

*Mediático is delighted to present a report on the 62nd International San Sebastian Film Festival (19/27 September, 2014) by [Belén Vidal](#), Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at King's College, London. Vidal is author of *Figuring the Past: Period Film and the Mannerist Aesthetic* (Amsterdam University Press, 2012) and *Heritage Film: Nation, Genre and Representation* (Wallflower Press/Columbia University Press, 2012), and co-editor of *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture* (with Tom Brown, Routledge, 2014) and *Cinema at the Periphery* (with Dina Jordanova and David Martin-Jones, Wayne State University Press, 2010). [Note: scholars and fans of the film director Icíar Bollaín, mentioned, below, might like to revisit Mediático next week for some great new resources on her work.]*

With nearly 150 films on offer in the Official Competition and sidebar sections, plus an extensive sample of contemporary East European Cinema under the banner “Eastern Promises”, the [2014 San Sebastian Film Festival](#) was a serious case of an embarrassment of riches. Among the many possible paths into the packed programme, this post trails the Spanish/Latin American selection (with a small European detour) that I managed to catch in my stay during the second half of the festival.

This turned out to be a bumper year for cinema made in Spain, with some films confidently exploring themes and styles beyond what may be deemed the national industry's familiar comfort zone. In this regard, the bestowing of the two top prizes, the Golden Shell and the Silver Shell for best director, on second-time director Carlos Vermut for *Magical Girl*, rewarded risk over consensus. Modest in terms of budget (with an estimated cost of half-million euros, and no public subsidies nor substantial investment from the television channels) but with notable formal ambition, *Magical Girl* builds on the strengths of Vermut's internet cult hit *Diamond Flash* (2011), unspooling a bizarre story of blackmail and retribution. The film is riddled with bewildering gaps and ellipses but what emerges is a perfectly formed, hyper-dark world. The story, set in contemporary Madrid but largely shot in airless interiors involves two different 'magical girls' (a trope borrowed from Japanese anime), connected through the sombre men who gravitate around them. Alicia (Lucía

Pollán) is a teen dying from leukaemia whose father Luis (Luis Bermejo), a taciturn out-of-work teacher, will do whatever it takes to get the money that buys her the hugely expensive 'magical girl' costume Alicia secretly desires. As a girl, Bárbara (Bárbara Lennie, in an iconic performance), somehow caused the downfall and imprisonment of her former school teacher Damián (José Sacristán). She has now grown into an infantilised adult who lives under the control of her psychiatrist husband, and falls prey to Luis's blackmail. Part entrapped Gothic wife, part icy femme fatale, she will go to extremes to pay Luis the sums he demands, wilfully putting herself in the hands of a mysterious abuser in a luxurious mansion, who remains hidden behind a door marked with a black lizard.



Magical Girl is not a perfect artefact by any means: the film suffers at times from its mixture of the momentous and the banal, and its reliance on violence to advance the plot; the most atrocious acts nevertheless take place offscreen and are left to the spectator's imagination. Still, in an era where cheap digital filming often produces films 'found' in the editing room, it is exhilarating to watch a film conceived as a conceptual jigsaw puzzle, in which every piece has its autonomy as well as its function. *Magical Girl's* bizarre realism has some illustrious precedents: early Pablo Llorca (*Todas Hieren*, 1998) and Gonzalo Suárez come to mind. And yet, despite a stronger and more culturally hybrid genre lineage, *Magical Girl's* opacity, its vertiginous displacements of meaning, its pointed references to the social world

and deadpan performances are not too distant from Yorgos Lanthimos' *Dogtooth* (2009). Like its Greek counterpart, the film searches for an idiom that resonates with the generalised state of moral crisis strangling the nation, but refuses to deliver a straightforward 'social' response.

Conversely, the eagerly awaited new film by Isaki Lacuesta is far more explicit in its address of the crisis in Spain—with opposite results in aesthetic and intent. Presented out of competition, *Murieron por encima de sus posibilidades* (*Dying Beyond their Means*) is a sprawling satire on institutionalised corruption and its mechanisms (as Astrud's [farcical song](#) in the colourful opening credits goes, "there's one man who does everything in Spain"). However, rather than precision killing, this is a hatchet job—and a literal one at that: fans of the popular TV series *Cuéntame cómo pasó* will have to avert their eyes during a particular scene involving the torture of a banker played by household name Imanol Arias at the hands of the band of scatterbrained panda-dressed fugitives from a mental institution (Albert Plà, Iván Telefunken, Jordi Vilches, Julián Villagrán and Raúl Arévalo, all giving committed performances). Punkish, cartoonish, and all over-the-place, the film's abrupt shifts in tone may be a reflection of the fragmented production process: *Murieron* was shot over two years, as finance was patched through. Still, the idea for the film must have looked wonderful on paper: *Murieron* boasts a long list of well-known faces cast in small parts (not all of whom seem to know what they're doing). Burdened by back story, comedy sketches, action pieces, and moments of tragicomic violence (and why is it that it is the female characters—played by actresses such as Ariadna Gil, Emma Suárez and Ángela Molina—who meet the most gruesome ends at the hands of the all-male band of anti-heroes?) the wheels of this comedy turn rather heavily and it takes a measure of good will to partake in the riotous fun that the director and his little army of stars seem to be having. As befits its contrarian spirit, *Murieron* drew both cheers and hisses at its press screening. Lacuesta and his regular partner in crime, Isa Campo, are to be admired for the courage of their convictions: their monster of a movie is a carnivalesque slap in the face of the biased austerity ethos that is becoming pervasive in the industry. And yet, for all its "popular"

trappings and its cathartic intent, this is a profoundly anti-popular film—if anything, the anti-*Torrente* of the year. At the time of writing, *Murieron* is yet to secure theatrical distribution.



If Lacuesta provoked confusion with his take on the crisis, Icíar Bollaín brought her no-nonsense approach to another facet of the same topic. *En tierra extraña* (*In a Foreign Land*) is a straight-talking and moving documentary on the most recent wave of economic migration, with a focus on the Spaniards trying to make a living in Edinburgh. The traditional talking-heads approach is interspersed with the documenting of their project *Neither Lost nor Silenced*, through which this growing community is trying to reclaim its voice. *En tierra extraña* eloquently communicates the different experiences and shared feelings of displacement of those interviewed by Bollaín (mostly female and mostly under-35, although there are exceptions), exploring the meanings of the dreaded phrase ‘lost generation.’ The film’s main function is one of compassionate solidarity—it *feels* their pain. This said, editing and music choices put this message into historical perspective. On the one hand, Bollaín inserts a montage including a cheeky musical number (extracted from the popular television variety show *One, two, three*) where “working girls” sing of the dreams of labour and wealth across borders arising from European integration, and miscellaneous footage that conveys the bubbly optimism attached to events such as the

1992 Barcelona Olympics and the construction boom of the 2000s. These images, shorthand for the former fantasies of prosperity peddled by the various socialist and conservative governments of the democratic period, make for an infuriating point of contrast to the situation of these men and women, amplifying their anger and frustration. The point is not subtly made, but the effect is nothing short of devastating. On the other hand, in an intriguing choice, Bollaín borrows sections from the score composed by Pascal Gaigne for pre-recession family drama *Azuloscurocasinegro* (*Darkbluealmostblack*, 2006), which depicts the entrapment of a young generation confused about their goals and identity and limited by class barriers. The juxtaposition between sound and image thus seems to make an implicit connection between the exiles on home ground and the exiles in a foreign land.



Before the victory of *Magical Girl* was announced, all bets were placed on *La isla mínima* (*Marshland*) as the sure winner among this year's crop of Spanish films. Alberto Rodríguez's handsome period thriller finally carried home awards for best actor for Javier Gutiérrez, and best cinematography for Alex Catalán's atmospheric recreation of the desolate Guadalquivir marshlands in 1980, the setting of this murder story. It is too early to say, but *La isla mínima* will possibly mark a point of inflection in the debates about historical memory and popular cinema. It is certainly a sobering counterpoint to the familiar film and television representations of Spain's fascist past that dilute politics into sentimental visions of history and nostalgia aesthetics (the film presented by Spain to this year's foreign-language film Oscar competition, David Trueba's *Vivir es fácil con los ojos cerrados* [*Life is Easy with Eyes*

Closed), is a perfect example]. In contrast, Rodríguez excavates the Transition period as the narrative of origins of Spain's disfunctional democracy, in a film in which genre reads history, and vice versa, with sharp clarity and economy. After the first preview screenings the coincidental yet notable stylistic similarities with the HBO series *True Detective* had become a talking point; however, Rodríguez's reference to Bong Jon-hoo's *Memories of Murder* (2003) as direct source of inspiration is much more suggestive with regard to transnational genre aesthetics applied to histories of trauma and violence across different national contexts. The plot rests on a tried and tested genre trope: two policemen with opposed methods are forced to work together on a case involving the brutal killing of several teenage women. Gutiérrez and man of the hour Raúl Arévalo (who held roles in no less than three films presented at the festival) beautifully set each other off, playing the friction between the inheritance of the repressive Francoist police and the allegedly democratic outlook of the younger members of the police force. The old and the new end up being strange bedfellows for the long run: even more striking than the film's sordid microcosm of poverty and abuse (with echoes of stark rural dramas like *Pascual Duarte*, 1976) is the offscreen space evoked beyond the detective story, in which the withholding of social justice and the oppression of women are part and parcel of the fast-track economic development and the (elusive) promise of redistribution of wealth.



History and political memory was also the central theme in the Basque selection. For the first time a film in Euskara was included in the official competition: the beautifully shot, women-centred *Loreak (Flowers)*. Yet two other films, presented out of competition, received a great deal of attention: Pablo Malo's *Lasa eta Zabala* tackles a story that needed telling—the torture and assassination of two young members of ETA carried out by the counter-terrorist group GAL under the first socialist government in the 1980s—but I wonder if this dismayingly flat film is going to do any favours to the debates about state-sponsored violence and trauma in the Basque country in general, and to the (still early days of the) political docudrama in Spain in particular. Exposition is reiterative, music emphatically underscores meaning, the performances range from one-note to uncertain, violence is unilateral (entirely explicit and yet almost unaffecting) and, saturated with procedural

detail, the film is left with precious little to say about state-sponsored violence in the days of the early democratic period. In contrast, the imaginative approach to the Basque conflict in *Negociador* (*The Negotiator*) makes Borja Cobeaga's new comedy the more astute piece of historical cinema. Using a plot that very loosely refers to the 2005 negotiations between the Socialist government and ETA behind close doors, Cobeaga delivers a very small film (key scenes concentrate on characters sitting around tables and in hotel rooms) about something huge—the end of decades of violence. Not only does the film eschew big statements, but questions the effectiveness of the language used to deal with its central conflict: we are perhaps before what could be called a metalinguistic political comedy. A sensational group of actors (notably Ramón Barea, Josean Bengoetxea and Carlos Areces) excel in this edgy comedy of errors. Despite the boldness of its approach, *Negociador* is only too aware of the limits of its sensitive subject to suggest anything but the most cautiously optimistic of resolutions.



Spread through the official competition, *Pearls* and the regular thematic section *Latin Horizons*, the Latin American cinema present at San Sebastian had something for everyone. Giving a new turn of the screw to the familiar patterns of the relationship drama, Anahí Berneri's *Aire libre* (*Open Air*) uses the building of a family home as an elegant visual and narrative metaphor for the slow unravelling of a middle-class couple. Among the most rarefied slow-cinema pleasures, Lisandro Alonso's *Jauja* ranks very high: a minimalist film featuring Viggo Mortensen on a journey without destination through the Argentinian

Pampa. *Jauja* is, first and foremost, a film about landscape, rigorously framed in 4:3, and bathed in a crisp, beautiful light in which human figures—to call them characters would be an overstatement—are almost incidental. In the opposite end, there can hardly be a film more unashamedly literal as *Relatos salvajes* (*Wild Tales*). At the packed morning screening I attended, Damián Szifrón’s sulphurous satire drew cheers and rounds of applause from the start and throughout its riotous 120 minutes and six stories. On the basis of this only, this already looks to me like the global hit of Latin American cinema in 2015. There is something wonderfully cinematic about the film’s relentless execution of its simple, “universal,” narrative principle of vengeful catharsis, around which the film proposes six brilliant variations. Have you ever wished to get even with someone? This film is acting this fantasy out for you in amazingly inventive ways. And yet, there’s something vaguely reactionary about the way the film secures our complicity by pointing at our neighbour as the sole responsible for the daily miseries we muddle through. Popular cinema should dispose of its superego and run wild from time to time—*Wild Tales* does exactly that, and it does it with great relish, so much so that the film ends up being too complaisant, perhaps at the expense of taking aim at the wrong target.



By far my favourite film in the Latin American selection was Alonso Ruizpalacios’s debut feature *Güeros*, a wry urban road movie set in Mexico DF that follows two very different brothers and the activist female student that the eldest romantically pursues, in search of local folk legend, the singer “who made Bob Dylan cry.” Beautifully shot in black and

maximising an inventive sound design, the film is wilfully arty but also playfully aware of its own artiness. *Güeros* takes its cue from the legacy of the European new waves and US independent cinema but is resolutely specific in its representation of the sprawling urban space of DF and the political frictions within in it, ultimately asserting the need to let go of the worship of one's heroes.



San Sebastian is also an excellent forum for European cinema, even if placed towards the very end of the festival calendar year, the festival often struggles to recruit suitable A-list films not picked by Berlin, Cannes or Venice already. *Vie sauvage (Wild Life)*—a somewhat surprise winner of the Special Jury Prize—is a jagged film by Cédric Kahn on a family torn apart by the choice between middle-class life and a semi-nomadic existence across rural France. Its adult characters—the warring couple played by Mathieu Kassovitz and Céline Sallette—are unsympathetic and the discourse is too muddled (and over-dramatic) with regard to the otherwise interesting ideas about anti-consumerism and living off the land expounded by the film. Selected as the festival's closing film, *Samba* by Olivier Nakache and Éric Toledano (the director duo behind the hit *Intouchables*, 2011) is bogged down by implausible twists and turns in the script (Charlotte Gainsbourg never fully convinces as a high-flying executive on a break doing social work) but kept afloat by the chemistry of the odd couple formed by the serious Samba, played as the straight dramatic hero by Omar Sy,

and his sidekick Wilson (Tahar Rahim in his most fun role to date), an Algerian migrant who passes for Brazilian as a strategy for integration.

Intertwined lines of music, memory and identity conform a persistent thread in other, much more interesting films I was able to catch: In *Retour à Ithaque (Return to Ithaca)* one of the five friends in their mid-fifties states “there’s nothing more serious than listening to music.” Laurent Cantet’s detour to Cuba, and to the memory of socialist Cuba, feels like an oppressive chamber piece staged in open air—more precisely, on a terrace overlooking the coast of Habana, where this group of middle-aged friends spend twelve hours reminiscing, arguing, eating, weeping and dancing. Despite poignant performances by the veteran actors and beautiful cinematography by Diego Dussuel (Isaki Lacuesta’s regular DoP) the themes feel more urgent than the film itself—this “return to Ithaca” comes soaked in Chekhovian melancholy, which takes the edge off the different forms of exile portrayed. In contrast, *Eden*, Mia Hansen-Løve’s ambitious depiction of the dance music scene in Paris wears the pathos attached to the implacable passage of time, and its ensuing disappointments, rather lightly. The making of electronic music is deadly serious for a group of friends in their twenties, whose world expands through the different phases of this movement, even if it is mostly confined to basements and apartments. Decades flow in this film without a centre that is pure 90s pleasure, especially when breathed in on the vast screen and potent audio system of the Kursaal. Still, my favourite musical moment came courtesy of Christian Petzold’s *Phoenix*. Between the first bars of Kurt Weill’s “Speak Low” in the opening credits and Nina Hoss’s devastating rendition of this classic torch song, a noirish tale of amour fou and (self-)deception spins, which is as staggering in its simplicity as implacable in its logic. As a World War II period piece, this is perhaps the closest Petzold has gotten, in form and themes, to classic American film genres—an influence explicitly addressed through a cluster of cinephilic citations. However, *Phoenix* progressively dispenses with every layer of unnecessary artifice. What is left is an extraordinarily elegant core, with Hoss’s incandescent performance at its centre. The last film I saw at San Sebastian, it made for a fitting farewell to five glorious days of rich cinematic pickings.



For anyone interested on contemporary Spanish cinema, this was a great year to be attending the festival. The double prize to *Magical Girl* feels not just like the consolidation of an auteur, but also the validation of a “movement,” in the purest sense of the word. Something is stirring, mudding the waters, and mucking about at the borders of an industrial model drained of funding and bent to the demands for standardised products by the television channels. *Vermut* is but one link in one of several emerging networks; many new filmmakers presented films in non-competitive sections (*Made In Spain* featured a selection carefully balanced between the mainstream and the experimental of the 2013-2014 crop) or came to San Sebastian to promote their projects, but also to endorse

their friends' films, to forge collaborations, and to support new initiatives. During the festival, the newly minted *Unión de Cineastas*, an association spearheaded by some of these emerging filmmakers, announced plans for a conference in 2015 that promises to round up filmmakers, producers, policy makers, critics and academics for a debate about the state of the industry. The strong buzz around diverse films such as *Magical Girl*, *10,000 km*, *Stockholm*, *Mapa*, *El Rayo*, or *Sobre la marcha* is quickly outgrowing tidy boxes such as “the [Other Spanish cinema](#)” and San Sebastian is contributing to their resolute move centre frame. The new Spanish cinema is joyfully ubiquitous and, if we are to believe the message sent out by this year's festival, is here to stay.

Belén Vidal

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