

## Spanishness Through Dark Humor

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Egea, Juan F. *Dark Laughter: Spanish Film, Comedy and the Nation*. Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin Press, 2013. 188 pp. ISBN-978-0-299-29544-8.

The book focuses on Spanish film produced between 1960-92 and it reframes important part of Spanish cinematic canon of the 1960s, as well as the early Almodóvar's and Alex de la Iglesia's films. It conceptualizes *Spanishness* through dark humor as a specific way of self-knowledge. In Egea's view, dark comedy is not only defining of the nation and of Spanish cinema, but also mediating of the socioeconomic context in which the darkly funny films are produced. To this extent, Egea understands dark comedies as *interventions* revealing the darker side of the dictatorship propaganda, and later, the incompleteness of the Transition and false glamour of Spain in the early 90s. Another important angle of Egea's analysis is what he calls "cultural specificity" of Spanish dark humor that could serve to reframe modern cinema and modernity itself. Not unrelated to this ambitious attempt to rethink modernity through Spanish dark laughter are the ethical questions that Egea reflects upon: What are the mechanisms and limits of complicity, dissidence and rebellion against an unethical social and political order from within?

The first chapter contains a discussion of dark comedy as a genre defining of Spanish national cinema. Egea argues that dark comedies re-shape once established imagined national community, indeed he claims that they "wrestle" with the nation. He follows with a brief history of what *seeming Spanish* has meant since *majismo* and connects this to the theories of Spain's peripheral modernity. Referring to the 1960-s when various films that he reflects upon were made, Egea notes that by then modernity has lost its ethos and become "a ceaseless creation of needs and consumption." The historical concept of "apertura" (opening) when Spanish culture performed towards the expectations of the tourists arriving mainly from northern Europe, is one side of the "visual modernity" of those years. On the other side stand dark comedies of those years with their aesthetics of deformation. They are retraceable to Valle Inclán's "esperpento," that continue also in Almodóvar's and de la Iglesia's films of the 80s and 90s. Towards the end of the first chapter, Egea introduces his own concept of "laughing darkly." Relying on Breton, he describes *dark laughter* as "self-protective" expression of modern sensibility whence we are laughing at ourselves bitterly yet not without perverse pleasure.

Chapter two focuses on *El cochecito* (1960) directed by Marco Ferreri. Ferreri's film's dark laughter examines the character's capacity to rebel against the consumerist society through an acquisition of a vehicle, an apparently liberating commodity. This acquires specific political meaning in the context of the 1960s Spain's transformation of socio-economic system that made various film directors and writers question citizen's complicity with the order through consumption. Through an analysis of the film photography, Egea retraces the transformation of the vehicle and its relations with the protagonist, and arrives at the conclusion that even if the the commodity has been used against the system that the protagonist rejects, that alone has neither guaranteed a transcendental character of his rebellion nor let him escape.

In the third chapter, Egea interprets Berlanga's *El Verdugo* (1963) along the same lines as a dissection-like analysis of complicity with the regime of an average good citizen. In Egea's text, it is the camera that examines the relation between the individual and the fascist state that is becoming consumerist at the same time. The moral statement of the movie can be tracked, as Egea suggests, through the shots, cranes, depth of the field and the montage. The same angle is used to film the execution of the death penalty and the wedding ceremony. The depth of the field of vision underscores how much the protagonists lack freedom while "nearness and closeness are at the same time spatial and moral terms." Dissecting the camera searches for the spaces where agency becomes complicit with the regime by failing to make a right ethical choice in the correct moment. In Egea's interpretation of *El verdugo*, dark humor is the function of the irony that leads good citizens to the opposite than they hope for. Instead of experiencing family happiness in a spacious apartment, their will they become killers. This comedy laughs darkly at the dream of the twentieth century modernity that can be only achieved at the expense of others, and this is so, perhaps, not only in Spain of the 60s.

Egea follows with an analysis of *Viridiana* (1961) whose humor reveals "remnants of surrealist jesting," cruel jokes defining of the national taste that indulges in what Buñuel himself, calls "Spanish tradition of blasphemy." In Egea's interpretation, while Buñuel comments on Spanish regime hypocrisy that covers with a mask of holiness its *developmentalist* practicality in the fast industrializing society, he also shows that innocence is impossible in its context. Same as with *Verdugo*, this final conclusion about the impossibility of innocence in modern society seems to be reaching much farther beyond Spanish borders and the 60s.

Similarly, in *El extraño viaje*, (1964, dir. Fernando Fernán Gómez), Egea perceives a Hitchcock's influence in a story of murders occurring in a provincial Spanish town as dark laughter disrupts the habitual way of looking at things by revealing the otherness hidden under the surface of "affable townsmen".

The sixth chapter analyzes Almodóvar's first three feature films *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* (1980), *Laberinto de las pasiones* (1982) and *Entre tinieblas* (1983) in the context of Spanish Transition. Egea insightfully argues that laughter intervenes in the business of making political transition. Rather than international and postmodern artist, Almodóvar is viewed here as a "local dark humorist filming a transition." Egea argues that his comedies are funny based on "a context-specific and hard to translate knowledge." By exploring the limits of laughter, Almodóvar traces unpleasant truths about Spanish

identity. In *Pepi*, he makes his public laugh at what is not funny to points out some serious concerns, and in *Entre tinieblas*, he goes further, telling serious stories in ways that make public laugh. In those early films, Egea distinguishes the comic principle of “incongruity” that functions as a provocation and constitutes a mode of testing freedoms. While the comic and the serious are inseparable, transition emerges as a “deadly serious joke.”

The last, seventh chapter, titled “Back with a Vengeance: Laughing Darkly in Post-1992 Spain” focuses on Alex de la Iglesia’s *Acción mutante* (1993), a science-fiction film about handicap terrorists, and *Justino, un asesino de la tercera edad* (La cuadrilla, 1994), a horror movie about a bullfighter who becomes a serial killer. Egea interprets them as expressions of fears about the moral degradation of a post-1992 Spain. He qualifies *Acción mutante* as an exercise in cultural distinctiveness which it expressed through an aesthetics of the ugly and awkward. *Acción mutante* and *Justino* are deconstructing euphoria of 1992 Sevilla’s Expo that showed Spain as a harmonious multi-national country where tradition and innovation coexisted without a conflict. The films do so by introducing their public into Spain through the back door. In contrast to the previous analyses where Egea relies greatly on the analysis of the camera movements, here he comments on the soundtrack that in the first scenes of *Justino* establishes incongruous contrast between horror film music and Spanish folklore, a dialogue that is soon related to bullfighting. Egea’s interpretation connects the “redeeming montage” of *Justino* that problematizes any kind of moral judgement of its protagonists’ killings with the financial and political culture in the Spain of the 90s where system naturalizes all sorts of violence and corruption.

Egea’s writing is subtle, complex and conscious of the reach critical debates to which it contributes. Indeed, as he considers different possibilities of interpretations, he literally imagines dialogues with scholarly community. At times, he leads a dialogue with his own text, anticipating objections to his claims, considering different arguments and their potential flows, then rejecting them for a moment and offering new visions, just to compare the results. This kind of film criticism rather than producing a linear discourse, spreads in front of the reader a network of possibilities, where specific nods in the net open up new perspectives of seeing and connect them to produce meaning. It does not simplify anything or even tell the reader what the movie means, yet it teaches how to watch and it guides us towards new ways of understanding.

It is beyond doubt, one of the best volumes of film criticism in our field. Marvin D’Lugo’s review qualifies this book as “always insightful and at times brilliant,” Conxita Domenech praises its depth and celebrates it as the first book on Spanish humor, and Antonio López L-Quñones praises agility and precision with which Egea connects film strategies to the socio-political problems, as well as its sophistication and originality. D. West in *Humanities Reviews* gives it three stars of “highly recommended.” To these superlatives, I can only add that this beautiful read is also a great companion for an ambitious film course of advance undergraduate and/or graduate level.