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## **Domestic Violations in Spanish Cinema: Reframing Gendered Violence Onscreen**

This presentation is part of a dissertation chapter that explores how representations of gendered violence in contemporary Spanish cinema are indicative of a larger shift towards viewing gendered violence as a human rights issue. In recent years, mainstream Spanish films, such as *Te doy mis ojos* (dir. Icíar Bollaín, 2003), *Sólo mía* (dir. Javier Balaquer, 2001), and *Piedras* (dir. Ramón Salazar, 2002), focus on the issue of domestic violence, referred to in Spain as *terrorismo familiar*, familiar terrorism, which emphasizes how domestic abuse is more than just a violent act, but a violent act whose goal is to intimidate its victim along ideological lines. While these films focus mainly on domestic violence within Spain, this shift towards thinking about gendered violence as a human rights violation is indicative of a larger attempt to promote gender equality within the Spanish and Latin American contexts and illustrates a decisive move away from North American and Northern European feminist thought and practice, which is either seen as the female counterpart of machismo or as a form of cultural imperialism that overlooks the cultural specificity of gender identity in the Ibero-American world.

However, despite the resistance to the ‘label’ of feminism in Spain, women and homosexual groups have mobilized at different moments to push for equality under the law and have achieved greater consensus by framing issues of gender and sexuality under the rubric of international human rights discourse. According to Stephen Tropiano, the linking of homosexual rights with women’s rights in the Spanish context results from a universalizing view that challenges discrimination of homosexuality as “part of a larger spectrum of sexual identities” that acknowledges a similar struggle against marginalization of other disenfranchised groups, in particular women and the working class.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the rise of collective social movements in Spain in the 1970s, this period marks a turning point from a 37-year dictatorship under Franco

to democracy by the end of the decade. The country's experience under harsh military rule and the resulting awareness of the level of state-sanctioned violence has also made it an active proponent of human rights law.

Similarly, the discussion of gender and sexual rights as human rights emerges in Latin America in the 1970s as a response to the excessive human rights violations and disappearances of alleged dissidents under various dictatorial regimes. As a response to these forms of state-sanctioned violence, but also to address the gendered nature of both systemic violence as well as individual acts of violence, women's groups have relied on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, created in 1948 in response to the atrocities of World War II as "an international body of laws...meant to protect the integrity and dignity of human beings,"<sup>2</sup> as a means to equate gender violence and discrimination within the framework of human rights violations. Elizabeth Jelin, in her essay "Engendering Human Rights" (1997) argues that the mistreatment of women "curtails the freedom of women and creates a climate of terror and submission that accentuates gender inequality and women's economic dependency...[and consequently], domestic violence reinforces the structural limitations on women's options."<sup>3</sup> The emphasis on human rights discourse also arises during a period in which Spanish and Latin American women's movements became transnational through participation in various international gatherings where women's groups met to discuss feminism, women's issues and political activism. The declaration of 1975 as the International Year of the Woman marks a significant link in these instances of transnational feminist practices.

In addition to the rise of international women's groups within the Ibero-American world, the role of media should not be underestimated as both a cultural practice and cultural form that is able to circulate with relative ease. For many in the Ibero-American world, the increase in

political activism among women during this period goes hand in hand with their increased participation in the construction of their media image as filmmakers throughout these regions, such as María Novaro in Mexico and María Luisa Bemberg in Argentina, used the camera as an extension of their political activism. Both women used their experience making films within various women's collectives to transition into mainstream feature-filmmaking. Continuing in this tradition, female filmmakers of the contemporary period have chosen to represent the female through a multiplicity of social issues, in an attempt to encapsulate the plurality of the female experience. As Susan Martin-Marquez argues in her book, *Feminist Discourse and Spanish Cinema: Sight Unseen* (1999), recent films by Spanish women emphasize “the different ways in which women of diverse backgrounds experience gender”.<sup>4</sup> It is in this regard that I will discuss the film, *Te doy mis ojos*<sup>5</sup> (2003) by Icíar Bollaín, a film that exhibits how anxieties over shifting gender roles are a factor in cases of domestic violence. But before I continue with this discussion of the film, it is important to first examine the portrayal of violence in Spanish cinema in order to address how the film makes an intervention into the portrayal of gendered violence onscreen.

The tendency towards violence in Spanish cinema has been well documented by film scholars. However, little has been written that challenges the gendered nature of these violent depictions. For instance, in her book, *Blood Cinema* (1993), Marsha Kinder discusses how opposition films of the *dictablanda* period in the 1970s specularized excessive violence as a mode of political critique against Franco, since the portrayal of violence and pornography was repressed during the dictatorship. She further adds that this specularizing of violence as political critique is rooted within Spanish culture and can be traced to paintings by Goya in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> Through her examination, Kinder pinpoints certain patterns that emerge in the cinematic portrayal of violence in Spanish cinema, among which is the “displacement of

violence onto surrogate victims, especially animals, children, and women”.<sup>7</sup> For example, in discussing the film *Bilbao* (1978) by director, Bigas Luna, Kinder reads the sexual violence in the film as symbolic manifestations of the Oedipal narrative and the repression characterized by Francoist ideology, but she also suggests that such representations of perverse sexuality demonstrate that the “post-Franco period is not really so free, that even in the superliberated city of Barcelona, Spaniards still retain an internalized repression that cultivates a taste for sexual perversity.”<sup>8</sup>

While Kinder’s analysis of violence through its reinscription of the Oedipal narrative is insightful and canonical, in my own work, I attempt to extend the discussion of violence in cinema to include how filmmakers’ treat gendered violence as a social issue in itself, but also to demonstrate that gendered violence is no longer limited by its national specificity, but can be seen as the cultural manifestation of a global human rights movement against gendered violence and an attempt to create a transnational feminist imaginary and practice. Due to time limitations, I will focus on one such film, *Te doy mis ojos* (2003) directed by Icíar Bollaín. The issue of domestic violence is not a new problem in Spain<sup>9</sup>, but is only recently addressed in contemporary Spanish cinema as a social problem.<sup>10</sup> In examining the issue of domestic violence, this film demonstrates how complex the issue is by showing how it is embedded within the strict gender roles that exist in Spanish culture<sup>11</sup> and which are perpetuated by the Catholic Church’s traditional views of marriage and female suffering that has permitted domestic violence by discouraging victims against speaking out in order to preserve the family.

While many films on domestic violence fall into the category of melodrama, this film avoids the clichéd characterizations of the “evil” male perpetrator and the passive female “victim,” by allowing the spectator to witness the subjectivity of both Antonio, and his wife,

Pilar, for as Medina-Ariza and Barberet write “abuse is not only an objective reality but also a subjective experience.”<sup>12</sup> In making the film, Bollaín and Alicia Luna, her co-screenwriter, asked the question of who were the men who abused women since little is known about them. In order to answer this question, Bollaín directed the short film, *Amores que matan* (2000) to discuss the issue of domestic violence from the abuser’s perspective. In making this short, Bollaín worked with the ‘Asociación de Mujeres María de Padilla de Toledo’, a women’s rights organization in Toledo, Spain that works with women who have been abused, providing resources and counseling services. This process of working with women’s rights organizations and collectives has its roots in women’s activism of the 1970s. Along with her co-writer, she gathered testimonies from women who suffered from domestic abuse and used this material as research to make the short film. In making this film, Bollaín realized that “*si ellos eran unos desconocidos, ellas eran aun mas/* “if they [the male abusers] were the unknown, the women were known even less.”<sup>13</sup>

With this realization, she then began work on a feature-length film, *Te doy mis ojos* with the goal of creating a subjective account of a couple’s abusive relationship. The film demonstrates that domestic violence is a complex issue by looking at the psychological, social and cultural circumstances that helps feed this situation of abuse. Both Antonio and Pilar feel pressured by their families to play the role of the dutiful son and daughter, which makes Antonio feel inadequate and Pilar feel obligated to make her marriage work. Throughout the film, Pilar’s mother insists that she return to Antonio for the sake of her family, ignoring the fact that her daughter is the victim of severe abuse, much like she ignores the fact that she too has been abused. By ignoring the issue, the mother is in a sense condoning domestic violence, much like the Church has in the name of preserving the family. Pilar’s progression throughout the film is,

thus, a journey of self-discovery, in which she learns to stand up to her mother and reject the ideology of the Church. In a pivotal scene in the film, Pilar confronts her mother at her father's grave and critiques her martyrdom in tolerating her abusive father, stating that she did it for her own self as martyr and not for the sake of the family. Accomplishing this, makes Pilar see the distinction between her own desires and her sense of duty. This process of disclosure, according to Bollaín, is the first step in a long process of healing for victims of domestic abuse, and a step towards confronting domestic violence as a social problem.<sup>14</sup>

In emphasizing the need for disclosure, the film functions to publicize the issue of domestic violence without specularizing it, since the only instance of violence in the film occurs without graphic eroticization. It is an act of brutality that leaves Pilar without any physical marks (although this does not make the act any less violent). This refusal to participate in the eroticization of gendered violence marks a departure from the ways in which violence has been portrayed in Spanish cinema and paves the way for a reevaluation of gendered violence onscreen. Additionally, as a film that evolved out of work with a women's activist organization, the film exemplifies what Rosa Linda Fregoso calls the "cultural politics of visibility,"<sup>15</sup> which emphasize the ways in which cultural practice is used to foreground the often unspoken issue of gendered violence through activism. While Fregoso focuses her argument around violence against women in Juarez, it is important to address gendered violence beyond specific localities and national contexts, but as a global phenomenon that needs recognition in order to be combated.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Tropiano. "Out of the Margins: The Construction of Homosexuality in Spanish, German, and Italian Cinema." (Diss. University of Southern California, 1996), 143.

<sup>2</sup> Marjorie Agosin, "Introduction," In Agosin, Marjorie (Ed). *Women, Gender, and Human Rights: A Global Perspective* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Jelin, "Engendering Human Rights," In Dore, Elizabeth (Ed). *Gender Politics in Latin America: Debates in Theory and Practice* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997), 72.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Martin-Marquez. *Feminist Discourse and Spanish Cinema: Sight Unseen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 281.

<sup>5</sup> *Te doy mis ojos* (2003). Dir. Icíar Bollaín. 103 min. Manga Films, DVD.

<sup>6</sup> Marsha Kinder. *Blood Cinema: The Reconstruction of National Identity in Spain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 138-9.

<sup>7</sup> Kinder, 137.

<sup>8</sup> Kinder, 262.

<sup>9</sup> One of the most publicized events of domestic violence in Spain occurred in 1997, when a woman named Ana Orantes was tied to a chair and burned alive by her husband after having appeared on a talk show, discussing the forty years of abuse she suffered at the hands of her husband. This incident led the government to initiate a national plan that addressed the issue of domestic violence against women, criminalized systematic psychological abuse and made it possible to obtain restraining orders. See Juanjo Medina-Ariza and Rosemary Barberet, "Intimate Partner Violence in Spain: Findings from a National Survey" In *Violence Against Women* 9.3 (March 2003), 302-322., which is a published account of a national survey on the prevalence of domestic violence and what is being done in Spain to address this issue.

<sup>10</sup> Among the many films that deal this theme include: *Sólo mía* (2001) directed by Javier Balaquer and *Piedras* (2002) directed by Ramón Salazar. The first film examines how a marriage evolves from a loving relationship into obsession and domestic violence and retaliation. In the latter film, the issue is not a main theme in the film, but treated as a problem that women need to learn to confront. There is also an incident of domestic violence in *Flores de Otro Mundo* (Dir. Icíar Bollaín, 1999) that is never addressed outside of civil society, although writings on the film attribute its brutality to racial subjugation. The film, *Princesas* (dir. Fernando León de Aranoa, 2005) portrays the violent attack on a Dominican prostitute, Zulema, by her Spanish john. In a similar vein, *El Bola* (2000) directed by Acheró Mañas and winner of 4 Goya awards deals with the issue of child abuse, demonstrating that *terrorismo familiar* also affects children.



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<sup>11</sup> Emma Daly attributes the high number of women murdered by their husbands to a ‘machismo’ culture of abuse that has treated women as second-class citizens. The number of female deaths caused by partners or former partners has been declining since 1996, when 97 deaths were recorded. This dropped to 91 in 1997. The number for 1998 varies from the police report of 33 deaths in the first 11 months of the year to 53 deaths, which is reported by women’s groups. This decline is attributed to changes in the judicial system and the enforcement of harsher punishments for men who are abusive. See Emma Daly, “Spain works to change ‘machismo’ culture of abuse.” *Christian Science Monitor* (January 19, 1999), 8.

<sup>12</sup> Medina-Ariza and Barbaret, 315.

<sup>13</sup> Author’s translation. Iciar Bollaín, “Historia de amor y maltrato” *El País Semanal* 1410 (October 5, 2003), n.p.

<sup>14</sup> Bollaín, *El País Semanal*, n.p.

<sup>15</sup> Rosa Linda Fregoso, “‘We Want Them Alive!’: The Politics and Culture of Human Rights.” *Social Identities* 12.2 (March 2006): 8.

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