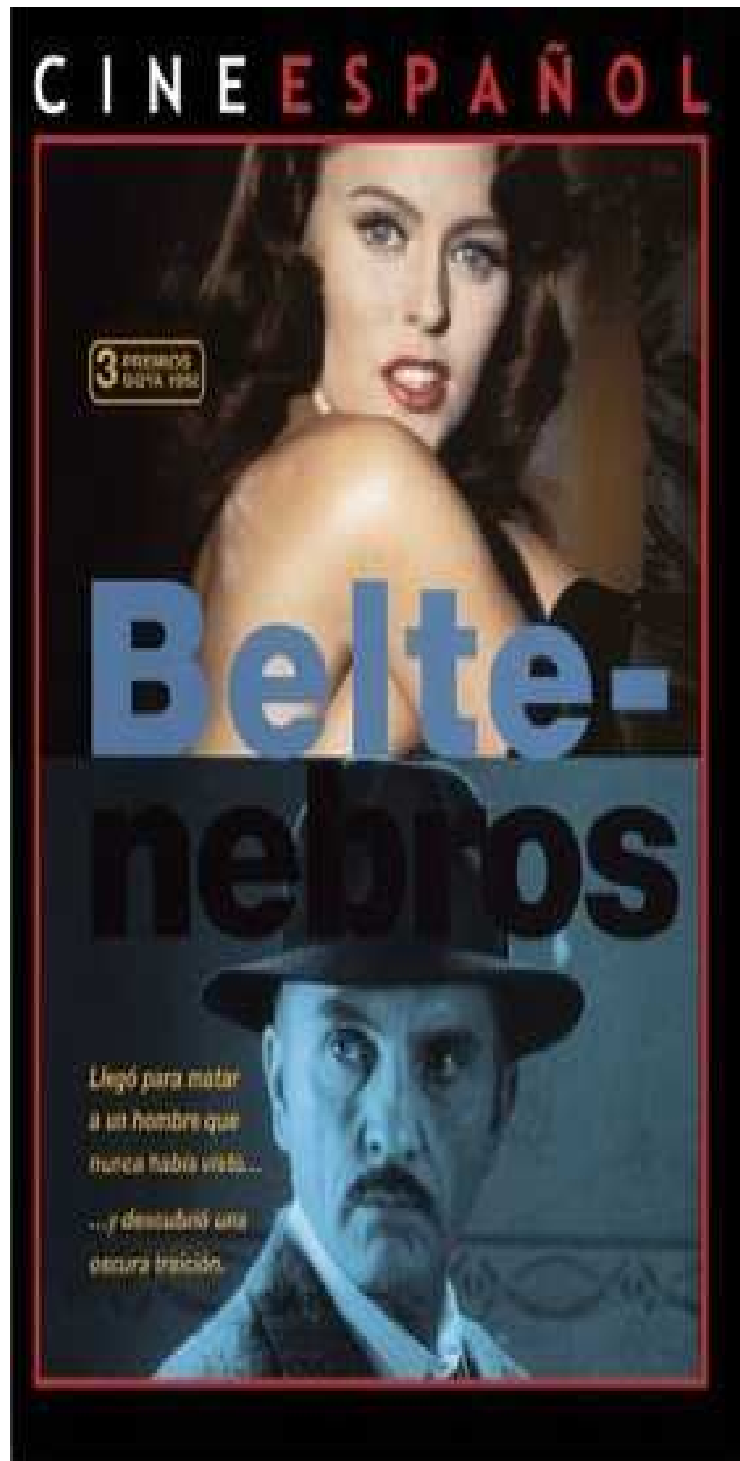
<sup>10</sup> Just like Gilda, Rebeca Osorio conditions Darman's behaviors: "Johnny is caught between his love/hate for Gilda and his attachment to Ballin, who offers him an escape from his past (always an attractive proposition for a noir protagonist)" (Ballinger y Graydon 93). Such an escape from his past is what Rebeca offers him, but not through the escape from self, but from confronting the demons created twenty years before.

of the genre in service of a reflection upon Spanish character and on a situation contemporary to the time of the film's debut, *Beltenebros* look diachronically towards the national context, and, through the preoccupations of the characters, it takes up the cares of Spanish society at to what has been its identity and the direction it has been taking since the decade of the 90's.

Paradoxically, the film is supported by international cultural referents which, with points of departure in classic Hollywood film, already have become overworked iconographies assimilated by Spanish culture, and, therefore, assimilated as their own, in order to represent the political history of the country. The taste for the dark and the grotesque which traditionally have been a key in the essence of Spanish culture, the foreign elements uniquely qualified to criticize or opine about Spain, and the traditional male who, in spite of his ups and downs, manages finally to get the female figure to bend to him, join together in Miró's work in order to reconsider national culture and identity.

*Beltenebros* plays with the paradigms of *film noir* in order to engage a wide range of public interest, and it uses the genre as a vehicle in order to project a preoccupation with Spanish themes. The film is fed by foreign references, and it also pays homage to a long productive, yet forgotten Spanish tradition of *film noir* unknown to much of the public. In this way, it uses the past in order to rethink the present; it uses the historical setting and the thematics of the political upheaval of the Franco era in order to recognize profound changes in Spanish society, to pick up on what were the pillars of Spanish character for the majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and to foreground the latent preoccupation with to the point to which national identity has been lost.

**Translated by: Richard K. Curry**



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