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## Representations of Madrid in the (post-)transition to democracy

Vicente Rodríguez Ortega

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### Abstract

This essay focuses on a group of films of the late Transition and beginning of the Post-Transition to analyse how they interrelate with the substantial political and social changes occurring in Spain during this key period of its recent history. Specifically, it examines diverse representations of Madrid as a crucial space to account for these transformations. The essay centers on the representational strategies of the filmmakers Pedro Almodóvar, Fernando Trueba, and José Luis Garci to study clashing approaches to the evolving Madrid cityscape: the attempt to move forward through the depiction of transgressive social and cultural behaviours, and the need to hold on to a disappearing past to deal with the drastic changes in Spanish society.

**Keywords:** cinema, Fernando Trueba, José Luis Garci, Madrid, Pedro Almodóvar, space, Spanish (Post-)Transition, urban

### Introduction

Historians date the beginning of the Transition to democracy in Spain in 1975 – the year of Franco’s death. However, there are multiple periodisations in regard to its end: the passing of the Constitution in 1978, the democratic election in 1979, the 1981 coup d’état, or 1982, the year in which the Socialist Party (PSOE) won the elections.<sup>1</sup> In my view 1982 is the more adequate temporal framework for several reasons. First, in the 1982 election the PSOE won with an absolute majority, obtaining more than 10 million votes. Thus, Spanish citizens severed ties with the Francoist past, declaring their unambiguous support for an antagonistic ideological position. In

addition, during 1982, Spain entered the global cultural map through two international events that signalled the country's openness to a series of transnational practices: the World Cup and Pope John Paul II's visit. The Post-Transition begins in 1982 and lasts until 1992, the year of the Barcelona Olympics, the polemical 500th anniversary of the conquest of America, the Seville Expo, the designation of Madrid as a European Capital, and the signing of the Maastricht treaty. By early 1992, Spain had fully integrated within the transnational flows of capital and culture and had consolidated its status as a democratic state.

As several commentators have argued, in the 1980s Spanish society rushed through modernisation.<sup>2</sup> New forms of economic and cultural interaction and exchange suddenly emerged, drastically re-shaping the constitution of the country's social fabric. This essay focuses on a group of films of the late Transition and beginning of the Post-Transition (the early 1980s) to analyse how they interrelate with the substantial political and social changes occurring in Spain during this key period of its recent history. Specifically, it examines diverse representations of Madrid, the country's capital, as a crucial space to account for these transformations.

During the late Transition, Spanish filmmakers attempted to record the rise of new social subjects. Cinema turned into a tool of cultural and political expression, chronicling the upsurge of the youth as an active agent of social change; or, alternatively, as the locus of disillusionment with the first steps of the newborn democracy. Also, in the early days of the Post-Transition, filmmakers assessed the disappearance of traditional forms of social exchange and the increasingly dehumanising and alienated character of the public sphere. I focus on the representational strategies of the filmmakers Pedro Almodóvar, Fernando Trueba, and José Luis Garci to study clashing approaches to the Madrid cityscape: the attempt to move forward (Almodóvar, Trueba) through the depiction of emerging social and cultural behaviours, and the need to hold on to a disappearing past (Garci) to deal with impeding changes in Spanish society. Madrid thus turns into a multifarious landscape where an on-going battle between the new and the old takes place, becoming a fundamental space in which to explore the nuances of historical change in the first years of Spain's democracy.

Cities are not static realities but rather fluid spaces.<sup>3</sup> They are continuously evolving physical frameworks, (semi)-fixed, institutionally-mapped entities, and also a multi-layered collection of social and cultural activities. Consequently, the filmic representation of cities functions at different levels. First, it deals with the 'real city' – the actual materiality of a particular urban space. Second, it tackles the 'lived-city' – that is, 'the experience of

urban life and of its representations that an inhabitant or a visitor may have'.<sup>4</sup> Third, it engages with the 'city text': the manifold ways a specific city or several of them have been represented throughout the history of cinema. It thus addresses both cultural and social realities and the very history of representation of urban spaces, establishing a series of links with previous and contemporaneous works. In addition, cinema does not simply reflect the city but also produces it through a variety of ideological and aesthetic templates. Therefore, a thorough analysis of how cinematic artifacts represent the social reality of a city needs to highlight what aspects of a particular cityscape become central and which ones are marginalised or even excluded. Cinema does not simply echo social change or stagnation; it actively intervenes in society and, subsequently, in the functioning of the city, contributing to maintain, alter, or subvert the existing power structures.<sup>5</sup> Films thus work as history-making mechanisms that express and disseminate the social and cultural values of a particular society at a given historical juncture. Like other audiovisual media, they contribute to create and spread the 'mechanisms of the citizens' socialisation and the ordering of the symbolic universe of each community'.<sup>6</sup> In this essay I explore how a variety of Spanish films wrote the history of the Spanish Transition and Post-Transition, constructing the Madrid cityscape as an active agent in re-building a country evolving from a dictatorship into democracy and its ensuing integration within the transnational flows of social and economic exchange.

### **Transgression, disillusionment, and subversive intimacy in *Pepi, Luci, Bom y todas las chicas del montón* and *Ópera Prima***

*Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras las chicas del montón* / *Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls on the Heap* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1980) and *Ópera prima* / *First Work* (Fernando Trueba, 1980) showcase several of the identifying traits of low-budget filmmaking: location shooting, post-dubbing, 'amateurish' visual aesthetics, and the use of static and theatrical long takes to depict conversations between characters. Almodóvar's and Trueba's backgrounds were radically different. Whereas Trueba was a film critic and had close associations with the emerging 'madrileña comedy', Almodóvar was an eager participant in the underground cultural circuits of Madrid. In other words, Trueba was part of a new generation of young intellectuals and Almodóvar was one of

the active members of the key movement in the Madrid cultural zeitgeist of the late 1970s and early 1980s: 'La Movida'.

'La Movida' may be defined as a Madrid-based counter-cultural movement that emerged during the first years of the Transition, encompassing a variety of artistic disciplines. It was a melting pot of heterogeneous approaches characterised by the rejection of the dominant representational models and the desire to appropriate international tendencies according to the idiosyncrasies of the changing Spanish landscape. Moreover, 'La Movida' aimed at modernising the Spanish capital by focusing on previously forbidden forms of social and cultural behaviour, detaching it from its historical association with the Francoist regime.<sup>7</sup> Banking on an aesthetic of 'playful transgression',<sup>8</sup> *Pepi, Luci, Bom* was, along with *Arrebato / Rapture* (Iván Zulueta, 1980), the first major cinematic accomplishments for La Movida.

*Pepi, Luci, Bom* opens with a move from the windows of an anonymous building to Pepi's apartment, foregrounding her extensive collection of marijuana plants. The camera then focuses on the young woman as she casually glues trading cards to an album. This movement is shaky and the rack focusing is somewhat clumsy; we have entered the territory of low-budget filmmaking. In this context cinematic imperfection works as a guarantor of spontaneity, attempting to make an intervention from a position outside the *status quo* of the Spanish film industry. Rather than situating the spectator within the realm of the landmarked, recognisable city, Almodóvar begins with the ugly architecture of the vernacular building. The film centers on those who inhabit the underground of the Madrid social and cultural scene, those who live on the periphery of the recognisable cityscape. Soon thereafter a policeman comes to Pepi's apartment under the pretext of busting her for the illegal cultivation of drugs. Shamelessly, she offers him a chance to lick her vagina or penetrate her anally in exchange for his silence. However, the policeman wants more and penetrates her vagina, taking her virginity. From the beginning Pepi is depicted as a modern and independent woman, a new type of female subject who will not remain silent when confronted with macho, patriarchal power.<sup>9</sup> Instead, she will seek retribution, triggering the main narrative arc of the film: a battle between the old order of the dictatorship, epitomised by the policeman, and the new subjectivity of a sexually and socially-progressive woman who asserts her unalienable freedom.

When the film exits Pepi's apartment the spectator encounters anonymous streets full of dirt, papers flying all over the pavement, layers upon layers of semi-destroyed posters on walls, and hand-painted building numbers. This is the opposite of a 'postcard' depiction of Madrid. Set in

the outskirts of a growing megalopolis, the film locates subversion within the margins of the city's fabric. By the mid 1970s, due to poor planning and real estate speculation, Madrid became a hostile urban monster for many of its inhabitants. Its deteriorating infrastructure increased the segregation between periphery and the centre, 'causing the expulsion of the popular classes from the centre of the city'.<sup>10</sup> Almodóvar moves way from the old city to the spaces forgotten by the implacable growth of modernisation to situate Pepi's liberating subjectivity in the middle of a non-discrete social space where interiors – such as Pepi's own apartment, the rehearsal locale of the punk band 'Bomitoni', or the apartment of the painters 'Los Costus' (a baroque pastiche of incongruent objects) – function as sites of agency against the pervading forces of the Francoist past.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, *Pepi, Luci, Bom* does not simply celebrate the new to reject the traditional. On the contrary, it establishes a clear link between older and newer forms of cultural expression as they collide in the Madrid streets, forging new types of social interaction.



Fig. 1: *The anonymous, dirty streets of Pepi, Luci, Bom.*

To carry out her revenge, Pepi offers the Bomitoni her marijuana plants in exchange for beating up the policeman. To perform this act, the Bomitoni dress as 'chulapos' and 'chulapas' (the traditional regional Madrid outfit)

and lure the policeman by singing the *zarzuela* 'La Revoltosa'.<sup>12</sup> In short, they play this traditional *costumbrista* persona to entice and subsequently punish the repressive stand-in for Francoism.<sup>13</sup> In this regard, the characters in *Pepi, Luci, Bom* stem from a compromise, a negotiated break with the past which suggests that 'the modernity which it proclaims so shamelessly is inextricable from the dead forms which precede it and which it claims, nonetheless, to have superseded'.<sup>14</sup> Almodóvar's postmodern pastiche<sup>15</sup> proposes the continuity between emerging practices of radical politics and past forms of popular culture. Even more, the old and the new are depicted as indivisible components of the marginal cityscape that *Pepi, Luci, Bom* attempts to bring to the fore. Through their inseparability they inscribe a new type of subjectivity that is simultaneously appropriating the past and looking into the future to create diverse forms of socialisation.

Consequently, Almodóvar's first feature instrumentalises the forms of popular culture the Spanish art film of the 1970s was aiming to leave behind, reclaiming them as an empowering method.<sup>16</sup> This also establishes a clear distance between provocative politics and the newly dominant 'progre' (leftish intellectual) position during the early days of democracy. The Spanish director himself appears as an MC at a party and calls for the 'General Election' contest to choose the king of the night. This parody of the 1979 democratic general election expresses distrust in the outcome of this form of participatory involvement, creating an alternative cultural and bodily engagement with the rapidly-evolving milieu of the Madrid cityscape. It is therefore not accidental that when Pepi and Bom decide to start a new life together the old and the new appear once again intertwined.

In the closing scene of the film Pepi and Bom walk through a bridge over a motorway, musing about what to do next. Both of them wear seemingly over-the-top outfits that immediately situate them beyond standardised fashion. When Bom observes that her musical career is a fiasco Pepi suggests that she should become 'a *bolero* singer' – that is, a performer of traditional forms of music. As they walk away off-screen the camera pans to the right and shows the centre of Madrid as a distant, almost indistinguishable space. Their non-compliant subjectivity stems from the periphery. The aesthetic 'messiness' and ideological provocations of Almodóvar's first film are an essential component of Madrid's changing fabric, for cities are not only the result of modernisation and organisation but also disorganisation and contestation.<sup>17</sup> *Pepi, Luci, Bom* establishes a dynamic relationship between the subversive bodies and subjectivities of the youth and the urban space. In Almodóvar's account of early democratic Madrid the body, as a cultural product, 'transforms, re-inscribes the urban landscape according to its

changing (demographic, economic, and psychological) needs, extending the limits of the city'.<sup>18</sup> It offers a reinvention of the Madrid cityscape that creates potential templates for the emergence of new social relations.<sup>19</sup>



Fig. 2: Closing shot of *Pepi, Luci, Bom*.

Almodóvar and his troupe of 'performative urban actors' slowly carved their way into cultural prominence throughout the 1980s. His second film, *Laberinto de Pasiones / Labyrinth of Passion* (1982), marks a move towards the city centre. It opens with an establishing shot of the thriving 'El Rastro' flea market, which takes place every Sunday and was one of the main gathering spaces for the participants in *La Movida*.<sup>20</sup> The film intercuts between Sexilia and Riza as they walk through the market and lasciviously 'scout' men's crotches and buttocks. This sexualisation of the walker is at the core of the film's establishment of 'the urban as the site of the tearing down the scopical and sexual barriers that will eventually lead to important social realignments'.<sup>21</sup> El Rastro, a temporary space of exchange, unexpected combination of aesthetic regimes, and fleeting human proximity, functions as the ultimate metaphor for the kind of urban space the film constructs: a sexually-charged social order where the transgressive politics of Almodóvar and his peers are becoming increasingly influential. This displacement from the suburbs to the city centre brings to the fore the key role of spatial

mobility in altering the urban landscape. Those who are able to move and ‘trespass’ in different zones within a particular urban fabric gain greater visibility and are able to spread a particular set of behaviors and practices to other city inhabitants, potentially altering the rules of societal exchange.<sup>22</sup> In this context, Madrid emerges as a central cultural force in the production of new forms of communication and exchange that foster the attainment of democratic principles.<sup>23</sup> However, rather than simply offering a jubilant version of the new democratic Madrid, Almodóvar’s films also address contemporary problems, social issues, and lifestyles.<sup>24</sup> They scrutinise the different forces at play during the late Transition to register the co-existence of several social orders and the consequences of Madrid’s urban growth in its inhabitants’ daily practices. Like *Laberinto de Pasiones*, *Ópera Prima* plunges the spectator into the very contemporaneity of Madrid’s center to depict the rise of new subjectivities among the youth. Democracy has become an unfulfilling social scenario and disillusionment has come to the fore.

*Ópera Prima* was one of most successful Spanish films of the early 1980s<sup>25</sup> and is considered one of the landmarks of the ‘New Spanish Comedy’.<sup>26</sup> The film immediately plunges us into 1978 Madrid, opening with the Ópera subway sign. Matías, the film’s protagonist, comes out of the station and, completely aloof, starts walking through the city. As soon as he walks the streets the film brings to the fore two co-existing realities: an unequivocal signifier of the new economic order – a Visa billboard – and the façade of an abandoned theatre with several layers of deteriorated posters. The film highlights the fact that Spain was entering the flows of transnational capitalism. Also, it emphasises the declining condition of part of the urban landscape as a result of the ‘impeding modernisation’ democracy was championing and the subsequent relegation of previously dominant social practices (and the spaces where they took place). The film thus records the material and social effects of the quick transformations taking place in Madrid as it evolved from dictatorship to democracy.



*Fig. 3: The Visa billboard in the opening scene of Ópera Prima.*



*Fig. 4: The decrepit building in the opening scene of Ópera Prima.*

*Ópera Prima* is typically understood as a comedic chronicle of the young, disenchanted leftist intellectual during the Transition.<sup>27</sup> It portrays the 'pasotas': burnouts who do not care any longer about the processes of political struggle.<sup>28</sup> The film depicts the disillusionment with the early stages of democracy, accepting a series of pre-established generic models 'to build a estranged look at a democratic reality that was becoming progressively different from the hopeful anticipations that many had invested in it'.<sup>29</sup> Teresa Vilarós has labelled this kind of psychological state 'disillusionment withdrawal'. Franco's death was a utopia and an addictive drug for many generations of Spaniards during the dictatorship. Franco's demise

signals the disappearance of the utopia and the emergence of an abstinence syndrome ... 1975 brought the end of the utopia, the verification of the disillusionment and the appearance of the withdrawal.<sup>30</sup>

However, Trueba declares his refusal to engage with the traumas of the Francoist past. With *Ópera Prima* he tried

not to reflect about anything, I was 24 ... and I didn't want to feature anyone from the previous generation, because Francoism, the sinister, the sadness was boring to me. I needed to breathe.<sup>31</sup>

Despite his dismissal of the film's engagement with the recent Francoist past, the depiction of the mid-twenties Spanish youth is unmistakably rooting the emergence of the 'pasota' subjectivity in the disillusionment with democracy. Consequently, it explores the chasm between what the progressive youth expected from democratic change and what it had accomplished in terms of promoting new values and effacing the traces of Francoism. Matías embodies this type of attitude towards the evolving social panorama. He is a young journalist and aspiring writer who, by chance, encounters his cousin Violeta in the streets. Soon thereafter they start an incestuous relationship that undergoes a series of ups and downs due to their diverse sensibilities. Whereas Violeta is a vegetarian, travel-hungry, sexually-active, and independent neo-hippie who, as she herself states, 'is perfectly happy living alone', Matías is a disenchanted, meat-loving, 'pasota' who wants to write bestsellers, hates travelling beyond a short train ride, and rejects the ethos of the hippie culture and the clichés it has turned into. Matías stands for those disenchanted left-wing intellectuals whose hopes and dreams were devoured by the political 'consensus', a tale 'manufactured from hegemonic positions that presented a harmonic

understanding of political space<sup>32</sup> and championed the overcoming of all differences to realise the Transition to democracy. This process developed through an agreement between the political elites to move forward and forget the past for the sake of social peace, minimising the involvement of the citizenry.<sup>33</sup>

The 'pasotismo' becomes a reaction to this political pact, turning into a popular trend that championed apathy as a form of ideological engagement with the social.<sup>34</sup> Understanding the political panorama within the Spanish left in these terms, Matías epitomises this type of 'disillusioned' subjectivity. However, one should be wary of generalising Vilarós' 'disillusionment withdrawal' to the majority of the Spanish population. At this historical juncture the 'pasotismo' attitude may have been a common disaffection among the Spanish youth in regard to the real power of political mobilisation to change the functioning of society. Nevertheless, this does not mean that this kind of subjective reaction was dominant within Spain's social imaginary nor that the young generations plunged into a de-politicised 'carpe diem' to shelter themselves from the failure of the political utopia they had dreamt about.<sup>35</sup>

For some commentators *Ópera Prima* crystallised this *pasota* mentality.<sup>36</sup> In my view, this conceptualisation imposes a dominant account of the political climate of the Transition to a cinematic artifact without properly taking into consideration the specific nuances of its narrative, genre, and aesthetic. *Ópera Prima* dissects the changing characteristics of the emerging democratic social order in Spain during the late Transition period to scrutinise its different effects on the youth's subjectivity. Hence, the disenchantment with the development of democracy co-existed with the appearance of new possibilities of social exchange that were effectively re-shaping Spanish society. Whereas Matías stands in for the 'pasota', Violeta represents a new kind of social subject. Her mobility within the social and cultural spaces of the city turns into the expression of such a position. Her attic becomes the very space where the fully democratic Spanish subject is realised.

Although the beginning of the film situates us in the exterior Ópera square location and a few sequences take place in the Madrid streets, most of the action occurs inside Violeta's attic. As soon as Matías moves in with his lover he is happy to lock himself inside, sheltered from the streets of a city he does not understand. One of his few 'excursions' outside the attic occurs in a supermarket where he subverts the establishment's electronic surveillance. He pretends to steal products, re-placing them in other locations. Like the foregrounding of the Visa billboard this scene points to the

progressive mercantilisation of Spanish society – the transition from the traditional corner store to the new ‘capitalist’ supermarket characterised by impersonality and surveillance. In addition, throughout the film, Matías repeatedly tells Violeta that there is increasing violence out there and that one should be careful in the streets. However, the direct representation of social turbulence is conspicuously absent from the film. The structural non-appearance of the constant manifestation of civil unrest and violent clashes between antagonistic ideological factions – a key feature of Madrid during this time period – is not only the result of operating with a very low budget and relying on limited locations but also the reflection of Trueba’s attempt to escape the specificity of the social coordinates of this time period and, simultaneously, Matías’ inability to engage with the on-going social and cultural struggles in Spanish society. Violeta’s attic is not only a safe haven of sexual and affective exchange but also a refuge from the diverse political positions at work during this period. As Matías tells Violeta when she asks him why he is writing a novel about a spy named Johnson instead of dealing with reality: ‘[w]hy would I do that? We all know each other too well.’

If Matías declares the stagnation of the social and cultural class he belongs to, Violeta represents the opposite: the search for new forms of socialisation. She is not only an independent, emancipated woman but also a changing subject who seeks novel experiences such as performing experimental music (even if rather poorly), starting a relationship with an older man, or travelling to other parts of the world. Even though the film’s narrative utilises Matías as its vehicle to enter Barajas airport through his job as a journalist, therefore foregrounding the increasing openness of the Spanish capital to international cultural practices and signalling its progressive detachment from Francoist isolationism, he does not actively share this internationalist ethos (he is late to one of his appointments, missing the opportunity to meet a renowned filmmaker). On the contrary, he prefers to lock himself in Violeta’s apartment to write his novel, feeling out of place when facing the constant impetus of the new forms of socialisation the city offers.



*Fig. 5: Violeta's attic: a site for new types of socialisation.*



*Fig. 6: Barajas airport: a gateway to international trends and practices.*

At the end of the film Violeta cancels her trip to the ‘Sun Party’ in Peru, leaving behind (or at least postponing) her adherence to the ‘neo-hippie’ mentality that Matías despises, and stays with her lover. She writes in his typewriter ‘I love you Johnson’ to tell Matías, in his absence, that she has decided not to board her plane. The last shot of the film showcases the heterosexual couple kissing in Ópera square, where they first met, as street musicians play a tune, aligning the narrative with the conventions of the ‘feel-good’ romantic comedy. The heterosexual couple achieves reciprocity. Perhaps the very reciprocity of a constantly mobile, independent woman could trigger Matías’ future agency in the new society that is rising before his eyes. At the very least, Violeta has managed to get Matías out of her apartment, making him accept the fulfilling character of an interpersonal exchange within the public space, a type of behaviour he had rejected throughout the rest of film. In this respect Trueba’s comedy breaks with the discursive rules of Spanish cinema by reclaiming

the value of intimacy and the everyday micro-interactions in the development of (democratic) social and political processes. The city, the very space where these interactions emerge, is looked at and told with new eyes.<sup>37</sup>

Consequently, Madrid turns into a space of liberating intimacy that chronicles the rise of new forms of subjectivity and their role in molding novel types of social interaction. The Spanish thriller of the late Transition and early Post-Transition would dig deeper into the ‘disillusionment’ of the early democratic stages by focusing on characters who are not able to detach themselves from the Francoist past as they negotiate a corrupt and violence-plagued cityscape.

### **Corruption, nostalgia, and the Francoist past in *El Crack* and *El Crack II***

Whereas *Pepi, Luci, Bom* was the calling card for Carmen Maura and ‘Alaska’, two of the key figures of the 1980s Spanish cultural scene, and *Ópera Prima* showcased young unknown actors, both *El Crack* (José Luis Garci, 1981, 1983) films capitalised on the recognisability of its lead actor. Garci’s films recycled Alfredo Landa, one of the icons of el ‘destape’ as a tough, corruption-proof PI who criss-crosses Madrid’s underworld seeking justice.<sup>38</sup> In addition, as opposed to Almodóvar and Trueba, Garci was already an

established figure within Spanish cinema with several feature films and remarkable box-office performances to his credit.<sup>39</sup>

As opposed to the unambiguous 'newness' of *Pepi, Luci, Bom, Laberinto de Pasiones*, and *Ópera Prima*, both *El Crack* films navigate a decadent cityscape that the protagonist cannot comprehend due to his inability to adapt to the changing social fabric.<sup>40</sup> However, although both films centre on the unfit relationship of their hero with the city to decode the evolving democratic regime, the first installment of the series captures a fleeting urban space during the last stages of the Transition, whereas the second one chronicles the effects of the capital-driven landscape of the Post-Transition.

*El Crack* and *El Crack II* look outward in an attempt to appropriate the tropes of Hollywood cinema to achieve an internationalisation of the product<sup>41</sup> and also inward – like other Spanish noir films of this time, they are imbued in the social and cultural changes Spain was undergoing during this period.<sup>42</sup> The series mobilises some of the distinguishing traits of film noir – a tough PI navigates the underworld, manoeuvring through seedy locales in low-key, canted-angle set-ups – operating within a transnationally recognisable generic category as a tool to approach the changing paradigms of Spanish society. The PI, Germán Areta, a former policeman who left his job due to his uncompromising honesty, still belongs to the Francoist social order.<sup>43</sup> In his day-to-day activities he sticks to what he has always done: he goes to old-fashioned barbershops to muse about legendary boxing matches in Madison Square Garden, visits traditional suit stores and dim billiard parlours, attends court wall games, has a beer in old cafeterias with impeccably dressed bartenders, plays 'Mus' with his friends, and utilises his network of informers from the popular classes to advance his case.<sup>44</sup> *El Crack* is an homage 'to a specific low-class ... to the simple people of the city'<sup>45</sup> that banks on the characteristic moral ambiguity of noir as a tool to depict the evolving patterns of the city.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, Garci punctuates his narratives with several visual montages of the Madrid cityscape that function as chapter separations. In *El Crack* the iconic nature of the Madrid centre comes to the fore as the identifying symbol of a disappearing social order. A blue colour palette and Jesús Gluck's musical score infuse these montage sequences with a tone of melancholy.



Fig. 7: *The melancholy-imbued monumentality of Gran Vía in El Crack.*

In the first music montage of *El Crack*, Garci takes the spectator from the monumental modernism of Gran Vía to the sidewalks of Santa Isabel Street in the popular neighbourhood of Lavapiés, then through the narrow streets of Madrid's historical centre. Eventually the sequence returns to Gran Vía. The camera slowly pans from Cine Rialto to a window on a side street: Areta's office. In other words, the film situates the action within the iconic recognisability of the Madrid cityscape, inserting Areta in its adjoining streets as the unknown hero who contributes to the preservation of this visual regime. Some commentators argue that *El Crack* offers a triumphalist postcard image of the Madrid of Francoist cinema instead of depicting an authentic and hyperrealist space.<sup>47</sup> Undoubtedly Garci does dig deep into the constitutive nuances of the Madrid underworld. However, he also anchors his film in the very salient monumentality of landmark Madrid, rendering it as the epitome of modernity and cosmopolitanism.

In addition, *El Crack* foregrounds the presence of film culture as an essential component of the city's fabric, constantly featuring movie theatres within the musical montages and the transition shots between scenes. It is thus not only an homage to the vanishing Madrid the filmmaker vows to preserve but also to its cinematic culture. The disappearance of the movie theatres Garci grew up with functions as a metaphor for the rising social and cultural order the film condemns.<sup>48</sup> Areta is Garci's mechanism to

express such a viewpoint. As the PI navigates the new world of democracy, unearthing layer upon layer of corruption, the narrative seeks refuge in the visualisation of a fleeting landscape.

Both the police force and a former colleague who now works in a private security firm attempt to prevent Areta from continuing his investigation. The colleague, 'El Guapo', a suave and impeccably-dressed young man – the flip side of the short and plainly-dressed Areta – arranges a meeting in a top-floor café overlooking Madrid, a panopticon-like location where he offers him a job in a multinational corporation. He fails to buy Areta out. This scene defines the enemy the PI is actually facing: a transnational conspiracy that will do anything to make him stop. The democratic regime has not only opened Spanish society to progress but also to the corrupted manoeuvres of international exploitation epitomised by the U.S. corporation that attempts to prevent Areta's investigation. After his refusal to cooperate the conspiracy attempts to murder Areta, but they instead kill his adopted daughter. Now Areta not only seeks to solve the case but also seeks retribution. The woman Areta is tracking down, a prostitute named Isabel Medina, becomes the victim of a sadist executive in the multinational corporation. El Guapo hides her body inside a new bridge crossing El Tajo river to cover his employer's tracks. In other words, the body of the innocent female is inside the very materiality of one of the highly-publicised symbols of the new, modern Spain – the unparalleled improvement of transportation infrastructures.

Eventually, Areta chases the sadist executive to New York to exact his revenge. The film then offers the spectator a stereotypical image of New York City that seems extracted from a tourist guide: from the Brooklyn Bridge to the ice rink in Rockefeller Center, from Penn Station and Madison Square Garden to the skyline, Times Square and yellow cabs, etc. Ignorant of the intricacies and less well-known spaces of New York's popular culture, Garci stays on the surface of social representation while in the U.S. metropolis, the cinematic city he has seen so many times on the silver screen. This incursion emphasises the transnational character of the conspiracy Areta is trying to dismantle and also the filmmaker's attempt to find solace in cinematic New York City while facing the disappearance of the Madrid he loves.

After avenging Isabel Media and his daughter by killing the sadist tycoon and El Guapo, Areta goes back to Madrid. The closing shot of the film shows him as he walks with his female partner. They are wounded but together. The camera zooms out and tilts up as the melancholic score and the blue palette reiterate Garci's approach to the Madrid cityscape – a sentimental account of a city that is becoming stranger and stranger for those who, like Garci or Areta, used to call it home.

*El Crack II* (1983) treads further inside the corrupted skin of a changing landscape, depicting an urban space that is becoming increasingly sick. In addition, Madrid has turned into an expansive urban mammoth where real estate speculation is destroying the old city. The film begins by emphasising the unchanged character of Areta – he is playing ‘Mus’ with his old-time friends. After the game he goes to a parking lot to get his car. Inside, three young drug addicts have broken in and mock Areta when he commands them to get out. In this scene *El Crack II* points to the progressively degrading social fabric of Madrid by highlighting two complementary social manifestations of this time period. First, the dramatic effects of the heroin plague in Spain during the 1980s;<sup>49</sup> second, the drug addicts, who wear leather jackets adorned with skull motifs, represent the urbanite rock crowd of 1980s Madrid; they are the aberrant and decadent side of La Movida. Throughout the rest of the fictional worlds of *El Crack* and *El Crack II* the thriving youth movement of the Madrid cultural scene is practically non-existent. Garci chooses to depict the perverse side of this cultural practice from the viewpoint of a hero who rejects the changing paradigms of social exchange. It seems as though his nostalgic account of the Madrid he loves and his disillusionment with the new transnationally-connected, corruption-plagued social scenario needs to be complemented with an indictment of the new generation as accomplices of the increasing moral decay of the city. Areta’s psychological make-up is Garci’s mechanism to express this dark view of the evolution of Spanish society. In this sense the PI is the opposite of what Richard Sennett identifies as one of the key characteristics of a productive negotiation of urban life: the ability to develop multiple images of one’s identity and shift among them according to the different social situations that occur in the processes of living in the city.<sup>50</sup> Areta, conversely, epitomises immobility and a lack of flexibility; he is an old-timer who cannot understand, tolerate, or adopt new forms of socialisation in his day-to-day existence.

Like in the previous installment, Garci uses a series of montage sequences in *El Crack II* to bridge the different chapters of the narrative. However, instead of nostalgically revisiting the monumental and popular Madrid that is fading away, the Spanish director deploys these sequences to diagnose the identifying markers of a capital-driven cityscape. He accounts for the appearance of non-traditional businesses, such as McDonald’s, and fixes his camera on the presence of two competing banks next to a ham store and the legendary cafeteria ‘El Brillante’. These new forms of transnational economic exchange are threatening the long-sedimented forms of culture that have characterised Madrid.



Fig. 8: *McDonald's* in *El Crack II*.

Significantly, *El Crack II* moves away from the centre and shows Madrid's old town from a distance, depicting its growth as a sprawling monster. The shots of the growing landscape function as the reverse of the final image in *Pepi, Luci, Bom*. Whereas Garci's film looks from afar to a rapidly decomposing city centre, refusing to turn around and examine the daily cultural practices within the periphery, Almodóvar's speaks from the margins of culture to offer an alternative view of early democracy in Spain. In addition, the night shots of Madrid's centre do not focus on Gran Vía but rather new, modern, anonymous office buildings that grow in numbers all over the city. *El Crack II* also leaves behind the constant visualisation of old movie theatres that characterised the first installment of the series and instead focuses on the effects of real estate speculation in the formerly immaculate landscape of old Madrid. In the Post-Transition city, cranes and buildings under construction grow taller than the old city, dramatically re-configuring the iconicity of the Madrid cityscape; modern highways guarantee mobility through a spreading urban landscape.<sup>51</sup> By 1983, Madrid has entered the transnational capitalist stage of the Post-Transition; the fleeting city of the Transition is almost gone.<sup>52</sup>



*Fig. 9: Sprawling Madrid in El Crack II.*



*Fig. 10: Cranes take over the Madrid centre in El Crack II.*



Fig. 11: Modern office buildings reconfigure Madrid in *El Crack II*.

In *El Crack II* Areta gets involved in a routine infidelity case that evolves into a double murder with links to a pharmaceutical conspiracy. His investigation ultimately leads him into a mansion in the suburbs of Madrid during Christmas night. With the laughter and chatter of children and the sound of carols in the background, the host, Don Gregorio, the representative of the multinational corporation, meets Areta and offers him a job. Upon Areta's refusal Don Gregorio convinces the PI that this time there will be no satisfactory revenge since he is fighting 'the system itself' and, consequently, that he will never win. Areta leaves the mansion and takes a long-awaited trip to Italy with his female partner. He has come to accept that 'the system' is beyond his reach. Madrid has turned into the very space where this new economic, social, and cultural logic has triumphed. Leaving the city, even if only temporarily, seems the only sensible decision.

Whereas *El Crack* concludes with the heterosexual couple holding hands in Gran Vía as they overcome a traumatic loss, *El Crack II* expresses the need to escape the city. Post-Transition Madrid has become an estranging space where people like Areta are out of place. The yearned-for arrival of democracy has brought an urban nightmare the older generations can hardly bear. *Pepi, Luci, Bom, Laberinto de Pasiones*, and *Ópera Prima* say otherwise. Although they originate from divergent perspectives they portray a variety

of rising social subjectivities that were pivotal in the consolidation of Spanish democracy by spreading new values. In this respect, both Almodóvar and Trueba depict the intimate and public places of Madrid as potential sites of subversion and contestation where the younger generations are inscribing their imprint in a changing social order, even if they also signal the growing weight of transnational capitalism and its palpable effects on the city. Garci, on his part, activates the common tropes of the generic category through which he operates to express a disenchanting understanding of the early 1980s Spanish social and cultural fabric. His series excavates the multi-layered constitution of a rotten society but also refuses to look elsewhere, perhaps to the locations where Spain's young democracy was forging new types of social and cultural exchange.

## Notes

1. Some historians extend the Transition to 1 January 1986, when Spain became a member of the EEC (Ruiz-Huerta Carbonell 2009, p. 79).
2. Richards 2000, p. 46; Moreiras Menor 2000, p. 141.
3. Donald 1992, p. 422.
4. Mazierska & Rascaroli 2003, p. 2. I borrow the concepts of 'lived city' and 'city text' from these authors.
5. Shiel 2001, p. 4.
6. Palacio 2012, p. 9.
7. Stapell 2010, pp. 105-106.
8. Acevedo-Muñoz 2007, p. 8.
9. López 2006, p. 7.
10. Stapell 2010, p. 23.
11. Three other films of this period that depict the dehumanising character of uncontrolled urban growth are *Maravillas* (Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón, 1981), *Deprisa, deprisa* (Carlos Saura, 1981), and *Colegas* (Eloy de la Iglesia, 1982).
12. They do not beat the policeman, but instead his twin brother. Pepi's next step to avenge her rape is to convince the policeman's wife, Luci, to leave her husband and join the ranks of a sexually fluid, identity-bending group.
13. By 'costumbrista' I mean a work that depicts behaviors and characteristics of a society, concentrating on the popular classes.
14. Smith 2000, p. 17.
15. Sánchez Biosca 1989, p. 121.
16. Examples of Spanish art film of the 1970s are the works of directors such as Erice, Saura, and Borau, among others.
17. Burgess 2010, p. 341.
18. Grosz 2005, p. 301.
19. Tolentino 2011, p. 168.
20. Triana Toribio 2000, p. 279.
21. D'Lugo 2006, p. 28.

22. Burgess 2010, p. 344.
23. D'Lugo 1991, p. 46.
24. Mazierska & Rascaroli 2003, p. 31.
25. *Ópera Prima* had over 1.2 million spectators. It was the third most seen film of 1980 and remained in theatres for a year (Ibáñez & Iglesias 2012, p. 103).
26. Jordan & Morgan-Tomasunas 1998, p. 69.
27. Faulkner 2012, p. 165.
28. Caparrós Lera 1992, p. 188.
29. Torreiro 2000, p. 396.
30. Vilarós 1998, p. 27.
31. Gurpegui Vidal 2004, p. 75.
32. Medina 2002, p. 25.
33. Roca 1999, p. 110.
34. Subirats 2002, p. 74.
35. Del Val Ripollés 2010, p. 80.
36. Hernández Ruiz & Pérez Rubio 2004, p. 50.
37. Ibáñez & Iglesias 2012, p. 117.
38. 'Destape' refers to a cycle of sexy Spanish comedies from late Francoism to the beginning of the 1980s.
39. Garci's biggest box office success was *Asignatura Pendiente* (1977), with 2.3 million spectators and over 1.3 million pesetas in earnings. *El Crack* earned 600,000 pesetas, while *El Crack II* fared slightly worse. See data here: <http://www.mcu.es/bbddpeliculas/buscarPeliculas.do>
40. In this respect it is worth noting José A. Zorrilla's *El Arreglo* (1983). Like in Garci's films, the protagonist, Crisanto Morales, is a 'fish out of water' within the social scenario of Post-Transition Madrid who returns to his job as a police detective after 26 months in rehab. *El Arreglo* links the police headquarters of the democratic state and the Francoist regime by establishing its location in the former 'General Security Direction' building, infamous as the location where the dictatorship tortured and killed prominent oppositional figures.
41. Herrero 2007.
42. Davies 2007.
43. Areta still calls La Castellana Avenue, one of the main avenues in Madrid, by its former, non-democratic name, 'El Generalísimo,' (a superlative of 'General', used to refer to Franco).
44. 'Mus' is a traditional card game.
45. Caparrós Lera 1992, p. 205.
46. Mira 2000, p. 132.
47. Camarero 2013, p. 40.
48. Expressing his frustration about the disappearance of movie theaters in the Spanish capital, Garci stated the following: 'Madrid has always been a city with cinemas. It still is. Even though many of them have been dismantled to erect gyms, offices, bingos, lawyer's offices, holdings, real estate companies, etc. Now the movie theatres are smaller... no one bothers you chewing seeds, fries or candy; now people slurp Coca-Cola and swallow popcorn.' (Garci 1997, p. 12)
49. Heroin addiction went from being practically non-existent in the mid 1970s to becoming a social plague that affected thousands of young men and women, especially from the lower classes (Gamella 1997).
50. Sennett 2010, p. 109-110.
51. *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!!!* (1984) also sets up the overgrown and alienating character of the city versus the untainted life style of 'the village'. This is a recurrent motif in Almodóvar's films, most remarkably *Volver* (2006).

52. *El Arreglo* also chronicles the dehumanising modernisation of Post-Transition Madrid, portraying an inhospitable landscape where modern architecture co-exists with the decaying traces of the previous social order.

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