

## RICARDO GASCÓN A FILMMAKER FROM BARCELONA

Rafael de España  
University of Barcelona



When cinema was a newborn art, Spain was mainly an agrarian country with only two industrially developed regions, Catalonia and the Basque Country. Madrid had the King and his ministers and noblemen, as well as all the administrative offices, but the enterprising bourgeoisie was in Barcelona. Apart from his capacity for business, this bourgeoisie was much more open to the latest cultural trends coming from Europe, especially from Paris. The upper classes in Barcelona had built the Liceo Opera House without any support from the central government, and they sponsored all the advances in art, for example in architecture the *Modernismo* movement -the Catalan version of Art Nouveau- that had Gaudí as its main exponent. In his formative years, Pablo Picasso lived the Bohemian life of Barcelona with the most progressive painters of Spain (Ramon Casas, Santiago Rusiñol...). It was inevitable that the first attempt to create a sort of cinema industry in Spain took place in Barcelona, and so it was.

The first Spanish filmmaker worthy of this name was Fructuoso Gelabert (Barcelona 1874-1955), and until the end of the First World War a lot of companies were actively producing films of different genres, not only for the domestic market but also for export. The first European "coproduction" (when nobody knew that word meant) was filmed between October 1916 and January 1917 in and around Barcelona, produced by Paris-based American Charles J. Drossner with the involvement of French and Spanish investors: *La vida de Cristóbal Colón y su descubrimiento de América*, in the French version *La Vie de Christophe Colomb*. As the title implies, it was an epic about Columbus.

However, Catalan tycoons never relied on film the same way they had done in other affairs, and after 1920 Catalan cinema (and also Madrid's less relevant production) languished while German, French and, obviously, American cinema seized the box office. The advent of sound changed this panorama: with the support of native language, Spanish cinema was at last able to conquer audiences, and again Barcelona was a pioneer in the use of new techniques with the building in 1931 of the first sound-equipped studios in Spain, Orphea-Film. One important factor to be remembered is that all the important film companies, European and American (the Hollywood majors), had their headquarters not in Madrid, but in Barcelona; Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer also had the best dubbing facilities in Spain, which would remain active until the late Fifties. During the Civil War, film production never stopped, not continuing only with politically-oriented short subjects (documentary and fiction) but also with feature films: André Malraux's classic *Sierra de Teruel*, later known as *Espoir* (or *Man's Hope* in English-speaking countries), was entirely filmed in Barcelona, on location and at the Orphea sound stages.

As is well known, Franco's victory isolated the country from abroad and, inside, and proceeded in order to centralize all the political and economic structures: therefore, Madrid had to be the center of all cultural activities. Although film production remained in private hands, the State claimed to be the "protector" of cinema, not only in moral aspects (strict censorship) but also economically, with a series of protectionist measures that obliged producers to depend on the "kindness" of the Francoist film authorities. Lavishly-budgeted productions only could be made in Madrid, close to the ministerial offices that, indirectly of course, provided the money. Barcelona was reduced to making cheap movies, avoiding some expensive genres which were Madrid's specialities, like the historical blockbusters. At any rate, Catalan producers had a peculiar way of subsidizing their films: according to Francoist laws, the Spanish subsidiaries of the American companies like Universal Films Española, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Ibérica, Hispano Fox-Film, Columbia (Warners and Paramount were banned until the Fifties for "pro-republican sympathies" during the Civil War)...., needed a quota of Spanish films on their list of releases in order to be allowed to market their own production in Spain. Consequently, a series of local production companies were created in Barcelona only to provide Spanish films for the American distributors: the most active were Emisora Films, working for 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox, and PECSA, associated to Universal. Both produced low-budget films with contemporary settings, focusing more on the ingenuity of the script than on production values, with contract actors and technicians who appeared regularly in all them. This trick allowed these modest companies to maintain their rate of production and give work to cinema professionals. One of the beneficiaries of this policy was Ricardo Gascón, who made his directorial debut in 1945.

Gascón had entered cinema in 1931 as an extra. In the years prior to the Civil War, he worked as a film critic and began to collaborate in film direction beginning with the lesser tasks. In the early Forties, he worked as an assistant director with Ignacio F. Iquino in a series of "quickies" produced by Aureliano Campa under the sponsorship of CIFESA, the main film company of post-war Spain. Gascón's first directorial credit was precisely in a Campa production: *Un ladrón de guante blanco*. With *Cuando los ángeles duermen*, released in 1947, he began his fruitful collaboration with PECSA Films (an acronym for "Producciones y Estudios Cinematográficos, S.A."), the company managed by wealthy textile manufacturer and movie lover José Carreras Planas... lover in every sense of the word, because it was precisely his cinema ventures which eventually lend him to ruin.





The seven features directed by Gascón for PECSA were undoubtedly his best achievements, especially *Don Juan de Serrallonga* (1948) and *La niña de Luzmela* (1949). The first was an adventure epic inspired by the work of Víctor Balaguer about a famous eighteenth-century Catalan bandit, that not avoided some libertarian and Catalanist overtones. And, the second was an atmospheric adaptation, slightly influenced by Hitchcock's *Rebecca*, of Concha Espina's novel of the same title. Unlike the Campa products, all of the Carreras Planas' films enjoyed a relatively lavish budget, incorporating foreign actors like Amedeo Nazzari, Clara Calamai (then faded stars of Italian Fascist cinema) or Cesare Danova (who later attempted to gain star status in Hollywood), but always with economy in mind: for example, Gascón's last works for Carreras Planas, *Correo del Rey* and *El final de una leyenda*, were filmed simultaneously in Minorca in 1950 using the same actors and settings.

Regrettably, after leaving PECSA, Gascón's career declined considerably. The three films he made for other producers during the early Fifties were complete disappointments, and, after a minor job as associate director for the Spanish version of *Sail Into Danger* (*El*

*aventurero*, 1957), an UK-Spain co-production actually directed by Kenneth Hume, he abandoned any cinematic activity and went to Argentina for, it seems, strictly personal reasons, only to return to his native city many years later, when no one remembered him.

Although intense, Gascón's cinematic career was unquestionably brief, less than a decade, and this could be the explanation for the oblivion into which his name later fell. When he left the cinema (and the country) in the mid-fifties, there was a more or less established film industry in Spain, with international films filmed in Spanish locations and studios, and some filmmakers like Bardem or Berlanga were beginning to be known abroad.

And when Gascón attempted to return to filmmaking in 1980, not only Spanish cinema had changed, but the whole country. A vehicle for a second-rate comedian, filmed with the aesthetic concept of a television show, and, worst of all, without any self-conviction, this attempt could hardly help him to regain the position he was in thirty years before. He spent his last years in Andorra and died totally forgotten. It is the hope that the pages that follow will contribute to remembering Ricardo Gascón him and to re-evaluating his work.



## Filmography

### Director:

*Su majestad la risa* (1981)  
*El aventurero* (1957)  
*Pleito de sangre* (1956)  
*Los agentes del quinto grupo* (1955)  
*Misión extravagante* (1954)  
*El correo del rey* (1951)  
*El hijo de la noche* (1950)  
*Ha entrado un ladrón* (1950)  
*El final de una leyenda* (1950)  
*La niña de Luzmela* (1949)  
*Don Juan de Serrallonga* (1949)  
*Conflicto inesperado* (1948)  
*Cuando los ángeles duermen* (1947)  
*Un ladrón de guante blanco* (1946)

### Scriptwriter:

*Su majestad la risa* (1981)  
*El aventurero* (1957)  
*Pleito de sangre* (1956)  
*Los agentes del quinto grupo* (1955)  
*Misión extravagante* (1954)  
*El correo del rey* (1951)  
*El hijo de la noche* (1950)  
*Ha entrado un ladrón* (1950)  
*El final de una leyenda* (1950)  
*La niña de Luzmela* (1949)  
*Don Juan de Serrallonga* (1949)  
*Conflicto inesperado* (1948)  
*Cuando los ángeles duermen* (1947)  
*Un ladrón de guante blanco* (1946)

### Assistant director:

*Ángela es así* (1945)  
*Un enredo de familia* (1943)  
*Boda accidentada* (1943)  
*Alma de Dios* (1941)  
*Usted tiene ojos de mujer fatal* (1939)  
*Nosotros somos así* (1936)

Actor:

"La noche del cine español" (1 TV episode, 1985)

Producer:

*Misión extravagante* (1954)

Pictures edited by Miguel A. Zárate and located at Archivo General de la Administración, Alcalá de Henares. Picture IDD: (03) 89-90 F-2177-01, (03) 89-90 F-2177-02, and (03) 89-90 F-2435-07-001.