

Almodóvar, El Deseo and the Co-Production of Latin American Space

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I. Transnational Film History

Pedro Almodóvar's films of the last decade and a half, in combination with the series of six co-productions sponsored by his production company, El Deseo S. A., during the same period, exemplify what Néstor García Canclini describes as the co-production of a transnational Hispanic identity (1995: 130). The objective of this essay is to explore the cultural politics that informs this particular version of transnational filmmaking, first by probing the implications of the strategy through which Almodóvar's recent films stabilize a mode of address directed to both Spanish and Latin American audiences; second, by examining the relation between his increasing emphasis on Latin American cultural tropes and El Deseo's collaboration with Latin American auteurs beginning in 2000.

This new "identity cinema" first came to critical attention in the Spring of 1999 when the staff of El Deseo was involved in promoting the recently-completed *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999), Almodóvar's thirteenth film, while beginning preparation for shooting their first Latin American co-production, Guillermo del Toro's *El espinazo del diablo* (2001). The latter work is a collaboration with Del Toro's Mexican production company, Tequila Gang, founded in 1998 with his long-time mentor, Bertha Navarro. There is a notable symmetry of historical retrospection shared by the two film projects: *El espinazo del diablo* views Latin American connections to the Republican cause during the Spanish Civil War; *Todo sobre mi madre* narrates a story that evokes historical remembrances of Spain as a haven for political exiles during Argentina's "Dirty War" of the late 1970s. Both films exploit audiovisual strategies, principally through musi-

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cal motifs, to advance an obvious but in no way overpowering Latin American connection to Spain.¹

In light of Almodóvar's and El Deseo's growing engagement with Latin America over the ensuing decade, these dual activities point to an ambitious yet subtle undertaking that would underpin El Deseo's new trans-Hispanic ambition consistent with patterns of global art cinema. Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden contend that the "auteur" as representative and bearer of national and/or ethnic identity has been central to the international reception and reputation of filmmakers (2006: 3). With this sensitivity to the attraction of auteur cinema, El Deseo's collaborations with filmmakers from the region build on that cultural mode of production in order to transcend the confining limits of national cinema in ways which, as I have argued elsewhere (D'Lugo 2013: 119), realign national cinema in new global contexts.

Once completed, the series of El Deseo's Latin American coproductions would include Chilean Andrés Wood's *La fiebre del loco* (2001); *La niña santa* (2004) and *La mujer sin cabeza* (2008), both by Argentine Lucrecia Martel; Mexican auteur Paul Leduc's *Cobrador: In God We Trust* (2006); and most recently another Argentine production, Julia Solomonoff's *El último verano de la boyita* (2010). Owing to the growing presence of Latin American material, themes and actors in Almodóvar's own work during roughly the same time-frame, these co-productions not only suggest an extension of a single auteur's cinematic repertory; but more significantly, they lead us to perceive an important expansion of the conception of Spanish film with trans-Hispanic ambitions generally as it portends the further integration of a Latin American dimension in Almodóvar's own transnational career.

A critical feature of that expansion lies in the increasing centrality of the profile of the producer as a creative figure. This feature is often ignored by critics and scholars even though it runs in tandem with and often contributes a determining conceptual framework to the activities of the film auteur. Most histories of Spanish film pay little attention to the role played by producers and production companies in the aesthetic evolution of Spanish cinema. Yet, with the demise of large studios during the 1950s, the role of the producer became magnified in terms of the kinds of transnational negotiations required for the marketing and distribution networks that emerged during the final decade of the Franco dictatorship and the period of transition.

Small independent production companies sprang up in the early 1960s, encouraged in part by Franco's minister of Information and Tourism, Manuel Fraga Iribarne, who provided generous subsidies to young filmmakers (Hopewell 1986: 64-65). Many of these small commercial enterprises were dedicated to the promotion of a single director who was often his own producer. As El Deseo's

own evolution would demonstrate, this particular commercial-artistic arrangement would, in fact, collapse the conventional distinction between filmmaker and producer, giving way to an 'inversion' of Walter Benjamin's famous aphorism of "the author as producer" (1978). The conflation of the two roles, of course, had precedents in the Hollywood tradition of the 1920s and 1930s (Charlie Chaplin, Irving Thalberg, David O. Selznick).

For Benjamin, the task of the producer was largely metaphoric, to produce knowledge and ideology rather than a consumer product. Throughout his pivotal essay, Benjamin alludes to the manner in which the 'producer' intervenes to disrupt conventional consumption of culture by the bourgeoisie and in so doing achieves a '*functional transformation*' (228) of mass media. This conception of authorship proposes a sense of the active intervention of "[a]n author who teaches...who promotes the exemplary character of production" (233).

Benjamin's metaphorical play with the paired concepts of authorship and production as they intervene and change the consciousness of the spectator (225, 230), affords us an understanding of the underlying forces that shape a certain genealogy of producers and filmmakers who have been pivotal in the formation of a transnational cinematic aesthetics in Spain since the mid-1960s. One may, in fact, refigure post-Franco transnational cinema around a series of crucial interventions by producers engaged in developing a radical form of entrepreneurial authorship which, for financial expediency and also political interests in the post-Franco period, constituted a rejection of the pristine sense of nation as it opposes the presumed racial and cultural purity of the nation-state.

At least three key precursors shaped the dynamics of Spanish transnational film production that would become the guiding principle for Almodóvar and El Deseo's works. Of these the earliest prominent figure is Elías Querejeta (1930) who, during and after the Franco years, was to provide a viable aesthetic/commercial model of filmmaking that was dialogical, intensely rooted in Spanish political life, but also stylistically accessible to international audiences and, of critical note, of high cinematic quality. In 1964 he established his own production company to take advantage of the government's liberalization of subsidy supports. What distinguishes Querejeta from others who made an effort to capitalize on the subsidy plan is a striking set of strategies, first and foremost, an understanding of the aesthetics of quality filmmaking in Europe (Vicent 2001, 29), so that Spanish films could emulate and be integrated into a European model of film culture. To achieve that objective, he formed a small, highly talented production team through which to stabilize a particular aesthetic that emphasized sleek elliptical editing which, as it appeared to mirror chic New Wave stylistics, was also a convenient way to circumvent censors at home. Of equal importance was the effort to control production by guiding selected filmmakers to develop small art house

film projects—limited locales, small casts—on a modest budget that would not run the risk of sinking the larger enterprise if a single film failed commercially.

Querejeta encouraged young directors—most notably Carlos Saura and Víctor Erice—to develop increasingly more metaphoric films that could be read both within and outside Spain and yet would achieve the support, albeit grudging, of the Spanish government. He would often deride the sense of auteur cinema as not consonant with the actual reality of production. Instead, he spoke of a “common sense” of film production as a team-collaboration (Angulo 1996: 44). This approach was at the service of a single goal: an appeal to the ‘other’ audiences of Spanish film, first at international film festivals and subsequently, through awards and critical attention, to the international film market.

By far the most prolific producer during the decade following the dismantling of the Franco dictatorship and the subsequent transition to democracy was Andrés Vicente Gómez (born 1943). Having worked as an international distribution agent for Querejeta’s productions, Gómez’s first task in working with the production company was to find international distribution for Carlos Saura’s *La madriguera* (1968), Querejeta’s first foray into production with an international cast that included Geraldine Chaplin and Per Oscarsson. Subsequently, Gómez developed his own production company and eventually became involved with Orson Welles, with whom he produced a version of *Treasure Island* (1972), starring Welles. Supporting some of the most promising young filmmakers of the period, Gómez went on to establish two of the most enterprising and ambitious production/distribution companies of the period: Lola Films in Barcelona and Iberoamericana Films in Madrid.

In the 1980s, these two enterprises constituted a major effort to radically internationalize Spanish cinema in accord with the Socialist government’s film promotional tag-line, “*Cine español para el mundo.*” What is especially noteworthy about Gómez’s role as a producer/distributor is the intense and complex texture of the transnational machinery his activities encompassed. Employing multiple avenues for production and distribution, he was able to open Spanish audiences to broader connections with their own culture and, at the same time, forge important links for normalizing the international circulation of Spanish-language films. We see this in the expansive contours of Spanish cinema he promoted during the 1980s and 1990s: co-productions and film projects that cultivated Latin American connections, including Saura’s *El Dorado* (1988), Alex de la Iglesia’s *Perdita Durango* (1997); adaptations of stories by Jorge Luis Borges for Spanish Television (RTVE) that could be shown on Spanish and Latin American television; young auteurs coming into their prime (Fernando Trueba, Pedro Almodóvar), as well as established auteurs (Carlos Saura, Vicente Aranda, Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón, Bigas Luna, Pilar Miró, Mario Camus, Jaime

Chávarri, José Luis García Sánchez); and, finally, international co-productions with prominent Latin American filmmakers (Lautaro Murúa and Héctor Oliveira in Argentina, Francisco Lombardi in Peru, Gabriel Retes in Mexico).

Writing in 2001, Gómez summed up his own role as authorial producer: “[The] figure of the producer understood as a creator and a builder of films is now more necessary than ever. The producer possesses the vision of the whole and the perspective necessary to channel the creative energies and talents of the auteur” (Vicent: 71). Yet, by contrast with Querejeta, the scale of Gómez’s activities was so immense that the sense of a personal relationship between the filmmaker and the producer, with the latter directly intervening in the creation of particular films, was largely lost. Still, as he has argued, it involves that necessary broader vision, one shaped precisely around the aesthetics of transnational communities transformed into markets. The producer’s authorial aesthetic involves a response to the Hollywood style of polished productions and recourse to a star system, as well as a flexible approach to questions of cultural specificity. With his activities in both Europe and the U.S., Gómez has managed to develop the kinds of films that seemed to erase the traditional borders between national cinemas, thereby normalizing what critics and scholars have viewed as the patterns of cultural hybridity in transnational cinema (Falicov 2007: 24-26). If not exactly a cinematic utopia, these projects suggested the potential for a nuanced border-crossing aesthetic for Spanish cinema. This, for example is much in evidence in the development of key films of the late 1980s and early 1990s: Almodóvar’s *Matador* (1986), playing on the internationally-recognized motifs of Spanish cultural specificity; Bigas Luna’s trilogy of Iberian Myths, *Jamón Jamón* (1992), *Huevos de oro* (1993), and *La teta y la luna* (1994). These are all films that self-referentially play on their Spanishness for audiences abroad.

A contemporary of Gómez, Gerardo Herrero (born 1953) expanded the volume and the complexity of the Gómez network, carving out a distinctive place for himself beyond that already established in the 1980s. His activities emphasized the important bridge between Spain and Latin American productions. Starting out as a filmmaker, with only mild commercial success, he moved on to become an independent producer. He founded Tornasol Films in 1987 with the intention of producing his own films (*El acecho*, 1988; *Desvío al paraíso*, 1994), and a series of adaptations of popular novels (*Malena es un nombre de tango*, 1996, by Almudena Grandes, and *Territorio Comanche*, 1997, by Arturo Pérez-Reverte).

Over the years, Herrero’s conception of cinema beyond national borders led him to produce films by Portuguese director Manoel de Oliveira and Britain’s Ken Loach (*Tierra y Libertad*, 1995). He also engaged in a significant series of Latin American films by noted directors: Francisco Lombardi of Peru (*La boca del lobo*, 1988; *Caídos del cielo*, 1990; *Tinta roja*, 2000); Cuban Tomás G. Alea

(*Guantanamera*, 1995); Mexicans Arturo Ripstein (*El coronel no tiene quien le escriba*, 1999) and María Novaro (*Sin dejar huella*, 2000); Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón's Cuban-Spanish film (*Una rosa de Francia*, 2006); and a notable series of Argentinean films (*Martín Hache*, 1997, by Adolfo Aristarain; *Plata quemada*, by Marcelo Piñeyro, 2000; *El lado oscuro del corazón* by Eliseo Subiela, 1992); and three important films by Juan José Campanella (*El hijo de la novia*, 2001; *Luna de Avellaneda*, 2004; and the Oscar-winning *El secreto de sus ojos*, 2009).

For Herrero in the 1980s and 1990s, as for Gómez earlier, the effort to expand the geographic imaginary of Spanish film relied heavily on a series of institutional supports: subsidies from the Spanish government in the 1980s; subsequent supports from the European community, Eurimage and MEDIA, finally from Ibermedia, beginning in 1997, which made possible a series of Latin American co-productions (Pardo 2007: 99-108). Beyond the formulas of multinational institutional financing of these productions, in some of these narrative films we begin to discern the persistence of cultural allusions to the affective bonds that cross borders as they simultaneously define Spain in Europe and the Spanish-language's transnational community in the Americas.

This tendency will be intensified in films sponsored under the rubric of *El Deseo*. Though on a much more modest scale than either Gómez or Herrero, the work of Agustín Almodóvar returns us to the problematic of the author and the producer with a specific objective of stabilizing the circulation of his brother's films, first in Spain, later in Europe and, finally, by the end of the 1990s, throughout Latin America. On the surface, the company's engagement with Latin American co-productions looks similar to the projects of other Spanish producers who had sought to expand distribution circuits through coproductions with Latin American partners.² Yet as Núria Triana-Toribio has detailed, in the case of *El Deseo*, "[W]e find a different portfolio and a different set of objectives for crossing borders. *El Deseo*'s international projection comes first and foremost from the main director in its portfolio and its co-owner, Pedro Almodóvar" (2007: 156). She goes on to trace the stabilization of the company through its "specialized producer" Agustín Almodóvar and its head of production, Esther García. The effectiveness of the team, as Triana-Toribio argues, derives from their ability to sell their films internationally, in large measure through the prestige associated with the Almodóvar "brand." This effectively moves *El Deseo* into the realm of a Spanish-based international production company with an eye toward audiences.

The transnational dimension of Almodóvar's Latin American films, however, is much more than simply a question of markets. It appears rooted in the textual practices that continually allude to the growing awareness of a Spanish-language audience defined beyond geopolitical borders. The notion of an ethnic audience transformed into a market, which was the underlying principle of Gómez

and Herrera's activities, is carried one step further by *El Deseo*; the market is reconceptualized as a transnational community, defined and shaped by a common language and other shared features of cultural identity. This new sense of a culturally-defined yet deterritorialized audience is further reflected in the logic underlying these coproductions.

As the following discussion will propose, the pairing of *El Deseo* with certain producers and filmmakers derives from a double objective: first, to advance the engagement of a spectatorship that embraces narratives of cultural hybridity aimed at stabilizing what Manuel Palacio describes as a collective cultural identity (1999: 232); secondly, to promote in the films themselves a textual erasure of geopolitical borders through a focus on specific aesthetic techniques, those that conceptualize narrative scenarios and characters who embody a borderless Hispanic culture. To further those aesthetic and cultural objectives, *El Deseo* has sought out what Agustín Almodóvar has described as "una red de confianza,"³ directors and producers who share the same conception of Hispanic cinema and its deterritorialized audience

Perhaps the area in which *El Deseo*'s operations most pointedly capture the sense of the transnational lies in what Mette Hjort has appropriately called an "affinitive transnational cinema; that is, the tendency to communicate with those similar to us" (2010: 17). "Us" here signifies a trans-Hispanic audience constructed as a film-consuming market. As Agustín Almodóvar, *El Deseo*'s executive producer, the company's principal promoter of these co-productions puts it, these collaborations represent "un encuentro maravilloso de sensibilidades distantes pero muy cercanas" (Merayo 2001: 83). Agustín further acknowledges that much of the motivation in *El Deseo*'s activities are not based on financial gain as much as the expenditure of "cultural capital." That is, the Almodóvar brand name has served as the key to transnational circulation of these co-productions at prominent international film festivals and thus adds a universal aura to a cinema that has often been viewed within the narrow limits of the Spanish-language film markets. Almodóvar, in effect, is expanding a conception of his own filmmaking to involve a borderless sense of cinema that actively and self-consciously seeks to integrate through the narrative universe of his characters the shared identity of Spain and Latin America, a community unified by a common language and culture, and centuries of cultural transfer that defy political and geographic boundaries and ideologies.

II. Conceptualizing a Trans-Hispanic Project

This emphasis on cinema's interaction with cross-border communities underscores Néstor García-Canclini's assertion of a Latin American transnational identity: "Ya no podemos considerar a los miembros de cada sociedad como perteneciendo a una sola cultura homogénea y teniendo por lo tanto una única identidad distintiva y coherente" (1995: 184). Such a rethinking of audience and market community recalls Paul Gilroy's eloquent depiction of a community formed out of the Black diaspora as essentially intercultural and transnational (1993: ix). Gilroy suggestively invokes the real and metaphoric notion of a "Black Atlantic" in order to investigate the dynamics underlying the historical reality of African diasporic culture. He characterizes this Black Atlantic by the "double consciousness" of members of its community who, as individuals, identify with their local culture, but, as blacks, feel the bonds of a shared ethnic and racial identity that otherwise defies the repressive geopolitical compartmentalization of nation states (1993: 4, 127).

According to Gilroy's argument, while the individual may be torn between allegiances to national communities or those of ethnicity, new media technologies—particularly sound recording for the dispersion of Black music—have intensified the destabilization of the nation state (96). In a specifically Hispanic context, Carlos Monsiváis draws a similar conclusion, paralleling for Latin American culture more generally the border-crossing movements of peoples and what he calls "migrations negotiated through technology" (2000: 159-60). He sees popular audiovisual mass media—radio, motion pictures and television—as having reordered the relation of individuals to their local territories by constructing a metaphoric proximity to broader social communities. This has come about through the transnational circulation of cultural styles, narratives and mythic characters through radio, motion pictures and television in ways that modify the community's relation to their immediate environment and beyond. Monsiváis notes, for instance, how "[e]l cine de algún modo integra a comunidades disminuidas históricamente por el aislamiento. Y el espíritu moderno surge cuando el medio nuevo revisa las tradiciones" (162).

Underlying Almodóvar's evolving conception of his own cinema, even predating this Latin American period, is the way in which questions of identity have been linked to questions of location and placement in much the way both Gilroy and Monsiváis have noted in the "new" cartography of diasporic cultures; that is to say, identity for his protagonists has often been a question of voluntary or involuntary spatial positioning. This, of course, is nowhere more evident than in the leitmotif of internal migration—from the provinces to Madrid—that characterizes some of his films even prior to *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999).

This sense of space, and its narrative corollaries—placement, location, centeredness and marginality—is not simply a quirky auteurist signature. Interestingly, during the decade in which this new cartography takes shape creating a virtual adjacency between Spain and Latin America, European cultural historians, motivated by the increasing integration of the European community, begin to speak of new “spaces of identity” precipitated by new communication technologies. David Morley and Kevin Robins, for instance, consider the emerging postmodern geography of Europe particularly as these new technologies (satellite, cable, etc.) “disrupt established boundaries—both at the national and domestic levels—and rearticulate the private and public spheres in new ways” (1990: 11). The changing nature of virtual geography as mapped through such technologies will, by the decade’s end, have a major impact on the dynamics of film reception, which will no longer be limited by the literal geography of movie theaters, but will now be moved to private spaces through cable and internet access.

This sense of shifting geography is in fact anticipated in the reasoned evolution that moves Almodóvar’s cinema. We see this in the gradual shift from the intuitive links to Latin America, most prominently featured in the incorporation of music from the region in his early films, to a broader range of textual gestures incorporating Latin American musical sounds in later works. As in the frequent refrain of tango music or boleros that form the background to his contemporary Spanish plots, his cinema tacitly acknowledges the technological proximity of Latin American musical sounds and singers to the cultural position of Spaniards. Almodóvar, in fact, speaks of how in Spain these well-known Latin American melodies and lyrics had long been considered vulgar and dated: “Me siento orgulloso de haber contruido inconscientemente al reconocimiento de estos cantantes en el plano artístico y comercial. Hoy se mira de otro modo a los intérpretes de boleros; incluso se han puesto excesivamente de moda” (Strauss 2001: 103). Indeed, the intermedial mix of recorded Hispanic music and cinematic illusions within his own films progressively blurs the lines of popular audiovisual genres as it similarly weakens the geopolitical borders of communities that share common cultural ties. In the following section let us consider the mobilization of a series of related cinematic techniques and strategies that have been advanced to promote that sense of kinship and which thereby lay the conceptual foundation for specific affiliative transnationalism of *El Deseo*’s Latin American coproductions.

III. The Spatial Aesthetics of the Trans-Hispanic Cinema

More than a commercial strategy, as Falicov (2007) and others have suggested, the aesthetics of Almodóvar’s trans-Hispanic films seek a more conceptual objec-

tive: to erase borders and connect the affective space of the transnational Latin American community. One of the most striking ways he achieves this objective, as earlier noted, is by the preponderance of musical linkages between Latin-America and Spanish characters. These hybrid musical numbers which combine Latin American sounds with a Spanish *mise en scène* are built on a concept described by Jean-Paul Thibaud as "sonic bridges," that is, a way to mobilize music as a form of "phonic deterritorialization" that neutralizes the sonic identity of places and constitutes "a continual listening between two spaces" (2003: 333). For Thibaud, these dramatized spaces mark "the interstices of lived itineraries" (337). Of Almodóvar's more recent films, the most striking example of a sonic bridge is to be found in *Volver* (2006), in which the use of the Gardelian tango "Volver" is presented as part of a common heritage. Almodóvar's plot gives centrality to Carlos Gardel's signature song as the film's heroine Raimunda (Penélope Cruz), recalling this tango her mother had taught her as a teenager, performs the number in a striking flamenco version.

What is most striking about sonic bridges is their appeal to the auditory memory of audiences, breaking the confining linearity of the plot and *mise en scène* with affective linkages that sustain the new cartographic imaginary for audiences. Such a praxis in fact speaks to the broader issue of what Caren Kaplan characterizes as a postmodern cultural geography in which nationalisms are destabilized; that is, where borders, maps, location, and space assume new meanings and in which "the transnationalization of culture as well as industry brings with it profound possibilities for forging new alliances and identities" (1996: 145). In what amounts to the erasure of borders, as Kaplan argues, questions are inevitably raised about national and ethnic identities, at once delegitimizing the national and replacing it with new identities (158). This process of geographic erasure joined with the narratives of placement/ displacement is one of the principal axes that move the narrative.

The process of geographic erasure is given special privilege in Almodóvar's cinema due to another strategy, what we might call migrant agency. We are speaking here of a group of protagonists who move across geopolitical borders, naturalizing their presence within new cultural spaces, thereby refiguring their own identity as an effect of passage or journey. Set against the traditional communal narratives of rootedness in the past, these dramatized figures cede to what Ann Marie Stock calls in the context of recent Latin American cinema "migrancy" (2006: 161), by which she means narratives of characters displaced from their communities of origin by political or economic forces who are now depicted as moving toward an as yet undefined future. In Almodóvar's own cinema, we identify these most readily as Latin American characters whose presence naturalizes the cinematic adjacency between Spain and Latin America.

We first see this most conspicuously in the presence of Cecilia Roth playing the role of Manuela in *Todo sobre mi madre*. Her metamorphosis comes from her long association with Almodóvar, who used her in cameos, usually dubbed, in both *Pepi Luci Bom* (1980) and *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* (1985), and also gave her a starring role in *Laberinto de pasiones* (1982). None of these roles was marked by her Argentineness. By the 1990s, however, Roth had leading roles in two Spanish-Argentine co-productions by Adolfo Aristarain: *Un lugar en el mundo* (1992) and *Martin Hache* (1997) and had thus achieved a transnational identity in the eyes of Spanish and Latin American audiences. Her character's narrative return to Barcelona for much of the action of *Todo sobre mi madre* served to build a historical linkage between Spain's status as refuge for Latin American political dissidents from the Argentine Dirty War. Thus, Roth seems an especially exemplary embodiment of the multiple meanings of migrancy in Almodóvar's cinema.⁴ Roth's characters suggest a more complex variation of a process identified by Tamara Falicov in which Spanish actors appear in Latin American coproductions. As Falicov argues, "[b]y delineating the various ways in which Spaniards enter into specific Latin American narratives, we find how it is that economic imperatives of funding can shape film narratives in specific ways" (2007: 24).

These textual and intertextual features and other related tropes shatter the sense of static "national" characters and their outlook confined to particular national spaces. Almodóvar's characters consistently normalize the process of geographic erasure and the comingling of characters from diverse countries to form a unified affinitive community on screen. *El Deseo* has clearly sought to integrate into its various co-productions the underlying project of erasing the rigid borders of the national. It is ultimately this feature that supports what García Canclini describes as "Glocal" hybridity to which the transnational aesthetic of *El Deseo* aspires. Let us consider how this spatialized consciousness operates in the most recent of *El Deseo*'s coproductions, a film which, on the surface may not seem at all to adhere to that transnational aesthetic.

IV. *El último verano de la Boyita*

Julia Solomonoff's *El último verano de la Boyita* (2010) is, in a sense, the most extreme naturalization of the process described above. As with the earlier films in the cycle, we see the undermining of traditional geopolitical borders that have helped define the space of the national community. The film focuses on the mythic Pampa, one of the important cinematic *señas de identidad* that potentially make Argentine films both legible and marketable abroad. Yet, with

an intense focus on newly emerging gender identities connected through narrative to that space, the film seeks, as Kaplan (1996) argues, to transnationalize the features of this local culture by forging new alliances and identities with other audiences beyond the national borders.

Implicit in this project is the effort, as Núria Triana-Toribio reminds us, to construct or “appropriate” new audiences for this kind of film outside of the market defined by national cinema (2007: 160). In effect, *La Boyita*'s refiguring of a local narrative with global issues of gender points to the fluidity and shifting meanings of representation in ways that undermine the hegemonic power of national cinemas (Kinder 1993: 389). As Morely and Robins argued earlier, such fluidity increasingly destabilizes “the fundamental principles for political attachment in capitalist societies” (1989: 22).

Unlike earlier coproductions which had been the result of personal contacts by the Almodóvars,⁵ *La Boyita* came about by Solomonoff's own solicitation of support from the company. Ironically, this film turned out to be closest to the overt content of Almodóvar's own cinema, at least in terms of the signature gender themes that had given him early and sustained prominence in Spain and abroad. While the narrative of gendered identities under pressure to conform to traditional patriarchal role models has often been a back story in Almodóvar's films, in *La Boyita* it helps to define the film's central themes.

The plot is deceptively simple. The principal action is set in 1980s rural Argentina, on a farm somewhere in the province of Entre Ríos. There is, however, in the opening sequences in Rosario the suggestion that this is really a narrative flashback from a contemporary moment. For instance, the “Boyita,” of the film's title, a key setting in the early sequence, was a local brand name for trailer homes of the period that could float. It becomes the site and symbol of memory of the place of children's privacy and communion for the film's young heroine, Jorgelina, and her older sister who is just beginning to menstruate. Jorgelina is a child of about eight years who accompanies her physician father, Eduardo, from their home in the city of Rosario to the farm the family owns as absentee landlords. There she reencounters Mario, the eleven or twelve-year old playmate and son of the tenant farmers who work her family's land. Although this is the story of Jorgelina's coming of age, the plot focuses on the emotional crisis that she observes Mario undergoing as he confides to her that he has begun to have periods and realizes that he is not like the other boys of the area. We eventually discover that he suffers from a condition of Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia since birth and his father, needing a farmhand, has imposed the male identity on Mario.

The film's linear plot foregrounds Jorgelina's journey from city to country and her inevitable return at summer's end to the urban space of her home; besides the physical movement, this is clearly a symbolic journey that has enabled her to

acquire a new consciousness of her own sexual identity through her identification with Mario. In its emphasis on the narrative trope of pre-adolescents discovering their sexual identity, and the dual perspectives of the child of the city and her counterpart in rural spaces, there is an obvious connection to Almodóvar's much more elaborate but thematically similar *La mala educación* (2004). In that film, prominence was given to the transformation of the male body into the female through the famously staged sequence in which Gael García Bernal as a drag queen lip-synchs the voice of Sara Montiel singing "Quizás, Quizás, Quizás." In Solomonoff's film, however, the ambiguity of gender identity is treated with much more subtlety and restraint.

As Solomonoff stresses in interviews, there is an explicit alignment of questions of gender with those of location and social class: "To me, Jorgelina is not only discovering the deep transformations in Mario's body, she is also becoming aware of the gap between her world and Mario's. She is not only questioning what it means to be a boy or a girl, but also grasping her privileges as an urban middle class kid and the burdens of the rural working class. In a way, Mario is a boy because in the countryside and with elder parents, that is what is desired" (Shaw and Martin: 2012).

From an Argentine perspective, questions of gender and location are inextricably tied to questions of class as we are brought to see Mario marginalized by both who he is and where he is. Solomonoff goes on to observe: "If Mario was born in a middle-class urban environment in the 1980s, he would have been subject to surgery before the age of 3 and maybe would only find out after decades of self-doubt, feelings of inadequacy, fear and confusion" (Shaw and Martin: 2012). Following that line of geographic positioning, Deborah Shaw and Deborah Martin perceive a linkage between *La Boyita's* treatment of gender ambiguity and "an international subgenre of films (*Ma vie en rose*, Berliner 1997; *XXY*, Puenzo 2007; *Tomboy*, Sciamma 2011), films that present gay/ transgender/ intersex children as part of a natural world, while the adult spaces are shown to be repressive and anti-natural. They all offer a riposte to the discourses of the Christian right wing that utilize the language of nature to condemn anything outside hetero-normative practices" (Shaw and Martin: 2012).

The film, in fact, is neither totally given over to the international art house reading of its sexual theme nor locked into a social realist portrait of Argentine rural life. Rather, Solomonoff's script and dramatic treatment balance the international subgenre material with a measure of Argentine cultural specificity around the tensions of urban vs. rural culture which in turn mirrors larger questions of tradition vs. modernization. These themes, it should be noted, are the same ones that run through nearly all the co-productions and are echoed in a number of Almodóvar's own films, most notably *Volver* (2006). As such, they

provide the kind of cinematic border-crossing that has enabled *La Boyita* to circulate internationally.

La Boyita constructs its narrative by underscoring the prominence of spatial locations for particular actions. These stagings are characterized through the persistent emphasis on the innocent interrogatory gaze of the eight-year-old Jorgelina. The paired opening and closing sequences show Jorgelina with her family in Rosario, thereby juxtaposing middle-class urban culture, largely dependent on social artifice as embodied in Jorgelina's sister's adolescent behavior, against a more natural world of the farm community, depicted by the continual blending of humans and the natural world that surrounds them (horses, birds, water). *La Boyita* is in fact structured with a precise narrative rhythm that moves us between these seemingly opposing locales and thereby encourages spectator interrogation of the nature of the tension between the two spaces.

In the precredits, for instance, the principal site of action is established as a masculine space, replete with the struggle by Mario and other farm hands to tame a horse, Yayo, with all the symbolism this act involves. The opening close-ups of the horse being wrested to the ground by the tamers, even suggests a Hollywood western movie trope. This scene thus crystalizes the subjugation of the wild and natural by the collective forces of a social order imposed by males. At once a universal theme, the scene and key moments in the subsequent plot evoke a modern-day version of gaucho culture.

Yet, Solomonoff's visual emphasis on the Pampa ultimately serves to problematize the mythic space of the nation. The frequent silhouetted landscapes of mounted horsemen on the flat plains foreground an ethnographic portrait of Argentine cultural history that runs counter to the national iconography that portrays the noble Gaucho as the symbol of Argentine identity so frequently evoked in the nation's literature.⁶ We note, for instance, that Mario's parents are of German ancestry and the other families who gather for a local celebration are variously described as Russian or Ukrainian. As Solomonoff explains to interviewers, "The immigrant colonies that were formed in Entre Ríos in the nineteenth century were very much a culture of pioneers. That's where the oldest Jewish, German and Italian communities are" (Shaw and Martin: 2012). As such, ethnic hybridity does much to blur what for some audiences might have easily been a pristine notion of a national cultural symbol. It provides a national form of address to Argentine as well as to international audiences.

Solomonoff further disturbs the appearance of Argentine normative identity by making Jorgelina's family Jewish. Mario's gender deviation is paired in this way with Jorgelina's religious-cultural "difference," aligning the two young protagonists as outsiders to the dominant patriarchal masculinity of the community. Jorgelina alone in this community has befriended Mario and identifies with his

plight when he confesses his secret to her, "Yo no soy normal." Her response to him is a telling admission that she too is not "normal." The question of Mario's normalcy continually deflects back to Jorgelina's position, an effective surrogate point-of-view for the film's spectator. When she asks her father why Mario has to "probarse como hombre" in the upcoming horse race at the local fair, it is to affirm through her surrogate perspective the audience's self-distance from the culture of masculinity that appears to be at the core of this community self-image. Jorgelina's innocent gaze in effect removes the story from the usual politics and gender discourse of the adult world and "recenters" the plot in terms of treating her friends as individuals and not as part of the horde.

To that end, Solomonoff visually centers several key sequences in public spaces in which male identity is forged through a social code of behavior imposed on the individual by the group. We see this early on in a scene in which Mario accompanies Eduardo and Jorgelina to the local general store and bar where other youths are gathered. In this scene, Mario is clearly ostracized by his male peers, suggesting a public knowledge of the general contours of his private identity.

Such actions lead up to the inevitable local agricultural fair, the most elaborate sequence of the film, in which Mario is supposed to race Yayo, again as a rite of passage. The scene is especially noteworthy in that it brings together the two child protagonists, Mario's parents, Jorgelina's father and Mario's youthful adversaries; tellingly, the backdrop to the action is the assembled members of the community who have come to celebrate this atavistic rite of passage. The scene opens as the master of ceremonies at the racing event applauds a local song from what he describes as sung by a gaucho from the Volga. Indeed, Mario's German parents and the Ukrainian farmers all suggest an immigrant rewriting of national identity through migration narrative. As if echoing Eduardo's explanation of why Mario must race, Solomonoff stages the event as a symbolic ritual of the heterosexual community's coming together to bear witness to the affirmation of masculinity: men mounted on horses in a contest to test their manhood. Given all of these overtures to masculine conformity to the community ideal, when Mario wins the race, he is not only affirming before the assembled crowd his gender imposture, but rewriting the masculine narrative of the nation in which the gaucho epic is rooted. The race scene in effect counters the precredit affirmation of a masculinist identity by proposing Mario's triumph as one of imposture; that is, he has won the race not by being who he is but, rather, in the terms that community recognizes as masculine. This feature of an imposed and constructed identity, readily feigned by the young horseman, undermines the sense of the naturalness of Argentine national identity. The film's linkage of Jorgelina the outsider as the source of Mario's identification with those who might understand

him thus opens the film to an interrogation of the limiting and artificial nature of the imagination of the national.

Importantly, a film like *La Boyita* demonstrates the ways in which the cultural affinities between Almodóvar's cinema and El Deseo's Latin American partners function. These are neither proxies of the Spanish director's films nor neocolonial exploitations of the Argentine film market. Rather, they assert the bonds of cultural and affective kinship in cinema that seeks to expand the cultural and personal sensibilities that operate often in fragmented form across what is increasingly understood as a malleable cultural virtual geography.

V. Conclusion

El último verano de la Boyita implicitly underscores the notion of a deterritorialized audience of Latin American cinema not bound by national borders. Rooted in the local experience of a community in conflict, the film shares profound connections with Almodóvar's own cinema and, as such, is exemplary of the kinds of co-productions El Deseo has supported: films that lead audiences to rethink national space and the ideological underpinnings of territorial placement of characters as well as the weight of the constraints upon them. *La Boyita*'s heroine, Jorgelina, embodies a feature common to many of the characters in these co-productions: she is imbued with a hybrid consciousness, as an individual living in the slipzone between fixed identities as constructed by social institutions such as the family, and, at the same time, drawn to spaces of ambiguity, beyond the borders of the familiar. For her, that new cartographic reality is represented by Mario and his sexual and social "difference."

In her actions and emerging outlook, Jorgelina is able to reflect a point of commonality with audiences similarly unbound from the localism of their geographic confines. In this respect, she becomes less a fictional character than an allegorical figure reflecting the ways El Deseo's Latin American co-productions have positioned themselves beyond the confines of the national. Viewed in these terms, such films provide a basis for understanding El Deseo's conceptualization of a broader transnational cinematic rhetoric aimed at communicating with Latin American audiences as these become effectively joined to Spanish audiences through a cinematic rhetoric which, more than transnational, is post-national.

NOTES

- 1 In *El espinazo del diablo* we hear the recorded voice of Carlos Gardel singing tango standards “Una lágrima” and “Yo no sé que me han hecho tus ojos” on a phonograph. These sounds are later followed with radio broadcasts that include Spanish popular singers of the 1930s, Imperio Argentina and Raquel Meller, intoning “Recordera” and “Besos fríos.” The musical combination serves to emphasize the acoustic union of the two cultures. There is a similar phenomenon to be noted in background strains of a bandoneón in *Todo sobre mi madre* to underscore the country of origin of the heroine Manuela.
- 2 For a detailed discussion of the policies and strategies guiding Spanish co-productions with Latin America over the past two decades, see: Hoefert de Turégano, T. (2004), “The International Politics of Cinema Coproduction: Spanish Policy in Latin America.” *Film and History: An International Journal of Film and Television* 4(2): 15–24. For a detailed examination of the presence of Latin American coproductions at international film festivals, see: Binimelis Adell, M. “La Geopolítica de las Coproducciones Hispanoamericanas: Un análisis a través de su presencia en los festivales de clase A (1997-2007).” Doctoral Dissertation, Universitat Rovira I Virgili, Tarragona (2011).
- 3 Interview with the Producer. Madrid, 12 December 2012.
- 4 For a detailed account of Roth’s career transformation, see particularly Juan Carlos Ibáñez’s chapter, “Memory, Politics and the Post-Transition in Almodóvar’s Cinema.” In *Companion to Pedro Almodóvar’s Cinema*. Edited by Marvin D’Lugo and Kathleen M. Vernon (2013), 153-175. London and Malden Massachusetts: Wiley-Black Publishers.
- 5 It should be noted that the five other co-productions besides Solomoff’s film are tied directly or indirectly to the figure of intrepid Mexican producer Bertha Navarro. It was Navarro who championed Guillermo del Toro’s early career and was co-founder with him and Alejandro Springall of Tequila Gang. Besides collaborating directly with El Deseo in *El espinazo del diablo*, Navarro promoted two other Tequila Gang productions: Andrés Wood’s *La fiebre del loco* and *Cobrador*. Finally, Lita Stantic, the principal producer of Lucrecia Martel’s first two films, encouraged the Argentine director to enter the Sundance Laboratorio de escritura de guiones, under Navarro’s tutelage. It was at the screen-writing laboratory where Martel’s script for *La ciénaga* won a prize enabling her to go forward with the film’s production.
- 6 See particularly Leopoldo Lugones’s paean to the gaucho as mythic symbol of “Argentinidad” or Argentineness in his collection of essays on Argentine identity, *El payador* (1916).

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