

## **EL PRÍNCIPE DESTRONADO (MIGUEL DELIBES, 1973)/ LA GUERRA DE PAPÁ (ANTONIO MERCERO, 1977) AND THIRD WAY SPANISH CINEMA**

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**RESUMEN:** Este artículo examina La guerra de papá como ejemplo de la Tercera Vía, y considera las razones de su éxito de taquilla. Mediante el análisis comparado de la novela original de Delibes y la versión cinematográfica de Mercero, se detiene en el uso del punto de vista infantil (subrayado en el título de Delibes) y el tratamiento de la Guerra Civil (focalizado en el título de Mercero). Tras analizar La guerra de papá en el contexto del cine de autor y cine comercial contemporáneos españoles, concluye que Mercero encuentra un punto de encuentro entre ambas tendencias que explica su éxito de público como un ejemplo de la cultura media española. Por último, el estudio considera los vínculos entre la novela de Delibes, el cine de Mercero, y la televisión española de momento.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Antonio Mercero; Miguel Delibes; La guerra de papá (1977); El príncipe destronado (1973); cine de la tercera vía; cine español de los años setenta; adaptación literaria; cultura media.

Spanish cinema in the 1970s has traditionally been seen as polarised between two tendencies. On the one hand, politically-charged and aesthetically-challenging art film reached a high point, and included what is still considered the masterpiece of Spanish auteur cinema, Víctor Erice's *El espíritu de la colmena* (1973), and the best work of other key figures, such as José Luis Borau's *Furtivos* (1975), Carlos Saura's *Cría cuervos* (1975), Ricardo Franco's *Pascual Duarte* (1975) and Basilio Martín Patino's *Canciones para después de una guerra* (1971). These are the films that are still available on commercial release, still widely taught on Film Studies courses, and still much admired by critics and scholars. On the other hand, an alternative cinema existed which was largely driven by

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**ABSTRACT:** This articles examines *Daddy's War* as an example of Third Way cinema, and considers the reasons for its box office success. First, it compares Delibes's original novel with the film version. Above all, it considers the use of the child's point of view (underlined in Delibes's title) and the treatment of the Spanish Civil War (the focus of Mercero's title). After analysing *Daddy's War* in the context of contemporary Spanish auteur and commercial cinemas, it concludes that Mercero finds a half-way house between both tendencies that was enjoyed by audiences. Thus, the film is an example of Spanish middlebrow culture. Finally, the study considers the links between Delibes's novel, Mercero's cinema, and Spanish television today.

**KEY WORDS:** Miguel Delibes; Antonio Mercero; *Daddy's War* (1977); *The Dethroned Prince* (1973); Third Way Cinema; Spanish Cinema of the 1970s; Literary Adaptation; Middlebrow Culture.

commercial rather than political or aesthetic imperatives, and which sought to satisfy an audience hungry for the kind of new material allowed by the tentative freedoms of the end of the dictatorship. Although official censorship was abolished in 1977 and replaced by a system of rating, commercial cinema anticipated its demise by broaching previously taboo subjects, albeit very timidly, as early as 1970<sup>1</sup>. *Landismo* films, a subgenre of the sleazy *cine del destape* of the decade, are representative of this tentative permissiveness. Named after their acting star, the hugely popular Alfredo Landa, films like *No desearás al vecino del quinto* (Fernández, 1970) and *Manolo la nuit* (Ozores, 1973) gently pushed the boundaries of acceptability in the area of extra-marital sexual relations. Various referred to

as commercial, popular, genre or subgenre Spanish cinema, these films have for years been considered a source of embarrassment, but are now attracting critical attention, as scholars cease to hold political dissent as the only source of interest in film, and note that commercial films were the ones that Spaniards actually watched. Audience figures for the two tendencies I've described of auteurist and commercial tendencies paint a predictable picture: anti-Franco art films –often hampered by limited distribution and exhibition– tended to preach to the converted, whereas *No desearás al vecino del quinto* was the most commercially successful Spanish film of the whole of the dictatorship era (Jordan, 2005, 83).

What I intend to explore in this article are the films that lie between these two extreme tendencies: the films that avoided both the refined challenges of art cinema, and the crude excesses of *destape* cinema, and also attracted wide audiences<sup>2</sup>. These films have been called *el cine de la tercera vía*<sup>3</sup>. They are middlebrow films which are in every sense in-between. They shared with commercial cinema the fact that they were audience-led rather than director-led<sup>4</sup>. In other words, these films were born less of the aesthetic vision of the director, and more of the demands of an audience; not an audience after the titillation offered by the *destape* films, but rather one that wanted to see its values and experiences reflected on the screen. This audience for Third Way films was the new Spanish middle class, enriched by the economic boom of the 1960s, men and women in their thirties and forties, Catholic, city-dwelling and university-educated (This, incidentally, is the group that would go on to make up the new democratic political class in Spain, and vote for the Unión de Centro Democrático in the elections of 1977).

Third Way films shared with contemporary art cinema the fact that their directors were themselves aspiring auteurs. Typically they had studied at the State Film School (whose mission was to train the directors and creative personnel of Spain's art cinema), but taking on a Third Way commission was their only way of making a film. Another characteristic of the Third Way film was that many were literary adaptations. Surprisingly perhaps, Luis Buñuel, the quintessential auteur, is something of a leader here: his 1970 adaptation of Galdós's *Tristana* triggered a number of adaptations of nineteenth-century classics, like *Fortunata y Jacinta* (Fons, 1970) and *La Regenta* (Suárez, 1974).

I will consider one example of this tendency, Antonio Mercero's *La guerra de papá* (1977), based not on a venerable classic, but on the short novel of contemporary writer, Miguel Delibes's *El príncipe destronado* (1973). Firstly, I will compare novel and film by analysing Mercero's work as a literary adaptation. As this picture was the most commercially successful Spanish film of 1977, I ask, secondly, what made the film so resonant for Spanish audiences at this time of social-political change? In the absence of empirical studies of real spectators, I will speculate about what I call the pleasures of the middlebrow in this regard. Finally, I will consider the legacy of the Third Way for Spanish cinema of the 1980s, and Spanish television up to the present day.

## LITERARY ADAPTATION

Long considered a pedestrian area of academic enquiry, adaptation studies have witnessed something of a resurgence over the past decade. Current interest in the area is manifest in the launch of a new Oxford journal on the subject, *Adaptation*, and the emergence of edited collections such as this one, "Literatura y Cine". However, adaptation studies are still tortured by the question of methodology –an issue that has bedevilled the field from the outset. Adaptation studies were first imprisoned within the limited framework of Fidelity Criticism, according to which film versions were judged according to their faithfulness to literary originals. These tended simply to reconfirm admiration of a literary original and find the newer art merely derivative. To avoid the subjective nature of these speculations, many scholars of adaptation adhered next to a methodology of categorization, which attempted to pin down the exact nature of an adaptation's relation to a literary original. The problem with this approach –which has proved particularly attractive to Spanish scholars<sup>5</sup> was that, again, it assumed the primacy of the literary original. As Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan argue in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*, "Hidden in these taxonomies are value judgements and a consequent ranking of types, normally covertly governed by a literary rather than a cinematic perspective" (Cartmell and Whelehan, 2007, 2). For Thomas Leitch, writing in the first issue of the *Adaptation* journal mentioned above, adaptation studies are "at a crossroads" (Leitch, 2008), "The

challenge for recent work [...] has been to wrestle with the un-dead spirits that continue to haunt it however often they are repudiated: the defining context of literature, the will to taxonomize and the quest for ostensibly analytical methods and categories that will justify individual evaluations" (Leitch, 2008, 65).

In order to overcome these methodological difficulties, some scholars in this area have done away with references to literary originals altogether. Christine Geraghty argues for an approach that shows that "adaptations can be understood without the crucial emphasis on literary origin" (Geraghty, 2007, 194). While this approach frees her from the vexed question of methodology, and allows her to explore in detail the different contexts of the films under analysis, doing away with a comparison with the original literary text surely does away with the special characteristic of the literary adaptation: the foregrounding of its relationship to literature.

I would contend that the quest to find a one-size-fits-all methodology into which all literary adaptations may fit –from those which draw on venerable sources to those based on contemporary bestsellers– is futile. The context in which a film is made, as well as the nature and age of its literary original, dictate the approach we might adopt, rather than an umbrella methodology. I have argued elsewhere that a text-and-context approach is particularly suitable for certain Spanish films, made in the late dictatorship and early democratic periods, and based on literary texts from earlier era (Faulkner, 2004). The film under discussion here, Mercero's 1977 adaptation of a short Delibes novel written in 1963 (though published a decade later), lends itself to similar analysis.

First, textual analysis of novel and film reveals a remarkable affinity between Delibes's prose and Mercero's film style. Pleasurably straightforward, Delibes's *El príncipe destronado* charts eleven hours of one day in the life of Quico, our three-year-old protagonist. The fifth of six children, Quico has been recently "dethroned" by a baby sister – hence Delibes's title. Delibes's use of dialogue and third-person objectivist description are designed to represent this moment of childhood. While Quico is dynamic and imaginative, he is a three-year-old: his world is thus one of action and experience, rather than consideration and interpretation. Were it not for the way Delibes plays

with socio-political context, the novel would therefore be a whimsical, if amusing, record of childhood play (the text is illustrated by drawings penned by Delibes's own son, so we may deduce that the novel is in part a fatherly portrait of a son). However, Delibes places his young protagonist in an upper-middle-class Madrid family of six children which is still torn apart by the hostilities that remain even twenty-five years after the Civil War. Thus the novelist contrasts two worlds: one of childhood innocence and one of adult resentment (a third one is touched upon through reference to the oldest son's attitude to his father's politics [Delibes, 1974, 153-154]). The role of the reader is, then, not just to enjoy the description of childish pranks, but also to ask what is the effect on Quico of growing up in this context of confrontation. The wider relevance of this question – posed by Delibes when he wrote the piece in the 1960s and again when he published it in the 1970s – is not difficult to deduce. This is yet another of the over-determined families that dominated Spanish culture of the period (to name but a few others, consider *El desencanto* [Chávarri 1976], *Ana y los lobos* [Saura, 1973]): the father stands for an all-powerful and arrogant dictatorship, the mother, a defeated and resentful Republican Spain, and the infant, the future generation caught up in the conflict between these two.

This is effortless for Mercero to adapt to the screen. Delibes's dialogue translates easily into Mercero and Horacio Valcarcel's script; and detailed, objectivist description of the objects that catch Quico's attention can be conveyed by point of view shots of those same objects from the child's perspective in the film. Likewise, just as Delibes withholds any explicit commentary on the part of the narrator regarding Quico's struggle to understand the world of adult confrontation, thus leaving this act of interpretation to the reader, Mercero too resists excessive didacticism and allows his viewer to draw out the significance of the contrast between childhood innocence and adult sophistication. One key difference, however, is that Mercero's viewer is primed to look for political interpretations, as the director changes Delibes's original title *El príncipe destronado*, which focuses on the family, to *La guerra de papá*, which focuses on the Civil War.

Two examples illustrate how this conceit unfolds on the page and on the screen. First, during the tense family lunch, Quico's mother scolds him for eating with his left,

rather than his right hand, and there follows a lecture by his father on virtues and qualities of left-handed and right-handed people, which has clear political overtones of Left-wing and Right-wing (Delibes, 1974, 66). Identical on page and screen – Delibes's dialogue is transposed by Mercero and Valcarcel to the script – the sequence illustrates how Quico causes and witnesses adult confrontations which he, as a child, does not understand, but that the reader or viewer, as an adult, does.

A second example of childhood innocence in confrontation with adult sophistication can be seen in the sequence where Quico and Juan play at war with their father's gun (Delibes, 1974, 78-81). This sequence also illustrates the way Mercero expands on Delibes's original. Both reader and viewer are accustomed to Quico and his older brother Juan's investment of everyday household objects with a symbolism that speaks of the values and obsessions that surround them. Thus the tube of toothpaste Quico keeps in his pocket is, variously, a "camión" (Delibes, 1974, 12), a "barco" (Delibes, 1974, 13), and a "cañón" (Delibes, 1974, 15), or the lamp with a winged shade, "el Ángel de Guardia" (Delibes, 1974, 78). In the context of this playful symbolism, it comes as a shock when Juan, after rummaging around in the drawer of his father's library, finds a real gun, and with it, pretends to shoot Quico. Our protagonist assumes this to be game of Cowboys and Indians, but it is actually, his older brother insists, the Civil War, or, as he calls it "la guerra de Papá" (Delibes, 1974, 79). In the treatment of this scene in the novel, the narrator passes no comment: it is for the reader to intuit the horror of a three-year-old and seven-year-old acting out a Civil War battle with a real gun. Further, Delibes's dispassionate narrator adds to the sense of danger with the chilling detail that it is an "escopeta de corcho sin gatillo ni protector" (Delibes, 1974, 79).

This is obviously a key scene for Mercero as it gives him the title of his film version, *La guerra de papá*. In terms of dialogue, Mercero and Valcarcel change the order of the boys' conversation, which otherwise remains unaltered in its passage from novel to script. In terms of mise en scène, we see the setting (the library) and actions (the war game) that Delibes's narrator describes. However, Mercero uses other resources that are specific to film to emphasize the sinister political dimension of this childhood game, which is only implied in Delibes's original. First, as soon as the

boys enter the library, Mercero uses lighting and introduces a musical score to imply foreboding and suspense. Next, on the desk where the boys find the gun, Mercero places a photo of the father as a soldier, a red and yellow Spanish flag, and a black and red Falangist flag (none of these details is present in Delibes's original) and ensures the viewer notes their presence through medium shots. Mercero thereby expands on the literary original to apportion blame more specifically: the vitorious Nationalists are responsible for the perpetuation of Civil War rivalries, and the damaging impact of these on the young.

Moving from text to context, how are we to interpret the success in 1977 of an adaptation of a novel written and set in 1963? Accounts of post-1975 Spain –whether historical or artistic, fictional or factual– can only ever convey some of the turbulence of this period. Cecilia and José Bartolomé's *Después de...* (1981), to take one example, gives some sense of the conflicting and multiple demands for change in these years. In the context of such plural, opposing voices, the relative simplicity of the political binary of for- or against-Franco seemed attractive. Nostalgia for this time of relatively uncomplicated ideological confrontation, coupled with frustration at the slow pace of change in the present, is summed up in Manuel Vázquez-Montalbán's slogan "contra Franco vivíamos mejor" (Hooper, 1995, 343). In this context, we may begin to understand the popularity of both Delibes's and Mercero's studies of the winners and losers of the Civil War. Not only is the binary opposition of the Two Spains comfortably straightforward, this political thread is sewn into the reassuringly familiar setting of a large, bourgeois, Madrid family. That both readers of Delibes's novel of 1973, and viewers of Mercero's film in 1977 enjoyed the same experiences of nostalgia, recognition and reassurance in both *El príncipe destronado* and *La guerra de papá*, shows that middlebrow pleasures were enjoyed in both literature and film in Spanish culture of this period<sup>6</sup>.

## PLEASURES OF THE MIDDLEBROW

Third Way cinema has been described variously as "cine comercial más cine de autor partido por dos" (Marta Hernández, quoted in Rimbau, 2000, 184; "cine de autor para mayorías" (José Luis Garci, quoted in Triana Toribio,

2003, 114); a "halfway house between the 'Sexy Spanish Comedy' and the sobriety of Saura" (Hopewell, 1986, 82); and a "product midway between the intellectualism of the art film and the sleazy, low-brow cultural designs of the sub-generic, sexy comedy" (Jordan and Allinson, 2005, 23). Although the term "middlebrow" refers originally to an early twentieth-century debate about Anglophone literature, it is a useful way of summarizing these references to this in-between-ness.

*La guerra de papá* is middlebrow in terms of both its aesthetics and its politics. Mercero as a director is considered technically proficient, with an especial talent for directing children. In this regard Philip Mitchell writes of "Mercero's acknowledged trump card: his portrayal of childhood disrupted by a precocious exposure to adult sadness" (Mitchell, 2004, 180). Characteristically then, *La guerra de papá* is technically sound. The action, limited as it is, unfolds in a bourgeois family's Madrid flat, with only two excursions: when Quico goes out to buy milk with Vito, the maid, and when he accompanies his mother to the doctor's. Very cheap to make in terms of the sets, then, the budget was spent on the actors. Competent comedy actress Veronica Forqué plays Vito (her jolly vivacity and affection towards children two qualities reprised by Pedro Almodóvar when he cast her as Cristal in *Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto* [1984]); Héctor Alterio showcases his sinister set piece as the insensitive Nationalist father (already seen in his role in Saura's *Cría cuervos* [1975], and extended in both Pilar Miró's *El crimen de Cuenca* [1981], and Luis Puenzo's *La historia oficial* [1985]); and finally, Teresa Gimpera portrays the down-trodden mother, whose Left-wing views and family background continue to irritate her husband, even now, twenty-five years after the Civil War. (While the novel is set, specifically, on "Martes, 3 de diciembre de 1963" [Delibes, 1974, 7], the first post-credit intertitle of the film states "Un día cualquiera del mes de marzo de 1964". Mercero perhaps made this change in order ironically to place the parents' arguments in the year of Franco's celebrations of "25 años de paz"). A Catalan model, Gimpera became the face of Avant-Garde Catalan film movement known as the Barcelona School (thanks to her début in Vicente Aranda's *Fata Morgana* [1965]), she also plays the mother of the most famous precocious child of art cinema of the period, Teresa in Erice's *El espíritu de la colmena*. Mercero draws excellent performances from these three actors, and through them gestures to both commercial

and auteurist traditions in the Spanish cinema, in a way that I suggest is middlebrow. Forqué offers the archetypal happy, ditzzy maid, recalling the roles played by the likes of Gracita Morales in the 1960s "Viejo Cine Español". Alterio is a brooding presence here in a brief performance that recalls his auteurist work with Saura and looks forward to similar collaborations with Miró and Puenzo. And Gimpera's radiant beauty –which recalls her work in Catalan art cinema– contrasts with her gloomy life, thus effectively conveying the tedium of her existence.

Mercero has been particularly praised for the performance he coaxes from García as Quico. While some sequences are slightly saccharine –Mercero lets cinematographer Manuel Rojas focus too long on García's thick, blond curls and big, blue eyes– the director does draw out a convincing performance in order to make the serious point of this film: the sins of the parents are visited upon the children, or, more specifically, Quico is psychologically affected by growing up in a house full of stories of the Civil War. At the end of the day of which the narrative consists, Quico is frightened and unable to sleep as he re-tells himself the stories about war, punishment and blood-letting that he has heard throughout the day. Here the end of the film neatly answers the question posed about Quico's bed-wetting at the start: we understand that the fears that arise from the stories he hears are the cause.

The conceit that future generations are tortured by the actions of previous ones is central to Spanish art cinema of the period: Erice and Saura made precisely the same point through Ana Torrent in *El espíritu de la colmena* and *Cría cuervos*. As we would expect in the work of Spain's key art directors, Erice and Saura rely on enigmatic silences, complex plot construction and intertextual references to draw their audiences towards this interpretation. Mercero, as we would expect in the middlebrow mode, requires much less work from the spectator. While referencing the art tradition, he draws too on the long tradition of celebrating innocent childhood in the commercial Spanish cinema, for instance in the 1950s and 1960s films of Pablito Calvo, Joselito and Marisol.

"Tercera vía" may be a term long forgotten in contemporary Spanish audiovisual culture. This tendency arose owing to the particular circumstances of filmmaking in Spain in the 1970s, but its influence extends beyond this period. In

terms of cinema, its legacy is apparent in the kind of quality films promoted by Spain's new Socialist government in the 1980s. Through the mechanism of state subsidy, the "ley Miró" encouraged similarly middlebrow cinema, aimed at Spain's educated middle-class audience (and suitable, in passing, for export abroad, and for re-release on TV). Many of these "Miró" films, like "tercera vía" cinema, were literary adaptations. Often criticised for being insufficiently innovative in terms of aesthetics or engaged in terms of politics, many of these films were popular with audiences, such as Mario Camus's *La colmena* (1982) and *Los santos inocentes* (1984). Also a Delibes adaptation, and also the most commercially successful Spanish film of the year in Spain<sup>7</sup>, *Los santos inocentes* is in a sense a re-run of the success of *La guerra de papá*.

With its focus on the minutiae of domestic experience within one family, and its setting almost entirely in one flat, films like *La guerra de papá* are no longer commercially successful on the Spanish big screen today. The legacy of this film for Spanish audiovisual culture today is, I would suggest, to the small screen. Mercero is a figure

known equally for his television and film work, alternating between the two throughout his career, from early hits like *Crónicas de un pueblo* (TV, 1971) and *La cabina* (TV, 1972), and *La guerra de papá* (film), to later successes such as *Farmacia de Guardia* (TV, 1991-95) and *La hora de los valientes* (film, 1998). This constant alternation perhaps explains why *La guerra de papá*, a feature film, has so much in common with television. Its aesthetics – especially the predominance of the medium shot– its domestic setting, and its family narrative are all standard for television drama today. In particular, Mercero's film seems to look forward to a specific example of contemporary middlebrow Spanish television that has been especially popular with audiences. Its focus on a bourgeois family, adoption of the perspective of one of its children, temporal setting in the 1960s and geographic setting in a Madrid flat are all characteristics shared by Televisión Española's runaway success, *Cuéntame cómo pasó* (2001–), which is now in its seventh year. I would therefore suggest that a focus on the middlebrow in studies of modern Spanish culture reveals a continuum between diverse spheres of activity in different periods; here, novel, film and television.

## NOTAS

- 1 Esteve Rimbau argues that the end of censorship made little difference to popular cinema: "Sin novedad en los géneros" (Rimbau, 2000, 182). It was political, art cinema that took advantage of increased freedom, most notably in the treatment of sex and violence, while other topics, it's worth mentioning in passing – like questioning the army, monarchy and police – remained taboo. In this regard see Trenzado Romero on "los tabúes filmicos de la nueva democracia" (1999, 89). Of course both art and popular domestic cinemas were affected by the end of censorship in terms of competition: a previously protected market was suddenly flooded by foreign competition.
- 2 According to the database "Datos de películas calificadas" on the web page

of Spain's Ministry of Culture, [www.mcu.es/cine/index.html](http://www.mcu.es/cine/index.html), *El espíritu de la colmena* was seen by 530, 925 spectators, *No deseáis al vecino del quinto* by 4, 371, 624, and *La guerra de papá*, by 3, 524, 450 (consulted 1 July 2008).

- 3 Carmen Arocena differentiates between "tercera vía" films, which she links to the producer José Luis Dibildos, and later films linked to the ideology of the UCD, "Cine de la Reforma" (Arocena, 1997, 771).
- 4 Audience-led cinema is also referred to as producer-led cinema.
- 5 For instance, Norberto Minguez Arranz (1998) and José Luis Noriega (2000).
- 6 See note 2 for audience figures for the film. To my knowledge, comparable figures for novel readership are not available.
- 7 It still figured among the four most profitable Spanish films ever made in 1991 (Evans, 1999a, 3).

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