Studies in Spanish & Latin American Cinemas
Volume 21 Number 1

Received 7 January 2022; Accepted 7 September 2022; Published Online September 2025

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On dangerous ground: Landscape, gender and genre in *La isla mínima/Marshland* (Rodríguez 2014)

ABSTRACT

La isla mínima/Marshland *(Rodríguez 2014) stands as the most successful feature by acclaimed Sevillian director Alberto Rodríguez to date. Rodríguez and other directors of his generation have been considered responsible for the resurgence in popularity of Spanish cinema at the box office in recent years, which to a large extent derives from their transnational artistic influences. Undeniably, the Hollywood film tradition has inspired much of their work, whether in terms of their 'glocal' use of popular genres, such as the thriller, or their characteristic cinematic style. In* La isla mínima*, the Hollywood influence is manifest but the reason for its national and transnational success should also be located elsewhere. Apart from its indigenized use of genre, what seems to have made* La isla mínima *particularly interesting to a broad spectrum of the audience is its remarkable use of the local landscape, which also situates the film in classic art-house territory. This article will therefore consider Rodríguez's symbolic use of rural space in a narrative in which international art-house cinema conventions and Hollywood's global generic influence intermingle with local geographical, historical and social elements in order to produce a story with a broad national and transnational appeal. While the film's investment in the national is evident, this feminist reading of the film will also contend that* La isla mínima*'s take on such issues as misogyny and femicide contributed significantly to its transnational legibility.*

KEYWORDS

Spanish cinema
rural thriller
police procedural film
transnational cinema
Spanish Transition cinema
femicide

La isla mínima/Marshland is a 2014 feature film of transnational reach by acclaimed Sevillian director Alberto Rodríguez (2014a). Popular among public and critics alike, the film was the fourth top-grossing Spanish film in 2014 and was awarded both the Best Film prize at the 2015 Goya Awards, the Spanish equivalent to the Oscars, and the 2015 Feroz Award for Best Picture, the Spanish equivalent to the Golden Globes. It also won the Audience Award at the 2015 European Film Awards. Moreover, the film was crowned Best Spanish Film of the Twenty-First Century by the Spanish specialized film magazine *Dirigido por...* (Fernández Valentí 2019) in 2019, which is also when the German remake of the film, *Freies Land* (Alvart 2019), was released. *La isla mínima*'s box-office takings more than doubled its estimated budget of €4 million, which is high for a Spanish film, the average cost of production during the last decade standing at €2.8 million (Espinel 2020). According to the Lumière database, over a million cinema tickets were sold in Spain and almost another million in various other European countries.[1] The film has certainly enjoyed larger international exposure than is customary for a Spanish film with no international funding and no internationally recognized director or actors.[2] At the time of writing, it had achieved distribution in over thirty countries and featured in several international festivals. Approximately 37,000 users in places as diverse as Kenya, Greece, India, Australia, Canada and Spain have rated the film on IMDb, which more than doubles the figure that box-office sensation *Ocho apellidos vascos/Spanish Affair*,[3] also released in 2014, can boast about. Finally, it was one of the four films of the month in the September 2015 issue of the prestigious international film magazine *Sight and Sound*.

Such international exposure is hardly coincidental, as Rodríguez's films have invariably looked to the outside world, providing a successful mixture of popular, globally recognized genres and stories that are at the same time firmly grounded on the director's local surroundings, i.e., his native Seville. As Cerdán and Fernández Labayen (2008) have explained, this has constituted standard procedure for what used to be the director's regular production company, La Zanfoña Producciones. As they remark, La Zanfoña has become representative of companies outside the powerful Madrid–Barcelona nexus that deliver nationally and transnationally attractive works with a marked local flavour but devoid of cultural or regional stereotypes. Their appropriation, deployment and frequent alteration of internationally successful generic frameworks, modes of narration and cinematic styles appear to provide both an entry and meeting point for diverse audiences and critics around the world. That said, *La isla mínima* also incorporates certain elements, from subject matter to historical and political allusions, which clearly resonated with the local audience. As Higson (2021) has recently concluded, in the era of globalization the concept of the national continues to have important purchase, at least in the field of European film production. Thus, due to its particular combination of transnational and national elements, *La isla mínima* may be categorized as a distinctively 'glocal' product in which the global mechanisms of genre are utilized in order to attract a wider national and international audience, but they are also strategically selected in order to deal with certain local issues. In this sense, this film is differently transnational to, say, the Spaghetti Westerns made in Spain, which lacked references to their (actual) local context or big-budget *Lo imposible/The Impossible* (Bayona 2012), a Spanish-produced but English-spoken film with major international stars that was devoid of any evident form of cultural specificity.

1. This figure is outstanding given that between 2005 and 2015 the average figure for European films was 185,000 (Higson 2021: 3).
2. See Jones (2020: 189) for the key aspects that make a European film successfully exportable, none of which curiously apply to *La isla mínima*.
3. Indeed, the all-time highest-grossing film at the Spanish box office sold 9,422,063 tickets in Europe, 9,300,453 of which in Spain.

As these examples evince, the transnational has proven to be a difficult-to-define category that has been differently applied to various types of films (Shaw 2018). Hence, for the sake of clarity, I will adopt Ezra and Rowden's (2006: 2, 3) conceptualization, which seems to be broadly applicable to this particular case. They define the transnational as those artistic practices which are able to transcend:

> the national as autonomous cultural particularity while respecting it as a powerful symbolic force [and imagine] its audiences as consisting of viewers who have expectations and […] cinematic literacy that go beyond the desire for […] national narratives that audiences can identify as their 'own'.
>
> (Ezra and Rowden 2006: 2, 3)

From this particular perspective, Rodríguez's work may be read as a good exemplar of a certain form of transnational cinema that utilizes and reconfigures the international language of genre to explore issues that are intimately linked to the local context. Thus, in *La isla mínima*, '[g]enre serves as a specific cultural space in which we can see the transnational dynamics of circulation, appropriation, and indigenization at work' (Klein 2008: 874).[4] Still, it must be acknowledged that such 'indigenization' sometimes goes beyond the merely symbolic and references concrete aspects of Spanish history and culture. The film's investment in the national seems evident, and yet this did not stop it from travelling transnationally, precisely because of its adoption of certain global cinematic mechanisms. Hence, this analysis will attempt to account for both the transnational and national frameworks that can be said to operate in the film.

As far as the former framework is concerned, I have already made reference to genre, which probably managed to attract the younger and mainstream segment of the national and international audience to the film. Apart from that, the use of other relevant transnational cinematic conventions derived from art-house cinema (more of which later on) may also be identified, which probably attracted those niche viewers with the kind of expectations and cinematic literacy that Ezra and Rowden refer to above. Far from being contradictory, this particular strategy is what has garnered certain European films, such as *La isla mínima*, admiration across nations. Indeed, Jones's research demonstrates that some relevant European products have proved to be transnationally successful precisely because they can strike:

> a balance between the conventions of commercial Hollywood cinema and European art-house cinema – that is, between […] popular cinema […] and a specialised cinema which is more dialogue-heavy, culturally specific and complex. European cinema may not be able to match Hollywood […] [but] it still manages to achieve occasional international successes by offering international film audiences something different – a cinema that is both […] thought-provoking and entertaining, culturally distinct and yet universally recognisable.
>
> (2020: 3)

Thus, in what is left of this article, the film will be analysed as a sophisticated creation that is able to offer different pleasures to different audiences, both at home and abroad, from its particular deployment of well-established

4. Klein discusses Bong Joon-ho's transnational work, particularly his 2003 film *Salinui chueok/Memories of Murder*, whose key influence has been acknowledged by Rodríguez (Casas 2019: 37).

generic parameters to its investment in art-house cinema conventions; from its critical engagement with local past and present realities to its remarkable and aesthetically pleasing use of setting in this 'visually active' and 'hauntingly poetic' film (Holland 2014).

NATIONAL AND TRANSNATIONAL DIMENSIONS IN *LA ISLA MÍNIMA*

Rodríguez and other directors of his generation have in part been considered responsible for the increase in popularity of Spanish productions at the box office during the last decade. Almost twenty years ago, Josep Lluis Fecé declared Spanish cinema to be 'a cinema without an audience' (2005: 3).[5] This was because, despite its popularity among the critical establishment, most 'quality' Spanish cinema remained oblivious to the interests and tastes of the younger generation of cinemagoers, who were becoming more and more financially significant for the local industry. In more recent years, and despite diminishing funding opportunities and a considerable increase in taxation during the worst years of the economic recession, Spanish cinema managed to stay afloat partly thanks to the work of this new generation of filmmakers. In 2014, the year when *La isla mínima* was released, Spanish productions enjoyed a record 25.43% share of the cinema-going public, which represented almost a 100% increase over the figure for the previous year (13.86%).

In many ways, this renovated interest in the work of younger Spanish directors has been understood to derive from their avowed love of genre (a customarily derided category among many Spanish film critics and scholars), cinephilia and multiple transnational influences emanating from Hollywood and beyond. Hence, it is through its emphasis on local reconfigurations of internationally popular genres that recent Spanish cinema has attempted to re-establish a connection not only with Spanish cinemagoers but also with foreign spectators, though, clearly, this is not exclusive to the Spanish case and reflects certain global cinematic practices aimed at both counteracting Hollywood hegemony and beating mainstream US cinema at its own game. This transnational sensibility has been accounted for by Rodríguez Ortega as a self-conscious attempt to reject, or at least revise, 'the *auteurist* stamp of the previous generation of Spanish filmmakers and to reclaim an understanding of film as an industrial practice that engages with its audiences' (2013: 273) both at the local and the international levels.

However, I believe that *La isla mínima*'s broad success derived from its ability to imbue its purely commercial or generic aspects with, precisely, an 'auteurist stamp', that is to say, an artistic, social and political sensibility (or a critical 'edge', in Hopewell's [2008] wording) that Rodríguez has consistently displayed in his work. This critical attitude no doubt reflects the increased politicization of post-economic crash Spanish society (Iglesias 2015: 84) and has led several commentators to point at links with the art-house social-realist formula in Rodríguez's work. Still, despite the film's clear thematic, even aesthetic, connections to this transnational cinematic tradition, the director has emphatically rejected this in promotional material and interviews (Belinchón 2014), opting instead to describe the film as purely generic.

Clearly, in order to connect with mainstream audiences, both at home and abroad, Rodríguez consciously chose to underline the film's adherence to the transnationally popular entertainment formula (i.e. the thriller) over and above the Spanish, or European more generally, social-realist auteur formula. As Rodríguez sees it, this approach does not necessarily entail a contradiction,

5. All translations in this article are mine.

quite the opposite. He is fond of crime thrillers, because they easily allow for stories to deal with social problems such as misogyny, violence and inequality (Belinchón 2014; Casas 2019: 37). Indeed, Rodríguez is not alone in thinking that, because of its inherent approachability by different audiences, the thriller genre represents a potentially powerful tool for ideological dissemination (Beck and Rodríguez Ortega 2008: 11), probably much more so than art-house social-realist cinema itself.

According to Triana-Toribio (2003: 155–58) and Fecé (2005), social-realist cinema has become culturally, if not commercially, canonized as *the* Spanish genre par excellence due to such vital characteristics as a commitment to realism, social commentary and denunciation. Fecé mentions such essential directors as Fernando León de Aranoa and Icíar Bollaín, though Benito Zambrano could also be added to the list, as exemplars of the kind of quality cinema that the Spanish cinema 'institution' (2005: 90), that is, the hegemonic film critics, have traditionally singled out as the true representatives of the 'Spanishness' of Spanish cinema (2005: 92). Thus, despite its director's choice of marketing strategy and preference for more commercial labels, one could argue that *La isla mínima* represents an interesting case study in which elements from the art-house social-realist formula (i.e. realism, social commentary and denunciation) seem to find their way and intersect seamlessly with the transnationally recognized thriller formula. It is against this global generic framework that Rodríguez assembles a powerfully critical, realistic exposure of diverse social ills at the local level, and more specifically for the purposes of this article, class inequality, misogyny and a deep resistance to female emancipation during the Spanish transition to democracy and still today. It is largely due to this socially critical 'edge' that the film became popular not only among film critics belonging to the Spanish cinema 'institution' (and beyond) but also among a certain segment of the national and international audience with a social, feminist conscience. It was also largely due to this 'edge' that the film made it to the international festival circuit and, from there, to the art house. *La isla mínima* therefore exemplifies Triana-Toribio's thesis that much recent Spanish cinema is 'looking north but heading west' (2003: 143).

Rodríguez's work's proximity to social realism is further demonstrated by an acknowledged (Belinchón 2015) visual, albeit non-cinematic, inspiration for the film, i.e., photographer Atín Aya's compelling portrayal of the Sevillian Guadalquivir marshland and its working people during the 1980s and 1990s, a time when mechanization was doing away with a long-established but by then already obsolete way of life. Aya has come to be known as the photographer of the working class, a 'black and white photographer in a country which could not turn to colour [who] became interested in the people in the backyard of Spanish history, those in a Spain without a Transition' (Riaño 2014: n.pag.). The desolation and resignation that his photographs distil are consistently and at times explicitly referenced in the film, which, according to its director, strives to portray, like a latter-day western, 'a landscape at twilight, […] the end of a cycle' (Rodríguez 2014b: n.pag.). The marshland (provided) 'a magical and mysterious space where wealth and power coexisted with the pain and misery of characters originating from Spain's political and social past' (Rodríguez 2014b: n.pag.).

Rodríguez (2012) had already displayed this characteristic 'edgy' style in *Grupo 7*/*Unit 7*, an acclaimed police thriller set in the markedly Sevillian underworld in which Hollywood generic influences were already in evidence. Again, the critical perspective that is typical of the social-realist formula was deployed

against the backdrop of the Hollywood noir/rogue cop/police thriller formula. In *La isla mínima*, the Hollywood influence is equally manifest, which the director has repeatedly emphasized by drawing intertextual parallelisms with, among others, post-classical Hollywood masterpiece *Chinatown* (Polanski 1974) and the noir detective-cum-western *Bad Day at Black Rock* (Sturges 1955), a socially critical film in which the use of Cinemascope enhances the film's symbolic use of location. Meanwhile, regular intertextual references are made to Hitchcock's (1963) work, *The Birds* in particular.

Rodríguez's recurrent reference to the aforementioned classics, whose *mise en scène* and plots foreground diverse elements of the natural landscape to a greater or lesser extent, leads me to what I believe to be one of the most interesting features of the film, namely its remarkable use of location, which has certainly attracted transnational admiration. *La isla mínima* takes us to the Spanish 'deep South', the deprived rural marshland area south-west of Seville in the convulsive period of the Spanish transition to democracy. The social and political uncertainties of this period of Spanish history are matched by the film's use of noir visual and narrative style, with its abundance of unreliable characters, red herrings, loose ends and, crucially, its foregrounding of the unstable, tide-dependent marshland location. As Rodríguez has stated, the film is conventional (or generic) as far as characters and investigative plot is concerned, but there is also 'an underlying tension full of density, muddiness, […] almost like the bottom of the marshland itself' (Rodríguez 2014b: n.pag.), which makes the film intensely 'political, [a movie] meant to raise questions' (Belinchón 2015: n.pag.).

The film's critical/political stance, its emphasis on ambiguity and its highly aestheticized, often metaphorical treatment of landscape are constant reminders of *La isla mínima*'s indebtedness to the stylistic conventions of art-house cinema. Thus, Rodríguez's engagingly symbolic use of setting and landscape contributes to the construction of a sophisticated film in which Hollywood's global generic influence co-exists with internationally established art-house precepts. Nature and landscape seem to transcend mere setting status and become an additional plot element against which disillusionment and pressing social and political issues, from social marginalization to sexual exploitation and femicide, are projected. The director's 'sense of place' and ability to anchor the narrative in the natural surroundings situates *La isla mínima* within an enduring current in Spanish cinema which Kováks (1991) and D'Lugo (2010) have investigated elsewhere. It is through this frequently symbolic use of the natural landscape that Rodríguez manages to introduce a markedly local perspective into the Hollywood thriller formula, which the remainder of this article will attempt to dissect. Indeed, much in the same way as in the (also transnationally influenced) UK police procedurals analysed by Roberts, it could be said that in *La isla mínima* '[l]andscape *is* the story, the memory, the meaning. It *does* begin there' (2016: 380, original emphasis).[6] It is by reading the landscape's 'density, muddiness' in cultural and historical terms that a deeper understanding of the film's underlying social and political implications can be achieved. Camporesi and Meneses (2018) and Whittaker (2018) have previously addressed the film's cultural and historical references but not from a specifically feminist angle. While diverse forms of power relations may be identified within the narrative, the analysis that follows will attempt to dissect the ways in which age-old misogyny seems to be embedded in the film's cultural landscape, thereby filling this gap in previous research on *La isla mínima*.

6. Roberts argues that such bleak dramas exemplify the transnational impact of Nordic noir. Given the many points of coincidence, one may consider that Rodríguez was inspired by the aesthetics of this Scandinavian genre, which has relentlessly focused on violence against women.

A SENSE OF PLACE: A CULTURAL READING OF *LA ISLA MÍNIMA*

The depiction of the local landscape is a particularly interesting aspect of the film. From the very beginning, the director provides us with striking aerial images of the marshland at the mouth of the Guadalquivir River. These aerial shots are in reality digitally animated photographs by Héctor Garrido, a scientific photographer currently working at the image archive in Doñana National Park. Rodríguez saw his work at an exhibition and became fascinated by the untamed 'fractal anatomy' of the marshland, always in flux, always alive (Garrido 2015). He went on to employ these sinuous, fractal images in his film (Figure 1) in order to present us with the labyrinthine ambiguities emanating from both characters and narrative, which the detectives try to impose their regular, linear investigative efforts onto (with partial success only). It is thus that Rodríguez's sense of place symbolically manages to anchor elements of the plot into the natural landscape from the onset of the film. Consistently, the film has an open ending which to some spectators may offer no proper closure (Weissberg 2014) and may even be considered as anti-climactic (Rodríguez 2015). However, this is no ordinary whodunit. As one reviewer wrote, the film's 'greatest strength is finding resolution while letting the mystery be' (Donadoni 2015: n.pag.).

If we go back to Rodríguez's suggestion that the film should be read in cultural and political terms, it may be argued that this absence of a clear resolution reflects the story's historical background. The Spanish 1977 Amnesty Law, also called the Silence Pact, not only facilitated the Spanish Transition[7] but also made it possible for the political crimes committed first during the Spanish Civil War and then during Franco's dictatorship to be interred. The film makes clear allusion to this through its intricate process of character construction. Juan (Javier Gutiérrez) and Pedro (Raúl Arévalo) are two detectives that have been sent from Madrid to investigate the disappearance of two sisters, which has taken place in a town south of Seville. From the start, it is evident that they represent two opposing poles in personal, political and professional terms. The former is an experienced but at times aggressive veteran who is

7. The Transition refers to the period in Spanish history (between 1975 and roughly 1982) which culminated in the re-establishment of a parliamentary democratic system after Franco's death. The 1977 Amnesty Law set political prisoners free and allowed people in exile to return but it also guaranteed impunity for those who had committed crimes during the Civil War and the dictatorship, effectively equating victims and victimizers.

Figure 1: Fractal shapes in the Doñana marshlands featured in La isla mínima, *Alberto Rodríguez (dir.), 2014. Spain.*

meant to represent the old authoritarian guard, while the latter has profound democratic convictions and takes a different, non-violent approach in order to move the investigation forward. As the narrative progresses, we learn that Juan used to be known as 'the raven' and was a particularly ruthless member of Franco's police. However, when Pedro, who has become increasingly violent during the course of the investigation, discovers the truth about Juan's past as a torturer and a murderer, he chooses to remain silent. As Pedro knows, Juan is, after all, the victims' actual avenger and the character that has shown the most compassion for their bereaved relatives. Hence, not only do the detectives' moral ambiguity and that of the ending itself reflect the story's historical and cultural background, but they are also consistent with the parameters of post-classical neo-noirs, many of which offer uncertain resolutions reflecting the genre's characteristic relativism. As Holland explains, through its combination of geographical, social, historical and political elements, the film offers a compelling portrait of an 'isolated community, and a whole society, in flux: a marshland. Here nothing is solid and everything is slippery, not least the distinction between cop and criminal' (2014: n.pag.). When, at the film's conclusion, Juan asks 'Everything under control?' Pedro is unable to answer, aware as he is that, like in real life, not everything is.

Precisely because of its particular time setting, the film could be added to the list of Spanish 'retro noirs' that Ann Davies (2007) has analysed.[8] Even though the story is set in the first years of the democratic period, namely the year 1980, the narrative and *mise en scène* make it evident that the influence of the dictatorship is still strongly felt. A crucifix with photographs of Franco, Hitler, Mussolini and Salazar still presides over Juan and Pedro's hotel room in Villa*franco*; a political rally of fascist party Fuerza Nueva is shown on TV; meanwhile, Juan is keen to underline the enduring power of the military in Spanish society, which has resulted in Pedro's temporary banishment from Madrid after he dared to criticize one of its members in the national press. Only one year after 1980, in fact, Colonel Tejero would attempt a failed *coup d'état*, which the film directly refers to not only through its depiction of simmering labour, social and political tensions but also through dialogue. At some point, Juan, who in the film is supposed to represent the old Francoist guard yells: *¡Que te sientes coño!* ('Sit down, fuck!'), a reference to Tejero which no Spaniard above the age of 35–40, perhaps even younger, and many non-Spaniards familiar with contemporary Spanish history, can possibly miss.

Davies also asserts that contemporary Spanish noir has been particularly adept at 'portraying the social and political climate of the transition [*sic*], given the emphasis on corruption and cynicism in both noir and the sense of *desencanto*' (2007: 230), i.e., popular disillusionment with Spain's incipient, slow-progressing democracy. *La isla mínima*, according to its director and co-scriptwriter, is profoundly indebted to a documentary that vividly recorded this sense of disillusionment among ordinary Spanish people (Belinchón 2014). It was entitled *Después de…/After…* (Bartolomé and Bartolomé 1980) and had two parts, *No se os puede dejar solos*/*You cannot be Left Alone* and *Atado y bien atado*/*Everything under Control*, again two unmissable, though this time ironic, references to the dictator. This important documentary was outlawed for a number of years but is currently available and well worth watching. It was shot in 1980 by Cecilia[9] and José Juan Bartolomé, only one year before Tejero's *coup d'état* but (perhaps unsurprisingly) was not released until 1983, one year after the momentous first victory of the Socialist Party. This graphic document vividly captures the aforementioned social and political *desencanto*

8. These are Spanish neo-noirs set during the Spanish Civil War or the ensuing dictatorship.

9. Although not as well-known as other filmmakers of her generation, Cecilia Bartolomé, the better-known sibling, is the director of what is considered to be the first feminist Spanish film, *Vámonos Bárbara* (1978).

or disillusionment and the intense political and social tensions of the period, focusing on such issues as terrorism, the ambiguous standing of the military, Republican mass graves, the struggles of farm labourers, particularly in the Spanish South, and last but certainly not least, women's rights. The directors' explicative voice-over is almost absent. Instead, they preferred recording the actual, unmediated opinions of ordinary Spanish people, whose bitter complaints evince that the Transition period was far from being peaceful and friction-free. In short, it documents the aforementioned 'unfinished business' of the Spanish Transition.

In this sense, this film acts as a strong counterpoint to the canonical but, in comparison, rather sanitized version of the period that was portrayed in Elías Andrés and Victoria Prego's (1993) documentary series about this significant historical time, *La Transición*, which has recurrently been aired on Spanish public television and is still available to watch on the RTVE (Spain's official TV channel) streaming platform. Because of its overexposure, this comprehensive, multi-episode documentary has arguably become the officially sanctioned version of this period of recent Spanish history. *La isla mínima,* however, explicitly draws on the two aforementioned 'unofficial', uncensored documentaries which were produced before the official discourse about the Transition established itself and strives to confront the spectator with the harsh social and political realities of the early 1980s, many of which remained unresolved in the name of consensus politics. Likewise, Rodríguez's far-from-nostalgic film reflects the enduring influence of the recent political past, the struggles of farm labourers, which were particularly virulent in Andalusia, the proverbial land of aristocratic landowning *señoritos,* and crucially, women's entrapment and struggle for liberation from violence and the patriarchal strictures of the recent Francoist past. During the Transition, women's rights were never at the top of the agenda and their struggles remained invisible (Gómez Fernández 2014: 251). Despite having endured four decades of male domination and repression, they were told to be patient as it was time for democracy, not feminism. Spanish law and institutions remained profoundly patriarchal, despite the explicit (though token) recognition of gender equality in article 14 of the 1978 Spanish Constitution. It is this actual state of affairs that the film references through the stark depiction of the gruesome murders of Estrella and Carmen, two young sisters 'with a reputation'. Despite its strong focus on the relationship between the two male protagonists of the story, the film can certainly be said to be about its female victims, who, it must be stressed, are only relatively absent from the narrative.

Ann Davies (2007: 230) has also importantly argued that certain contemporary noirs have effectively relocated to rural contexts, intently moving away from the urban milieu, which has traditionally provided the setting for crime thriller narratives. In so doing, contemporary Spanish noir has helped 'to bring [other] Spanish realities, often uncomfortable ones, into the mainstream (2007: 231)', from extreme poverty to the subjugation and social marginalization of women. Often, both in classic and modern exemplars of the genre, the countryside features as an idealized counterpoint to the dark city, a nostalgic pastoral dream where troubled characters can find redemption. However, Bell (2000) and Schlotterbeck (2008) have alternatively argued that in the *rural* noirs that they analyse the countryside regularly fails to fulfil characters' expectations, confirming that the rural idyll of peace and security to which they often retreat is a long-lost myth. There is, in other words, no safe place left to go. However, even though the myth is frequently exposed in many a

classic and contemporary (rural) noir, the pastoral dream remains as a nostalgic aspiration for the doomed characters in film noir.

In the Spanish context, for its part, one cannot easily find similar sentimental representations of the countryside. Traditionally, and regardless of genre, the rural context and the small provincial town have represented a neglected hinterland of backwardness, isolation, strict moral codes and a lack of social, cultural and economic development, the place one wants to escape from and never return to. As a rule, the countryside, in which barely 25 per cent of the Spanish population currently reside even though it occupies 85 per cent of the national territory, has not been depicted in idyllic terms, which, probably unfairly, relegates rural Spain and its people to the cultural background. The legend of '*la España profunda*', '*la España negra*' or dark, ruthless Spain has been represented in myriad Spanish films about rurality ever since modernization and urban industrialization took hold in the 1960s, as exemplified by such classic film adaptations as *Pascual Duarte* (Franco 1976) and *Los santos inocentes*/*The Holy Innocents* (Camus 1984) and more recently by Carlos Saura's (2004) rural historical drama *El séptimo día*/*The Seventh Day*, based on the horrific Puerto Urraco murders that shocked Spanish society in 1990, and Zambrano's (2019) *Intemperie*/*Out in the Open*. These films partake in the Spanish naturalistic tradition of *tremendismo* (Monterde 2007, 2010), which started to develop in the bleak post-civil war period, though it had deeper cultural roots, and was characterized by stark depictions of violent crimes and a proliferation of socially marginal characters, traits which are also broadly shared by the cinematic film noir tradition. As Monterde (2007: 48) explains, *tremendismo* is usually associated with rurality and notions such as backwardness, violence, irrationality and primitiveness, which, this critic emphasizes, have frequently been linked in Spanish film to hunting practices.

Hunting is in fact a particularly significant trope in *La isla mínima*, and it becomes a more or less constant metaphor for the murders that take place in the film, as it did in the earlier rural thriller *Un cuerpo en el bosque*/*A Body in the Woods* (Jordà 1996). Indeed, hunting as a metaphor is a recurring trope in Spanish rural cinema. In this regard, John Hopewell has argued, in a somewhat clichéd way, that 'Spanish filmmakers return time and again to the *brutality* of the Spaniards, their residual *animality* of conduct, with an insistence even on the same broad metaphor – human relations as a hunt' (cited in Whittaker 2013: 165–66, emphasis added). Saura's (1966) metaphorical film *La caza*/ *The Hunt* was certainly paradigmatic in this respect. *La isla mínima* reworks this metaphor but focuses its social criticism on the gendered nature of the hunt, that is to say, on explicitly turning young, impoverished women into easy, vulnerable prey at the mercy of sexual predators.

The film, it should not be forgotten, is set in the Guadalquivir marshland, at the heart of Doñana National Park, one of the most important wetlands in Europe. It is a World Heritage site, very popular with tourists and birdwatching enthusiasts alike. However, from approximately the thirteenth century until fairly recently, the late 1960s, *el Coto de Doñana*, literally Doña Ana's (Lady Ana's) game preserve, provided lucrative hunting grounds for the local and foreign aristocracy and was regularly frequented by royalty. When in the 1960s Franco's government planned to drain the marshland in order to promote agriculture and urbanization, the local landowners, who were keen hunters and early birdwatching aficionados, campaigned to save the site, which led to the eventual creation of the National Park in 1969. It was only in 1983 that hunting was banned (except for scientific purposes) in the park (González 1983),

but the site's deep connection with this practice lingers on. Not only is the park still named *el Coto*, or game preserve, but poaching remains rather frequent.

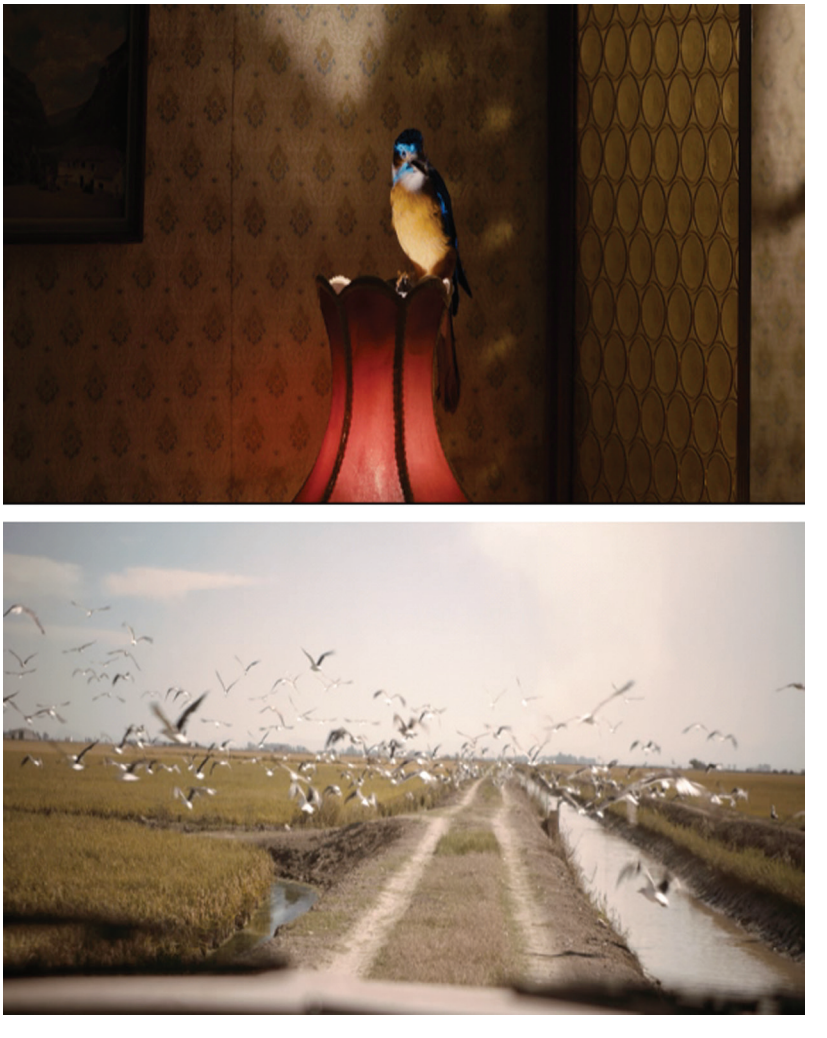
Hunting and birdwatching are therefore deeply linked to the film's location, hence their prominent role in the narrative. It is actually two men about to release some ducks for a hunting party that find the two sisters' corpses in the water, while a local poacher with a deep knowledge of the local roads and paths proves essential for the detectives to carry out their investigative work. Meanwhile, one reviewer commented that Quini (Jesús Castro), one of the murdered girls' ex-boyfriend, who becomes the first suspect, 'has green eyes that remind you of a predator regarding its prey before pouncing' (Rodríguez 2015: n.pag.). In addition, one of the murder weapons is a hunting knife. Last but certainly not least, the local gamekeeper is found, deceptively or not, to be the girls' murderer.

While hunting remains a controversial issue in (mainly urban) Spanish society, there is no denying the fact that it is a popular cross-generational activity in the countryside, especially among men. Nowadays more a sport than a necessity, hunting represents the third most popular sporting activity in Spain, only after football and basketball, if the number of members of the official sports federation is considered. This intensely homosocial activity has invariably been linked to traditional forms of masculinity. Culturally speaking then, hunting (and associated game-meat eating) stands for old-fashioned Spanish machismo. The aforementioned film *La caza* was quite explicit in establishing symbolic links between hunting, homosociality and misogyny in Spanish society. In *La isla mínima*, the hunting metaphor is also clearly present and conveys the meaning that the transition to democracy did very little to improve matters in this respect. During the course of the narrative, Estrella's and Carmen's murders are eventually linked to the suspicious disappearances and deaths of another two poor young women, which nobody had bothered to investigate seriously. In fact, Estrella and Carmen's father believes their disappearance is being investigated not because the girls matter at all but because of the local judge's personal links to one of the girls' relatives. The judge, for his part, is not particularly interested in facilitating the investigation; he just wants to stop the spread of social unrest, which could impact the upcoming rice harvest (and therefore the interests of the local landowner, whom he protects) negatively.

This simmering misogyny, like hunting, is therefore presented as an age-old undercurrent that continues to form part of the Spanish cultural DNA. Gender-based violence is still deeply entrenched in Spanish society, though these crimes are not silenced any longer and command large headlines in the mainstream media rather than the tabloids, as they used to during the dictatorship and the ensuing Transition period, if they were reported at all. While Spanish society is no longer inured to this type of crime, significant pockets of misogyny remain which have become more and more vocal in recent years due to the resurgence of extreme far-right anti-feminist discourses and politics, a clear indication of the fault lines existing in Spain's democratization process. Despite Spain's tremendous progress towards attaining full gender equality and female emancipation, one cannot help but thinking that this too remains an important part of Spain's 'unfinished business'. This state of affairs is symbolically recorded in the film through its emphasis not only on hunting but also on bird imagery.

As already mentioned, Doñana National Park is internationally known for its remarkable bird population, most of which are migratory birds, a

characteristic that evokes the local women's desire to flee from the town in order to find freedom. Like in Hitchcock's classic film, birds, whether real or imagined, appear at crucial moments in the narrative (Figures 2 and 3). Juan has recurrent dream-like visions of kingfishers and flamingos, which are common sights at Doñana, a place where birds and people coexist. For this reason, one could take these birds to represent the local dwellers, particularly the dead women in the film, who seem to be beckoning Juan, aka 'the raven', to avenge their deaths. In western societies, ravens have traditionally signified bad omens and were considered to be harbingers of death. Juan's own seems to be near and although the reason why he has been assigned to this murder case is not quite as explicit as in Pedro's case, one may suppose that he was sent away due to his criminal past actions, for which he may now be seeking



Figures 2 and 3: Birds are a frequent sight in Doñana and feature prominently in La isla mínima, *Alberto Rodríguez (dir.), 2014. Spain.*

atonement. Juan's visions of birds would represent his more or less unconscious desire for redemption by becoming the dead girls' avenger.

All of the four murdered women in the film are linked by a common desire to flee their place of origin, to migrate, like birds, to a warmer, more habitable environment, in this case tourism hotspot Málaga, in search of work opportunities, which are denied at home, and freedom from gendered oppression and sexual exploitation. At some point, the murdered girls are also referred to by one of the locals as 'Charlie's *angels*'.[10] These various metaphorical analogies, coupled with the recurrent use of bird's-eye-view shots at certain crucial moments during the film, seem to reinforce, temporarily but significantly, the dead girls' point of view. It is thus at a hauntingly symbolic level that the dead women seem to make their presence felt.

Aesthetically speaking, these bird's-eye-view shots provide us with moments for quiet, visual contemplation of the beautiful natural setting, impossible to appreciate at the ground level, but they also punctuate crucial moments in the narrative and invite us to pause and recapitulate, to reflect upon what has been going on so far. For example, the aerial shots at the beginning of the film focus on the sinuous forms of the landscape and set the mood for the mysteries and uncertainties that are about to come. The next two provide us with a view of the location where the corpses of the two sisters are found and the cemetery where they are buried. The final aerial shot closes the film as the two detectives leave the town (Figure 4). The camera, significantly, does not follow their car as they return to Madrid. It retreats, as if to pessimistically signify that there is actually no way out, that Madrid and its *movida*, the transition to democracy and the possibility of social modernization remain a distant dream for the people in this forsaken land.

Still, I believe the film introduces a final glimmer of hope as far as the fate of women in particular is concerned. As the detectives celebrate their triumph, which the spectator deduces is only partial, a song is heard in the background. It is the song 'Yes Sir, I Can Boogie', by the highly successful Spanish female duo Baccara, an aptly transnational Euro disco hit which sold over 16 million

10. US detective series *Charlie's Angels* was hugely successful in Spain at the end of the 1970s. It depicted three gorgeous female detectives working for mysterious manager Charlie. Like Quini, Charlie was adored by his angels.

Figure 4: Aerial shots punctuate the narrative at various crucial moments, such as the end of the film, Alberto Rodríguez (dir.), La isla mínima, *2014. Spain.*

copies worldwide back in 1977.[11] Juan dances to this feel-good song with two local women. They are happy because the strike that they were participating in has ended positively for the local factory workers, most of whom are women. Like these working-class women's triumph, this song underscores incipient emancipation for Spanish women under the new democratic system. While the song is clearly, though coyly, about women's sexual freedom, it also encapsulates young women's overall desire for personal empowerment. The catchy tune goes: 'Baby, I wanna keep my reputation, I'm a sensation, you try me once, you'll beg for more. Yes sir, I can boogie, but I need a certain song. I can boogie, boogie, boogie, all night long'. This 'certain song' may well be referring to the emancipatory spirit of democracy, which brought about, even if belatedly, increasing freedom and opportunities for Spanish women which continue developing these days, despite the many the hurdles in the way. It is a pity that, unlike Baccara, the film's young victims 'with a reputation' never had the chance to dance to their certain song.

11. 'Yes Sir' is sung in English but with a markedly Spanish accent. Baccara became the highest-selling female musical duo to that date and represented a good example of the new Spain's desire to 'look north' and become culturally, as well as economically and politically, an integral part of Europe.

CONCLUSION

La isla mínima was not long ago chosen as best Spanish film of the twenty-first century by certain relevant members of the national cinema 'institution' (Fernández Valentí 2019: 36). This is quite an achievement for an avowedly generic film that was produced for a broad mainstream national and international audience in mind. Indeed, the film was praised for its unusual, 'edgy' take on the noir thriller, i.e., for its distinct treatment of space and its critical stance on social and political issues, among which systemic inequality and violence against women stand out. As I have tried to explain during the course of this article, these 'edgy' features reflected Rodríguez's wide-ranging cinephilic impulse and allowed the film to find an alternative niche audience, both locally and internationally. It is therefore hardly surprising to find that a German remake of the film, this time set in 1992 East Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall, was released in 2019. The title of the remake, *Freies Land*, can be translated as 'Free Country', which ultimately denotes that women's emancipation and search for freedom, while an essential local reference in this narrative, is not limited to the Spanish case. It is by critically reflecting on the national past that *La isla mínima* attempts to make sense of the flaws that may be found in the present. Still, and going back to Jones's argument at the beginning of this article, the answers that are given are 'culturally distinct and yet universally recognisable' (2020: 202). As recurrently portrayed in the diverse cinematic contexts which *La isla mínima* references, from Nordic noir, to the Korean and Hollywood crime films and the Spanish rural thriller back again, violence against women remains a disturbingly transnational trend.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to Luis Miguel García-Mainar for his comments on an earlier version of this article as well as the anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

This article was researched and written to the standards of Intellect's Ethical Guidelines: https://www.intellectbooks.com/ethical-guidelines. No approvals or subject consent were required.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

FUNDING

This research was funded by Project Number FFI 2013-40769-P of MINECO and Project Number H23_23R of the Government of Aragon.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Luzón-Aguado, Virginia (2024), 'On dangerous ground: Landscape, gender and genre in *La isla mínima*/*Marshland* (Rodríguez 2014)', *Studies in Spanish & Latin American Cinemas*, 21:1, pp. 81–98, https://doi.org/10.1386/slac_00128_1

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